

# Turning nationalists into EU supporters: the case of Croatia

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## Introduction

Providing that nothing unexpected happens in the last phase of the accession talks between Croatia and the European Union, it is likely that they will be completed in the autumn of this year. Once the Treaty of Accession is signed, it will be followed by a referendum in Croatia on joining the European Union, which – providing there is sufficient support for EU membership among Croatian voters – will in turn be followed by a longer process of national ratification in the EU Member States. Although no date has been officially set, even for the completion of the accession talks, Croatian political leaders hope for EU entry on 1 January 2013,<sup>1</sup> while EU officials indicate that this might not happen before the end of 2013 or even in 2014<sup>2</sup> provided there are no further complications in the ratification process.

Croatia has always insisted on an ‘individual approach’ to membership for each candidate country and has persistently rejected any grouping with other Western Balkan states, arguing that other candidates in the region are too far behind in post-war reconstruction and in establishing stable democratic institutions and practices. Furthermore, they have unresolved internal issues, open disputes with their neighbours and internal border disputes (Serbia and Kosovo). Croatia’s journey towards EU membership would only be slowed down if it was grouped with other states. This does not mean that the Croatian authorities do not support their neighbours’ EU membership bids. On several occasions in 2010 and 2011 Croatian officials explicitly encouraged other countries in the Western Balkans to speed up reforms in order to become credible candidates for EU membership as soon as possible. President Josipović promised that once it joins the EU and becomes a full participant in debates on further enlargement Croatia would do nothing to slow down or block Serbia’s or Bosnia and Herzegovina’s entry.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, recent opinion polls conducted by *Eurobarometer* in autumn 2010<sup>4</sup> show that the majority of Croats – unlike the majority in the EU 27 – support the EU membership bids of all the Western Balkan countries. For example, while 66 percent of Croats would support Montenegro’s membership, only 36 percent in the EU 27 are in favour of it. Support for other countries is also high: for Bosnia and Herzegovina 74 percent (as against only 35 percent in the EU 27), for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (72 percent (as against 35 percent in the EU 27), for Kosovo 66 percent (29 percent), for Albania 65 percent (29 percent), and even for Serbia 61 percent (and only 34 percent in the EU 27).

Paradoxically, by relying only on public opinion polls, one could indeed conclude that more Croats support Serbia’s EU membership than that of Croatia. Although the polls show that support for membership has increased in the last year of negotiations, Croats remain largely unconvinced of the benefits of EU membership. The last *Eurobarometer* survey shows that only 27 percent of Croats believe that EU membership would be good for their country, while

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<sup>1</sup> See President Ivo Josipović’s statement at: [http://www.hrt.hr/index.php?id=48&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=93587&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=e46b727876](http://www.hrt.hr/index.php?id=48&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=93587&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=e46b727876).

<sup>2</sup> See statement by Hannes Swoboda at: <http://www.jutarnji.hr/hannes-swoboda--hrvatska-ce-u-eu-uci-tek-krajem-2013-/920502/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Dejan Jović, ‘Palubna diplomacija i funkcionalna suradnja: hrvatsko-srpski bilateralni odnosi na početku mandata Ive Josipovića’, *Izazovi evropskih integracija*, vol. 11, pp. 27-42.

<sup>4</sup> See: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74\\_hr\\_hr\\_nat.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74_hr_hr_nat.pdf).

29 percent think it would be bad for Croatia (41 percent says it would be neither good nor bad). Only 37 percent expect Croatia to benefit from EU membership, while 54 percent think there would be no benefits at all. There is a widespread sense of unease that EU membership would bring new opportunities for foreigners (i.e. Europeans) to buy Croatian real estate, in particular on the Adriatic coast. In addition, jobs that are now available exclusively to Croatian nationals (and *de facto* this means all jobs, since very few are advertised without a request for *domovnica*, a certificate of Croatian nationality) would also be available to other EU citizens, irrespective of their nationality. Due to factors that will be explained below, the general image of the EU is less positive in Croatia than in most other EU countries. Only 28 percent of Croats have a 'predominantly positive image of the EU', while 25 percent have a 'predominantly negative' one.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a poll conducted by Croatian pollster *Ipsos Puls* in November 2010 shows that Croats are unlikely to reject EU membership in an eventual referendum. Of the total population, 52 percent are in favour of joining the EU and 35 percent are opposed to it. There was an alleged increase of 10 percent in the number of people supporting EU membership between June and November 2010, which goes to show how volatile public opinion is with regard to this issue.<sup>6</sup>

