Croatia's accession to the EU has proved to be an important move, bringing challenges as well as benefits, says Tonino Picula.

Croatian regions have long established importance of the European Union with the region of Istria opening its very much successful office in Brussels in 2005, long before Croatian accession to full EU membership. Two years later a joint Croatian regions office was opened representing several Croatian regions, cities and regional development agencies aiming at bringing themselves closer to the union's capital, as well as bringing Europe closer to Croatian citizens. Today, most of the Croatian regions can be found among over 300 European regions with offices spread throughout Brussels.

In addition to this formal recognition of importance of the EU, Croatian regions have provided some substance as well. In order to gain access to around €150m of funds made available to Croatia per
year through the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA), Croatian regions - a total of 20 of them plus the city of Zagreb – founded regional development agencies in order to increase their capacity to successfully apply for the EU funding. Up until 2010, over 40 per cent of the total contracted value from the pre-accession assistance was granted to Croatian regions, their development agencies, cities and counties, as well as public companies in their ownership.

The benefits stemming from the Croatian regions' interest in the EU's pre-accession assistance are many. It provided a valuable experience and practice with EU funding procedures. It provided an incentive for establishing lasting cooperation with cross-border regions - an invaluable result for a post-conflict society on its way of rebuilding weakened regional relations. It gave Croatian regions a much needed financial supplement to their otherwise weak budgetary capacities, but it also allowed them to glimpse and better prepare for the day of full Croatian EU membership when EU funds would become one of the main sources for financing development projects.

As of July 1 2013, the 'carrot' has become sensibly larger and more appealing. A transition from €150m yearly from IPA to over a billion from the structural and cohesive funds now available is a dramatic one. It calls for an equally dramatic increase in national, regional and local capacity to successfully withdraw these funds for the benefit of Croatian, now also European, taxpayers. This provides a unique chance for regions in highly centralised member states, such as Croatia, to initiate their own and actively participate in already ongoing development projects with other relevant stakeholders. It is quite an endeavour seeking a vision before having the capacity to carry it out.

Besides the financial benefit of full membership in the EU, one more advantage strikes me as equally, if not more, relevant: strategic planning. Strategic planning with a clearly set vision, defined goals and detailed work plans set in an elaborated time and financial framework has brought a new and more efficient principle of managing local communities and their development. Contrary to the existing Croatian principle of 'to solve it as we go', this new approach contributes to better assessing actual needs and problems and coming up with lasting and meaningful solutions. It encourages us to go beyond what concerns us today towards deliberating and defining where we want to get tomorrow.

The amount of available funds is important, no doubt about it. Being able to use it in the best possible way for the benefit of the widest possible range of people is, however, much more important. Croatian regions fortunately have incredible development potential thanks to its geographical and biological diversity, as well as a rich historical and cultural heritage. Before efficiently using newly available European funds, Croatian regions are faced with a challenging task of recognising and appreciating their own resources, as well as deciding how they want to develop them.

Full membership in the European Union has clearly articulated this challenge for Croatian regions and has brought a welcome change in their modus operandi. The illusion that 'all will be magically solved once we are in' was abandoned long before 1 July.

About the author

Tonino Picula is head of Croatia's S&D delegation to the European parliament

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