

Gazda, Adam; Borzan, Biljana

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INTERVIEW WITH BILJANA BORZAN, CROATIAN MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Adam Gazda

On 1st of July 2013, Croatia entered the European Union. The country has 12 seats in the European Parliament, one of them held by Biljana Borzan (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). She is a member of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and also a substitute in the Committee on Foreign Affairs. Previously, she was a member of the Croatian Parliament (2007–2013) and since 2008 she holds a position in the Presidency of the ruling Social Democratic Party of Croatia. Originally from Osijek, the 4th largest city in Croatia, Biljana Borzan graduated in medicine and for part of her life worked as a doctor in Osijek Community Health Centre. For the readers of Porta Balkanica she kindly agreed to give her views on a few topics regarding in particular Croatia's new status as a member of the European Union.

It has been 4 months since Croatia entered the EU. Do you think that during that time the country has sufficiently advocated its interests within the Union and subsequently succeeded to implement its demands into EU legislation proposals?

Since the accession Croatia has had the chance to participate in the legislative procedures through our representatives in the Council and through its Members of the European parliament. I believe that, even though our mandate will last less than a year, we will be able to safeguard the interests of Croatian and European citizens. For example, last month I submitted several amendments on the legislative dealing with maritime spatial planning. As Croatia has a very diverse coast with over 1200 islands this directive would have a different impact on us than for example Portugal, whose coast is basically a straight line. Therefore my amendments put more emphasis on the subsidiarity

principle allowing Member states more flexibility in maritime spatial planning.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of Croatia's EU membership?

Europeans today tend to forget that the Union was envisioned as a guarantee of peace between European nations. We in Croatia know very well how precious and fragile peace, stability and democracy are. Of course there are other, less abstract advantages to EU membership like freedom of travel, the common market, a stronger voice on the global stage etc. Furthermore, even though our negotiations were long and sometimes frustrating the process has transformed Croatia into a better country for its people. Today Croatia is a country, whose former Prime minister is in jail on corruption charges, where gay prides are held without major incidents and where houses are not

built without construction permits. In 2003, these things were unimaginable.

There are disadvantages as well. We were obliged to leave CEFTA which has hurt our trade with Bosnia and Serbia. Some of our vines are banned from export because Italy and Slovenia have protected similar brands. We have less sovereignty in regards to our territorial sea which is a problem if you know that the Italian fishing fleet is much larger than ours. These are not the only disadvantages but in the big picture Croatia is much better off with the EU than without it.

With which countries in particular should Croatia seek cooperation in the EU, in order to promote the joint interests?

The countries in the region like Slovenia, Italy and Hungary are our logical partners in regards to trade, transport and cross border cooperation. With the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria we have historical and more recent tourist ties that will grow stronger now that we are members of the same club. Furthermore, a lot of Austrian and German capital is invested in Croatia and we expect this will continue and increase since now there are less obstacles to investment.

You mentioned Czech Republic; do you see any particular areas where cooperation with this country would be of extra relevance?

Up until now the exchange between our two countries was pretty much a one way street with our Czech guests coming to the Adriatic every summer. In my opinion this needs to change. Croatia could learn a lot from the Czech Republic when it comes to the absorption of EU funds. You have the experience and expertise we need and I believe our government should make steps to facilitate this cooperation.

Recently Croatia has been seeking to implement the minority rights law by the introduction of bilingual signs - in Croatian and in the language of a minority counting at least one third of the population of a certain municipality, which concerns especially Serbian. On what else should the country focus in relation to minorities in order to avoid segregation and potential conflicts?

Our minorities and their rights are protected by constitutional laws that, among other things,

guarantee their proportional representation in the public and political life in Croatia. The government is resolute in respecting these laws as it should. Unfortunately, the political opposition led by an EPP¹ member party is fomenting unrest and saying that the laws should not be respected. The paradox is even greater as it was them that, under pressure from the EU, created these laws. Croatia is and will be a country where laws are upheld, regardless of people that would endanger more almost two decades of peace and reconciliation for a few percent more in the polls.

Can the EU membership contribute to better cohabitation of various minorities in Croatia?

Of course, and it already did. Croatia is not much different in that aspect than other EU countries.

In September this year the Commission threatened to impose sanctions on Croatia if the country would not amend the Law on judicial cooperation in criminal matters with EU member states allowing extradition of persons wanted for alleged crimes committed before the year 2002. Do you think this was an appropriate approach from the Commission or were these threats disproportionate to the given situation?

All Croatia wanted in that particular situation was to be treated like other Member states, but as all disagreements with the Commission are resolved I don't see a point in discussing this issue.

How big according to you are the chances of other ex-Yugoslav countries and Albania entering the EU in the next 10 years?

It took Croatia almost 10 years to become a member and for five of those years Europe was going through an economic boom. Now the economy is still struggling and the negotiations are more thorough and demanding. The EU perspective needs to be a viable goal for these countries as it is an incentive for reform and reconciliation in this troubled region. If it wasn't for the EU Serbia and Kosovo would never sit at the same table and talk. The negotiation process is never easy and sometimes not fair, but countries in the region must go through it as it is a way for positive

¹ The European People's Party.

transformation. Unfortunately, even though most countries in the Western Balkans are making progress Bosnia and Herzegovina is actually regressing because of an irresponsible political caste that is interested only in protecting its status.

Do you think that the integration process should be speeded up or that the accession criteria should be strictly followed even at the cost of giving lower priority to the EU agenda in the (potential) candidate countries, as is the case of for instance Turkey?

The process itself is a powerful tool for positive changes and reforms and therefore I believe that accession criteria should be strictly followed.

The European Commission 5 times recommended the Council to start accession negotiations with Macedonia however due to a negative stance of Greece they were yet not commenced. Should the EU, for instance with the help of the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle or the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, intervene more in the negotiations between Macedonia and Greece over the name dispute and ultimately help to find speedy solutions leading to the initiation of accession talks?

The worst aspect of the name dispute is the fact that the Macedonian people are the victims of this impasse! Croatia was also blocked several times

in its path to the EU and we know how frustrating this is for a country. Especially if the reason is something as fundamental as a country's name. This has led to a resurgence of nationalism and made the political situation in Macedonia volatile.

The EU is making progress in Kosovo where the conflict and disputes are much more serious than the FYROM-Greece situation so I see no reason why a similar diplomatic effort couldn't be made there as well.

You have worked a relatively short time as a member of European Parliament and in May 2014 there will be new elections. If you are re-elected, do you have any long-term goal you would like to achieve in the office?

My goals are the same as they were the first day in the office. Members of the European Parliament have a responsibility to watch over the legislative process that shapes the everyday life of EU citizens. We must be aware at any time whether a legislative act could make life miserable for a farmer or force an entrepreneur to close down his business. Croatia is a small country and twelve MEPs do not seem much in comparison to the total of over seven hundred, but there are farmers and entrepreneurs in other Member States who also feel the effects of EU legislation. Together with other MEPs our job is to watch over the interests of the European citizens as their elected representatives in the European Parliament.