



Croatia: A Stable Western Ally and a Playground of External Contestation

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Abstract

Croatia is a committed member of the EU and NATO and a stable ally of the United States in the region. Yet, it has been experiencing illiberal tendencies since becoming an EU member, marked by widespread corruption and a weakening of independent institutions which should control the executive. This stems from the dominant position of the HDZ party and not from external influence. However, non-Western external actors can use these illiberal tendencies to expand their influence. Russia has used the gas and oil sectors to target parts of the political elite and lend support to populist, far-right, and anti-Western actors. It has used corruption as its most trusted tool for sowing discord and creating instability. China is mainly focused on gaining a foothold in critical

infrastructure, primarily seaports, while its soft power is very weak. Türkiye has had the most comprehensive approach, combining investment with cultural influence in Croatia's Muslim community and toward society at large. The Turkish government has found ideologically like-minded groups among conservative politicians and NGOs in Croatia. Finally, the presence of Gulf countries is relatively low in Croatia, except for Qatar, which is crucial because of the off-shore LNG terminal on the island of Krk, which provides an alternative to Russian energy sources.

Introduction

The aim of this report is to provide a short yet comprehensive overview of the main pathways of influence of external, non-Western actors in Croatia (Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf), the EU's youngest member state with close economic and cultural ties to the Western Balkans region. This report starts with a brief explanation of the

sources and methods used for data collection and evaluation and then points to the state of democracy in the country and the way the quality of democracy may or may not be linked to the influence of external actors. It then devotes a chapter to each of the four external actors and offers some concluding remarks and observations.

Methodology

This report is based on a combination of international comparative democracy indices, secondary academic and media sources, and fieldwork. Fieldwork involves semi-structured, one-hour interviews with fourteen experts on Croatia, the Western Balkans, and the politics and economics of the four external actors considered in this paper: Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Gulf countries, respectively. The experts provided their opinions and

assessments in direct, face-to-face interviews and chose to remain anonymous due to the topic's sensitive nature. All note-taking during interviews was done by hand and later recounted and referenced anonymously in the report. The experts mainly come from the academic community in Croatia, with some being investigative journalists and activists in watchdog non-governmental organizations.

State of Democracy

In 2022, Croatia was, according to the *Freedom in the World* report, a free country, albeit with serious problems regarding corruption and visible problems regarding discrimination against ethnic and sexual minorities (Freedom House 2022a). According to the *Nations in Transit* report, it was a semi-consolidated democracy and one of the few countries in Central and Eastern Europe where a majority of the population expressed satisfaction with democracy (Freedom House 2022b). According to an influential paper published in 2020, the primary sources of democratic backsliding in Croatia after EU accession are in the historically developed dominant position of the governing party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Once the conditionality of the accession process passed, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was able to capture public institutions, leading to the illiberal weakening of the

control capacities of independent agencies, the judiciary, and the media, over the executive (Čepo 2020). Thus, illiberal tendencies are internal and not external in Croatia's case. However, as this report will show, non-Western external actors might use these illiberal internal conditions to expand their influence. Recent illiberal tendencies stand in stark contrast to the rapid improvements and democratic development the country has experienced during negotiations with the European Commission during the 2000s (Finn 2021). In March 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution on malign external influence in the European Union, particularly regarding fake news and disinformation campaigns, highlighting Russian efforts in this regard (European Parliament 2022).

Russia: Gas Money

Despite Russian efforts, the country is viewed in Croatia primarily as a Serbian, Orthodox ally, while Croatia sees itself as aligned with the West, especially the United States (Jović 2018). However, Russian influence is largely felt through the energy sector and its spillover effects on internal and foreign policy. According to official statistics, imports from Russia rose significantly in 2020-2021 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022), mainly gas. However, due to the imposed sanctions, Russian oil and gas shares in the Croatian energy mix have dropped significantly, from roughly 40 percent to a mere 15 percent.

