

Croatia under the Excessive Deficit Procedure: which measures should be implemented?

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How to put public finances on a good track when (almost) all measures regarding spending cuts and tax increases have been already exhausted? Croatia's government has been seeking to solve this tricky problem since mid-November when [an excessive deficit procedure \(EDP\) was launched](#) against the country. Let us explain what an EDP means: the public deficit of Croatia currently exceeds 3% of GDP; the breach is neither exceptional nor temporary; consequently, the government of Croatia has to curb its public deficit in a lasting way.

On 28 January 2014, the EU Council will propose (1) the time limits within which Croatia must reduce its deficit below 3% of GDP and (2) the average annual amounts of deficit reduction during the period. Yet, (3) the EU council will invite *formally* the government of Croatia to propose concrete measures towards reducing the deficit-to-GDP ratio below 3%.

The problem facing the government of Croatia is not straightforward since the proposed measures should not further depress the economy. Currently, only modest signs of recovery are in sight in Croatia, and its unemployment rate stands at a high level (16.5%). The country is among the poorest EU members: its GDP per capita is 62% of that of the EU-28.

Briefing Paper n° 6 aims at proposing a list of measures that an EU country under EDP such as Croatia could envisage. For each measure, we present the main arguments "in favor of" it and "against" it in general terms. Then, we discuss the

relevance of every measure for Croatia. Note that our list of measures is suitable for both advanced and less advanced EU countries. More generally, our list could be used for any country facing public finance problems and looking for solutions.

Three measures (out of seven) seem to us particularly relevant in the case of Croatia:

- the use of service concession contracts;
- the privatization of some state-owned enterprises;
- the improvement of tax collection and compliance.

The first two measures are related to the need to restructure state-owned enterprises that are inefficient due to poor management. In particular, state-owned enterprises which are neither natural monopolies nor of strategic importance (*i.e.* in the tourism and agriculture sectors) should be privatized. Privatization of other state-owned enterprises should be envisaged more carefully, but not excluded. Croatia is the first country to join the EU with such a high share of state-owned enterprises (25%), and the slow pace of privatization has hindered growth. More privatizations will result in (long-run) gains even if causing (short-run) pains, in particular layoffs among the workforce. Service concession contracts are another way of restructuring the state-owned sectors. The impact on public finances is different, though. Services concession contracts provide a regular source of revenues for the government (through receipts of concession fees) and/or of savings (through lower payments of government subsidies). By contrast, immediate and potentially large amounts of cash can be obtained from the proceeds of privatization.

Recommending a restructuring of state-owned enterprises in Croatia is not a novelty. The [International Monetary Fund](#), the [World Bank](#) and the European Commission have repeatedly stated that the pace of privatization or service concessions should

be accelerated to raise the efficiency of the economy. Currently, the government of Croatia is actively engaged in accelerating such a process, in particular for service concessions. A few recent concessions include [Zagreb's airport](#) and [Rijeka's port](#), while [motorways](#) and [Brijuni's island](#) have also been proposed to bidders.

Croatia's citizens do not always support the restructuring process. To obtain greater public acceptance of privatization and service concessions, communication should be improved and intensified. In particular, the budgetary authorities should explain *what* they are doing, *why* they are doing it, and what the long-run benefits of their actions will be. Otherwise, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises will be perceived as a gift to the private sector. Last but not least, the process of privatization and service concessions should be more controlled to prevent misguided choices, abuse or conflicts of interest. That also means fighting corruption.

The improvement of tax collection is the third measure that we advocate to curb Croatia's public deficit. According to the [Institute of Public Finance](#), the cumulated uncollected tax revenues in Croatia would amount to HRK 40bn, which represents more than twice the projected public deficit for 2014 (HRK 19.3bn). Should the government be capable of collecting at least a portion, it would give a little breathing room to the public finances. In Croatia, increasing the tax collection means several interrelated things: fighting the grey economy (since unreported incomes are untaxed incomes) and prosecuting tax fraud (otherwise, rules and procedures are useless). Again, tighter control means fighting corruption.

By contrast, other measures such as wage cuts in the public sector or low corporate tax rates do not appear suitable to put the public finances of Croatia on track.

Further details can be found at <http://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/pdf/briefings/2014/briefing6>

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