

Chapter 4

Germany and Central Europe Drifting Apart? The Case of Croatia

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1. Introduction

Germany plays an important role in the Croatian political discourse since the very early stage of its independence in the early 1990s. It was a very prominent advocate of the recognition of Croatia's independence and among the first to officially recognise the country's statehood, prior to the joint European Commission (EC) recognition. While being a generous provider of humanitarian aid in the Homeland War period and a strong supporter of Croatia's European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bid, it used extensively the possibilities provided by conditionality mechanisms and its role of one of the strongest members of both organisations to influence political and economic developments in Croatia and to maximise its influence in the post-Cold War period in Southeast Europe. An outspoken and sizeable Croatian community in Germany on the one hand and a necessity of post-unification Germany to regain political relevance in the post-Cold War era on the other significantly contributed to all of this.

The economic relations followed the trends of political ones, making Germany the most important foreign investor in Croatia and one of the most important trade partners. The increasing number of German tourists was very significant for the overall growth of this branch of the economy and provided significant assets for covering the large current account deficit. Remittances from Germany represented an important category in Croatian macroeconomic tables and charts as well, increasing the relevance of the former for the economy of the latter.

However, bilateral relations had their own ups and downs, being far from eternally harmonic. There were different disputes that burdened the relations between the two, especially related to policies in Southeast Europe. Furthermore, the accession of Croatia to the EU and NATO changed the wider context for relations, since it removed conditionality as a mechanism of influence over the acceding state. It resulted in Croatia undertaking regional initiatives, like Intermarium, that happened to oppose German interests in the Eastern European flank.

This paper will attempt to analyse German–Croatian relations in the context of the changing political environment characterised by various aforementioned elements. It will try to measure the institutional connectedness: the level of convergence of national policies of the two countries with broader joint EU policies, their position towards emerging global

challenges and geostrategic repositioning in the wider international arena, as well as the image of one another.

2. Bilateral Political Relations since 1989

For Croatia, the essence of close relations with Germany in the contemporary international affairs goes back to the early 1990s and the period of formation of the modern Croatian state in a very complex international environment. The late 1980s and early 1990s brought many changes in Europe, including the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslav federation that influenced dramatically the strategic landscape of the continent. In early 1991, the crisis in former Yugoslavia erupted, bringing along a high probability for an armed conflict. Regardless, the attitude of the German Government was actually along the lines of other Western powers, a combination of increasing concern and declarative optimism. The Kohl Government had many preoccupations that were more important than the precedent crisis – German reunification, the fall of the entire Warsaw Pact and the dissolution of the USSR in particular, as well as the Gulf War and all its consequences. This is the reason why it treated the militaristic rhetoric of nationalist parties in the region as an attempt to fortify their positions for the unavoidable negotiations about the future of the state. The resolution of the two north-western republics of former Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia) to declare independence of the increasingly dysfunctional federation have received the same treatment. In that period, focused on maintaining a harmonious approach with other Western allies, Germany treated the crisis as one of an intra-state modernisation and democratisation process. This approach, dedicated to the preservation of the Yugoslav federation, prevented it from foreseeing the danger of growing Serbian nationalism that was hiding behind the concept of Yugoslav state unitarism. Therefore, different modalities related to the concept of a confederative state, acceptable to other Yugoslav republics, were never seriously taken into consideration by the German decision-makers at that time.

It was only after the first blood-shed, in late May 1991, that a joint statement of German Chancellor Kohl and French President Mitterrand ceased to mention a dedication to the concept of Yugoslav unity. This represented a first step in a gradual distancing from the policy pursued up to then, based predominantly on the information on the ground provided by German parliamentarians who were less eager to support the idea of maintaining a dysfunctional state by force. The changed attitude of the parliamentarians was best manifested by the adoption of a parliamentary resolution advocating the right of peoples in former Yugoslavia to autonomously decide their own political future.¹ However imperfect and burdened with some contradictions, the declaration represented a stepping-stone for a new German policy towards the crisis in former Yugoslavia. Highlighting the importance of principles of non-use of coercive measures in parallel with the abovementioned principle of self-determination, it represented a prelude for a moral support to Croatia and Slovenia in their efforts to declare independence. This had affected the German Government and

¹ For the details about the parliamentary debate in the German Bundestag on this matter see the official stenogram (Deutscher Bundestag 1991).

indirectly the European political elite, raising awareness concerning the importance of the crisis in former Yugoslavia for the wider European political space.

