

The presidency of the Council, COVID-19 and Croatia. What do they have in common?

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Abstract

Currently, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, also known as COVID-19, is spreading throughout the world. This pandemic currently affects not only the lives of citizens in everyday life, but also the pursuit of the activities of politicians, statesmen or employees of the European Union institutions. In our paper, we have analyzed and described in detail the Presidency of the Council, which is currently chaired by Croatia and what challenges Croatia is currently facing.

Keywords: presidency, Council, Covid-19

1 The current state of the issue discussed

The Croatian Presidency started on the 1st of January in 2020 and ends on June 30 in 2020. The Presidency lasts for six months. In our paper we want to look at the Presidency of the Council, in the EU, as an institute, its development and the mechanism of rotation of presidencies using the descriptive and comparative method. The contribution in our paper is the evaluation of the Presidency of the Republic of Croatia in response to the operational management during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will respond on what challenges Croatia is currently facing.

The Presidency of the Council is one of the most important activities, which is quite demanding and complex, as it involves several activities. The three basic activities during the Presidency of the Council are administration and its management, followed by the administration and management of the Council of Foreign Ministers to the management and administration of the other levels of the Council of the European Union. Activities whether the presiding country's actions may lead to influencing the priorities of the Union and thus opening negotiations on matters that the country considers important. (Hrivík, 2017) However, the Council's negotiations and the enforcement of priorities affect not only the diplomatic capacities of the states, but also the current events taking place in Europe and the world. The most recent is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the suspension of a number of conferences and negotiations under the EU Presidency. In the past, we have witnessed events that have influenced the importance of the Presiding State, for example, by the Ukrainian crisis, unregulated migration to the EU, or the Lisbon revision of the Treaties on the European Community and later the EU.

Each Presidency has certain priorities. Thus, each presiding country has some influence on setting these priorities, often pursuing their national interests, but considering the interests of the European Union as a whole. The constant evolution of the Presidencies and their constant evolution is that priorities are mainly about the priorities of the EU as a whole rather than national priorities.

This is proofed and evidenced by the experience of the Croatian Presidency. The Strategic Program for the European Union of June 2019, which runs until 2024, identifies four priority areas for the Council. This document contains not only priorities but also guidelines for the other institutions of the European Union. The main four priorities of the Strategic Program for the EU are the protection of citizens and their freedom, the development of a strong and dynamic economic base, the creation of a climate-neutral, ecological, green, social and fair Europe, the promotion of European interests and values at world level. The Croatian Presidency fully agreed on this program and continued to prepare and work on addressing their internal and external challenges precisely in line with this program. (Strategic program for the EU, 2019)

The Institute of Presidency was already known in 1951 in the first Treaty on the European Coal and Steel Community, where the presidency was gradually defined for all members for a period of three months in alphabetical order in the national languages of the countries concerned. Several years later, in 1957, the period was extended to six months in the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, which was

confirmed in so-called The Merger Treaty, later in the Tindemans Report, or the Three Wise Report. The Presidency was supposed to increase the efficiency of communication between the European Council and the Council of Ministers. Subsequently, in 1970 there was a further modification of the Presidency through intergovernmental European political cooperation, which resulted in regular intergovernmental consultations of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs with a view to coordinating the positions of the Member States. In 1981, a presidential trio system was set up in London, which meant cooperation between the previous presiding country, the present country and the following country. The Presidency Trio aims to harmonize and minimize differences between the presiding countries.¹ In 1985, the first revision of the Founding Treaties of the European Community took place, where the presiding country was given greater responsibility, whether in terms of political cooperation or the timetable for negotiations. In 1991 they agreed in Maastricht that the presiding country would be held accountable by being responsible for expressing the international political positions of the European Union. (Hrivík, 2017)

