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An Open Letter to the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier:

A Call upon the German Government to Urge Slovenia to Unblock Croatia's EU Accession Talks

Berlin, 18th April 2009

Copies sent to:

European Commission	Federal Chancellery (german version)	Southeast Europe Association (german version)	Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia
European Parliament – Committee on Foreign Affairs	German Bundestag – Committee on Foreign Affairs (german version)	German-Croatian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (german version)	Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Ivo Sanader
European Commission – DG Enlargement	German Bundestag – German-Croatian Parliamentary Group (german version)	Editorial Offices of German Print Media, nationwide (german version)	Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration
Representation of the European Commission in Germany (german version)	German Embassy in Croatia (german version)	Croatian Embassy in Germany (german version)	Croatian Parliament (Sabor) – Committee on Foreign Affairs

Dear Dr. Steinmeier,

in the light of Croatia's EU accession talks currently being blocked by Slovenia, we call upon you in the name of nearly 400,000 people of Croatian origin living in Germany to stand up and vigorously advocate against Slovenia's extortionate blockade. As the fifth largest migrant community within this country, we urge Germany as an EU founding member to exert its political influence and set the course for an adequate European policy in accordance with its dignity and basic values.

While the world's attention is focused on the current financial crisis, Slovenia – taking advantage of its strong position as EU member state - attempts to tie a bilateral border dispute, simmering for 18 years, to Croatia's EU accession talks, claiming Croatian territory by means of blackmailing. As the maritime boundary between Croatia and Italy lies off the Slovenian coast, Slovenia wants to shift its national border with Croatia, claiming 150 km² of Croatian territorial waters in order to gain direct access to international waters (see maps attached).

More than a million people of Croatian origin living in Western Europe are witnessing Europe's passive attitude towards this unprecedented incident in the EU accession history with feelings of consternation and bitterness. It is simply not enough for Brussels to constantly repeat that there is no space for bilateral issues in EU accession talks. The time has come for a clear signal and an explicit warning for Ljubljana, reinforced with determination. Slovenia needs to lift its blockade immediately! Once, in the historic case of Austria, Europe stood up unanimously and in solidarity to defend its principles and put pressure on an EU member state. So why the double standards now?

No more, no less than the European Union's credibility is at stake, particularly against the background of the problems involved in the Lisbon Treaty ratification. If Europe was to allow blackmailing practices against an accession candidate by a member state like Slovenia, on the mere ground of being a member state, European integration would lose its meaning. Slovenia's action is contradictory to the European values which we Croats have come to appreciate and apply in our daily lives in Western Europe. Germany and Europe must not allow the principles of solidarity, co-operation, good neighbourly relations and the rule of law, which constitute the EU's foundation, to be betrayed. Interestingly enough Croatia, so far reacting with reserve and prudence to the Slovenian blockade, has now taken on the role to champion these European values.

The process of mediation initiated by the EU has to be based on international law and the conflict has to be settled before an international court of justice. Europe is based on the rule of law, and maritime border issues are subject to international conventions. Politicians cannot draw the borders as they please! The European Parliament has already passed a corresponding resolution by an overwhelming majority, which stipulates that the border dispute shall be settled according to international law. The only alternative to the settlement of the



border dispute – in the event of Slovenia immediately lifting the blockade – would be a suspension of the matter, but by no means a solution based on pressure and blackmailing.

We point out with concern, that this conflict – unfortunately fuelled in a demagogical spirit by Slovenian politicians – poses a serious threat and might poison the close traditional friendship of the two nations. Particularly in view of the traumatic war experience in the Balkans, Europe would incur a tremendous amount of guilt, if the rule of force was to prevail again, seriously undermining the most successful project of peace and prosperity. Slovenia's aspiration to gain free passage of its ships is understandable; accordingly, Croatia has offered its neighbour an agreement, granting the right of free passage to international waters for Slovenian ships (besides, a right Slovenia has been holding anyway!). Slovenia's demands to re-draw the border or for Croatia to cede a part of its own territory are therefore neither necessary nor in accordance with international law.

Slovenia's current blockade furthermore counteracts the millennium project of the Western Balkans' EU integration. The current EU policy will have a negative impact on the reform efforts of Croatia's neighbouring countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. Croatia is considered a role model in the region, and these countries look to Croatia. If the Croatian accession process is undermined by aspects which prove not to be part of the EU accession framework, a fatal signal will be sent out to the Balkans, conveying the impression that the accession process is not based on a foundation of clearly defined standards and criteria, according to which every country will be evaluated due to its individual reform efforts, but that the community of states is based on the rule of force, or even that strategic considerations of single EU members are treated as priorities. Euro-Atlantic integration is the only opportunity to achieve prosperity in the region, whereas Slovenia's policy, after the tragic wars of the 1990s, proves to be extremely irresponsible, if not dangerous.

We would like to emphasise with resolve, that Croatia merely calls for the same conditions which applied to Slovenia's accession process back in 2004, when the pending border issue posed no obstacle. We would like to recall that Croatia, upon entering the EU accession process, committed to settling potential border disputes before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Croatia has more than clearly expressed, that any decision ruled by that court will be accepted. The Slovenian side, in turn, refuses by all means to settle the conflict before that court, which has ruled in more than 50 cases of comparable border disputes. This very fact speaks for itself and illustrates quite clearly the legitimacy of the Slovenian position. As a consequence of this policy beneath Europe's dignity, Euro-scepticism is increasing among the population in Croatia, but also among the Croats living in Western Europe.

Although further reform efforts need to be implemented, Croatia has been on a successful course towards EU membership for many years and is one of the best equipped candidate countries in EU history. In the case of Croatia, the strictest accession criteria so far have been applied, and nevertheless have been successfully met, in the collective opinion of European member states. Croatia has turned into a stabilising factor in the region and is currently participating in several UN missions around the globe. Croatia is a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council and has recently joined NATO. As an essentially European country, it is – after two Yugoslav dictatorial regimes -Croatia's historical objective to return to the European family which it has always belonged to. With a stable economy, the small country can boast high growth rates, so that it will not represent a burden to the European taxpayer. Moreover, we would like to point out, that the over one million people of Croatian origin living in Europe are deemed exceptionally well integrated and loyal citizens in their respective host countries, being highly esteemed.

In conclusion, we call upon you to play a part in assuring, that the roadmap leading to the conclusion of Croatia's accession talks by the end of 2009 – a timetable set up by the EU itself – will be adhered to, according to plan. Please do not allow lesser motives, be it economic interests or power politics, to compromise this noble European aim.

Yours sincerely,

Mijo Marić
Chairman of the Croatian World Congress in Germany