The intensification of armed assaults of the former Yugoslav Army on Croatia only speeded up the process of wider international recognition of Croatia's sovereignty, despite very strong propaganda from Belgrade. However, only the siege and destruction of the ancient town of Dubrovnik that started in October 1991 have added enough symbolism and emotional energy to the proponents of the idea to provide effective countermeasures to Serbian aggression. This had dramatically strengthened the German argument about the right of self-determination of nations and the unsustainability of the Yugoslav federal state. This development in mid-December gradually led to the acceptance by the entire EC of the German position on the international recognition of any former Yugoslav republic meeting certain criteria that should have taken place on 15 January 1992.

However, Germany decided to unilaterally recognise Slovenia and Croatia on 23 December 1991, hence departing from the previous position that gave priority to the EC common stand and sparking fierce criticism among its European partners. There were several reasons for such an unprecedented German move: 1. Recently unified Germany was sending the message that it is back as a decisive player in the international arena; 2. It had certain economic interests in the two most developed western republics; 3. The influence of the active Croatian diaspora in Germany.

In the period that followed, Germany was significantly less outspoken when it came to issues related to the military conflict in Croatia, as well as to the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and all their consequences. As Ramet and Coffin put it, "Germany's passivity was rather a product of two major factors, reinforced by two minor factors. The major factors were a strong preference for multilateralism in international crisis management and the widespread consensus in policy circles that Article 24 of the German Basic Law barred the country from providing military forces in any capacity outside of NATO area. This latter consideration inevitably pushed Germany to the side-lines" (RAMET-COFFIN 2001, 53).

Nevertheless, due to the firm German support to the Croatian statehood almost from the beginning of the conflict, in the first half of the 1990s, the image of Germany in Croatia was extremely positive, sometimes even irrationally so.² An important role in that regard was played by the Croatian diaspora who had an important role not only in lobbying for German recognition of Croatian sovereignty, but also in portraying a desirable image of a functional society and a future potential model for the development of the Croatian state.³ The new leverage of the united Germany in European affairs, that was increasingly mirrored in the developments in Southeast Europe, backed by its economic strength and a leading role in the process of European economic integration, was fundamental for the image of Germany in the wider Croatian society. The decades in which German tourists were spending their

² Along the line of strong national sentiment in the midst of the Homeland War, there were even songs composed to express gratitude to German support in the early 1990s.

³ The estimation of the German authorities on Croats living in Germany differs from those of the Croatian Embassy in Berlin. German statistics show there are about 231,198 Croats in Germany. However, the Croatian Embassy in Berlin estimates there are more than 350,000 Croats living in Germany. For details see the Registry of Croatian Entities Abroad s. a.

vacation period on the Croatian coast created a sort of collective memory for both sides, which significantly helped in tightening societal bonds between the two states. All these developments helped to create a kind of 'harmonic relation' between them in the first few years after the international recognition of Croatian sovereignty.

However, it is not only bilateral issues that are decisive in the relationship between the two countries. The crisis in the former Yugoslav space became one of the toughest challenge for the newly formed European Union, as well as for Germany as its most influential member. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina appeared to be the most complicated issue with many overlapping interests of regional and European players. Croatia's policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina under President Tudjman's administration sparked a lot of criticism in the transatlantic community, Germany included, putting the country in a rather unfavourable international situation. Also, their estimation about the lack of political will for post-conflict regional co-operation and the unsatisfactory level of collaboration with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have complicated Croatia's position in the wider regional framework and in particular its bilateral relations with Germany, as one of the major proponents of regional consolidation based on criteria defined in a multilateral framework. Hence, the desired fast-track EU and NATO accession processes in the post-conflict period, that should have enabled Croatia to narrow the gap with the Central European countries, if not to catch up with their pace of reforms, did not occur. Instead, the country was blocked in its efforts to speed-up its accession processes and remained cemented in a rather unfavourable political construct called 'the Western Balkans'.