Due to strong links to the West, particularly the United States, Croatia opted out of the Russian South Stream pipeline project (Rašidagić 2013, 358). While President Stjepan Mesić (2000-2010) supported this so-called Družba-Adria initiative, Prime Minister Ivo Sanader (2003-2009) opposed it. However, in 2007, a Balkan Energy Cooperation Summit was held in Zagreb, and President Vladimir Putin was cordially received. According to a foreign policy expert, “this was the start of the process of fragmentation of the European Union/European energy market and the slow takeover of the gas and oil business by Russian capital” (Interviewee 2, 2022). Russian energy became more important through the takeover of INA, the Croatian national oil company, by the Hungarian MOL in 2008. Particularly through the gas business, Russia developed its influence on Croatian political elites and spun networks of crony business connections (Vidov and Prkut 2019). For years, local environmentalist groups opposed building the LNG terminal on the island of Krk. According to several interviewees, there are strong indications that some of these green groups were financially supported by Moscow to thwart the LNG project, ultimately creating an opportunity for alternative gas supply routes away from Russian pipelines.

One of the key Russian-aligned politicians in Croatia was the former Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) President (2012-2016) and Vice Prime-Minister in the short-lived Orešković cabinet (January-June 2016), Tomislav Karamarko. The connection went through his spouse, Ana Karamarko, and her business, linked to the Russian capital in the energy and real estate sectors (Banac 2016). Together with other HDZ members and business associates, she

ultimately faced trial due to tax evasion (Dešković 2022). As an international relations scholar observed during the Orešković government, pro-Russian oriented circles felt encouraged to exert their influence (Interviewee 2). A right-wing historian, Zlatko Hasanbegović, became a culture minister, prompting the increased prominence of a circle of right-wing intellectuals connected to *Matica hrvatska*, a traditional cultural institution in Croatia. These people, largely involving former dissidents during communist Yugoslavia and émigré Croats who returned during the 1990s to Croatia, started a counter-revolution against liberal and left-leaning NGOs and media outlets, promoting Euro-Asianist and national-conservative ideas close both to the French *Nouvelle Droite* and the philosophy of Alexander Dugin.¹ Around the same time, then-Russian ambassador Anvar Azimov developed close ties to ex-president Stjepan Mesić and long-time mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić (2000-2021 with short interruptions, social democrat turned populist). Two local TV stations, Z1 in Zagreb and *Osječka TV* in the eastern Croatian city of Osijek, developed into right-wing outlets supporting political and cultural tendencies aligned with Moscow. Bandić was the only Croatian politician ever received in the Kremlin itself, was decorated by Putin, and symbolically marked his Russian ties by placing a bust of the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin in the newly developed Bundek public park in Zagreb in 2017 (Šobak 2022). Despite being a former NATO Deputy Secretary General, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (2015-2020) also maintained cordial relations with Vladimir Putin (Körbler 2017).

Croatian-Russian relations, which were previously positive regarding cooperation in the tourism and energy sectors, took a sour turn after Prime Minister Andrej Plenković visited Ukraine in 2016 and lent support to Kyiv's efforts to return Crimea and Donbas to its sovereign control (Bojić 2017). As observed by an international relations scholar, “after Plenković's visit, Russian banks, which were providing funding for Agrokor, the largest food and retail company not just in Croatia but in the whole of Southeastern Europe, stopped extending credit, triggering an insolvency crisis” (Interviewee 2, 2022). *Agrokor* was simply “too big to fail, as its downfall for Croatia would be the equivalent of a crash of the City financial sector for Great Britain” (Interviewee 2, 2022). Out of the total *Agrokor* debt of 3

1 Prominent Russian nationalist ideologue and associate of Putin's regime.

billion euros, one-third was held by the Russians, namely the state-owned VTB and Sberbank financial institutions. Through a complicated restructuring process, *Agrokor* was transformed into *Fortenova* Holding, with 51% of assets going to Russian banks and 6% to ENNA Group, a gas transport company owned by Pavao Vujnovac, the greatest broker of Russian energy (mainly through his long-term deal with *Gazprom*) in the region. The Plenković government rejected proposals to nationalize the company and instead sought to restructure it. In the end, the Russians do own the majority of *Agrokor* and can thus project influence on Croatia, yet they are unable to make use of it due to sanctions. In recent months, the government has tried to broker a deal whereby the four private retirement funds (owned by major banks and/or insurance companies) would buy the Russians out. However, the German-owned Allianz insurance and retirement fund ultimately rejected the offer and thus nixed the whole deal (Drljača 2022). Apart from trying to prevent the downfall of *Agrokor*, Plenković spent the better part of his first prime ministerial term (2016-2020) battling against the Karamarko faction in his own party ranks and, thus, by proxy, waging a war of pro-Brussels against pro-Moscow forces.