Based on these data one might conclude that there is not much enthusiasm for EU membership in Croatia. Yet it is as if there is a sense of inevitability about it. Media reports on the EU accession talks have been rather technical, often using new jargon that means little to the general public. Most have simply stated which 'chapter' in the EU negotiations has been opened and closed, without describing the actual substance of the process and what it really means. This has left the impression that the entire EU accession process is something technical and better left to politicians, experts and the state administration. There again, the negotiators themselves have preferred to be left to their own devices, rather than having to face sometimes difficult questions and protests by various segments of the general public. No politician anywhere is likely to gain popularity by talking about the EU – and the same was (and still is) the case in Croatia.

The public opinion data correspond to what can be seen in Croatia itself. Most Croats believe that it is decisions made somewhere else and by somebody else that will (or will not) lead to EU membership. They do not feel that they can influence the decision in any particular way. This is not really surprising. People (not only in Croatia) rarely feel that they can influence political decisions, be it on a local, national or supranational level. The less influence they have, the more distant these issues are from their own personal lives. Croats are no exception to this general trend in Europe. Thus they believe that even if they voted 'No' in the referendum on EU membership, the pro-EU political elite would manage to find a way to overturn the result; if in the end Croatia did not achieve membership, then it would be due to decisions taken by external forces (the EU itself or some of its Member States) and not because Croatia had done or failed to do something. This sense of the outcome being all but inevitable, regardless of what happens on the ground, is at the root of the relative indifference in Croatia towards EU accession. It also means that Croats' expectations of the EU are fairly low, and consequently Croats are actually unlikely to be disappointed once they enter the EU. Those who are likely to be disappointed are those who expected much more than can be delivered, which is not the case here.

Nevertheless, at this stage it does indeed look as if Croatia has advanced towards achieving the paramount (and some would even say the only) foreign policy objective: membership of

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<sup>5</sup> See: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74\\_hr\\_hr\\_nat.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74_hr_hr_nat.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.poslovnih.hr/vijesti/istrazivanje-rast-podrske-pristupanju-eu-165356.aspx>.

the EU; and it is indeed very likely to become the 28<sup>th</sup> Member State. The fact that there is not much enthusiasm for membership still needs to be addressed during the referendum campaign on membership. The real challenge will be how to convince moderate (and as yet unconvinced) Croatian nationalists – especially those who participated in the war of independence (known in Croatia as the *Homeland War*) – that joining the EU does not mean losing sovereignty. To do this, the pro-EU political elite will need to get across the message that EU membership is the final stage on the long road of transition from ‘the Balkans’ (personified in the concept of *Yugoslavia*) to ‘Europe’ (i.e. the European Union, which for all intents and purposes is referred to as Europe, and which in this paper we will also call Europe). The aim is to show that, by joining the EU, Croatia would be more protected, more influential and more respected in the community of nation states; that it will have achieved not only symbolic recognition (such as in 1992) but *real recognition of its statehood*. If this strategy is successful, the pro-EU forces are likely to win the day and secure sufficient support for a ‘Yes’ vote. In this author’s view, due to circumstances that are specific to Croatia, this argument has perhaps more chance of convincing nationalists in Croatia than in other EU countries. However, as in all EU Member States, the battle between nationalists and anti-nationalists will never be over. The forces of nationalism will keep challenging the European Union as a concept and will agree to compromise only when and if it is instrumental to their national interests. In the case of Croatia this is likely to be manifested in a policy of opposing any further EU enlargement towards Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and imposing more bilateral conditions for supporting further enlargement into the remaining Western Balkan states.