Only after the elections in early 2000, when a coalition of six opposition parties led by the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the centre-right Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSL) swept the parliamentary elections and dethroned the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), while their candidate also won the presidential ballots, has Croatia started implementing a real transitional reform process and improving bilateral relations with the countries of the transatlantic community, Germany in particular. This opened new perspectives for integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, a process that has been frozen for a long time owing to the lack of political will of the previous regime and its negative image abroad. One of the crucial preconditions for a new start was a structural change in the political system, i.e. reductions of the unnecessarily strong position of the president and the improvement of the position of parliament in it.

From that period onwards, especially after the introduction of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP),⁴ Croatia started its steady pace of reforms in an attempt to meet the EU and NATO membership criteria. Since the reunited Germany recognised the potential EU enlargement process not only as a tool for consolidation, but also as an extension of its foreign policy interest and relevance, it offered generous political, material and expert assistance to Croatia. Hence, after a period of stagnation, the relations between the two countries started displaying a visible upward trend and Germany became one of the most outspoken proponents of Croatian accession to NATO and the EU in particular. Since Croatia was much more developed and better in meeting membership criteria than the other countries of the SAP, Germany regarded its accession to the EU and NATO as a positive example to the rest of the region and a contribution to its long-term consolidation.

⁴ For the details on the Stabilisation and Association Process, please see European Commission s. a.

On the other hand, being burdened by very cumbersome transitional issues and growing enlargement fatigue en route to membership, Croatia did its best to maximise the profit of support of one of the most influential EU member state. Being aware of the fact that not only meeting the criteria, but also fostering relations with influential member states, counts for the final decision to sign the accession treaty, Croatia treated bilateral relations with Germany as strategic for reaching its most important foreign policy goals.

Croatian accession to NATO in 2009 and integration into the EU in 2013 represented a confirmation of the country's mature stage of democratic consolidation and opened a new framework for co-operation between Croatia and other EU and NATO member states, Germany included.

3. Economic Relations since 1989

Germany is the most powerful economy in the EU. Its 16% of the population creates more than 20% of the entire GDP of the EU. Therefore, it is obvious that economic trends in Germany significantly influence the general macroeconomic EU data. Additionally, Germany is the single biggest exporter in the EU, amounting to almost a third of the overall EU's exports. Due to the volume of its economy and its high value of export, Germany is also one of the biggest importers in the EU, having almost 20% of share in its overall imports.⁵

On the other hand, in European terms, Croatia is a relatively small economy and a market of less than 5 million citizens, dependant on export markets. While the average share of commodity exports is 30% of the GDP and is hence still relatively low in comparison to the EU average, together with services export it has a significant share in the GDP – above 50%. Due to that, the overall commodity goods and services export had the biggest impact on the growth of the economy over the course of the last few years. Therefore, the importance of export markets, in particular of those of volume and size like the German, is absolutely clear.

Germany is one of the most important foreign trade partners for Croatia. More specifically, it is among the top five export markets for Croatian commodities and the most important one for Croatian services, almost two times more valuable than the second most important partner, Italy. Of course, the biggest revenue comes from the touristic sector which generates very valuable income, in which German tourists have traditionally had the biggest share for many decades.

The positive impact of Croatia's accession to the EU is visible in the growth of its trade in the period after the accession. Since the Croatian economy is very dependent on the growth of exports and on sizeable export markets, these figures are more than indicative for the overall change of business environment and the trade exchange between the two sides after the Croatian accession to the EU.

Furthermore, the correlation between the trends in the German economy and the Croatian exports to the German market is noticeable. Namely, when the German economy was shrinking, so were the Croatian exports to Germany and the other way around. Similar

⁵ For general information on German macroeconomic parameters see OECD Data 2018.

trends, if not the same, have been visible with the number of German tourists visiting the Croatian coast.

