

Recommendations

FROM THE
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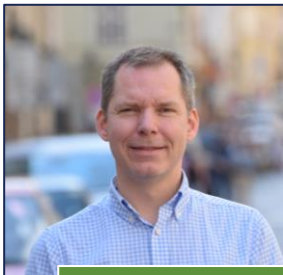
TEPSA NETWORK

TO THE
INCOMING

CROATIAN PRESIDENCY



The Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) has a tradition of formulating recommendations to the incoming Council Presidency. These recommendations are formulated by experts from the TEPSA network, without necessarily representing the views of TEPSA or its Member Institutes. They will be presented to the incoming Croatian Presidency on the occasion of the TEPSA Pre-Presidency Conference on 28-29 November 2019 in Zagreb. The conference is organised by the Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb (IRMO) and TEPSA, with support from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Croatia and the European Commission – namely from the Europe for Citizens and Horizon 2020 programmes (in the framework of the SEnECA and InDivEu projects).



PETR KRATOCHVÍL

Institute of International Relations, Prague, and TEPSA Board member, coordinated the process and composed the recommendations.

Introduction

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The Croatian Presidency will be defined by its ambitious programme, which is further complemented by the informal plans revealed by Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. The Presidency faces a number of difficult challenges, ranging from the currently stalling enlargement process to the need to conclude the negotiations about the new Multiannual Financial Framework. Croatia is not a neutral mediator in these matters, as it has a clearly spelt-out position regarding both the enlargement process and, as a Friend of Cohesion, also the future budget.

The priorities of the Croatian Presidency are closely linked to the overall tenor of the Presidency trio, and the priorities clearly overlap with those of the other members of the Presidency troika, i.e. Finland and Romania. This also defines the four priorities we have chosen as we discussed some of the above-mentioned topics in our recommendations for the previous presidencies. The four policy areas on which our recommendations focus are:

- 1) the renewed attention to enlargement;
- 2) the novel focus on migration;
- 3) the strategy regarding cohesion as a sensitive socio-economic problem;
- and 4) connectivity as an overarching topic of utmost importance.

Rethinking the enlargement process and the Eastern Partnership strategically

HRVOJE BUTKOVIĆ

Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb



The current standstill regarding enlargement shows that the accession process needs to be seriously re-thought as it has become overly politicized and thus unpredictable. Instead of relying on the practice of member states blocking a decision on enlargement in the Council, the EU should focus on making the fulfilment of the membership criteria more transparent and on developing **new instruments to monitor the rule-of-law after the accession**.

The Croatian Presidency should strongly endorse the Berlin Process, which is still an initiative of only several member states, as it aims at **boosting regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries and their EU counterparts**. The Process should be used as a tool to achieve goals of common interest and ensure the sustainability of reforms in these countries.

The Croatian Presidency should use the opportunity of the Western Balkan Summit in May 2020 to give a new impetus to the current enlargement policy. The French proposal for the reform of the enlargement methodology is a welcome development and should be further worked upon. Equally importantly, the Presidency should work on **resolving bilateral issues** between the Western Balkan countries as these tend to be among the major obstacles on the path towards the EU membership. It should also foster positive attitudes towards further enlargement, which at the moment is not very popular among the EU citizens. As the only SAP country that entered the EU Croatia possesses relevant experiences with the accession process.

The Presidency should work on improving the sharing of these experiences with all the countries in the region.

The high-level meeting between the leaders of the EU and the leaders of the six Eastern Partnership countries should be used to further the process of bringing these countries closer to the EU. The Presidency should insist

upon furthering the principle of a merit-based progress towards closer ties with the EU, which would be measured by reform progress. This would imply that **reform efforts are rewarded by reachable aims**. For example, the EaP countries which persist on the path of reforms should be offered a membership in the EU's Customs Union, Energy Union or Digital Single Market.

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Preparing for the future of the EU's migration policies

PATRÍCIA LISA

Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid

The Croatian Presidency is taking place in challenging moments for the EU project, but the start of a new Commission is always an excellent occasion for advocacy and strategic planning. Additionally, Croatia will be the last country of the presidency's trio, the other two being Romania and Finland, and will have to take stock of the last eighteen months of the working programme of the Council. The exercise can be a good departing point for the debate on the future of migration and asylum policies. The relative stabilization of the migration pressures to pre-2015 crisis levels did not help with the still persistent cleavages between the member states. The debates continued to be strongly emotional, with a subsequent negative impact on the EU's interinstitutional decision-making process. Nevertheless, the EU has managed to deliver partial reforms, with important outcomes for strengthening the EU's operational and coordination capacities, mostly through the relevant EU agencies: EASO and the EBCG.



The President-Elect Ursula von der Leyen is endeavouring "a fresh start on migration". A consultation process is taking place to prepare the communication of the Commission. Twenty years after their first inception in the EU Council conclusions in Tampere, the EU's migration and asylum policies will have to readdress the integrity of the European common borders in a new solidarity-based approach with an obvious interlinkage with the design of the Schengen system.

The Croatian presidency should second the Commission's consultation process on migration, connecting the results to the discussion about the next multiannual JHA guidelines.

Croatia is an important geostrategic front-line member state. The cooperation on border control and the partnerships with third countries on migration are among its main priorities. Within this framework, the Croatian presidency should second the Commission's consultation process with a **high-level debate on the possible fundamental axes for the future of the EU's migration and asylum policy and the protection of the common borders**. This work can also feed the discussion for the next multiannual JHA guidelines, which should ideally be approved by the European Council in the spring of 2020.