In summary, firstly the Presidency creates a predetermined program and priority issues. This is important to ensure continuity. The program is expected to consider current issues, issues that previous presidencies have failed to address and also urgent current issues, as it was during Croatian presidency about Covid- 19 pandemic. Program is also based on a common agenda and topics set by the trio chair. The presidency has certain roles: the role of the mediator is the flow of speech to ensure agreement or consensus, the role of administrator to ensure organization of meetings, formal and informal events, representative role on international and EU level, the role of coordinator between Council and Member states, the role of agenda setting during the six months presidency. (Vodić kroz Hrvatsko predsjedanje Vijećem Europske unije 2020, 2019)

2 Discussion

As we mentioned in our paper, the so-called Presidency Trio, the aim of this trio is to ensure a simpler and more continuous process of handing over the presidency every six months. They cooperate together and have a common eighteen-month program. Croatia ends the trio, which began with the Presidency of Romania, followed by Finland to Croatia. Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia will be following countries and Slovenia will end their presidency in December 2021.

Their common program formed five pillars of how the Union should work, such as the Union of Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness, a Union that supports and protects all its citizens, a Union that has a strong climate policy progress and is moving towards an Energy Union, The Union of Freedom, Security and Truth and the Union, which is a strong global player. The existing trio program focuses on the common values of the EU, such as respect for human rights and values, human freedom, equality, democracy, and the rule of law. The program also included economic growth, boosting competitiveness, and promoting investment.

Croatia's priorities under the EU Presidency are a Europe that is developing, connecting, protecting and influential, and has recommended topics. These are perceived as important, and therefore Croatia, as the country holding the Presidency, has a strong emphasis on them. These topics include:

- An ambitious, sustainable, and balanced Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2021-2027
- Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
- Stopping negative demographic trends
- Connectivity: The Trans-European Transport Network and the CEF (Connecting Europe Facility)
- Security, strategic guidelines for free, safe and just European Union
- Enlargement policy and the EU-Western Balkans summit
- Green Europe and a 'Green Deal'
- New job markets, the importance of knowledge, education, innovation, and lifelong learning
- Connecting the EU with the public, particularly young people
- Democratization, the fundamental values of the Union, the fight against fake news, intolerance, and disinformation on digital platforms (eu2020.hr, 2020)

As Prime Minister of Croatia Andrej Plenković said in an introductory speech on Croatia's EU presidency, the four priorities summarized in the motto of their presidency, namely Strong Europe in a world full of challenges.

¹ The Amsterdam revision of the Treaty on European Union of 1997 reduced the Trio Presidency down to two, which returned to the Presidential Trio in 2007 in the Nicosian version of the Lisbon treaty.

He also said that the Croatian Presidency is coming at a time of major changes when the virus and pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Europe has not yet been discussed. (eu2020.hr, 2020)

Croatia is interesting not only because of the ongoing Presidency, but also because this country is the “youngest” member of the EU. Croatia should be role-model for the other countries of the Western Balkans how to become a member of the EU. Croatia also joined the United Nations in 1992, the World Trade Organization in 2000, NATO in 2009 and as we mentioned, the European Union in 2013.

The priorities that Croatia has set out in its program are a Europe that is developing as a priority to harmonize regional development, increase competitiveness and also fight against climate changes. The Europe that connects within the economy is harnessing the potential of the common economy, improving the quality of infrastructure, and connecting EU citizens more closely. The priority of a Europe that protects is to protect its citizens by guaranteeing the freedom of each citizen, but also to ensure a sustainable migration policy. The aim is to show strength in the fight against cyberterrorism or misinformation in the digital world. The fourth priority, Influential Europe, is to strengthen the EU's position in the global world. The aim is to strengthen the Union's position, expand its impact, eliminate poverty, develop global development, promote stability. (eu2020.hr, 2020)

One of the priorities in the integration processes is close regional cooperation, support for communication and trade between countries in the region. The European Union is the main trading partner for the countries of the Western Balkans, but also thanks to regional cooperation, which makes accession to the EU conditional, the countries of the Western Balkans also benefit from intensive intra-regional trade and political cooperation. Following the recent enlargements of the EU, the Western Balkans is a priority for the EU, as the countries of south-eastern Europe have become immediate neighbors and thus neighbors of the European Union's external borders. During the Croatian Presidency, this priority was not on the list of priorities that Croatia wanted to achieve during the Presidency. The opening of further negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania is a great success.