### **Croatia’s five-fold transition: from war to peace**

Croatia’s accession to the European Union is a more complex process than any previous one due to the fact that the country was at the centre of the post-Yugoslav conflicts and wars. While Slovenia also experienced some resistance to its independence in 1991, the violence was limited to ten days of conflict with only a dozen casualties. Soviet intervention was also rather limited in scope in the Baltic states once they had indicated their intention to break away from the Soviet Union. But in Croatia’s case, the entire first decade of independence was marked by internal and external conflicts over its borders and internal disputes over its constitutional structure. It was not until January 1998 that the last part of the territory of what used to be the Socialist Republic of Croatia (1945-1991) was reintegrated into the post-Yugoslav Republic of Croatia. The intensive military conflict lasted from August 1991 until January 1992 but peace did not arrive until August 1995, when the largest part of the self-proclaimed secessionist Krajina region was defeated militarily and incorporated into the newly independent Croatia. The war claimed some 20,000 lives all told (including both military and civilian deaths). Even now, 20 years after the beginning of the conflicts, there are still about 2,000 people missing as a direct result of the atrocities. The bodies of some victims might never be found, as they were most likely transported to other territories of the former Yugoslavia, or even abroad. Some of those who died were reportedly buried beneath or beyond the minefields which have still not been completely cleared.<sup>7</sup> Some were buried in unknown locations, while other bodies were hidden in already existing graves, under other people’s names. The problem of missing people is still high on the agenda of bilateral

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<sup>7</sup> Croatia plans to clear the remaining minefields by 2019. Currently, 994 square kilometres are still laid with mines. See: <http://www.24sata.hr/politika/razminiranje-hrvatske-bi-trebalo-završiti-do-2019-50486>.

relations between Serbia and Croatia, as demonstrated at three meetings between Serbian President Boris Tadić and Croatian President Ivo Josipović in 2010.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the Serbo-Croatian war of the early 1990s created about half a million refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). In the first phase of the war, there were about 250,000 registered IDPs and refugees, mostly ethnic Croats who had to leave Krajina and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina which had been at war in 1992-1995. But after 1995, most ethnic Serbs from Croatia had become refugees in neighbouring Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result of the war, the ethnic Serb community in Croatia was reduced to approximately one third of its pre-war size. While in 1991 there were 581,663 Serbs (12.2 percent of the total population of Croatia), in the 2001 census there were only 201,631 (4.5 percent). Moreover, those who in previous censuses had declared themselves as 'Yugoslavs in the ethnic sense' also disappeared after the collapse of Yugoslavia. In 1981 there were 379,057 ethnic Yugoslavs (8.2 percent of the Croatian population), while even in 1991 (at the moment when the conflicts in Yugoslavia had already started and the process of disintegration was at an advanced stage) 106,041 Croats (2.2 percent of the population) declared themselves Yugoslavs in the ethnic sense. Most of them changed their ethnic self-definition (which in Yugoslavia and in all post-Yugoslav states was one of the fundamental markers of political and social identity) under heavy pressure and as part of the policy of *voluntary* or (in most cases) *involuntary assimilation*. Consequently, after the war, Croatia became a *de facto* mono-ethnic country. While in 1991 ethnic Croats made up 78.1 percent of its population, in 2001 they accounted for 89.6 percent.

The war thus dramatically changed the nature of Croatian society which historically had been fairly open to the influences of other cultures. Croatia's transition was therefore unique and much more complex than in any other EU candidate country. It was a case not of triple<sup>9</sup> or even quadruple<sup>10</sup> transition, but fivefold, having an additional – fifth – element: the transition from war to peace. In Croatia's case, not only have the political and economic system changed, the very identity of the state and the nation went through a radical and thorough transformation after 1989. The fact that it experienced major conflict has made its democratisation and Europeanisation much more difficult. Although unique compared to any other previous EU accession state, Croatia is only the first in a series of similar cases that might follow if the EU opts to expand further into the Western Balkans. All the potential candidate countries in Southeast Europe had similar experiences in the 1990s, although not to the same extent.