As for the partnerships with third countries, the recent setbacks in the enlargement process in the Western Balkans should not undermine the geostrategic importance of the region for the EU. The Croatian presidency is best placed to keep this regional cooperation high on the agenda and to **build bridges between member states and the Western Balkan partner countries to strengthen and interconnect their asylum and migration systems**, as well as their operational capacities and migration diplomacies. Furthermore, the current EU-Turkey partnership, which was established under very special circumstances in 2016, is going to have to be reassessed as the corresponding funding is going to run out by the end of 2020. The presidency can work through future sustainable solutions to continue to **strengthen the cooperation with Turkey** in migration matters.



Strengthening the EU's growth and cohesion

MAJA BUČAR

Centre of International Relations, University of Ljubljana



In line with the new Strategic Agenda of EU, the Croatian Presidency lists the balanced, sustainable and inclusive growth of the EU as one of its priorities. Implementing this priority is of utmost importance, but here the Presidency is also faced with a number of challenges, including the consequences of Brexit as well as the pressing need to complete the agreement on the MMF 2021-2027. The latter is crucial for starting the planned programmes aimed at strengthening the economic base of the EU and its competitiveness.

Balanced growth suggests a need to strengthen a whole array of policies which strengthen the cohesion of the EU. This requires not only significant financial support for the regional policy through the currently hotly debated cohesion funds but also an appropriate **long-term comprehensive strategy** in this area. The financial support for the Cohesion Policy should not be endangered in spite of other important commitments of the EU, like the new Green Deal. But the content of the regional policy needs to be reformulated as well so that it would be adjusted to the specific needs of the less developed regions. Thus their gradual convergence could be assured. The Croatian presidency is well placed to understand the importance of cohesion funds for regional development due to its own experience with the implementation of the on-going financial perspective. At the same time, the absorption capacity of the less developed regions, along with the continuous removal of barriers to a more efficient allocation of resources, deserves specific policy attention.

The financial support for the Cohesion Policy should not be endangered, other important commitments of the EU notwithstanding. Having said this, the content of the regional policy needs to be reformulated.

The consequences of Brexit along with economic uncertainties in global markets suggest that ensuring the sustainability of EU growth is not a simple task for 2020. In particular, the **deepening of the Single Market** in all its dimensions can be an important tool to offset short-term economic difficulties and enable the EU to follow an ambitious long-term development strategy. The EU model of growth, with its emphasis on quality

employment and inclusiveness, is based on **investing in its people** through upgrading their skills and education. This requires that the digital transformation the EU is undertaking be shaped in a way that embodies our societal values and promotes inclusiveness and not only based on the technicalities of the digitalisation. This is a matter to which the Presidency should pay appropriate attention.

Developing a comprehensive and rules-based connectivity

ROMAN VAKULCHUK

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Connectivity is among Croatia's priority areas for its 2020 EU presidency. Sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity is at the core of the EU's 2018 Connectivity Strategy, and is now higher on the agenda than it ever was before in European history. The Strategy draws on the EU's four comparative advantages: a strong internal market; experience in creating cross-border networks; the capacity to build strong partnerships; and a robust financial market. By the end of 2019, the EU's approach to connectivity has been sharpened, concretized and better operationalized, giving the partners a clearer view of the EU's internal and external interests and development priorities.



Still, one particular challenge that poses risks to the connectivity agenda is the EU's limited anticipatory and adaptive capacity when dealing with internal problems (e.g., those related to Brexit, migration, and macroeconomic stability) and reacting to external ones (e.g., China's economic slowdown, the US-China trade war, global security challenges). In this situation, issues become more dynamic and multi-dimensional, problems more complex and actors more numerous. **Better anticipation of and preparedness for internal and external risks** requires higher flexibility on the part of the EU and its approach to connectivity.

For Croatia's presidency, we suggest prioritizing four connectivity dimensions for the EU relations with the Eastern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, Asia and other parts of the world, which means elaborating roadmaps and launching concrete plans of action. First, the EU should boost its **soft infrastructure cooperation** in the form of educational mobility partnerships, human networks, knowledge communities, and cross-border business and cultural partnerships. This is the area where the EU has a distinct advantage compared to other global connectivity initiatives in which the soft infrastructure dimension is often downplayed and lags behind a massive hard infrastructure investment (e.g., China's Belt and Road Initiative).

Croatia's presidency should focus on four connectivity dimensions – soft infrastructure, decarbonization, building new networks, and awareness-raising and impact assessment – and elaborate roadmaps and launch concrete plans of action in these areas.

Second, the EU's connectivity measures that accelerate **decarbonization** are of vital importance. The world is facing mounting pressure from climate change. Given the EU's solid decarbonization track record, large epistemic capacity and experience, the EU is well placed to take a

leading global role in building and fostering bilateral, regional and international **decarbonization-based partnerships and networks**, and in promoting clean energy and environmental standards. Third, the EU should focus on building new bilateral and multilateral **networks in digital infrastructure and financial markets as well as in transport**, including the EU's Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T). Last but not least, it should expand *awareness-raising* and *impact assessment* measures across all the dimensions of the connectivity strategy. This is necessary for *building trust* internally and with external partners, achieving higher economic spillover effects, better anticipating risks and strengthening the adaptive capacity. The EU needs to identify what works and what does not, zoom in on success stories and failures, and broadly communicate this information to societies within Europe as well as those of partner countries, including through the networks built as part of the soft infrastructure cooperation.