Western Balkans and the integration of the countries of this region, we are talking about the priority of the European Union as such. For the EU, the integration of these countries into the European structure is important from several points of view. One of them is the promotion of peace, stability in the region, economic development in the Western Balkans and, finally, the provision of secure external borders. Why we are talking about the sustainability of peace and border security is also because the Western Balkans as a region has a very turbulent past and is a post-conflict region where the non-integration of these countries could result in greater isolation but also the threat of further conflict. (Barčáková, 2019)

During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic many of the meeting had to change into video calls or had to be postponed. The Croatian Presidency had the opportunity to prepare meetings in “online environment”. There have been made significant online meeting, for instance Online Video meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU Member States and the Eastern Partnership, meeting of CIO representatives of EU member states, representatives who are in charge of implementing and creating digital policies, minister of foreign affairs were discussing Post- Cotonou negotiations and Team Europe package against Covid- 19. During the Croatian Presidency, The Council in the area of employment and social affairs adopted three sets of conclusions. How to enhance well-being at work, how to become more productive and for better participation in the labour market. How to reduce public health expenditure. (eu2020.hr, 2020)

There were also needed online meeting about tourism and the “summer season” as one of the economic sectors first and most affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The tourism sector has experienced a rapid and sharp drop. Incredibly significant meeting about funding, was in June, via video conference, so called Eurogroup. President of the Eurogroup, Mário Centeno, called on the Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Economic and Monetary Policy (ECON) to discuss the economic prospects of the euro area in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. *“The Eurogroup has already agreed on some key features of the recovery fund. It must be temporary, targeted and proportionate to the extraordinary costs of this crisis.”* (consilium.europa.eu, 2020)

3 Conclusion

The Croatian Presidency is one of the most challenging presidencies. For Croatia was preparing and leading such important Presidency really challenging. Firstly, because Croatia is the youngest member of the EU with lack of experience, but also there is a question about adequate logistical, administrative, and diplomatic capacity. We can sum up that the presidency is as strength as their national government of the presiding member state. Why is it important we can bring up example of Czech presidency, where there is visible the importance of

political stability. The example pointing out how government instability and domestic problems can significantly undermine the success of the presidency. Czech presidency was criticized for "failing to provide stable leadership" due to the fall of the Czech government during its council term.

Croatia has been experiencing challenging times lately. This is not only because of the importance of the presiding country, but also because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the March 2020 earthquakes, which do not contribute to the well-being of the citizens of Croatia. Among other things, during the EU presidency of Croatia, the migration crisis broke out on the Greek-Turkish border in March 2020. Thus, Croatia had to cope with the crisis, starting with the crisis associated with COVID-19 and many of the upcoming negotiations with EU leaders. Despite all the events, the Croatian Presidency has been successful in supporting one of its priorities - the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans. There has been no accession to the EU in the past seven years but opening the negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania are opening during the Croatian Presidency. Ministers discussed and exchanged views on enlargement policy, stability in the region and the integration process of the Western Balkan countries through a videoconference in March 2020, with support for a shift in the integration processes of Northern Macedonia and Albania.

The European Union has decided to fight the pandemic through four priorities, and that is it limiting the spread of the virus, securing the procurement of medical equipment, promoting research for treatment and vaccines and support for the preservation of jobs, businesses and the economy by financial support. The current crisis is still ongoing, so further monitoring of the situation and subsequent analysis of the mastery of Croatia's presidency of the European Union is needed.

We dare to state, that Croatia managed good and adequate presidency, when we look at the challenges and existing Covid- 19 pandemic. The Croatia Presidency was test of maturity in the eyes of other member states, if Croatia is possible to bring adequate organization of international events and meeting. We dare to state that Croatia managed those challenges.

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