

Tihomir Ponoš

Lost in Cacophony

Croatia has been going through the first weeks of 2012 in the accelerated rhythm of the referendum on the accession to the European Union. As the date of the referendum, 22 January comes closer, the rhythm is approaching a fast staccato. Indeed, everything reminds us of such clear-cut, distinctive notes. These days everybody, whether they are 'for' Croatian membership in the European Union or 'against' it, is playing their own notes with little attention to the other. Croatia is deafened by the confusing pre-referendum cacophony.



Officially, no-one, at least among those who are of any relevance, is opposed to Croatia's entry into the European Union, whereas voices opposed to the accession have lately been multiplying and are becoming more and more present in the public. All relevant political parties support the entry of Croatia into the European Union. Only one party in the current assembly of the Croatian Parliament (elected on 4 December 2011) opposes Croatian accession, the Croatian Rights Party of Dr. Ante Starčević, which has one Member of Parliament. In the previous assembly of the Croatian Parliament, there was likewise only one party that opposed the entry – the Croatian Rights Party¹, which also had only one representative in that assembly. For years, this party –although slightly sceptical – had been in favour of Croatia's accession to the European Union, only to decide near the end of the previous assembly of the Croatian Parliament to oppose it and to try to use this opposition to build its image in the electoral campaign. Its success can be measured by the fact that it didn't cross the electoral threshold, losing its parliamentary status after 19 years.

But who then is against?

Nearly all social groups and relevant organisations also support Croatian accession. On Tuesday, 17 January, the Croatian Bishops' Conference has called on Catholic believers to follow their conscience when casting their vote at the referendum, but the rest of the message clearly suggests that the proper answer should be 'in favour'. It couldn't have been any other way, since during his visit to Croatia in June 2011, Pope Benedict XVI has endorsed Croatian membership of the Union. The majority of the Homeland War veterans' organisations also support Croatia's entry into the Union. On Tuesday, it was the turn of the HVIDR-a, the organisation of disabled war veterans. That same Tuesday, five days before the referendum, was evidently important for calls to participate in the referendum and to cast votes in favour of accession. In the early hours of the afternoon, Prime Minister Zoran Milanović and Labour and Pensions Minister Mirando Mrišić held a meeting with pensioners in the government building. There are around 1,2 million retired people in Croatia, their lives are hard, their pensions small, but they are a large electoral group. In the first sentence of its report, the public information agency Hina informed that the pensioners told the Prime Minister and the departmental minister that they support Croatia's entry into the European Union. The second part of the text reported on the pensioners' questions. On the same day, the most influential Serb politician in Croatia, Milorad Pupovac, added his voice to the conversation, saying that the Serbs in Croatia have greatly contributed to the process of the Croatian accession to the European Union, and that they should vote in favour of it at the referendum.

So who then is against? Nobody of any relevance – apart from some thirty percent of citizens. This is the number of those opposed to the accession to the Union according to surveys. The problem the opponents of Croatia's accession to the Union face has been the same for years – no-

¹ of which the Croatian Rights Party of dr. Ante Starčević is a splinter

one important or sensible has succeeded in expressing their interests. This was most evident on Saturday 14th of January, when a protest was held in the central square of the capital, Zagreb. It was organised by the 'Council for Croatia – No to the EU', a coalition of 14 non-parliamentary parties and 15 associations. What illustrates the 'strength' of these parties: if all the votes they won at the recent parliamentary elections were added up, they would still end up outside the parliament. Several hundred people gathered at the protest. One of the most bizarre condemnations of pro-European politics pursued by all Croatian governments since 2000 was uttered at this assembly – namely, that such politics is treasonable.

Ivan Pernar, a young man who in 2011 suddenly became seemingly important also spoke at the protest. He was the instigator and one of the organisers of the protests that took place during February and March last year in Croatia. The motive for these protests was a series of, to put it mildly, utterly clumsy statements made by the then PM Jadranka Kosor, which were completely inopportune regarding Croatia's real, very difficult economic situation. It was this poor economic situation and the dissatisfaction with the politics of the government that caused the protests. It was at these protests that larger numbers of anti-European banners and flags opposed to Croatian membership of the EU were first seen. These protests that came to be known as the 'Facebook protests' (since Facebook was the means used for organising them) were primarily anti-government; the opposition was primarily a reflection of disagreement with every policy that had been pursued by the government, including that of Croatian accession to the European Union.