“Corruption is a method of Russian influence and control,” observed a scholar of international relations (Interviewee 2, 2022). As noted by the same scholar, there were “three main ways of Russian influence – through the dependence of other countries on Russian oil and gas, through media outlets such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, and finally, through the Russian Orthodox Church” (Interviewee 2, 2022). In Croatia, only the first of the three ways can be observed.

In recent months, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become (as observed by a foreign policy investigative journalist) a “discursive bogeyman of Croatian politics,” with politicians left and right accusing each other of being “Russian players” (Interviewee 7, 2022). Indeed, at some point, Russian businesspeople and Croatian entrepreneurs in the gas sector, such as Pavao Vujnovac,

have provided campaign funding and even loans to political parties (e.g., HDZ). However, the only relevant political actor currently not wholeheartedly supporting the Ukrainian war effort and issuing statements that play into Russian hands is President Zoran Milanović. Noted for his inflammatory rhetoric both in domestic media and abroad, Milanović has become increasingly more aggressive in his communication style since the so-called Slovenska Affair in 2020, when the media found out that many prominent politicians, both from the government HDZ party and Milanović’s former party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) frequented a private club during a lockdown and enjoyed food and drinks with several businessmen accused of corruption, including Dragan Kovačević, chairman of the board of JANAF (Adriatic Pipeline). Although this cannot be confirmed, investigative journalists pointed out that the President could also have been complicit by association with Russian-tainted capital (Interviewee 7, 2022 and Interviewee 8, 2022).

The Plenković government positioned itself at the forefront of the pro-Ukrainian coalition by organizing the 1st Parliamentary Summit in Crimea Platform in Zagreb (Croatian Parliament 2022). In addition, the government wanted to join those EU member states that would provide on-site training for Ukrainian soldiers, yet President Milanović vowed to veto such a proposal.

Through friendly journalists and scholars, Russia tries to promote a counter-narrative on supposed American colonialism in Croatia (Interviewee 4, 2022). In addition, it panders to far-right groups by capitalizing on the so-called “anti-woke” discourse. Newer, challenger political parties such as the Bridge of Independent Lists (Most) and the Homeland Movement can be seen as ideologically close to Orbán and Putin due to Russian criticism of LGBT rights and secularism. However, these parties largely support the government’s aid to the Ukrainian war efforts. *Sputnik*, the Russian Language Center in Zagreb,² has lost most of its public visibility after the start of the invasion but still operates on a lower scale.

2 Owners of this language school are local language instructors; there are no known connections to the Russian Embassy.

China: Infrastructural Efforts

Croatia is not China's primary point of interest in Southeastern Europe, as Beijing has developed close ties with Belgrade. However, China sees the country as a potential link between the EU and the Western Balkans for its economic interests. Thus, in 2013, the year of Croatia's EU accession, the Chinese Southeast European Business Association (CSEBA) was established in Zagreb as a gateway organization for investors (CSEBA 2022). Through CSEBA, there were attempts at investments in hotels and spa resorts in the Zagorje region, north of the capital city, yet most of these projects remain on the drawing board (Interviewee 5, 2022). According to experts in China, there were also talks about building a new sports stadium at Blato, a suburb of Zagreb, as well as a highly symbolic reconstruction of the building of the Kumrovec (birthplace of Josip Broz Tito) political school for communist cadres, proposed by Yu Jiang, a businesswoman with close ties to the Communist Party of China (Srzić 2019).

