



Croatia's EU Presidency: A strong Europe in a world of challenges

European View
2020, Vol. 19(2) 188–196
© The Author(s) 2020
DOI: 10.1177/1781685820968303
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Goran Bandov

Abstract

The article reflects on Croatia's EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2020. The programme for Croatia's Presidency had four pillars: a Europe that is developing, a Europe that connects, a Europe that protects and an influential Europe. The article focuses on the various challenges faced by the Croatian Presidency during its six-month term. The period of Croatia's Presidency will forever be remembered as the time when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Other demanding issues also had to be dealt with: the UK leaving the EU; the challenges of European (non-) solidarity; the continuation of the enlargement process, with the green light being given to Northern Macedonia and Albania; the migrant crisis at the border of Turkey and Greece; the preparations for the EU's 2021–7 budget; and the COVID-19 recovery plan.

Keywords

Croatia, EU Presidency, COVID-19, (non-)Solidarity, Zagreb Summit, Enlargement, Next-Generation EU

Introduction

In the first half of 2020, Croatia held the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time. Based on Croatian national priorities, in line with the guidelines set by the EU Strategic Agenda 2019–24 and drawing on the Trio Programme (for the trio of Romania, Finland and Croatia), the Croatian Presidency's programme planned to focus on four main pillars: a Europe that is developing, a Europe that connects, a Europe that protects

Corresponding author:

G. Bandov, University Office for International Relations and Sustainable Development, University of Zagreb, Trg Republike Hrvatske 14, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia.
Email: goran.bandov@unizg.hr



and an influential Europe (EU 2020 HR 2019a, 1). In addition to the listed priorities, it was already known that the Croatian Presidency was coming at a time of great change for the EU: a new institutional and legislative mandate for the European institutions and the challenges resulting from the UK's EU withdrawal process.

An additional test was to find an agreement acceptable to all members for the EU's 2021–7 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Furthermore, even before the Presidency began, it was known that the EU was facing global challenges. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković pointed out before Croatia took over the role: 'Uneven economic development, climate change, increased migration, dissemination of disinformation and growing populism are some of the challenges of today's world to which citizens are expecting answers, and with good reason. Those answers can be given only by a strong Europe' (EU 2020 HR 2019b, 4). Precisely those challenges and the need for a strong Europe were the key messages of Croatia's EU Presidency motto, 'A strong Europe in a world of challenges'. The motto very accurately predicted the circumstances of Croatia's Presidency.

This article analyses the main challenges of Croatia's EU Presidency. The most significant were the COVID-19 pandemic and European (non-)solidarity, which will be the main focus. In addition, the article will address the UK's EU withdrawal process, the preparations for the 2021–7 MFF and the Next-Generation EU recovery plan, the EU enlargement process, and the migrant crisis at the border of Turkey and Greece in February 2020.

Migrant crisis at the Greek–Turkish border

At the beginning of its Presidency Croatia had to deal with the migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border. The situation had escalated, with a significant number of illegal crossings of the Greek–Turkish border happening in late February 2020. This situation called into question the implementation of the 2016 EU–Turkey Joint Statement on addressing migrant challenges (European Council 2016).

Following an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 6 March, the situation at the EU's external borders calmed down. In a statement, the FAC said that it recognised the burden of migration and the risks facing Turkey, and acknowledged its efforts to take care of the 3.7 million refugees and migrants living within its borders (Council of the European Union 2020b). The statement noted, nevertheless, that the FAC opposed Turkey's use of migrants for political purposes. In this context, the EU expressed its full solidarity with Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus in preserving the EU's external border.

The temporary calming down of the migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border was a consequence of successful diplomatic activities, but also of the growing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the more rigid control of European (external and internal) borders.

The COVID-19 pandemic and (non-)solidarity

Another sudden challenge was COVID-19. Resolving the crisis caused by the pandemic imposed itself as an absolute priority on Croatia's EU Presidency. As early as 28 January, due to the occurrence of isolated cases of coronavirus in some EU member states, the Croatian Presidency decided to activate the EU integrated crisis response arrangements in the form of an information exchange (Croatia, Government of the Republic of Croatia 2020). This crisis coordination mechanism, which collated the information coming from the various international actors, was a very useful tool for monitoring the further development of the situation and for evaluating COVID-19-related activities. Unfortunately, at the time, the topic was still of little interest to the media. The European media were mostly focused on the conclusion of Brexit and the potential new migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border. COVID-19 continued to be seen as an Asian problem even though the first European case was reported in France on 24 January 2020 (WHO Europe 2020).