In Croatia, just as in other countries of the post-Yugoslav area, the political culture of the 1990s – and to a degree of the 2000s as well – was marked by nationalism, not by multiculturalism. The principles of internationalism and multi-ethnicity that dominated Yugoslav politics (and the European international system during the Cold War in response to the radical nationalism of the Second World War) were quickly abandoned and replaced by a 'return to nationalism', following similar trends in Eastern Europe after the 1989 'revolutions'. The main objective was to create, defend and strengthen the newly achieved

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<sup>8</sup> 'This is the primary, central issue in our bilateral relations. This issue has to be resolved so that we show to everyone that we care about the victims of the war and those who were left behind them', said President Tadić on 24 November 2010. <http://www.komentar.hr/portal/vijesti/svijet/5369>.

<sup>9</sup> Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: the East European and East German Experience* (London: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Taras Kuzio, 'Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?', *Politics*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2001, pp. 168-77.

statehood, not to preserve diversity and increase interaction. Politics of ‘ethnic engineering’ comprised a range of political and legal measures which favoured ethnic Croats – including members of the Croat ethnic community who lived in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina – and discriminated against all minorities, especially ethnic Serbs from Croatia. Even if the laws were subsequently changed to avoid discriminatory practices, they were often implemented according to ethno-nationalist objectives and principles. In the early 1990s this was most evident in the policy of citizenship,<sup>11</sup> while throughout the post-1995 period there was a high degree of bias against ethnic Serbs from Croatia in the Croatian judicial system, especially in cases related to war crimes.

On the whole, it can be said that Croatian nationalism more or less succeeded in achieving its main objectives in the 1990s, and was perhaps more successful than any other brand of post-Yugoslav nationalism. The three main objectives it achieved were: (a) international recognition of Croatia, despite initial hesitation and resistance on the part of the main European and global powers; (b) successful reintegration of all the territories that used to belong to the Socialist Republic of Croatia; and (c) an ethnically more homogenous Croatia than at any time in the past, with the size of its ethnic minorities much reduced. Ethnic homogeneity was one of the main objectives of all ethnic nationalisms in the Western Balkans, but nowhere else has it been so successful than in Croatia during the 1990s. Furthermore, by granting *de facto* citizenship to all the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia enhanced its political influence over this neighbouring and complex country, without any territorial expansion. It used politics of dual citizenship not only to protect ethnic Croats (who found themselves torn between loyalties to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) but also to advance its political objectives in the Western Balkans.<sup>12</sup> At the same time Croatia skilfully avoided international sanctions and isolation, although its initial policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina took it dangerously near. If there was any clear winner of the wars of the 1990s, it was Croatia, or rather Croatian nationalism. Indeed, this is how Croatian nationalists describe their own successes in the 1990s: as a victory for the Croatian cause, sometimes against all odds and mostly without significant EU support.<sup>13</sup>

The consequences were and still are significant: such victory not only strengthened Croatian nationalism domestically but also determined Croatia’s stance towards Europe. If you (unexpectedly) win a war, you do not heed any ‘conditionality policy’ or any such similar advice from the European Union. If you are convinced you were able to win a war on your own merits, it is difficult to accept external pressure to reform. Those who won the war are unlikely to agree to their policies and actions being thoroughly scrutinised. The increased confidence that came with winning the war was a major stumbling block to initial cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Pressure from the

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<sup>11</sup> Igor Štiks, ‘The Citizenship Conundrum in post-Communist Europe: The Instructive Case of Croatia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 62, no. 10, 2010, pp. 1621-38.

<sup>12</sup> That being said, the author does not argue against the policy of dual citizenship when it comes to Croats (or anyone else in Bosnia and Herzegovina). If introduced now, a ban on dual citizenship would force ethnic Croats to opt for one of two citizenships. If faced with such choice, a very large majority would chose Croatian citizenship and renounce Bosnian, if not for any other reason than because Croatian citizenship is soon to become also EU citizenship, with all the benefits that status brings. As a consequence, they would become foreigners in their own country of birth (Bosnia and Herzegovina), which could lead to a wave of migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia. This would in fact make Bosnia and Herzegovina less likely to remain multi-ethnic, and would in fact be another victory for ethnic nationalists in their attempt to construct mono-ethnic societies.

<sup>13</sup> Croatian nationalists acknowledge the fact that they had support from the United States, especially in the final military and police operations in the *Homeland War*, such as Operations *Flash* and *Storm* in 1995.

