



## **CROATIA RECEIVES GREEN LIGHT FOR EU MEMBERSHIP**

Croatia who started EU accession talks in October 2005, the same date as Turkey did, has received the green light from Brussels to be the Union's 28th member. Membership talks with Croatia have been ended, which will be followed by the signing of the Accession Treaty before this year is out and Croatia's admission into the EU on July 1, 2013. The Croatian government has celebrated the end of accession talks as one of the biggest achievements of Croatia. However, EU opponents in Croatia who constitute a sizeable group continue to defy the government.

It could be sad that Croatia's integration with the EU has gone through two stages. The first stage is the period until 2000 and the second one is the one which has come to this day. Croatia's aim to join the EU was widely expressed in the first stage but it did not go to much beyond being an unfulfilled wish.

The solid steps towards EU integration were taken after 2000, though this stage was full of problems. First and foremost, some Croatian politicians perceived the criticisms from the EU as anti-Croatian sentiments and attempts at interfering into Croatia's internal affairs. There are some in Croatia even today who believe that Croatia was made to undergo a set of unnecessarily excessive difficulties during the accession talks.

Croatia was forced to capture some Croatian citizens accused for committing the war crimes and turn them over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as one of the preconditions to start the accession talks. However, Croatians were of the naive conviction that as they waged a war of independence in the first half of the 1990s, they could not be charged with having committed war crimes. The issue of war crimes still poses certain sensitivity in Croatian society.

Yadranka Kosor, who took office at the beginning of 2009 as Croatia's Prime Minister had set the successful conclusion of her country's accession talks with the EU as its fundamental priority. What was to be done was to overcome the border dispute with Slovenia, which she did. She later took some crucial steps to fight corruption. Investigations were launched about hundreds of people, among them Croatia's former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, in the face of abuse of power and corruption charges, and arrests were made.

Owing to the Croatian government's determined and insistent attitude to fulfill all criteria, membership talks with the EU were wrapped up. The thing is that the tough process of accession is not over yet from the standpoint of the Croatian government because the reforms Croatia pledged to carry out and implement will continue to be scrutinized by Brussels. On the other hand, those Croatians who are against EU membership will have to be persuaded. It's been known for a long time that EU does not have a very favorable image in Croatia. For example, a report issued on February 18, 2011 based on a poll conducted by Eurobarometer, which is in charge of EU's public opinion polls, indicated that 27 of those polled found EU membership useful and 29 percent harmful. 41 percent of those polled found Croatia's EU membership neither useful nor harmful. Current public opinion polls also show that the percentage of those who support Croatia's EU membership is below 50.

Those Croatians who actively fought in the war for their country's independence and have a more nationalistic stance believe that EU membership will damage Croatia's sovereignty. That is why high level Croatian officials have insistently been giving messages that EU membership will make Croatia a more secure and more prestigious country with a stronger say in international politics, thus trying to present EU membership as the ultimate phase of Croatia's independence and sovereignty. Brussels has also lent support in this respect and the announcement heralding the conclusion of accession talks was so made as to coincide with the date of 20th anniversary of Croatia's independence.

Those of lower income groups are also suspicious towards Croatia's EU membership. It is apparent that those people fear EU membership will further increase the cost of living making life even more difficult for them. There are also those who are wary of the economic side of the story. They believe that Croatia where the rate of unemployment soars around 18 percent and whose 2011 growth rate is predicted to be below 2 percent will bump into serious hardships as a result of competition with EU companies.

Within 30 days following the signing of the Accession Treaty, Croatia will have to hold a popular referendum on EU membership. In the hope of tackling the anti-EU sentiments in the country, Croatian officials eased the referendum conditions with a Constitutional amendment in 2010. To put it this way, the absolute majority of those casting their votes instead of that of the number of registered electorate will be sufficient for the referendum to be a successful. Nevertheless, Croatian officials will still have to conduct an intense campaign in the forthcoming months to boost popular support for EU membership.