
BRUSSELS TO LAUNCH PR-CAMPAIGN FOR THE BALKANS

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23.01.2013 SETimes Unlike some other EU aspirants in the region, Croatia is highly regarded by the public in most member states, one expert said. The EU will spend 20 million euros on a public relations campaign to polish the image of Balkan accession countries in the member states, including 1.5 million euros to promote Croatia. EC enlargement spokesperson Peter Stano said that Croatia, which is to join in July, is highly regarded by the public in most member states. The image problem rests with the other accession countries, he said. "In many EU member states there is lack of information, which results in prejudices and stereotypes." Bernd Posselt, a German member of European Parliament and rapporteur on Croatia, spoke more bluntly. "Enlargement is not popular in the EU, but Croatia is," he said. "Why? It is not too big, and many people know the country. When you travel there you feel like being in the EU." Figures released by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics suggest that 2012 will be the country's best tourism year since the 1990s armed conflict, with a large upswing of Germans. In October, EU-citizens accounted for 77, 1 percent of all overnight stays. Many Western Europeans also like Croats working in their countries, Posselt added. "Here in Bavaria, every village has a restaurant and a church. Croats have a reputation of being not only the best chefs, but also the best priests." But there are critics. Natasa Srdoc, head of the Adriatic Institute for Public Policy, a Croatian think tank, noted that the PR campaign for Croatia is being launched even though the country has not dealt with corruption. "Ivo Sanader's verdict is only a pinprick strike against Croatia's colossal corruption," Srdoc told SETimes, referring to the 10-year jail term that the former prime minister received. Philip Lerulf, co-author of The European Union's Burden, told SETimes that the project is a waste of euros. What the European Commission (EC) calls 'prejudice' is in fact a legitimate opposition to EU-enlargement," Lerulf said. The Adriatic Institute denounced the EU for "marketing" the Sanader case as a success story, and said the bloc has closed its eyes to the so-called Balkan Route for smuggling drugs, arms and people to Western Europe. The route runs through all Balkan accession countries, including Croatia. EU officials said that mistakes were made admitting Romania and Bulgaria. "This is one reason why enlargement is not popular," Stano said. "But we have learned our lesson. We now start accession negotiations with the chapters on justice and rule of law * The Western Balkan countries, by contrast, must prove they can implement the legislation." According to Sasa Segrt, director of Transparency International in Croatia, this has worked. "The push from the EU has helped," she said. "Apart from Sanader, three other important corruption-cases are pending. People have become more sensitised." TI statistics, she said, show that Croatia is less corrupt than Italy or Greece, and much less than Bulgaria and Romania.