ICTY on Croatia, as well as EU pressure for reforms, was not at all welcome in Croatia which was the only post-Yugoslav state that could claim victory in the wars of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

The other fundamental element of Croatia's post-war identity was based on the notion of victimhood. In Croatian political circles – and in Croatian society in general – Croatia was viewed not only as the winner of the war, but also as a victim of that war.<sup>15</sup> The official narrative – which was soon to focus on glorifying the *Homeland War* (*domovinski rat*) – presented Croatia as the victim of foreign (Serbian/Montenegrin) aggression. This narrative insists on the inter-state and inter-ethnic nature of the war, and rejects any attempt to describe the conflict as a 'civil war'. Ethnic Serbs in the Krajina region (and often Serbs in general) are described as 'foreign invaders' who committed an act of international aggression (invasion), although they did not come to Croatia from anywhere else (at least not in the last few centuries) but were in fact born and lived in Croatia. But because the secession was organised and supported by Belgrade, the areas that declared secession from Croatia were treated as 'occupied'. This narrative then served to justify the expulsion of the 'occupiers' and restrictive measures when it comes to their returning home. In the nationalist narrative that emerged in the first years of independence, ethnic Serbs were collectively treated as 'guests' in what is essentially an (ethnically) Croat homeland. They were not seen as an integral part of Croatian society but rather as temporary and undesirable inhabitants.

In addition, Croatia declared itself a victim of the passivity and indifference with which the European Community approached the post-Yugoslav crisis from 1991 to 1995. Croatian nationalists are largely critical of Europe's role during the breakup of Yugoslavia, blaming it for being too passive in preventing the worst consequences of the war, for being morally deficient and completely insensitive to the suffering of other Europeans or for wanting to maintain the *status quo*, namely Yugoslavia, for too long. On more than one occasion, former President Tudjman criticised Europe for not helping Croatia. Without decisive US intervention in 1994 and 1995 (via Washington and the Dayton Agreement), the war in the former Yugoslavia would have caused even more casualties. Thus, while the United States understood the plight of the victims, Europe failed to do so. Subsequently, Croatian nationalists and supporters of sovereignty became even more dismissive of Europe. It had not helped the victim and got involved only to apply pressure on the winner. This came on top of the ideological scepticism with which all nationalists in principle view the European 'experiment'. The European Union is – after all – an alternative to the old Westphalian state system in which only nation states matter. It combines national sovereignty with functional institutionalised cooperation, something about which nationalists would by definition be sceptical. In the case of the post-Yugoslav states, the ambition to create new states out of multiethnic Yugoslavia led to the victory of nationalism over any alternatives. In order to create new states, a degree of nationalism was inevitable, and the political elite used all means available to promote it.<sup>16</sup> In this context it was only logical that the membership of the European Union was not seen as a priority over the objective of consolidating the new statehood. If membership of any international organisation was desirable, then it would be the United Nations and NATO. While membership of the United Nations meant confirmation of

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<sup>14</sup> For the ICTY and Croatia see: Christopher K Lamont, *International Criminal Justice and the Politics of Compliance* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Victor Peskin and Mieczysław Boduszyński: 'International Justice and Domestic Politics: Post-Tudjman Croatia and the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 55, no. 7, 2003, pp. 1117-42.

<sup>16</sup> For transformation of elite nationalism into popular nationalism, see Catherine Baker: *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

newly achieved statehood and thus had high symbolic value, membership of NATO (which Croatia achieved in 2009) offered an additional guarantee of safety and protection and thus increased the level of *de facto* sovereignty. The 1991-95 war thus provided the context within which Euroscepticism flourished in newly independent Croatia.

### **Constructing a new narrative: making nationalism compatible with EU membership**

In response, pro-EU forces in Croatia need to show that in order to have a functioning and independent state, Croatia needs to be a member of not only NATO but also the European Union, as it is the only way for Croatian national interests to be fully protected. It is not enough to declare sovereignty as such: a declaration can still be challenged and is purely symbolic unless there are sufficient guarantees from powerful, international actors. By joining the EU, Croatia will be offered a seat among the powerful nations of Europe, and will thus gain real power. EU membership is in direct continuity with the declaration of independence, and is its culmination.

