

**Speech by H.E. Zoran Milanović**  
**President of the Republic of Croatia**  
**76<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, General**  
**Debate**  
**September 21, 2021, New York**

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to address this important body once again. I especially want to congratulate you, Mr. President, on being elected to preside over the 76<sup>th</sup> Session. I wish you much success.

I also want to thank your predecessor, H.E. Volkan Bozkir of Turkey, for his leadership and guidance in truly difficult times.

And I congratulate H.E. António Guterres on his re-appointment as UN Secretary-General.

Perhaps more than ever, it is important we continue to strengthen multilateralism and the international rules-based order, with the United Nations playing a central role.

Mr. President,

You are right in pointing out how this moment in history calls for, above all, hope.

Violence, poverty and hunger are once again on the rise. Our post-pandemic recovery will be even more hard pressed in upending the world's uneven economic development. Devastating natural disasters, especially due to severe weather patterns, are increasingly more difficult to deal with. And as our best scientific minds tell us, we can no longer afford to ignore how climate change is making natural hazards worse. Migration continues to rise, further fuelling discontent in its wake. All along, populists and disinformation campaigns, blatantly or maliciously ignoring factual accounts, can unnervingly shake people's confidence in public authorities, in science and in the media.

But we cannot, we must not give in.

It is our responsibility, as global leaders, to tackle these false narratives head on; to win back the people's trust; to give them hope.

Multilateralism, global solidarity and international cooperation have little, if any, alternatives. It is a sound way forward for rational beings. The United Nations stands only to benefit from its cooperation with regional multilateral actors like, in a European context, the EU, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and NATO.

I therefore want to reemphasize Croatia's commitment to our collective efforts in tackling the many challenges before us. This includes taking action on climate change, our commitment to solidarity in times of crises, protecting human rights and upholding humanitarian law, promoting education and the empowerment of women, peaceful conflict resolution, fighting organized crime and corruption, countering terrorism, and dealing with disruptive technologies.

Mr. President,

The COVID-19 pandemic is a historic test for our generation. How we respond today, both individually and collectively, will greatly shape the world of generations to come.

Croatia is pleased to have been able to co-coordinate, with Afghanistan, the resolution on the "*Comprehensive and coordinated response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic*", which not only set the stage for our recovery, but also for building back better.

The resolution also recognizes the value of an integrated "One Health approach". By better understanding the health related interlinkages of humans, animals and our ecosystem, we stand a better chance at tackling antimicrobial resistance, as well as preventing and containing another major zoonotic disease outbreak.

I think we all share in the aspirations of a comprehensive, multi-sectoral engagement in strengthening national, regional and global capacities, as well as society's overall resilience to a future pandemic.

Let us maintain momentum and keep working towards a more robust architecture that will reinforce global health security. The World Health Organization plays a pivotal role, and therefore, its further development is essential.

Establishing legal standards and assuring compliance is a fundamental part of an effective multilateral cooperative response. This is why Croatia actively advocates the “Pandemic Preparedness and Response Agreement”.

As an upcoming member of ECOSOC (2022-2024), Croatia wants to foster the deliverance of a stronger multilateral response to the pandemic, in the spirit of global solidarity and partnership. Safe and effective vaccines, as well as diagnostics and treatment, need to be made more easily accessible to all, in a timely and sustainable way, and without discrimination.

We are firmly committed to supporting the work of ECOSOC as the UN’s key platform for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, clearing our path to recovery.

Mr. President,

Ahead of the 26<sup>th</sup> UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow this November, it is vital we stay on track and promote the continuous implementation of the Paris Agreement. Even Pope Francis, who has dedicated his first Encyclical *Laudato Si’* to the common heritage of our Planet, is expected to attend.

The necessary changes in our lives and in our economies will certainly not be easy. However, I am convinced that shifting to green and sustainable technologies can go hand-in-hand with economic growth.

Croatia is actively setting up a legislative and strategic framework, which is a prerequisite for coordinated action on climate change. Our commitment to reaching climate neutrality is visible through several key strategic achievements: the National Development Strategy 2030, the Strategy of Low-Carbon Development 2030 with a view to 2050, and the Five-Year Action Plan for the implementation of a Strategy of low-carbon development.