The Chinese government has secured equity in the Zadar port, yet ultimately did not achieve the same goal in Rijeka, Croatia's largest port and a trade entry point for Central Europe. Instead, ENNA Group has bought the same allotments at the seaport. However, the government in Beijing is still actively interested in investment and ownership of critical infrastructure in Croatia and elsewhere in the region, a fact with potential sensitive security implications, as explained in an interview with a political economy scholar (Interviewee 9, 2022). Before the pandemic, in 2019, there were talks that the vital corridor of the lowlands railroad connecting the port of Rijeka to Zagreb and the Hungarian border would be built by Chinese investment instead of EU funds (Galić 2019). Due to the pandemic, imports from China slightly decreased in 2020–2021 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Although Croatia did not officially join the efforts of the Trump administration to block Huawei from entering the 5G market in the EU, Croatia ultimately opted for Swedish Ericsson, bypassing the Chinese offers, as pointed out by an economic policy and China expert (Interviewee 9, 2022). Thus, despite Chinese remarks about a "diamond stage of relations with Croatia," the "romance was short-lived," as observed by a Western Balkans expert (Interviewee 10, 2022).

Since the building of the vital Pelješac Bridge (opened in July 2022) by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), the first such project funded by the EU (85%) and

won by a Chinese company, Croatia has increased relations and hosted the 2019 China-CEEC meeting in Dubrovnik (Stopić 2020). However, an expert on China observed that Croatia might be enticed to leave the initiative if larger countries, such as Poland, follow the example of the Baltic states, which abandoned this platform in 2021, thus relegating it to a 14+1 format (Interviewee 9, 2022).

Apart from the publicly highly visible Pelješac Bridge (financed by the EU), the second largest Chinese-built (and, in this case, co-financed by local and regional authorities in Croatia) construction is the windmill park at Senj, in the Northern Adriatic. This project is, according to a China expert, "surrounded by low public visibility and dubious business transparency" (Interviewee 9, 2022). In addition, "local residents complain about the environmental impact due to high noise levels" (Interviewee 9, 2022). The expert noted that "high noise levels result from the fact that this on-shore windmill project used building components usually reserved for off-shore wind plants in order to circumvent customs authorities and reduce costs" (Interviewee 9, 2022). This detail points to a clear link between investment from key external actors and local corruptive practices.

In April 2022, a huge economic and political delegation toured Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia. The delegation, headed by Huo Yuzhen, a special representative for the China-Central and Eastern Europe Investment Cooperation Fund (CEEC), tried to reinvigorate the China-CEEC initiative and create networking opportunities for members of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (Interviewee 5, 2022).

According to a China expert (Interviewee 5, 2022), Beijing authorities have put much effort into mobilizing former Croatian officials in consulting and lobbying activities for Chinese investments. These high-level lobbyists include ex-presidents Stjepan Mesić and Ivo Josipović (2005-2010) and current President Zoran Milanović while he was in non-governmental business (2015-2019). These networking and lobbying activities mostly occurred through business seminars and conferences in Shanghai.

As explained in an interview with an expert on China (Interviewee 5, 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered Chinese diplomacy and investment less visible in Croatia, with many potential projects put on hold. While Chinese

language and culture are taught both through the Chair of Chinese Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Zagreb and the Confucius Institute, which is, curiously enough, directly integrated (both organizationally and financially) in the University of Zagreb, the Embassy is “not particularly satisfied with the impact of these institutions” and is “trying to expand its visibility through a new education section” (Interviewee 5, 2022).

Türkiye: Soft Power Strategy

Ever since Ahmet Davutoğlu (minister of foreign affairs in 2009-2014, prime minister in 2014-2016) devised Türkiye’s Neo-Ottoman foreign policy, Croatia and the Western Balkans have been a primary focus of Turkish efforts to expand political, economic, and cultural influence (Interviewee 3, 2022).

Türkiye has had some investment in the Croatian banking sector (Kent Bank), but its most important economic ventures lie in tourism (*Rixos* hotels, *Doğuş* nautics) and transport infrastructure, such as the Zagreb and Dubrovnik airports. TİKA, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, maintains offices in Zagreb. Imports from Türkiye increased by 21 points in the 2020-2021 period (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). A Turkish company, Cengiz İnşaat, has won a public tender worth 321 million euros for the reconstruction of a key railroad connecting northern Croatia to Hungary (Bakotin 2022).