The Croatian position towards EU membership changed in 2000, not because of a complete rejection of the nationalist narrative but rather because it has been reinterpreted in such a way as to present EU membership as the final stage in the process of making Croatia an independent and sovereign state. EU membership is now seen as the final step in the long process of transition which started with the formal declaration of independence from Yugoslavia but will only end once Croatia no longer feels that its survival as an independent state is being challenged. In the years of war and post-war reconstruction, Croatia was a sovereign state in name only. In reality, for a long time it was not in full control of its territory due to the presence of secessionist forces (supported, financed and politically controlled by Serbia during most of the war) as well as UN peacekeepers and other international observers in the United Nations protected areas of Krajina and Eastern Slavonia. It was also exposed to *de facto* interventionism as a result of the activities of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) whose jurisdiction and authority significantly reduced the independence of Croatia's political and judicial systems. Although Croatia began to reflect on the crimes committed by its own side in the post-Yugoslav wars (especially since 2001), had it not been for permanent pressure from the ICTY, its own prosecutors would have been rather reluctant and much more hesitant to prosecute. Finally, the EU *conditionality policy* further reduced the *de facto* sovereignty of the new Croatian state as regards domestic public policies. Over the last six years, since the accession talks began, the Croatian authorities have been obliged to implement reforms that otherwise they would rather have avoided. But it is primarily because of the prospect of EU membership that they decided to change.

This cooperation would not have been possible if the mainstream nationalist narrative developed by the Croatian political elite, including the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) which led the country for 17 out of 20 years since independence,<sup>17</sup> had not incorporated the objective of EU membership. The HDZ now argues that without EU membership, Croatia would remain a semi-sovereign country, still under heavy pressure from external forces. It would be much more vulnerable to potential tensions in the region of Southeast Europe, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina which shares a 932-kilometre border with Croatia and where some 450,000 Croatian nationals live. Furthermore, by becoming a member of the EU, Croatia would disassociate itself from the complexity of the 'Western Balkans', a concept

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<sup>17</sup> For the transformation of HDZ in the early 2000s, see: Dejan Jović, 'Croatia after Tudjman: the ICTY and issues of transitional justice', in Judy Batt and Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik (eds.), 'War Crimes, conditionality and EU integration in the Western Balkans', *Chaillot Paper* no 116, June 2009, pp. 13-27.

invented to describe a specific group of countries which emerged out of Yugoslavia but were not yet fully consolidated, plus Albania. By becoming part of Europe, Croatia would finally – and once and for all – ‘leave the Balkans behind’. One of the key claims of the Croatian nationalist discourse – that Croatia is a Central European, not a Balkan country – would finally materialise. Ever since the Yugoslav state was created in 1918, Croatian nationalist discourse argued against it on the grounds that Yugoslavia pushed Croats into the Balkans, a place where they did not belong. Even after the collapse of Yugoslavia, Croatia was still seen as part of the Western Balkans and not really as part of Europe. This view was compounded by the fact that in Europe there was a tendency to treat the Balkans as a ‘European backyard’ rather than as a room in its house. Europe also referred to ‘the Balkans’ as being the ‘other Europe’. In the collective mind the Balkans is closely associated with violence and conflict, despite the fact that there have been longer periods of cooperation than of conflict in this part of the world. For many Europeans, the Balkans is lawless, violent and pre-modern; a rather simplified picture which does not reflect the other – multiethnic and tolerant – side of the region. The process of transformation is about turning the ‘Balkans into Southeast Europe’, and then – into ‘Europe’, as John Lampe has indicated in the title of his book.<sup>18</sup> The process of EU enlargement to the Balkans is also the process of ‘de-Balkanising the Balkans’.<sup>19</sup> It would be the end of the Balkans, at least as a political concept.