The COVID-19 situation had already become very serious by the time the Director of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020). After the declaration, the EU did not act as one. The pandemic strategies of the EU member states were not unanimously agreed at the EU level, but were adopted individually by each country. However, we can see that some methods were implemented almost as a domino effect—when one country applied one, others soon followed (Bandov 2020). This was the case, for example, with closing the borders, imposing a mandatory 14-day self-isolation period on all people entering the country, the transition to online education, the regulation of retail opening hours and the closing down of a range of services. Every European country zealously started to inventory available medical equipment; count medical staff; assess how many intensive care beds, respirators and masks it had; and establish the quality of the equipment. Each state devised its own strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19, in particular to reduce the number of severe cases and deaths (Bandov 2020). Some states also discussed whether they should go with the proven quarantine method or opt for 'herd immunity'.

On 19 March 2020 the EU established the coordination of common medical equipment supplies, primarily respirators and protective masks, for emergencies in EU member states (European Commission 2020a). This newly established system of common stock is an excellent instrument for achieving solidarity and providing rapid assistance to member states in need. But in precisely these areas, the EU had to do more. Although, on the whole, EU solidarity functioned to a significant extent during the COVID-19 pandemic, at one point, it remained simply words on paper.

The EU is based on fundamental ideas and values, one of which is solidarity. The principle of EU solidarity is 'based on sharing both the advantages, i.e. prosperity, and the burdens equally and justly among members' (EurWORK 2011). 'Solidarity already has an undoubted presence in the legal framework of the EU, as well as a well-established constitutional tradition in some Member States' (Federico and Lahusen 2018). Consequently, EU solidarity is one of the most powerful instruments of interconnection

among the EU member states, ensuring that assistance is provided to any country that is unable to respond effectively to a crisis such as a flood, epidemic, earthquake or pandemic (Bandov 2020).

At the same time, ‘solidarity is an identification with a collectivity such that an individual feels as if a common cause and fate are shared’ (Hunt and Benford 2004, 439). As former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker pointed out: ‘. . . solidarity must be voluntary, must come from the heart, it cannot be forced’ (Juncker 2016). Consequently, solidarity between member states is also strongly felt by the individual citizens of the EU. However, if EU solidarity is not activated immediately, it causes concern and its absence is unexpected, because it is expected that you help a friend and ally in need, no matter how difficult it is for you at that moment in time.

Italy, one of the countries most affected by COVID-19 in Europe, requested the activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism for the supply of personal protective equipment on 28 February 2020 (European Commission 2020b). Unfortunately, not a single EU country responded within a reasonable time frame to this request. The EU itself was unable to act independently because it did not, at that time, possess an EU supply of medical supplies. Where Europe should have been first, others were ready to step in: China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam.

EU solidarity was first visible in the following weeks when aid began to arrive. Among others, Austria delivered 1.5 million masks and over 3,360 litres of medical disinfectant to Italy via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism; Czechia delivered 10,000 protective suits; France donated 1 million masks and 20,000 protective suits; Germany delivered 7.5 tons of medical equipment, including ventilators and anaesthetic masks; and Slovakia sent masks and disinfectant (European Commission 2020c).

European solidarity worked, but much later than it should have. Precisely because of that delay, on 16 April European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen offered an unconditional and sincere apology to Italy and its citizens for the absence of full solidarity at the time of their suffering (Von der Leyen 2020). Moments of non-solidarity threaten the EU as a community of peace, prosperity and well-being for every individual citizen. It was therefore very important that concrete, strong and clear actions of European solidarity followed in the subsequent weeks. EU solidarity came to the fore in a number of aspects, from the organised return of European citizens, the transportation of protective masks and respirators, and the sharing of medical staff, to the admission of patients for treatment in intensive care units and, ultimately, assistance for the economies of the EU member states (Bandov 2020).

The return of European citizens from all over the world took place in a spirit of full European solidarity. From Asia, North and South America, Australia and Africa, EU citizens flew back to Europe together. At the end of the journey, within Europe itself, a series of flights were organised to allow citizens of individual countries to return to their homes (European Commission 2020c).

EU enlargement

One of the main successes of Croatia's EU Presidency was the continuation of the enlargement policy and the adoption of the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia. On 6 May 2020 a key political event of the Presidency occurred—the EU–Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, which took place via video conference. The meeting brought together the leaders of the EU27, EU institutions, the six leaders of the Western Balkan countries and representatives of international organisations. The summit delivered a strong message about the European prospects for the region and support for the reform efforts of the Western Balkan states (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 7–9).

At the summit, the EU showed its determination to further intensify its engagement at all levels to support the political, economic and social transformation of the Western Balkan countries. EU leaders and Western Balkan partners agreed with the Zagreb declaration that 'the EU once again reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans . . . [and] the Western Balkans partners reiterated their commitment to the European perspective as their firm strategic choice' (European Council 2020b).