Asymmetric representation

This January, in the weeks leading up to the referendum, a series of representatives of insignificant organisations attempting to impose themselves as the spokespersons of opponents of EU accession have been given space in public discussions, round tables and the media. Their media representation does not correspond in the least to their importance. The space granted to them in the media is mostly due to the logic of the media and the organisers of the public discussions on the accession to the Union, which says that opponents of entry into the Union must also be given a place at the table, regardless of the fact that they are personally and socially insignificant and their organisations wield no influence. On the pro-European side, the main spokespersons are the leading party politicians. Thus, one side is being represented by those without importance, as there is no-one important to speak in their name, and the other side is mostly argued by politicians, while those who have no status of importance - however fervently they advocate accession to the Union - have no access to the media space. What kind of space this could potentially be was excellently illustrated by the aforementioned Tuesday the 17th of January, when the public information agency Hina recorded 15 events that had the referendum as their central subject or where the event was used to talk about the referendum. It would appear that the media are more interested in these events than the citizens are. The public discussions tend to gather between five and forty people.

On the eve of the referendum, the government initiated a media campaign, which is both informational and propagandistic in nature and is perceived by the public as predominantly propaganda. The informational part consists of publishing documents that are the result of the negotiations with the European Union on the internet as well as printing and distributing flyers and brochures. The propaganda side is much more prominent: a series of short television spots, in which numerous state officials (the president of the republic, the head of government, three government vice-presidents, the minister of foreign and European affairs and the president of the largest opposition party) speak of the advantages of membership in the Union, inviting people to vote in favour of it at the referendum. The television spots were rated as boring and it is interesting that the only vice-president of the government who wasn't represented in a spot was the minister who is responsible, among other things, for European Union funds. The government's communication strategy has unfolded along the same pattern that it has followed since 2000 – from top (the government) to bottom (the voters), only now the increased propaganda activities have brought an extra edge to such an approach. The communication strategies of the opponents of accession to the European Union have striven to take the opposite route, above all for the reason that, if power is taken as the criterion, the opponents of entry are powerless.

This unsubstantial conflict had begun late last year, before the TV spots were recorded and

broadcast. While still in opposition, when it was clear that they would win the elections, the representatives of the new government announced that the referendum was to be held in the second half of February and there were also mentions of March as a potential date. However, the first decision following the establishment of the new government (the 22 and 23 December 2011) was to announce the referendum for 22 January. The government explained this with the need to ratify the Croatian accession agreement with the European Union in parliament as early as possible following the (successful) referendum, in order for the Member States to begin ratification as soon as possible allowing Croatia to become a full member by 1 July 2013. On the other hand, it is expected that in an economic situation as severe as the one in which Croatia currently finds itself, the government will have to take a series of unpopular steps, which caused many to believe that it has decided to conduct the referendum before it starts taking those unpopular steps. Parts of the public thought the decision to announce the referendum for 22 January was rushed, since it did not leave enough time for public discussion and informing the citizens about the European Union, with the obligatory remark that the citizens are not well enough informed. It has also been announced that according to surveys, 80 percent of people believe they are not sufficiently informed, but no-one has ever explained what "being sufficiently informed" actually means or asked to what extent this may be a subjective impression among those 80 percent or whether this is an objective fact.

Will a “no“ to the EU lead to ‘junk rating’ of Croatia?

The focal point of discussions regarding the Croatian membership of the Union in the period before the referendum has somewhat shifted. Until recently, the focus of discussions between the two sides had been the question of sovereignty. The advocates of entry into the Union considered it the apex of sovereignty (since Croatia would be making a sovereign decision on its membership), while the opponents considered accession to membership to be nothing less than a loss of the sovereignty that was bitterly won in the war of the nineties. Sovereignty still plays a role in discussions, but the discussion has been brought up to date, so the focus has shifted to the current state of both, Croatia and the Union. As the referendum approaches, the proponents of accession to the Union have been saying with increasing frequency that, if the referendum were to be unsuccessful, Croatia would lose its credit rating and it should be noted that the next lower rung of rating for Croatia is ‘junk’, and losing our credit rating, with all the added difficulties that would accompany it, could lead us to ruin. The Foreign and European Affairs Minister Vesna Pusić, usually very active and a great advocate of Croatia's accession to the EU, has recently been especially engaged in the ‘credit rating’ argument, whereas before, she had regularly emphasised the strategic advantages of membership in the Union. Therefore, accession to the Union isn't necessarily considered with the long term in sight, but through the lens of current affairs and needs, for the needs of the referendum.

On the other hand, the opponents of accession to the Union cite the situation in Greece and Italy (much less Hungary) as an argument for staying outside the EU, as if these countries' current state is to blame on their EU membership and will not change in the future. There are two basic lines of argument among the opponents of the accession to the Union. The hard, non-parliamentary, right speaks primarily of the loss of sovereignty, while the hard left, also non-parliamentary, and also often lacking elementary political organisation, primarily uses anti-capitalist rhetoric, using the global economic crisis and the collapse of the neo-liberal economic model as argument.

The government is cautious, in spite of the irrelevance of those who have publically spoken against entry into the Union. It is aware of the fact that a failure of the referendum would represent a debacle for the Croatian policies that have been pursued for the past ten years or more and in which enormous energy and no little sums of money were invested. In case of failure it would take some explaining how something that all the relevant actors were in favour of could fail.

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