We have become a member of the most prominent international organizations such as UN, NATO, EU and many others. This is an impetus/motivation to further work, build and strengthen our foreign policy standing and our diplomacy/diplomatic service to be able to take up a more global role and better respond to challenges of a very complex and constantly changing international environment, for Diplomacy&Commerce magazine says Marija Pejčinović Bućić, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia.

INTERVIEW

THE DEGRADATION OF THE GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT CALLS FOR A STRONGER AND MORE RESILIENT EU. BECAUSE OF THAT THE EU WILL NEED MORE UNITY, SOLIDARITY AND LEADERSHIP

This year Croatia marked 25 years of its international recognition. How do you see its present foreign policy position and the challenges that complex geopolitical and geostrategic trends place before the Croatian diplomacy?

— Today we live in an age of insecurity, unpredictability and complexity. Crises are everywhere, internally and externally. The outside factors are having more impact on our inside, like it is the case with terrorism, migration or climate, to name but a few. Our European security order has been challenged. Under such circumstances, we are bound to each other and to cooperation. Nobody has enough resources and capabilities to cope with the current challenges and threats alone. What we have learned is that we are better off if we act together, that we need to take global responsibility and global action and that we need to deliver. Our citizens expect us to deliver on their needs and concerns, their needs for peace, security, better jobs, way of life, energy.

In this sense Croatia sees itself at a specific geopolitical position, where it can advance cooperation Europe-wide with our friends in Central Europe and the Mediterranean and on to the Baltic, as well as with our friends in South East Europe and beyond. Further our interests and priorities expand in concentric circles to our wider neighbourhood to the east and south of Europe. We also continue to lay emphasis on fostering the transatlantic relationship as one of the most important pillars of stability and security in the international system and Europe, which helps us strengthen resilience, stimulate economic growth and address conflicts.

In this regard, Croatia naturally lays particular emphasis on the Southeast Europe and on promoting advancement of the enlargement process in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU. Here we always stress the importance of the transformative power of enlargement and our investment in the reform agenda of those countries through continuation of the strict and fair enlargement policy, where...
moving forward on the EU path is directly linked to delivery in terms of reforms, fulfilment of criteria and conditions that we have set out and respecting EU values of democracy, fundamental rights and rule of law. Croatia will continue to be firmest supporter and promoter of enlargement, including in the framework of our Presidency of the EU in 2020. We see the continuation of enlargement also important for the EU. I would like to remind here that enlargement has changed our continent. It has turned Europe into the continent of peace, democracy, respect for the rule of law and human rights. Today, it shows that the EU is still attractive. And it is an investment into our own stability and security and security and resilience of our neighbours.

Today, Croatian Foreign Service is facing a very intense period of change. We shall continue to operate in a very complex, interconnected and contradictory international environment and rapid changes to which constantly we have to adapt. We see to best be able to serve our interests as a credible and reliable European and global partner and member of the UN, EU and NATO. Our path and action so far are a testament to our credibility and responsibility where we place peace, stability, human rights and democracy, multilateralism and international law at the core of what we do.

What is your opinion on the development of relations in the EU after Brexit and Catalan independence referendum, and how does Croatia see its future in the EU? What are the greatest foreign policy challenges for Croatia, and what are its goals?
— This year we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. It was a good opportunity for us in the EU to reflect on our achievements so far and to look into how we intend to move our European project forward. The EU has over the last six decades brought peace and prosperity to Europe. This makes us both responsible and credible to work for a world to become better, to promote our values and democracy and to continue to bring stability to the outer world.

Various internal and external crises and challenges tend to resonate as a decline of Europe. Under such circumstances we have to make sure that the EU will work so as to be more responsive, more responsible, more credible and more efficient. To be better and closer to our citizens. For that to happen we have realised we need to reform. We in the EU know the value of both unity and diversity. The EU needs to face up to its difficulties in order to overcome them. Over the history we have learned how to transcend divisions and differences through forging consensus and building partnerships. We have to be able to shape history, set the agenda and lead by example, and not let the developments and events take over. In other words we need a true European spirit and approach.

**OUR LONG TERM GOAL IS TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION THROUGH SEARCHING FOR SUSTAINABLE AND LASTING SOLUTIONS FOR CONFLICTS AND CRISES AND FOCUSING ON STABILISATION EFFORTS**

These are all pointers advocating for a dynamic EU, an assertive and engaged EU. An EU that would take the lead within the international community and advance our interests. An EU that would nurture finding common solutions, collective and coordinated approaches. An EU that would deliver. An EU that would get closer to its citizens.