Table 1.
*Correlation between the trends in the German economy
and the Croatian exports to the German market*

	German GDP growth	Croatian exports to Germany (% growth)	Overnight stays of German tourists (% growth)
2008	1.1	14.0	1.2
2009	-5.6	-19.6	4.3
2010	4.1	11.5	0.2
2011	3.7	4.8	8.8
2012	0.5	1.5	11.7
2013	0.5	-0.7	3.5
2014	1.6	19.2	2.2
2015	1.7	12.2	6.9
2016	1.9	10.4	8.3

Source: The State Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Croatia

This table clearly shows the practical example of connectedness of the growth of the German economy and the growth of its aggregate demand, which is in the end closely related to the growth of the value of imports of commodities and services. Therefore, the growth of big economies brings profit to the small ones as well, especially the export oriented, whose GDP significantly depends on the capacity to increase exports. Therefore, it is almost entirely impossible to analyse the growth or decline of the Croatian GDP without taking into account the trends in its most important foreign trade partners, where Germany still holds the first place. This is fairly relevant to Croatia due to the fact that the export of commodities and services amounts to up to one third of the aggregate demand (domestic and foreign) and hence significantly influences the trends of GDP and the entire economy.

As any other developing market economy, Croatia is in need for foreign direct investment. Germany also plays an important role in that regard. Among foreign direct investors in Croatia, Germany ranks third, after the Netherlands and Austria. In addition to major investments by German businesses including DAX-listed companies, numerous small and medium-sized German companies have set up subsidiaries in Croatia (German Federal Foreign Office s. a.). Furthermore, if we take a look at the longer period of almost 25 years (between 1993 and 2016), Germany ranks first with a share of 9.5% (Croatian Chamber of Economy 2018). The development of co-operation between the two sides is fostered by the institutions specifically designed for that purpose, like the German–Croatian Industrial and Trade Chamber that is providing assistance in the field of market entry, taxes and regulations, public relations, event management, translation and others.⁶

It is also worth mentioning that there is a growing economic co-operation between Croatia and some German federal states, like Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, especially

⁶ For details see German–Croatian Industrial and Trade Chamber s. a.

in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.⁷ Since the economy of scale sometimes simply disqualifies Croatia in comparative economic terms and production capacities from the list of potential partners at the federal level, there are numerous examples of economic co-operation with some German federal states, especially those where there is a visible Croatian community.

Hence, it is clear that a small economy like Croatia very much depends on big export markets, especially those where there are no political barriers for increased co-operation. In that regard, it is clear that access to the German market, as well as to other attractive markets in the EU and beyond, will remain crucial for the sustainable growth of the Croatian economy. If we add to that the enormous importance of the tourist sector for the Croatian current account balance and the role of German tourists in that field, the biggest European economy is likely to remain very important for Croatia.⁸

4. Institutional Relations since 1989

The institutional relations between Croatia and Germany have undergone different stages, from the stormy period of dissolution of the former Yugoslav federation to the partner-like relationship in the EU and NATO, after Croatia's accession to the transatlantic structures.

After gaining sovereignty in the early 1990s, Croatia opted for membership in the transatlantic structures, showing an intention to abide by 'Western values' and change the society accordingly. This was, however, easier said than done, especially due to the fact that Croatia was both post-socialist and post-conflict with heavy burdens on the transitional process. Hence, the first twenty years of modern Croatian sovereignty was marked by enduring efforts to institutionalise its relations with the transatlantic community by becoming a full-fledged member of the EU and NATO. Therefore, the institutional relations with Germany in the EU and NATO can be fully measured only for the period after the membership (2009 for NATO and 2013 for the EU). Even for the relations between the two countries within the OSCE, which Croatia joined immediately after the international recognition of its sovereignty in 1992, it has to be taken into account that it had a mission of the OSCE deployed in the country until 2007 and an office operating until 2012.⁹ The mission was closed in 2007 upon the decision of the OSCE Permanent Council, based on the conclusion that Croatia met all fundamental criteria set in the mission's mandate – media reform, electoral legislation reform, police reform and the creation of a framework for sustainable development of the civil society. The Office was created to monitor the war crime trials taking place in Croatia and was closed in 2012. This is telling of the fact that the OSCE mission was more of a multilateral tool for the oversight of democratic reforms in post-conflict Croatia than a multilateral forum for the development of institutional ties between it and any other participating state, Germany included.