On 30 June progress was also made on the accession negotiations with Montenegro. Negotiations were opened on Chapter 8: Competition policy. This is especially significant, because it is the final chapter of the negotiations, which started in 2012 (European Commission 2020d). At the same time, Croatia's EU Presidency continued to support the establishment of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for the period 2021–7, which will help to prepare partners for future membership of the EU and support their accession process (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 9; European Commission 2020e).

The 2021–7 MFF and the recovery plan

Although European Council President Charles Michel was in charge of the EU member states' agreement on the MFF, Croatia's EU Presidency was obliged to coordinate all the preparations for the meetings of the working groups, the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the General Affairs Council. Following the outbreak of the economic and health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on 23 April 2020 the EU held a strategic debate via videoconference on overcoming the crisis and recovering from the pandemic. It was agreed to work on the establishment of a recovery fund for the most affected sectors, regions and EU countries.

The European Commission was in charge of the needs analysis and urgent preparation of a proposal which would be in line with the MFF. Consequently, on 27 May the European Commission published a package proposal containing a Recovery Plan for Europe and a modified version of the MFF (European Commission 2020f). This was followed by several meetings, while intense quiet diplomacy also continued in the background. Discussions held during Croatia's EU Presidency continued in July under the German EU Presidency.

A modified version of the Recovery Plan for Europe and the MFF was finally agreed at an extraordinary meeting of the European Council held on 17–21 July: ‘Combining the multiannual financial framework (€1074.3 billion) and an extraordinary recovery effort known as the Next Generation EU (€750 billion), the package will help the EU to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and will support investment in green and digital transitions’ (European Council 2020a). Both of these financial instruments should support the economic recovery of the EU member states and at the same time encourage the transition of European society to green and sustainable solutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe

From the very beginning, Croatia’s EU Presidency was very active in the Conference on the Future of Europe, a new initiative of the European Commission and the European Parliament, announced at the end of 2019. The aim of the Conference is to search for a new vision for the EU’s future, including the sorts of policies that should be implemented, the institutional reforms that should be made and what kind of EU its citizens want. In addition, the Conference offers an excellent opportunity to debate some of the most crucial issues in contemporary Europe (*EuropeanMovement.eu* 2020).

During February 2020, the Conference debates stalled. The main cause of this was the crisis caused by COVID-19, but there were also differences of opinion on what the mandate of the Conference should be. After several months of very intensive talks and negotiations, an agreement was reached on 24 June on a Joint Statement which sought to stimulate wider public debate on what kind of EU citizens want: ‘Member states want the Conference on the Future of Europe to get citizens involved in a wide-ranging debate on Europe’s future in the coming decade and beyond, including in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic’ (Council of the European Union 2020a).

Croatia’s EU Presidency successfully advocated that the Conference on the Future of Europe should have a strong mandate to make a significant contribution to the debate on EU fundamental values, the social and human rights of EU citizens, the EU’s economic recovery process and the strengthening of each member state.

Brexit and negotiations on EU–UK future relations

Even before Croatia’s EU Presidency began, it was clear that one of the main priorities would be to complete an orderly exit of the UK from the EU. On 30 January the European Council adopted the Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU and the European Atomic Energy Community (Council of the European Union 2020c). On 25 February, a Decision to open negotiations and a mandate to negotiate a new partnership with the UK was adopted (Council of the European Union 2020c).

Britain will remain in a transitional arrangement until the end of the year while negotiators try to thrash out future EU–UK ties. Negotiations began in March 2020. Four

rounds of negotiations were held during Croatia's EU Presidency (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 11) and the negotiation process has continued during the German EU Presidency.

Conclusion

Croatia's EU Presidency was full of challenges and unprecedented events. The global crisis caused by COVID-19 forced the issues of health and resolving the crisis to become the absolute priorities of Croatia's Presidency. COVID-19 made the Presidency significantly more difficult and gave it a new, significantly more complex framework. However, the Presidency responded very quickly and adapted to the extraordinary circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the pandemic has accelerated the transition to digital platforms and virtual conferences, which have become an integral part of the new normal.

During Croatia's Presidency, the EU also managed to address the issue of EU enlargement, a topic that shows that the EU is still a very attractive club, a factor to which the EU does not pay enough attention. Northern Macedonia and Albania have been given the green light to start negotiations, and Montenegro has opened the final chapter of pre-accession negotiations.

Croatia's EU Presidency has contributed to the further development of the EU as a community that promotes equality, inclusiveness and solidarity, and strengthens European democracy and fundamental values. It has advocated for the EU as an influential global player and for an EU that reflects responsibly on its citizens' future, and establishes green and sustainable solutions to the problems they face in their daily lives.