It is important for all Member States to renew their trust in the European project. In this time and age, the EU does not need new divisions. This means strengthening of our internal cohesion and convergence, economic growth and a more balanced development of Member States, the creation of new jobs, further strengthening of the global role and influence of the EU, advocating the continuation of the enlargement policy as well as promoting common European values. From its own position, Croatia has always strongly believed in the European project. Our membership in the EU was a realisation of our most important foreign policy goal. Peace, freedom, security and prosperity have been and will remain important anchors of our EU membership. We are therefore determined to take good care this project continues. We shall contribute our share to the development of the EU, its unity, to advancing its stability and prosperity and to promoting our values outside the EU. For Croatia the EU is about democratic values and the rule of law. This justifies our voice to be heard abroad. In this regard, we need to lead by example and focus our action on responding to growing global threats; keeping the promise to the countries with a clear European perspective; engaging our wider neighbourhood – to the South and to the East; building our capacities to respond to crises; showing solidarity with and helping those living in precarious conditions; and addressing common issues concerning our planet. These are all goals that Croatia will be working on with its partners within the EU.

Thus, joining the Schengen Area and preparing for the introduction of the Euro are the current Government’s goals on which we wish to work with great commitment.

Just before the Catalonian referendum Spain, as well as some other European countries, was swept by a wave of terrorist attacks. How efficient was the European joint response against terrorism? What future actions will official Zagreb be taking in this field in coordination with Brussels?
— The series of terrorist attacks on the European soil that we have been witnessing over the last period has demonstrated the whole complexity of the challenges of terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism. It has shown that the challenge will not go away and that we have to remain committed to fighting it. It has also pointed to...
Terrorism and the migration crisis have proven to be very important factors playing decisive roles in the political choices of voters in Europe. Where does the question of migrants stand on today's political ladder in Croatia now that the Balkan route is more or less closed?

— Migration is not exclusively European but a global challenge. As with all global challenges, neither the EU nor individual Member States are able to tackle it on their own. Solutions can only be found through a stronger cooperation and coordinated action at the national, regional and global level.

From the very beginning of the migration and refugee crisis Croatia has been advocating a common European response as well as a stronger coordination and cooperation with partners outside the EU, in Southeast Europe, but also the southern Mediterranean, Africa, Middle East and Asia. The Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route remains closed, however, we all need to remain vigilant on that and other routes as the pressure still continues. This is particularly the case in the Mediterranean, where we are witnessing an increased pressure from Libya as the main point of departure of migrants from Africa to Europe.

Within the EU we have worked on a comprehensive set of activities and adopted a series of legislative documents in response to the crisis. The cooperation with the countries along the Western Balkans route has been reinforced, we have agreed on a migration deal with Turkey, we are working systematically to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and cooperation with key countries of origin and transit on migration file has been significantly improved.

The countries along the Western Balkans route have been reinforced, we have agreed on a migration deal with Turkey, we are working systematically to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and cooperation with key countries of origin and transit on migration file has been significantly improved. The EU has a unique toolbox of diplomatic, economic, developmental and security instruments that can be used to this end. Efforts are needed on return and readmission, development cooperation, trade measures, facilitating reintegration and work on capacity building of partner countries to deal with migration, in particular on border management.

What is your view, in the framework of current relations in the EU, of the current dispute between Croatia and Slovenia and Hungary blocking Croatia's entry into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)?

— The open border issue between Croatia and Slovenia is a bilateral issue that the two states can and should resolve through mutual dialogue. The irretrievably compromised arbitration did not yield a solution to the open border issue, so it is up to the two states to determine their common border by mutual agreement.

Contrary to the generally accepted practice of OECD, according to which it is necessary to meet the prescribed membership criteria and not to politicise the process of membership, contrary to the common position of EU Member States adopted in 2007 and the current call of the European Commission to maintain the expressed unity of the Member States as well as to provide solid support to the OECD enlargement package — Slovenia and Hungary emphasised that they would not support Croatia's entry into OECD because of exclusively bilateral issues: Slovenia due to the open border issue and Hungary due to issues related to the company MOL.

Being members of EU and NATO, and considering Croatia's traditionally alloying with Hungary and Slovenia, we hope that our open bilateral issues will be resolved in the spirit of good neighbourly relations. Regarding the OECD membership, we intend to continue our committed work on meeting the membership criteria.

Recently you said that in the years to come South-East Europe has the potential to become a very dynamic region. Most frequently what reaches the public is less good news, that is strained relations in the region, primarily between Serbia and Croatia, and then those related to the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina. How do you assess the future dynamics of foreign policy relations in the region?

— Quite to the point: I see no reason for South-East Europe not to become a successful region in every possible sense if it directs its energy and potential towards accomplishing the necessary reforms and transformation processes. This refers mainly to Euro-Atlantic integrations which are of strategic importance to Croatia. Hence we strongly advocate the continuation of enlargement of the European Union and NATO to include countries in South-East Europe which wish to do so and assist them in the process.

This is important for the internal stabilisation of the countries in South-East Europe, for institutional development, strengthening of the rule of law, economic management, respect of fundamental rights and freedoms as well as respect of minority rights, in addition to the development of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation. In this context, regional cooperation initiatives encouraging countries to cooperate in diverse areas are essential, which is especially important in order to achieve infrastructural, transportation and energy development and mutual interconnection, as well as to approach EU standards and policies.