**Article 2: Beautiful south**

*Croatia must work quickly if it is to meet its target of joining the EU by the end of the year, argues Joseph Daul*

The European Union was conceived on the hopes of peace, prosperity and the joining of forces towards a common goal. It was enlargement of the EU that contributed to peace and stability throughout the continent and consolidated common principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as the market economy. The story of enlargement is the story of Europe itself. And it is the EU’s most successful policy. The EU plans to take the next step with Croatia.

We have a responsibility to ourselves to continue to consolidate the European space and create a better future for the people of Europe. The timely accession of Croatia will set an example for other countries hoping to join, and significantly contribute to the stability and security in the south-east of our continent. With Croatia we must be aware that we are sending a message to other countries in the region that reforms do pay off.

The EPP-ED (European People’s Party) group has supported Croatia in its bid to become the EU’s 28th member state – conditional on its compliance with the accession criteria – since the start of negotiations. In its annual strategy document unveiled on 5 November last year, the European commission gave Croatia an agenda which outlined the changes the Croatia must make by the end of the year.

But the border dispute with Slovenia has moved up to the top of the agenda. As a union based on dialogue, we must try hard to find a lasting solution into this dispute. I encourage Croatia to continue with preparations for EU accession, in order to keep within the timeframe. The first thing that needs to happen is for Croatia and Slovenia’s governments to meet together in order to create a treaty that will reconcile their differences.

Croatia is a country that has moved far along in the process of joining and it is the only country that can expect to join the EU in the short term. It is clear that there are challenges ahead and reforms to be undertaken, such as building their shipbuilding industry, creating a judicial branch, and fight against corruption. And we will not make any exceptions for Croatia; although, I find it difficult to suggest that the country is not keeping up with the reforms when our own agenda-setting mechanism, the negotiations process, is stalled.

But we should not make an exception of Croatia. We must not forget the fundamental premise on which the EU was built: the hope of peace.

*Joseph Daul is the leader of the EPP (European People’s Party) group*

**Article 3: Seas of Change**

Border disputes between Croatia and neighbouring Slovenia must not impede the country’s progress in joining the EU, says Hannes Swoboda. In recent months, Croatia has undoubtedly made progress in moving towards the goals needed to join the EU. With the government reshuffle and new interior and justice ministers, the prime minister gave a clear signal that fighting organised crime and corruption should be a top priority. Both ministers still have a lot of work to do, but the reform of the justice system and the security forces seem to be on track.

The government is also engaging more with economic reform and the restructuring of the shipyards, despite difficult market conditions. Good cooperation with the trade unions is vital to reduce the social costs of these reforms. The border disputes with Croatia’s neighbours are significantly affecting the negotiation process. Its dispute with the country of Montenegro was resolved after both sides agreed to take the issue to an international court, but the situation is more difficult with Slovenia.

Looking at the dispute between Macedonia and Greece or Turkey and Cyprus, it is clear that the EU needs to send a strong message that disputes with countries must not block the opening of accession negotiations and that both sides must work to solve these issues. The dispute between Croatia and Slovenia is increasingly affecting relations between the two countries and the position of Slovenia within the EU. Still, a clear majority of the Slovene population supports Croatia’s membership, and Croatia’s political elite believe that a well-founded compromise with Slovenia can find a majority within their population.

Both sides have a justifiable position in the border conflict. Croatia highlights that the problem is a legal one, and wants an international court to make a decision on the issue. Croatia is ready to accept any decision from the international court of justice or the international tribunal for the law of the sea. Slovenia, however, prefers a negotiated solution because it gives it a stronger position as a member state of the EU. Commissioner Olli Rehn’s recent proposal to set up a mediation group headed by UN diplomat Martti Ahtisaari highlights that the EU wants a quick solution to the dispute. But the argument about the legal basis must be part of the procedure to solve the crisis. Both the political aspects underlined by Slovenia and the legal concerns of Croatia must be respected.

*Hannes Swoboda is rapporteur on Croatia and is a member of the delegation to the EU-Croatia joint parliamentary committee 16 February 2009 PARLIAMENTMAGAZINE*