

Croatia and Slovenia in New Border Dispute

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Tension remains between Zagreb and Ljubljana following allegedly staged incident on disputed border territory.

Croatia and Slovenia have sought to defuse a war of words that broke following a controversial incident on the border between the two countries.

At the same time, an earlier threat from Slovenia – to block Croatia’s much-wanted accession to the European Union – has been withdrawn following the intervention of top EU official Javier Solana on September 28.

The row broke out after Croatian police arrested 12 Slovenian nationals – including two members of the nationalist Slovenian People’s Party – in the border town of Plovanija on September 22.

The group had been visiting a fellow party member who lives in an area of the frontier claimed by both republics. They did not pass using the official border crossing, and were stopped by Croatian police officers who asked to see their identification.

When they refused, the group was arrested, bundled into police cars and taken to a local station.

However, Croatian analysts and politicians believe that right-wing Slovene politicians deliberately staged the incident as a publicity stunt ahead of their parliamentary elections, which are being held on October 3. Right-wing nationalist parties have seized on the controversial border issue in the run-up to the ballot.

The presence within the group of a television news crew – which filmed the arrest for broadcast within Slovenia and around the world – is viewed by many as proof that the incident was staged. The influential Slovene daily newspaper *Delo* has also speculated that the incident was a “provocation”, although it also condemned the reaction of the Croat police as “uncivilised”.

Both Zagreb and Ljubljana lay claim to the area in which the Slovene group was detained.

Slovene foreign minister Ivo Vajgl commented, “The incident happened in an area which is territorially registered as part of the Piran municipality, and for as long as there is no agreement on the border, we will consider it to be Slovenian territory.”

But Prime Minister Anton Rop went further in his condemnation, warning Zagreb that in the light of the incident “Slovenia can no longer support the entry of Croatia into the European Union”.

Slovenia became a member of the EU in May, and Zagreb is expected to begin formal negotiations for membership of the body next year, with a possible accession date of 2007. Ratification by all 25 EU member states will be necessary for this to happen.

However, following the September 28 visit of Solana, the EU High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy, who offered his services to help end the dispute, Rop toned down his remarks.

He said instead that Slovenia “supports the entry of all the countries of the western Balkans into the European Union, including Croatia”, and added that Ljubljana was ready to accept arbitration on border issues.

Zagreb reacted calmly, with Prime Minister Ivo Sanader saying only, “Slovenia and Croatia are friendly countries which shared a past in Yugoslavia and who will share a future in the European Union. All problems should be resolved by agreement and when that is not possible, as in the case of the border, international arbitration should be sought.”

But, privately, Croatian diplomatic circles have described the local police intervention as “unfortunate”.

One foreign ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, “The images of violence... for example when the Croatian police forcibly pushed the Slovenian deputies into a car...have travelled around the world.

“Europe is shocked by scenes like those and, regardless of how legitimate the police action was, it portrayed Croatia as a country whose policemen use force. We would have gained more if we had let [the Slovene group] go.”

Political analyst Davor Gjenero, who specialises in Croatian-Slovenian relations, told IWPR that he is not confident that political relations between the two former Yugoslav republics will normalise soon.

“Slovenia will be very cautious in entering into arbitration over the border with Croatia, and will do so only if it has firm guarantees that Zagreb will respect the eventual decision,” he said.

The issue has been rumbling in the background since June 2001, when both states signed a treaty to end a dispute over maritime demarcation that had not been settled after the break-up of Yugoslavia ten years earlier.

In the deal, Zagreb granted a nautical corridor two miles wide to Slovenia, giving the latter the access to international waters that it had been lacking. In return, Slovenia promised to improve road links to Croatia and grant its citizens “fast-track” entry status.

However, the Croatian public was largely unhappy with the deal and criticised then-prime minister Ivica Racan for ceding too much territory. The demarcation of the land border remains a thorny issue for both nations.

In contrast, economic relations between the two nations have always been healthy.

Slovenia is Croatia’s third- and fourth-largest trading partner in terms of imports and exports respectively.

The Croatian Economic Chamber said that in 2003, Croatia exported 511 million US dollars worth of goods to Slovenia and imported just over one billion dollars worth.

And while the border incident sparked media speculation of a possible boycott of Slovenian goods, analysts agree that this is very unlikely.

The Croatian Economic Chamber and Agrokor, Croatia's largest consumer goods retail chain, dismissed talk of a boycott of Slovenian goods as both "irresponsible and unrealistic".

And economist Milan Gavrovic said, "Trade is based on interest, not personal likes or dislikes. Yesterday I went into the Slovenian Mercator department store in Zagreb and I didn't see any fewer buyers than I did before the border incident."

Croatian shoppers seem to back this view up. Mirjana Krunic from Osijek spoke for many when she said, "I won't stop buying Slovenian goods because I look at price and quality when I buy." Mercator is due to open one of its stores in Osijek, the fourth-largest city in the republic, next month.

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