

**Speech of H.E. Paul Vandoren at the roundtable: After the Referendum " What next" at the Croatian Parliament**  
7<sup>th</sup> of February 2012

Dame i gospodo,

Veliko mi je zadovoljstvo što mogu otvoriti ovaj okrugli stol.

Posebno su mi drage ovakve inicijative, jer one dokazuju da je hrvatsko civilno društvo sazrijelo u pravog čuvara, te da će podsjećati institucije i građane ne samo na njihova prava, već i na obveze.

(Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to open this roundtable.

I am particularly pleased to see such initiatives as they prove that Croatian civil society has matured into a proper watch dog and will remind the institutions and the citizens not only of their rights but also their duties.)

First of all, I would like to invite everyone, inside and outside this hall, to master his or her expectations. This is a truly promising period. The referendum was a great moment for all of us. The day of the accession of Croatia to the EU is approaching at high speed. But, when the citizens of Croatia will wake up on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013, they will quickly realise that paradise did not install itself overnight in their country. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2013, you will not notice in the country many changes visible to the eye. Why is this? **Because the accession to the EU is not a one time event. Any country's accession to the EU is a process, not a sudden change.** It is about a transformation of the society spread out, over many years, in many aspects of every day's life. I have, at previous occasions, described the accession process as a 'silent revolution'. The constitution of the country was revised. Thousands of pages of legislation were adopted. I understand that the Sabor will adjust 55 laws to EU standards in 2012.

New institutions and agencies were put in place. I have the impression that the citizens are still digesting these changes. Many young people are still wondering whether what is happening is in their interest. There are now

less than 17 months left to make the young people understand that the EU is their future.

At this point in time, I would like to share the following key messages with Croatia's citizens, representatives and civil society, in the broadest sense possible:

1. Get fully prepared for membership and continue to inform yourselves. This is a great opportunity for all layers of the Croatian society to get the most out of future membership.
2. Contribute to EU policy shaping, which will determine your life and work, in the next decade or more, by being an active observer in the EU institutions.
3. Comply with the commitments made during the negotiation process and the delicate compromises reached at the end of the accession negotiations.

Now that the Accession Treaty was signed in December and the referendum led to a comfortable "yes" vote last January, **Croatia and the EU are now sitting on the same side of the table**. We have common goals and are defining common policies. Soon, we will take common decisions. So, let us shake off the rhetoric of the negotiation chapters. Let us look together at the remaining work, opportunities, reforms and challenges.

### 1. Prepare yourselves

All of you have the opportunity to seize the upcoming membership to the maximum possible. The key focus for the remaining months, for all of you, is to prepare yourselves **for EU membership**.

While authorities must enhance their information to the citizens about what membership entails, responsible and conscientious citizens have ample

opportunity for continuing to **seek information**. A wealth of information has been available for a considerable period of time. No one will come and knock at your door. Until recently, the focus was mainly on capacity building of institutions. It seems to me that, now, it is about capacities of citizens and civil society. Again, I hope that the youngsters of this country will soon realise that they can, but win, from the solidarity of the citizens from the current 27 Member States.

Here are some examples of what can be done pro-actively:

Students: look for scholarships and schooling opportunities in our current Member States. The conditions for enrolling yourselves will be identical to the ones for citizens of these Member States.

Entrepreneurs: go and explore 'niche' markets on this Single Market of more than 500 million customers. Identify and prepare your sales strategy for top quality products and services at the lowest possible prices. That is what competition is all about. The market will not come to you. You have to go out there. Many entrepreneurs from other 'enlargement' Member States have done it before you.

I understand that there is some concern about losing advantages from the CEFTA markets. But, your future market will be the biggest purchasing power in the world.

You will have the opportunity to benefit from numerous preferential trade agreements the EU negotiated with many trading partners in the world.

SMEs: you are the backbone of the Croatian economy. Be dynamic and proactive too. EU funds will be available only for good projects. So, you need to have good and strong ideas. The best will win. Establish synergies with partners, look over the borders to your neighbouring countries and prepare joint actions.

To all of you, I say: seize the opportunities. The Single Market is there and will be further developed. Do not hesitate. But you have to do it yourselves. The time that you could turn to the 'state' is over. There is no money left. At any rate, the initiative should be in your own hands.

Joining the EU also requires a **modern and citizen-oriented administration**, which can provide services in an efficient manner, using modern technologies (e-services) and offering simplified procedures to citizens.