According to an expert on Türkiye and the Middle East, “Türkiye has developed a strong cultural influence through popular culture, including the provision of academic scholarships, language courses, and the ubiquitous presence of Istanbul-based soap operas” (Interviewee 1, 2022). A Zagreb office of the Yunus Emre Institute was opened in 2013. The Rijeka-based Croatian-Turkish cultural society has made efforts to combat negative historical images of Türkiye in Croatia from the Ottoman past (Croatian-Turkish Society Rijeka 2009).

In September 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Zagreb with great pomp and circumstance. He also visited the city of Sisak, where he opened a new Islamic

China has made some attempts to block Taiwanese scholarly activities in Croatia (Interviewee 4, 2022). The embassy has protested against the Autumn School on Political, Economic, and Security Aspects of East Asia, a series of short courses offered for almost a decade at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, due to the fact that the Autumn School treats Taiwan as a separate entity from mainland China.

Apart from several large building projects, the impact of Chinese policy on Croatia is rather limited.

Center named after him. The Turkish government financed the mosque and auxiliary facilities. An expert on Türkiye and the Middle East observed that “the Turkish government is trying to influence the Islamic Community in Croatia and bring it closer to the vision of Islam promoted by the AKP party” yet remains only partially successful in doing so (Interviewee 1, 2022). According to the same interviewee, “Erdoğan views Muslims (Bosniaks, Albanians, and Roma) in Croatia as too secular and wants to see them embrace a Turkish vision of Islam” (Interviewee 1, 2022). At the same time, Erdoğan is admired by conservative Catholic politicians and non-governmental organizations due to his similar positions on abortion and the LGBT community. A policy of academic cooperation and scholarship has also left its mark among Croatian historians and Turkish studies scholars. Strong pro-Turkish sentiments among these scholars have created silence about the issue of the Armenian genocide. While countries like Czechia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have officially recognized the genocide, Croatia has remained silent about it.

Erdoğan can be seen in Croatia, just like in the Western Balkans, as a power broker and mediator who can use economic and soft power to influence local politicians (Bakotin 2022). However, since the 2016 attempted coup d’état in Türkiye, Croatia has become somewhat more cautious regarding Ankara. As observed by a Western Balkans expert, “Croatia has even started giving asylum status to Kurds” (Interviewee 10, 2022). Therefore, despite the strong and varied influence in Croatia, the relationship is not as one-dimensional as might seem at first.

Arab States of the Persian Gulf: A Small Footprint

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, i.e., Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar) has a rather weak diplomatic presence in Croatia. Bahrain covers Croatia from its Embassy in Rome, Kuwait and Oman cover Croatia from their Prague Embassies, Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Sarajevo covers Croatia, while the United Arab Emirates uses its Embassy in Berlin to maintain diplomatic ties with Zagreb.

As explained in an interview with an expert on the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA), "Saudi Arabia seeks to be a regional leader representing the Arab Peninsula in Croatia" (Interviewee 1, 2022). However, this influence actually operates through "security cooperation via proxy (the United States)" (Interviewee 1, 2022). In addition, the same expert claimed that "the Saudis are working in Croatia through Egypt," which does have a diplomatic presence in Zagreb. In addition, the improving Israeli-Saudi relations, due to their finding common ground because of Iran, are reflected in the security ties between Zagreb and the Gulf countries. Despite some initial media coverage, Croatia is largely silent on the Yemeni war, which might point to the tacit support of Saudi Arabia as a US ally in the region.

Qatar is the only one of the Gulf States with a direct foothold in Croatia, as it has an extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador in Zagreb. Through its Embassy, the State of Qatar provided in-kind donations of medical devices and equipment to the main maternity hospital in Zagreb from Qatar Charity in 2021, amounting to 200.000 dollars, as part of post-earthquake relief (The Embassy of the State of Qatar in Zagreb, 2022). Qatar was also the main charitable provider of endowment (*waqf*) for the building and furnishing of the Islamic Center in the port

city of Rijeka (allocating 8 million euros), which opened in 2013 (the Embassy of the State of Qatar in Zagreb, 2022). Al Jazeera, a Qatari-owned international news network, has a TV studio in Zagreb, which enables it to exert some soft power influence and maintain a greater presence than other Gulf countries. However, despite its generous financial support for the Rijeka Mosque, Qatar's cultural and religious influence on the Muslim community in Croatia is weak and overshadowed by Türkiye's key position in that regard.

