Croatia's Future in Europe

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Croatia's new leaders must introduce substantial political reforms if they are to be taken seriously by the rest of Europe.

The new government in Croatia is keen to foster good relations with Europe, but to do so it will have to improve significantly the country's democratic record.

Croatia's former leaders were frequently criticised for their authoritarian approach to government which, it was argued, stifled political development.

The late President Franjo Tudjman pledged to address Croatia's "democratic deficit" as a condition of joining the Council of Europe three years ago. But he never had any serious intention of introducing reforms, as this would have challenged the very foundation of his brand of politics.

Therefore, many of the Council of Europe's criticisms of Croatia remain valid. The task of addressing them, a process that could form a platform for the genuine Europeanisation of Croatia, now rests with the new ruling coalition.

One of the most pressing tasks is the transformation of Croatian state television from a vehicle for party propaganda into a true public service station, free of any political control. The ruling coalition has said it intends to do this and also reform the process by which broadcasting frequencies are allocated.

However, some undemocratic practices like the Croatian Democratic Union's (HDZ) authoritarian rule in Zagreb will be more difficult to change. Although the opposition won the elections in Zagreb in 1995, Tudjman imposed his own choice for mayor by manipulating votes. New elections for the Zagreb authorities, it is hoped, will prevent such practices in the future, but it will not be easy.

Many of the Council of Europe's criticisms were concerned with Croatia's failure to put into effect various international conventions, charters and pacts that it has ratified. The only one it has fully implemented is the reintegration of Serbs from Eastern Slavonia into the Croatian legal system.

Serbs from Eastern Slavonia have been granted their demands, such as a number of ministerial seats and the right to develop their own culture and elections for local authorities. Tudjman's government tried hard to disrupt these developments, but stopped short of seriously undermining them.

As the new authorities in Croatia have placed European integration as a priority, there is reason to hope that the country will strive to fulfil many of the pledges Tudjman made to the Council of Europe.

But three conditions set by the Council could cause the administration real problems. These are the return of Serbs who fled Croatia, the reinstatement of their property and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague.

The new government is more likely to hand suspected war criminals over to The Hague than its predecessor, which regarded many Croat suspects as patriots and even war heroes. But the authorities will have to tread very carefully because a policy of cooperation with The Hague may result in a backlash from...
nationalist Croats.

The return of the Serbs and the reinstatement of their property could be equally problematic. Croats have long regarded the country's Serbian population as a troublesome minority. When they fled the country during the Croatian army's re-conquest of Krajina four years ago, few tears were shed. Consequently, many Croats are reluctant to see them repatriated.

Indeed, none of the opposition parties drew attention to the issue during the election campaign, as they feared it would undermine their support. Croatia's new leaders have indicated that repatriation is likely to take place, but they know it will be no easy matter.

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