References

- Bandov, G. (2020). European (un)solidarity in the time of coronavirus. *Crosol.hr*, 20 April. <https://crosol.hr/eupresidency/en/european-unsolidarity-in-the-time-of-coronavirus>. Accessed 23 September 2020.
- Council of the European Union. (2020a). Conference on the Future of Europe – Council agrees its position. Press Release, 24 June. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/24/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-council-agrees-its-position/>. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- Council of the European Union. (2020b). Decision 2020/135 on the conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community. OJ L29 (31 January), 1.
- Council of the European Union. (2020c). EU–UK relations – Council gives go ahead for talks to start and adopts negotiating directives. Press Release, 25 February. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/02/25/eu-uk-relations-council-gives-go-ahead-for-talks-to-start-and-adopts-negotiating-directives/>. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- Council of the European Union. (2020d). Statement of the Foreign Affairs Council. Press Release, 6 March. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/06/statement-of-the-foreign-affairs-council-on-syria-and-turkey>. Accessed 23 September 2020.

- Croatia, Government of the Republic of Croatia. (2020). Coronavirus protection measures. 16 March. <https://vlada.gov.hr/coronavirus-protection-measures/28950>. Accessed 27 August 2020.
- Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia. (2020). Izvješće o aktivnostima i rezultatima hrvatskog predsjedanja Vijećem Europske unije. 31 July. <https://www.sabor.hr/izvjesce-o-aktivnostima-i-rezultatima-hrvatskog-predsjedanja-vijecem-europske-unije-1-sijecnja-2020>. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- EU 2020 HR. (2019a). *Priorities of the Croatian Presidency*. 2019. <https://eu2020.hr/Uploads/EUPDev/files/priorities-of-the-croatian-presidency.pdf>. Accessed on 27 August 2020.
- EU 2020 HR. (2019b). *Programme of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, foreword by the prime minister*. 20 December. https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2019/12%20prosinac/31%20prosinca/web_FINAL_PROGRAMME_EN_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 28 August 2020.
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. (2020). Update: Cluster pneumonia cases associated with novel coronavirus – Wuhan, China – 2019. 14 January. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/update-cluster-pneumonia-cases-associated-novel-coronavirus-wuhan-china-2019>. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Commission. (2020a). COVID-19: Commission creates first ever rescEU stockpile of medical equipment. Press Release, 19 March. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_476. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Commission. (2020b). COVID-19: Commission works to get protection equipment to Italy under the Civil Protection Mechanism and coordinates assessment of impact on industry. 28 February. https://ec.europa.eu/luxembourg/news/covid-19-commission-works-get-protection-equipment-italy-under-civil-protection-mechanism-and_fr. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Commission. (2020c). COVID-19: European solidarity in action. 26 June. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS_20_563. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Commission. (2020d). Montenegro. 20 June. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/montenegro_en. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Commission. (2020e). Questions and answers: The EU budget for external action in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. 2 June. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_988. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- European Council. (2016). EU–Turkey Statement. Press Release, 18 March. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>. Accessed 23 September 2020.
- European Council. (2019). Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community. OJ C 348I (12 November), 1.
- European Council. (2020a). The EU budget – Long-term EU budget 2021–2027. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget-2021-2027/>. Accessed 23 September 2020.
- European Council. (2020b). Zagreb declaration. 6 May. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>. Accessed 23 September.
- EuropeanMovement.eu*. (2020). The Conference on the Future of Europe. <https://europeanmovement.eu/conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>. Accessed 18 September.
- European Parliament. (2020). MEPs want the EU to play a stronger role in improving public health. Press Release, 9 July. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200706IPR82715/meps-want-the-eu-to-play-a-stronger-role-in-improving-public-health>. Accessed 18 September.
- EurWORK. (2011). Solidarity principles. *Eurofound.europa.eu*, 4 May. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/solidarity-principle>. Accessed 18 September 2020.

- Federico, V., & Lahusen, C. (eds.). (2018). *Solidarity as a public virtue? Law and public policies in the European Union*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Hunt, S. A., & Benford, R. D. (2004). Collective identity, solidarity and commitment. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule & H. Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 433–57). Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.
- Juncker, J.-C. (2016). 'State of the Union 2016'. Speech addressing the European Parliament. Brussels, 14 September. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches/state-union-2016_en. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- Von der Leyen, U. (2020). Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the EU coordinated action to combat the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. Brussels, 16 April. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_675. Accessed 18 September 2020.
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2020). Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020. 11 March. <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19—11-march-2020>. Accessed 23 September 2020.
- WHO Europe. (2020). 2019-nCoV outbreak: First cases confirmed in Europe. 25 January. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/01/2019-ncov-outbreak-first-cases-confirmed-in-europe>. Accessed 25 September 2020.

Author biography



Goran Bandov, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Head of the University Office for International Relations and Sustainable Development at the University of Zagreb, and former Vice Dean at Dag Hammarskjöld University College of International Relations and Diplomacy in Zagreb. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hamburg.