

FOREWORD

During recent years, since the start of the project “EU Monitoring” in 2002 and its first publication, Croatia has successfully accomplished important steps on its way to EU membership. The steps on this way were, first, overcoming the international isolation that had characterised the country during the nineties, then the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in October 2001, followed by the official application for EU membership in February 2003, which obtained a positive response from the EU in April 2004, and finally the accordance of status of candidate country in June of the same year. In December 2004 the European Council of the enlarged EU then announced the date of the 17th of March 2005 as the starting point for the negotiation process. At the political level, integration with the EU has been the main priority of the two governments in power since 2000 and has had the support of all major political parties. While during this period the majority of the population welcomed this policy, during the last year there was a surprisingly strong decline in enthusiasm in Croatia for the EU. Even without consideration of the details of this development, this change indicates that accession to the EU and the related reform process may have also led to fears and negative expectations.

Although Croatia can look back to an accession process that has been largely successful, a lot of problems at different levels of society still remain and have to be tackled in order to meet the requirements of EU membership and to adapt to EU standards. In this context, and with regard to the positive response to the results of the EU Monitoring project from the Croatian public as well as from international circles, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Institute of Public Finance in Zagreb are continuing with the project of analysing and evaluating the EU accession process of Croatia by Croatian researchers. Apart from the regular official reports on the progress of the implementation of reforms in Croatia by the government and international organisations, we deem it important to present a critical view by independent domestic experts on the accession process, covering political, economic and social fields. In these annual reports, which we intend to publish during the years to come as well, we want to contribute to the public debate on the development of Croatian society in the process of EU integration. The recently ambivalent attitude to EU membership of the Croatian population shows that public discussion on this topic is desirable and necessary.

With the aim of elaborating a comprehensive view of the accession process and covering various aspects of it, we have chosen a different focus for each of the publications. While the content of the first book concentrated on the economy, legislation, and civil society issues, the second one dealt rather with institutional aspects of policy issues and legislationⁱ. This time we have put the focus on EU accession and its requirements as a key to the transformation of society. It is known from the experiences of other countries that EU accession is indeed a strong stimulus and a driving force for the implementation of reform programmes. One should not forget that, regardless of the requirements and conditions in the context of the EU membership, Croatia still needs reforms to transform the society for its own good. Like the two other publications, this report also attempts to give the reader an in-depth view of some of the political and economic problems in the context of EU accession. As well as distributing the present book to the interested public and relevant institutions the Institute of Public Finance and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung intend once again to organise a series of workshops in the course of the year on the topics of the different chapters presented in this study for an intensive discussion of the problem areas among experts. Through this publication and the subsequent workshops we wish to provide a useful contribution to the public debate about Croatia's accession to the EU, which is vital for the acceptance and implementation of the necessary reforms on this way.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who contributed to this project, in particular Dr. Katarina Ott, director of the Institute of Public Finance and editor of the book, for her contributions and the fruitful cooperation with her Institute, and Prof. Dr. Nenad Zakošek from the Faculty of Political Sciences for his cooperation and assistance in editing the contributions.

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ⁱ "Croatian accession to the European Union: economic and legal challenges", Zagreb, 2003 and "Croatian accession to the European Union: institutional challenges", Zagreb, 2004.