



# EU ENLARGEMENT

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## EVERYTHING IS READY FOR CROATIA TO JOIN THE EU IN JULY

"July 1 does not represent the peak of our ambitions, but the beginning of a new chapter for Croatia and its society", said Josip Leko, the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament in late April.

His enthusiasm sprang not just from the scheduled date for Croatia's accession to the EU, just a matter of weeks away. He also looked forward to the opportunities – and duties – that would follow for his country, as Croatia became a member of the EU. "Croatia wants to contribute to the progress of the joint European family as a credible and responsible member, notably in these challenging times of the economic and financial crisis", Leko said.

At the same time as he was speaking at a conference of speakers of European parliaments in Cyprus, the foreign affairs ministers of the EU's current 27 member states were meeting in Luxembourg, as the General Affairs Council, to discuss Croatia's readiness for membership. "The Council looks forward to welcoming Croatia as a member of the European Union on 1 July 2013", it concluded.

The Council noted the recent crucial report from the European Commission on Croatia's pre-accession preparations, which had confirmed the view that Croatia will be ready to join the European Union on 1 July 2013. Ministers formally stated: "the Council commends Croatia for the results achieved".

### THE LAST LAP

It is the last lap for this young country on its way into the EU. Its people have come a long way since Croatia's independence in 1991. Over the last two decades it has overcome the effects of war, rebuilt its infrastructure and expanded its tourism-driven economy. It also strengthened the rule of law, and carried out extensive reforms in its legislation, politics, administration, and judiciary. It applied to join the EU in 2003, started accession negotiations

in 2005, and signed the accession treaty with 27 EU Member States in 2011. In January 2012, Croatian citizens backed the treaty in a referendum, with a 'yes' from 68 percent of those who voted. In April 2013, they elected for the first time their representatives to the European Parliament.

### TOUGH DECISIONS

Along the way, the country has made tough decisions. It has had to privatise much of its state-owned industry. It has had to root out corruption, with a former prime minister convicted for taking bribes. With its 3,200-mile long borders and its location on the 'Balkan Route' into Europe from Afghanistan and Pakistan, it has had to combat the smuggling of drugs, weapons and people. And it has faced up to the past by transferring indicted Croatian commanders for trial in The Hague.

"The decision of Croatia, and the hopes and dreams of other countries which apply for EU membership, show that the EU has a deep meaning - our rules, our values, the European perspective still exert a magnetic pull", said Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

The Commission's report of March 2013 lists further improvements in boosting law and order and fundamental rights, protection of minorities, and translating the whole body of EU legislation into what will become the EU's 24th official language. Croatia has "shown the will and ability to fulfil all outstanding commitments in good time before accession", it said.

### CROATIA WILL BENEFIT

By joining the EU, the 4.3 million people of this country on the shores of the Adriatic Sea - often known as "the land of a thousand islands" - will gain

access to more products. Of better quality. At a lower cost. Businesses will be able to sell their products and offer their services all over the EU - in a market of 500 million consumers. In Croatia, 60% of the total exports already go to EU countries. Being part of the single market will make it even easier for exporters. Croatian regions and towns, small and medium-sized businesses, NGOs, scientists and others will be eligible for EU funds. Above all, Croatian citizens will be able to travel, study, live and work in another EU country.

## AND SO WILL THE EU

For the EU, Croatia's accession will extend the EU to new borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia - not just widening the area of the EU by 56,594 square kilometres, but by consolidating stability at the heart of the Western Balkans and demonstrating that enlargement is an on-going reality. As Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, said in March, "Croatia's entry provides fresh evidence of the transformative power of European Union's enlargement policy: torn by conflict only two decades ago, the country is now a stable democracy, capable of taking on the obligations of European Union membership and of adhering to European Union standards. This transformation is also a powerful signal to all of the Western Balkans whose European perspective has been consistently proclaimed by the European Council".

The new member state, with its abundance of natural resources and its rich and diversified fauna, flora and animal wildlife, will bring to the EU a rich cultural heritage, and additional capacity for strengthening borders and challenging crime.

Croatia won three gold medals at the London 2012 Olympics. Discus-thrower Sandra Perković achieved her personal best and national record of 69.11 meters there. Sports shooter Giovanni Cernogoraz won the Olympic gold medal in men's trap. And the national water polo team - nicknamed 'The Barracudas' - beat Italy to secure the title.

The "new chapter" that the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, Josip Leko, referred to will include continuing actions to ensure that Croatia makes a real contribution to the EU in other ways, too. As the April General Affairs Council remarked, "Croatia's forthcoming accession is the result of a rigorous

negotiation process and of close monitoring during pre-accession preparations. Building on the achievements to-date, Croatia is expected to continue developing its track records in the field of the rule of law, notably in the fight against corruption and the handling of domestic war crimes cases". The General Affairs Council also welcomed "important initial steps on urgently needed structural reforms that have been taken to improve competitiveness and growth prospects the economy", and "encourages further progress".



Georgia Kokot is a young artist whose Croatian background is already flavoured with other influences, and it is this mixture which is often reflected in her art. Her studies have taken her to Paris, New York and Belgium, and in some ways she sees Croatia's accession to the EU as mirroring something of her own trajectory too. "It brings a sort of coherence to the different aspects of my personal and professional life. It means that all my family in Croatia are now fully part of the same world I have been living and working in. It means that Croatia becomes part of a world where the chances are better of being able to express yourself without reprisals, without the fear of being beaten up at a gay pride march, where people's rights are taken more seriously. And this brings a new dimension to my art, which has always drawn from the diversity of my background, and the tensions created by the barriers between its different elements. Now I have an opportunity to explore what happens when some of those barriers are removed." She has the chance to display some of the results of that exploration in a one-woman show in Brussels, opening just weeks after Croatia joins the EU. [www.brussels.be](http://www.brussels.be)