⁷ For details see European Commission 2016.

⁸ Illustratively, in 2016, almost 2.3 million German tourists visited Croatia and made more than 17 million overnight stays. For details see Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia 2016, 26.

⁹ For details see OSCE Mission in Croatia 2018.

Hence, while being more of a subject to debates and policies in the OSCE, Croatia was not primarily aiming at fostering bilateral relations within the OSCE, but rather at using the OSCE to justify its position and prove its democratic maturity in the wider political context. So, basically, the country was dedicated to showing its capacity to support the developing European positions and policies in different areas and align to them. In essence, these positions were created by the most dominant member states, where Germany plays a very significant role, so accordingly one would assume that the institutional relations between the two sides showed no significant setbacks and dissonances.

Overall, it would be rational to conclude that Croatia, in its pre-accession phase, has concentrated all its efforts on the finalisation of its accession processes to the EU and NATO and paid particular attention not to cause any harm to it by destabilising bilateral relations with one of the most influential member states like Germany. If we add to that the fresh memory of German support from the early 1990s, the impact of the economic exchange between the two countries, the impact of the Croatian community in Germany and the role of tourism in bridging the gap between the two sides and fostering direct exchanges, it is apparent that the institutional relations were predominantly harmonic, mirroring 'the situation on the ground'. Of course, a very relevant mechanism at the German disposal at that time was conditionality. Especially in the final phase of accession, Germany has taken the lead in defining the concrete criteria for a number of negotiating chapters as a response to a growing fatigue at the community level towards any further enlargement (HILLION 2010, 6).

However, after the strength of conditionality at Germany's disposal has weakened with Croatia's accession to the EU, some bilateral issues started popping up, changing slightly the image of harmonic relations between Germany and Croatia. The most important issue is a difference in approach to the long-term consolidation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While Croatia has a constitutional obligation to ensure the preservation of the Croatian national corpus in BiH as a constitutive political actor, Germany argues in favour of a concept of civic state where citizens, regardless of national, religious and cultural background, are the pillars of the BiH political system, not the constitutional peoples. The difference between the pre-accession and the period of today is that Croatian policy towards BiH, while having to be in line with broader European policies, is not part of a conditionality mechanism. Instead, it is a matter of compromise among EU member states. So, while there is an evident difference in capacity to exert political influence in any particular case of European policy between Germany and Croatia, it is still evident that this is the issue of a specific Croatian interest. Therefore, it is likely that the country would do its best to punch above its weight in the European decision-making procedures to be able to safeguard the constitutional position of Croats in BiH.

Another issue worth mentioning is the policy initiative called Intermarium (The Three Seas Initiative),¹⁰ initiated by Croatia and Poland, which is viewed with suspicion in Germany as a project that could potentially weaken the cohesion within the EU, but also weaken the German influence on its eastern neighbours. The initiative itself is framed

¹⁰ The Three Seas Initiative – also known as the Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea (BABS) Initiative – gathers the following states: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

with the idea to foster co-operation between the participating states in the areas of energy infrastructure primarily, but with the possibility to develop joint projects in the area of transport, economy, etc. However, it carries along a certain geopolitical dimension, i.e. the potential to be a buffer zone between two big players – Germany and Russia. This has been recognised by the United States (U.S.) and therefore Washington supported the initiative at the highest level – President Trump’s visit to Poland in 2017 was a clear sign of that.