The economic influence of Qatar is most visible through the off-shore LNG terminal on the island of Krk in the Northern Adriatic. The gas shipping capacities at the terminal are fully booked until 2023, with the lion's share going to Powerglobe Qatar LLC and MET Croatia Energy Trade (*Poslovni dnevnik* 2020). MET Croatia is part of a wide, Swiss-based group of energy market companies operating Europe-wide, including Spain, Germany, Hungary, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Türkiye (MET Croatia 2022). Imports from Qatar strongly rose in the 2020-2021 period (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Since the founder of the Arab Center in Zagreb, Mustafa Alajbegović, passed away in 2020 (*Arapski centar* 2020), there have been no Arab language courses on offer in the capital city, save for the courses provided by the Zagreb Mosque through the Institute for Arab Language and Islam (*Institut za arapski jezik i islam* 2022). At the university, the Chair for Turkish Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in Zagreb offers a single subject on the introduction to the Arab language (*Katedra za turkologiju* 2022).

Conclusion

Croatia's illiberal tendencies mostly stem from its internal dynamics and the dominant position of the HDZ party, which create conditions for crony capitalism, nepotism, and corruption. Yet, the corrosive influence of external actors finds fertile ground precisely through corruption, as exemplified by Russian attempts at controlling Croatia through dubious money flowing from the gas and oil business towards electoral campaigns. While China is less active, it has employed former politicians for lobbying and consulting. Unlike Western Europe, in Croatia, Chinese authorities do not have to deal with vigorous criticism of human rights violations or an anti-regime diaspora. Türkiye uses historical and cultural ties to influence the general Croatian public and the country's Muslim population. While Croatia and Türkiye might see things differently regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, conservative and illiberal groups in Croatia do admire Erdoğan's strongman style. Gulf countries are mostly visible through Qatar and its energy presence through the off-shore LNG terminal at Krk. The marginal status of Croatia and the Western Balkans in terms of the rest of Europe makes these countries especially prone to (malign) external influence (Kovačević 2019). Also, the corrosive influence of external actors is directly linked to low levels of the rule of law in these countries (Prelec 2020).

As noted through talks with investigative journalists and foreign policy scholars, there is an undercurrent of anti-Western sentiments in parts of the Croatian media and social media. This is partially visible through foreign policy and geopolitics news portals such as *Advance.hr* (subscription-based) and *Geopolitika.news* (financed through ads) which often portray "alternative" views of current political, economic, and security events and

processes in Europe.³ While the official Croatian foreign policy and the bulk of its political elite are strongly oriented towards Washington and Brussels, Russian corruptive influence through the energy sector does reach illiberal and far-right parts of the political and cultural elite, while the Chinese operate through former politicians, offering them consultancy status. It is worth noting that Croatian citizens have more favorable opinions about Western countries and leaders than Russia, China, and Türkiye (Petrović, Bilić, and Fila 2022) and that positive stance towards these actors is to be found in those segments of society that are prone to illiberalism, populism, conspiracy theories, and anti-Western sentiments.

- ✘ Croatia's illiberal tendencies are rooted in corruption and the dominant position of the ruling party.
- ✘ Russian influence has been curbed since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, but an undercurrent of anti-Western sentiment in fringe media outlets remains close to Moscow's position.
- ✘ China has not managed to turn its economic presence into cultural and political influence.
- ✘ Türkiye has the most comprehensive policy, which relies on a combination of investment, soft power, and outreach to Croatia's Muslim community.
- ✘ Apart from Qatar and its role in providing an alternative supply to Russian gas, the influence of the Gulf states is limited.

3 The owners of both portals are journalists who are not widely known.

Policy Recommendations

- ✘ Dependence on Russian energy has been reduced and should further decrease after the start of Russian aggression on Ukraine.
- ✘ Croatia should follow the European Commission's and NATO's efforts to develop infrastructure interconnections for gas, oil, and electricity solely through member states.
- ✘ Croatia should increase domestic efforts at safeguarding media independence and judicial efficiency to raise its capacities for the fight against fake news and corruption.
- ✘ A successful tackling of corruption will be the best remedy for the influence of illiberal and authoritarian external actors.

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