

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0084/08
by Iles Braghetto (PPE-DE)
to the Commission

Subject: Exclusion of Italian fishermen from Croatian fisheries zone

With effect from 1 January 2008, Croatia unilaterally introduced an 'ecological and fisheries protection zone' dividing the Adriatic Sea by a line running from north to south.

The western section is assigned to Italy and the eastern one to Slovenia, which has little in the way of coastal development, and Croatia, which has been establishing an 'ecological and fisheries protection zone' in the eastern half of the Adriatic since the beginning of this year. This is a project advocated years ago mainly by parties with a clear nationalistic bent. It was halted by a four-year moratorium to which Croatia subscribed, but then reactivated last autumn at the time of the Croatian parliamentary elections. The moratorium expired on 31 December, when Zagreb introduced the protected zone, which effectively prohibits fishery activity.

At the most recent European Union Council of Ministers, the topic was the subject of a dispute between the Italian and Croatian delegations, in the presence of Prime Minister Romano Prodi. It seemed possible that a broad agreement might be found, enabling a negotiated settlement to be reached, especially bearing in mind Croatia's application to join the EU. However, no official agreement has been reached as yet.

Meanwhile, Italian fishermen must bear the brunt of this unilateral decision by Croatia, banning fishing in the eastern part of the Adriatic, in the Balkan area. Under international law, a state may designate a protection zone up to 200 miles from its own shores. Where this is not possible, the maritime zone should be divided in two. As the Adriatic measures less than 200 miles from shore to shore, Zagreb is choosing to apply the law by dividing the sea in half. As the Adriatic is a long narrow sea, the removal of fishing opportunities is having serious social, economic and employment-related effects on the Italian and European fleets. A thousand jobs are said to be at risk if this situation persists. In addition, to make an already rather complex situation even worse, in recent days a fishing vessel from Manfredonia (Foggia) has been seized, possibly for crossing into Croatian territorial waters in the vicinity of Split.

Bearing in mind that accession negotiations with Croatia are moving ahead swiftly, with the firm support of the European Parliament, as expressed in the Swoboda report (A6-0092/2007) adopted in Strasbourg in April 2007, and that the eastern part of the Adriatic will no longer be 'Croatian' but 'European', what steps will the Commission take to encourage negotiations to settle the dispute between Croatia and the Italian fishermen?

Does the Commission think that this obdurate behaviour by Croatia towards a European state, Italy, could adversely affect the mid-term review of the accession negotiations?