However, regardless of these minor differences in the approach to particular issues, one can conclude that the Croatian-German bilateral relations, with certain ups and downs, have been relatively close and steady in the entire period in focus of our research. Germany has always been, and is likely to remain, a model of functional democracy and growing economy naturally attractive to Croatia. There are multiple interests that are likely to keep this relation relatively close – not only the narrative of close relations from the past, but also forward-looking political, economic and cultural ones. Potential hurdles could be related to Croatian attempts to position itself between the U.S. and the EU which have increasingly diverging interests over the last one or two years, and German attempts to apply some political models – like the one of civic state in BiH – to rapidly consolidate dysfunctional states in Southeast Europe without taking into consideration country-specific elements derived from the existing political context. However, this is unlikely to overshadow a wide range of evidence of close co-operation between the two sides in different bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

5. Policy-field Specific Relations

There are different policy-fields where Croatia’s policies and its activities in the wider EU context mirror close relations with Germany. Namely, the two states share the attitude towards further EU and NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans. Both processes, regardless of the existent enlargement fatigue, are viewed as the most appropriate tool for the consolidation of the region. Of course, both countries are insisting on firm conditionality for that goal to be achieved. The candidate states have to undergo a thorough democratic reform process in order to meet the demanding criteria for membership and Germany and Croatia are undertaking concrete measures to provide assistance to that. Germany is the main promoter of the so-called Berlin Process¹¹ which has been designed to reiterate the EU’s commitment to membership perspectives of the SAP states laid down in the Thessaloniki Agenda from 2003.¹² Croatia on its part, as the newest EU member state connected to that group of countries, has a particular interest and responsibility to support the accession process by sharing recent experience and knowledge, hence contributing to the long-term stabilisation of the region. Therefore, it is using its comparative advantages – no language barrier, common history, geographic proximity and similarity of transitional difficulties – to encourage and foster necessary reform processes in the region.

Croatia is investing a lot of efforts into aligning to the highest possible level with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU. Accordingly, from the very

¹¹ For details see Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans 2018.

¹² For details see European Commission 2003.

beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, Croatia clearly supported joint EU policies towards Russia, including the sanctions. Croatia also decided to show solidarity with the U.K. in the aftermath of the Skripal spy-poisoning scandal, following the reactions of the majority of countries from the transatlantic community, and expelled one Russian diplomat. However, there is an overall impression that Croatia made this move in order to show its willingness to contribute to CFSP coherence in crisis situation rather than to really line up with the U.K. In practical terms, Croatia's foreign trade with Russia is fairly low, so the consequences of reciprocity in the sanction period are not hurting the national economy to an unbearable extent. Unlike other countries of the region, there is no significant Russian FDI in the country and hence no decisive political influence over its decision-making process in general. In other words, Russia's leverage in Croatia is far lower than in countries of its surrounding and hence aligning strongly with the EU policies vis-à-vis Russia does not come at a political price that is too high.

While being an EU member since 2013, Croatia is still to become a member of the Schengen Area. The incumbent and current government were both very dedicated to meeting all technical criteria for the membership and the process is in its final stages, while political considerations at the EU level following the migrant crisis and some remaining bilateral issues with neighbouring members could slightly slow down the process. The Croatian Government has defined joining the Schengen Area and the Eurozone in the upcoming period as two very important goals of its European policy. Hence, Croatia still firmly sticks to the idea of free movement within the European Union and is doing its utmost to join the treaty as soon as possible. It has shown an excellent capacity to withdraw the large amount of EU funds available for that aim, boosting its capabilities to take all responsibilities of the Schengen membership, and is therefore expected to join in 2019.¹³ In that regard, it has received concrete reassurances of the highest representatives of the EC¹⁴ and support of the German officials. For Croatia, this is of recognisable importance due to the fact that its south-eastern borders represent also an EU external border towards the SAP countries and it is extremely difficult to control it without being able to use the capacities of the Schengen Area. Border management is of fundamental importance in this context, especially due to the fact that there are numerous potential threats to the EU stemming from the region – organised crime, terrorism, illegal migration, among others.

As for the migration policy at the EU level, it is clear that “contemporary challenges seek for a common and comprehensive EU policy, and there is an obvious track record of developments in that direction, but the single policy document still does not exist. The issue of solidarity among member states and with those in need for refuge and immigration, as one of the basic principles of functional immigration policy (laid down in Article 80 of the TFEU) is frequently questioned, especially in times of crisis when member states should take the share of burden of a common policy. That was clearly displayed with the crisis in 2015–2016 when EC quota proposal sparked many tense debates and mutual accusations” (KNEZOVIĆ–GROŠINIĆ 2017, 7). In practical terms, it was clear that the crisis stimulated EU member states to depart from declarative statements about solidarity at the community level and lock themselves in their national clusters, trying to defend their national interests.