Knowing foreign languages is key to effectiveness, as it enables communication with and learning from partners in the other Member States. This is where I would like to encourage the Government, in these difficult times of budgetary restrictions, to make the relevant **expenditures which are actually investments for the future**. Invest enough in your human resources. Provide enough scholarships enabling young Croatians to undertake academic studies abroad in EU related matters. All this might bring good return on investment.

By strengthening the administrative capacity, you will be able to benefit much more from future funding and will be able to prepare ambitious infrastructure projects. It seems worthwhile to build on the experience and knowledge acquired by the relevant agencies, which have been involved in the preparation and implementation of projects financed by the EU. Next year, the funding from **EU structural funds** will have to be committed according to the national procurement rules. Are the agencies and supervisory bodies ready to handle an amount of funding, which may be many fold of what has been available until now?

Report of Court of Auditors!

My advice is to take even more advantage of the experience and know-how of Member States, which recently joined the EU and have a good track record of using EU funds.

Explore which structures they put in place. Learn from their best practices. As you know, the EU has been financing successful twinning projects for this purpose.

## 2. Contribute to EU policy shaping

Croatian representatives can already now participate, at various levels, in meetings of the EU institutions and take advantage of this opportunity to voice their views and, thus, contribute to the EU policy shaping (in areas of CAP, Cohesion Policy, 2020 Strategy, new EU budget (2014-2020), Climate change, Energy CFSP (including enlargement)).

The EU invites Croatia to play a constructive role in the region by sharing its negotiating experiences with other countries. The first candidate is Montenegro, because negotiations are expected to be initiated this coming June.

The experience acquired with regard to the rule of law will be extremely valuable to any other country of the region. What about the Middle East?

Although Croatia is not expected to sign the draft International Budgetary Treaty (called 'Fiscal Compact'), it certainly can apply its disciplines and can also implement the contents of the recently adopted 'Declaration on Growth and Employment'. Indeed, after having adopted severe austerity measures, time has now come, for the EU, to stimulate employment, especially for young people, and completing the Single Market.

The level of unemployment, especially among young people is no longer tolerable.

## 3. Comply with commitments

The EU Member States gave the European Commission a strong mandate to monitor Croatia

in order to ensure that the outstanding reforms are indeed taking place.

In many areas, negotiations were closed, but Croatia committed to continue its reforms. In the interests of the citizens, this motivation and pace should not be lost.

**Croatia should abstain from adopting decisions, which could cast doubts on previous commitments.** Proper and timely consultation with the European Commission or the EU Delegation, in such instances, is recommended. **Next April**, the European Commission will adopt a new monitoring report on progress made.

This is where the citizens and civil society can step in. You can and you should keep a close eye on developments and make sure that Croatia is not backsliding in any respect.

You can remind the government, the local authorities, politicians and individuals that this is no longer about closing chapters.

It is about **attaining better quality, applying and implementing the rule of law on the ground in all possible spheres.**

At the same time, civil society should be constructive: besides saying 'no' or highlighting what does not work, ideas for doing better would be highly valued.

I hope that the government will soon reach an agreement on the privatisation contracts of the shipyards, primarily with the view to saving the

jobs of the workers and secure the lives of their families. There is no time to be wasted

The reform of the judiciary needs to continue: impartial, independent, efficient judges must be nominated. The fight against corruption and organised crime must be continued.

Effective and preventive measures to fight corruption must be adopted. Fundamental rights must be respected. Bring finally the war crime investigations to an end, solve the unbearable problem for the families of missing persons and provide refugees what they deserve. Step up the demining of the country.

The citizens of Croatia are desperate to see their economy picking up and jobs being created. Hence, stimulating investments, national or foreign, has become a priority.

Also removing obstacles to potential investors has been long outstanding and awaited for. I have, one week ago, on behalf of the Ambassadors of

the EU Member States, transmitted to the new Government a list with recommended actions of a practical, pragmatic and focused nature.

My Delegation is open for a dialogue with the relevant institutions to work towards an investors-friendly society. This can only lead to a win-win situation. But no time should be wasted. An Inter Ministerial work group could be set up.

One last issue: in spring 2013, Croatia will hold elections to select 12 Croatian members of the European Parliament. Next year there will also be local elections in Croatia. It is important that the register of voters is

reviewed urgently. Croatia cannot afford to go to EP elections with a list on which there are more voters than inhabitants.

Hopefully, significant progress can be noted by the European Commission in its Autumn Progress report.

Ladies and gentlemen, **there is no time to be wasted**. The door to the EU is wide open. We are waiting for you. I hope you will share my realistic optimism.

Thank you for your attention.