The cultural and political dichotomy between ‘Europe’ and ‘the Balkans’ had direct consequences on how Croatian nationalism perceives EU accession. It appropriates it as the final step in the long struggle against Yugoslavia and anything associated with Yugoslavia, and thus with the Balkans.<sup>20</sup> In other words, EU membership is seen as ‘missing evidence’ that the Croatian nationalist discourse was in fact right in starting the process of secession from Yugoslavia in the first place. It is an opportunity to present the whole nationalist programme as progressive and modernising, rather than as regressive and out of step with contemporary trends of multiculturalism in the EU. In addition, by joining the EU, Croatia would leave the Balkans and would therefore contribute to its disappearance in the political sense.

Moreover, EU membership of Croatia would spell the end of 20 years of international supervision of the state’s policies. The Croatian nationalist discourse has always been critical of the ever-expanding international presence in Croatia in the war and in the post-war period. It viewed the various UN, ICTY, OSCE, EU and IMF missions to Croatia as hampering the country’s sovereignty. This was especially the case with the ICTY, against which Croatian nationalists are quick to mobilise. They hope that once the country becomes a member of the EU, such interference in internal Croatian politics will cease. Thus, EU membership is seen

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<sup>18</sup> John R. Lampe, *Balkans into Southeast Europe: A Century of War and Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> This concept occurs in both academic and semi-academic discourse. For the former, see: Andrew J Pierre: ‘De-Balkanizing the Balkans: Security and Stability in Southeast Europe’, USIP Special Report no. 54, available at: <http://www.usip.org/publications/de-balkanizing-balkans-security-and-stability-southeastern-europe>. In political discourse, see the official website of the President of Serbia, Boris Tadić, where it is said that the President ‘has actively promoted the ‘de-Balkanization of the Balkans’ by taking the initiative in reconciliation efforts as well as by encouraging an increase in regional trade’. See: <http://www.predsednik.rs/mwc/default.asp?c=100000&g=20061005141211&lng=eng&hs1=0>.

<sup>20</sup> Arguments of this nature are expressed, for example, in newspaper articles by three leading nationalist columnists in the Croatian daily press. See: Zvonimir Despot, ‘Ipak bolje EU nego Balkan’, *Večernji list*, 7 March 2011; Davor Butković, ‘Treća Jugoslavija je besmislica kao i politička jugosfera’, *Jutarnji list*, 13 November 2010; and Tihomir Dujmović: ‘Hrvatskom ulasku u Europsku uniju najviše se protivi Srbija’, *Večernji list*, 5 March 2011.



also as a bulwark against (in their view undesirable) foreign influences.<sup>21</sup> From the point of view of most nationalists in other EU Member States, it must seem a paradox that EU membership is seen as an instrument of gaining, not losing, *de facto* sovereignty. However, this is what has motivated and successfully transformed many ardent Croatian nationalists into (at least temporary) supporters of the European Union. On the one hand, they never liked the idea of Croatia becoming part of another multiethnic and supranational structure which some see as a kind of 'New Yugoslavia'. On the other, however, they hope that once Croatia has become a fully-fledged member, it will be more powerful and thus have more freedom to implement its own policies without being told what to do (or not to do).

## **Conclusion**

With the accession negotiations almost complete, the Croatian political elite now needs to secure sufficient support for EU membership among Croatian voters. Most of them are undecided, and a not insignificant proportion of the public opposes membership. However, the decision will be made by the large body of moderate nationalists who have prevailed in all the parliamentary elections since the country's independence with the exception of those in 2000.

The key to their acceptance of the EU lies in convincing them that EU membership is not incompatible with the long-term objectives of Croatian nationalism. Although at first sight this may appear paradoxical, the nature of Croatian politics since 1990 shows that it is not entirely impossible, largely due to the mental and conceptual dichotomy that opposes 'Europe' to 'the Balkans'.

