

Croatia joins European Union amid mixed response

Ena Paponja 7:19 p.m. EDT June 30, 2013

Story Highlights

- Some citizens in Croatia celebrate the nation's entry into the EU; others express doubt
- Nation has gone through years of rebuilding after bloody conflict
- Croatia faces many hurdles now and in the future

ZAGREB, Croatia - And the countdown began: "five, four, three, two, one," people cried in unison, raising champagne glasses, toasting and cheering as fireworks danced light on the grand buildings and cobblestones of Ban Jelacic Square in the Croatian capital.

New Years Eve? Hardly. Instead, as the clock struck midnight on July 1, it was Croatians marking their country's entry into the European Union as its 28th member state.

Despite the festivities on the main streets of Zagreb, many Croatians are less than thrilled over joining the bloc. While the country has come a long way since the bloody collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the war that followed, some here think that becoming part of another union of nations seems more like a return to the past, and the relinquishing of their hard-won freedoms.

"If we spent hundreds of years fighting for independence with Turks and Serbs, I don't understand how we can sell it once again, 20 years after winning sovereignty, to a bigger and more powerful union where we are going to be marginalized," said Doris Vucic, 21, a student in Zagreb.

"It was a stupid move by our people," she added, referring to a referendum on EU membership in 2012 where 66% voted in favor.

After the war ended in 1996 with the country devastated and cities and towns in ruin, Croatia went through years of rebuilding and reform. Since then, the country has managed to reconstruct its economy, implement democratic reforms and develop industries including tourism.

Still, Croatia is still grappling with serious unresolved issues exacerbated by the euro crisis: a contracting economy, inflation, high taxes, pervasive corruption and brain drain.

Croatian economic growth fell 6.5 percent in 2012 while the unemployment rate rose to 18.1% in the first quarter of 2013, with youth unemployment spiking to 51.8%, according to the European statistics agency, Eurostat.

Meanwhile, the country is still reeling from the conviction in November 2012 of former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader on charges of bribery and kickbacks involving 13 million euros in the biggest political corruption trial in Croatia's history. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

A few years ago, many here looked to the EU as a way to a more prosperous future. But since the euro crisis broke out five years ago, some Croatians believe the bloc's focus is inward on solving its own problems and that the Balkan country will find little help to develop there.

Others express concern about interference from Brussels.

"I worry about the enormous influence the EU will have on Croatian law and social policies," said Andrej Ivan Nuredinovic, 22, a student in Zagreb. "Our government is manipulating us to want to join."

The EU is notorious for obscure regulations governing everything from sausages to cigarettes, and Croatians worry that new EU regulations will destroy traditional industries such as special handmade local cheeses, the traditional alcoholic drink rakia brewed at home and the custom of "Kolinje," the slaughter of pigs on local farms which occurs every autumn, and turns into impromptu festivals.

That's because from July 1 on, local producers will be obligated to meet EU standards, which means, for example, that brewers of rakia will likely no longer be able to sell their moonshine along highways or at markets without registering their product first, and meeting certain standards.

Others worry about low-cost competitors from abroad.

"Our local economy will go downhill from this point because of the big interest by foreign countries in our market," said Krunoslav Blazicevic, 28, manager of ABC Interijeri, an interior design salon in the capital.

Meanwhile, Croatians are bracing for inflation. Among products expected to face price hikes are food staples such as bread and milk as well as the so-called 'sin' goods such as cigarettes or alcohol are expected to jump 25-30 percent over the next few years, analysts say.

"We are in a recession," Stefica Petracic, 60, who is retired. "And neither our wages nor our pensions will be higher after July 1."

While only 45 percent of Croatians support becoming a part of the EU, accord to a recent poll by Croatian pollster, Ipsos Puls, some analysts say that joining the bloc will have a positive impact on the country.

"The EU is not just the common market—it's not just about money and trade—it's about values and it's important for the civil societies in these countries – especially for the young," said Olaf Boehnke, head of European Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin.

"Entry comes with a price that these societies and political systems have to change – they have to become more democratic, more accountable, more transparent toward their own people."

A group of students sitting at the Ban Jelacic Square before the festivities started watched construction crews putting up the stage and other preparations. They expressed a cautious hope that joining the EU would mean a better future.

"If we celebrate sports events, why not this," asked Josip Virovac, 20, an engineering student.

"Joining the EU is inevitable. We can't live in isolation and ignore the globalization. The primary goal of world economy is to make a big global market and if want to survive we need to be a part of this union."

"I want us to join because it will be easier for me to travel outside of the country, and work," he added, referring to travel restrictions on non-EU Europeans. "However, I know the EU is only good for you if you are either rich or smart."

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