¹³ For details see Schengen Visa Info 2017.

¹⁴ For details see Gulf Times 2017.

So, Croatia found itself on the immigrants' route, surrounded by EU member states that were erecting physical barriers to prevent the flow of immigrants (Hungary built a heavy border barrier and Slovenia erected the barbed wire fence) and the SAP states (like Serbia) with strained bilateral relations dating back to the conflict period in the early 1990s, channelling the flow of immigrants to Croatia. Furthermore, one should not forget the fact that only recently before the crisis, Croatia was dealing with the migration policy as with only one of many to align to in its final accession phase. Suddenly, it found itself in the situation of the newest member state of the EU on the immigrants' route, forced to deal with the issue in a very volatile and non-cooperative regional set-up. Regardless of the aforementioned challenges, it maintained its humanitarian approach to the challenge during the 2015–2016 crisis, refraining from erecting physical borders and maximising efforts to facilitate the transit to Western European countries. In that regard, there were clear displays of bilateral co-operation between Croatia as a transit state and Germany as a destination state in order to, together with other states in between, facilitate the easier flow of the immigrants. In line with that, Croatia did not object significantly to the concept of immigrant quotas and reallocation scheme proposed by the EC. On the contrary, as an EU member state willing to share a burden of what is supposed to become a common migration policy of the EU, it already started implementing the EU relocation scheme in 2016.¹⁵

Taking the aforementioned examples into account, one may conclude that the concrete field-specific examples confirm relatively close relations between Croatia and Germany. While there are some differences in approaches to respective issues, depending on the momentum of analysis and political background governing structures at the national level, fundamentally the two states share views and interests in many cases. Hence, regardless of a few aforementioned examples of minor discrepancies, it is unlikely that unexpected changes will take place in that regard.

6. Conclusions

The bilateral relations between Croatia and Germany have been relatively close and steady during the last three decades, regardless of existing discords over some important issues. It started at the very early stage of Croatia's fight for the international recognition of its sovereignty and against the occupation by the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitary forces. The Croatian diaspora in Germany played a big role in this context, as well as the societal consequences of the traditional orientation of German tourists towards the Croatian coastline as one of their favourite destinations. These bonds represented a solid backbone for the development of economic co-operation between the two sides and support of Germany towards Croatia's EU and NATO accession processes. The united Germany in the post-Cold War period represented a strategic partner for Croatia in its bid to join the institutions of the transatlantic community. On the other hand, Germany needs a reliable ally in its attempts to steer the European policies towards the wider Southeast Europe and contribute to its long-term consolidation in the increasingly volatile geostrategic framework marked by numerous unconventional threats.

¹⁵ For details see Reuters 2016.

However, the accession to the EU and NATO has deprived Germany of the privilege to use the conditionality mechanism in Croatia's pre-accession phase to influence its reform processes and policy orientations. From this time onwards, we are witnessing a 'more autonomous' formulation of Croatian foreign policy in the newly created regional frameworks (Intermarium) and attempts to fine-tune its strategic balance between Washington and Brussels, depending on the issue at stake. Also, Croatia is insisting on protecting the constitutional position of the Croat national corpus in BiH and practically opposing the German ideas of re-constructing BiH as a civil state. While these examples prove the increasing 'autonomy' of Croatian European policies, they actually do not blur the general picture of close relations and a high percentage of convergence of national interests and policies of Croatia and Germany in the European framework and beyond. This said, one should not disregard the obvious difference in relevance and leverage between the two, which is relevant indeed in defining positions and policy-making in the EU context.

In conclusion, Germany not only has a strong symbolic importance for contemporary Croatian policy-making, with its role in the 1990s and 'bridge communities' like Croatian guest workers in Germany and German tourists in Croatia, but a very concrete political and economic leverage in European and global terms. On top of that, fundamentally, the two countries share basic ideological and functional views about the future of the region of Southeast Europe, the EU and beyond, and therefore minor ad hoc differences are unlikely to avert the existing trends in the relations between the two.

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