The more nationalistic the government's rhetoric regarding the EU agenda, the more likely it is that these voters will be in favour of EU membership. They will support EU membership only if they see that the achievements of their nationalist struggle during the *Homeland War* (1991-5) are better protected if the country is in the EU rather than if it remains outside. However, there would be consequences for their expectations of EU membership. Once the country joins the EU, these very same people, elite and voters alike, will try to exploit the EU in an effort to disassociate Croatia from the 'remaining Balkans', namely from Serbia, first and foremost, but also from Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is thus a very real danger that, unless they are marginalised within Croatia, the same nationalists who voted for the EU would become the most vocal opponents of further enlargement to other Western Balkan countries. Indeed, they will almost certainly oppose any further softening of the EU border, because it is the border that divides 'Europeans' from the 'Others', in particular from Bosnians and Serbs, who should – according to Croatian nationalists – be kept permanently out of Europe. It is the fact that 'we' belong to Europe and 'they' do not which keeps us different and determines 'our' new identity. From that perspective, it is only logical that they want to keep that division (which they argue has deep historical, cultural and political roots) distinct. One of the leading Croatian opinion makers, Davor Butković, expressed this in clear terms in one of his columns in *Jutarnji list*, on 13 November 2010:

'If Croatia joins the European Union at the beginning of 2013, it will be separated from Serbia – in fact: separated from Serbia more than at any period of its modern history – for a solid period of time. This separation will be manifested both in economic terms and physically – through the Schengen system. For that reason it is

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<sup>21</sup> One could here reverse the old slogan of Croatian nationalists according to which Croatia was a *bulwark of Christianity (antemurale Christianitatis)* into Europe becoming the *bulwark of Croatian sovereignty*.

indeed unbelievable that some still argue that Croatia is now being threatened by some *Third Yugoslavia*. Croatia, I repeat, has never been farther away from Yugoslavia and Serbia in its whole history... When at the end of 2012 or the beginning of 2013 we finally join the EU, any talk of any sort of association with a Yugoslav prefix will become long-forgotten history. Fortunately'.<sup>22</sup>

One may of course wonder whether the narrative of Croatian nationalism will survive the deep political and cultural changes that EU membership brings. As we saw in public opinion polls conducted recently, most Croats today are in favour of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia joining the EU. The same is true of the political leadership of Croatia. So, what chance do Croatian nationalists and supporters of Croatian sovereignty have within an increasingly globalised and Europeanised framework? Regardless of why and how they entered the EU, no Member State remained quite the same after joining. In all of them the EU was instrumental in defeating excessive nationalism and in promoting (in many cases rather successfully) liberal politics. Would Croatia not also become much more liberal and cosmopolitan once it joins the Union?

It might indeed. In fact, in the last decade Croatian politics have become increasingly liberal, largely as a result of the EU accession process. However, the founding discourse of the *Homeland War*, which in essence celebrates the war and conflict of the 1990s, has survived. Indeed, in this final phase of the EU negotiations and with the twentieth anniversary of Croatia's new statehood this discourse has been revived and revitalised. In these last 20 years, the myth of the *Homeland War* has become the keystone of official discourse and enshrined in the official declaration enacted by Parliament back in 2000.<sup>23</sup> This narrative has now become one of the main obstacles to creating a more liberal, open-minded and tolerant Croatia which is open to its neighbours. However, the European Union is primarily a community of peace, which actively promotes a culture of peace and tolerance. It should thus be expected that those who are unwilling to actively promote peace might come under some pressure.

The experience of previous enlargements shows that EU membership offers a new chance not only to liberal and anti-nationalist globalising forces but also to nationalist anti-globalists. While the former use the new institutional set-up to advance their liberal agenda and defeat local nationalism, the nationalists also use EU membership to consolidate their own discourse and respond to the challenges of globalisation. They use the EU as the new 'hostile other' in order to mobilise the nation against it. Both of them – nationalists and globalists – are constantly restructuring. They both survive, and even strengthen their own positions in the new circumstances. Similar trends may of course be expected in Croatia too.

By accepting Croatia in the Union, the EU will be faced with the new experience of including a country that has recently been at war and where that war is still much remembered and celebrated. It will accept a member that bases much of its contemporary political identity on the notion of being both a winner and a victim of a war that Europe considered unfortunate and unnecessary. It will be a challenging experience and one that is likely to have a major impact on the EU integration of other Western Balkan states in the future.

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<sup>22</sup> Davor Butković, 'Treća Jugoslavija je besmislica kao i politička jugosfera', *Jutarnji list*, 13 November 2010.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/274008.html>.