Let me say a few words about our southeast neighbourhood.

Croatia has vested interests in the well-being of the Western Balkans. The region's stability, functionality and prosperity means a great deal to us. This is why Croatia is one of the strongest advocates of the region's EU enlargement prospects. The fulfilment of well-established criteria, the implementation of reforms and delivering tangible results remain key requirements for EU membership. But even more so, the path to membership serves to secure the higher standards its peoples aspire to.

Democratic transformation and the rule of law will remain central markers. But we have also continued to call on all regional leaders to lower tensions, overcome their differences, and seek ways to build lasting relationships.

In a way, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a cornerstone of peace and security in the wider region. Its territorial integrity, functioning institutions, and inter-ethnic cohabitation have always been important concerns for Croatia. Yet, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is as challenging and as complex as it gets in the Western Balkans. (And it is always challenging in the Western Balkans)

We would like to see a stable, peaceful and prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina, progressing firmly on the path to EU membership; a country where the equality among its three constituent peoples and the rights of all its citizens are fully guaranteed.

Unfortunately, narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina often swing between two tenaciously unachievable and unjust ends – centralised governance and separatism. In their own way, both are destructive and contrary to the spirit of its constitutional framework, stemming from the Dayton-Paris Agreement.

The Dayton-Paris Agreement is not without its faults, which undoubtedly will need to be addressed. However, we should not underestimate Bosnia and Herzegovina's well-established sensitivities and inherited intricacies. Nor should it be subject to experimentation that dangerously deviate from the Dayton-Paris Agreement's founding principles. This is essential

in moving Bosnia and Herzegovina forward and securing its EU aspirations.

The inequality of its constituent peoples has been left unresolved for too long. It unnecessarily created internal political instabilities and tensions. In order to move forward, Bosnia and Herzegovina requires an appropriate institutional ‘power sharing’ framework, based on principles of federalism, decentralisation and legitimate representation. The concept of constituent peoples is often misrepresented as an obstacle to the equal rights of all its citizens. Many political and legal practices can be ensured without having to give up democratic rights and freedoms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s electoral reforms are long overdue and urgently needed. Electoral reforms should facilitate constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) are able to respectively choose their representatives at all the appropriate political levels. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Croats have not been able to exercise this right. It’s no wonder they feel marginalized and disenfranchised. This has to change.

Mr. President,

The collapse of Afghanistan’s Government is a major setback. After 20 years of our engagement and investments, it is hard not to come away discouraged.

We will certainly assess the lessons from our Afghan experience. But the key question today is how should we deal with the Taliban? Maintaining a pragmatic approach will not be easy, as we rightfully call upon those in power to respect the most fundamental rights of their people.

Security will remain fragile, as risks of a regional spillover cannot be ruled out. We are also concerned Afghanistan may once again become a breeding ground for terrorism.

Croatia has decided to financially support UN OCHA’s efforts in providing humanitarian support to the Afghan people.

The Middle East Peace Process remains crucial not just regionally but globally. We call on both sides to refrain from unilateral actions that could exacerbate tensions and reopen new cycles of violence. In the long

term, the focus should be on developing a wider political horizon for meaningful negotiations and renewing the peace process. A two state solution based on internationally agreed upon parameters remains viable.

Reviving the Iran nuclear deal is a key instrument of regional security and stability that can still serve as a useful platform for broader regional dialogue. We hope that further diplomatic efforts will contribute to resolving issues of common interest.

After over a decade of instability, the Libyan crisis could be winding down. Nevertheless, a lasting peace will remain complicated. I sincerely hope the planned elections will be held in December, as a legitimate leadership is an important precondition for a successful transition.

Mr. President,

Together, we urgently need to start reforming the UN, especially the Security Council, our main instrument for securing global peace and security. In this regard, we welcome the Secretary General's efforts, expressed in his recently published report - "Our Common Agenda."

Croatia also upholds the "Responsibility to Protect", consensually adopted in the 2005 World Summit Outcome. We welcomed the General Assembly's resolution on the "Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity", adopted in this Assembly with overwhelming support.

Together with Costa Rica, Denmark and the Global Centre for "Responsibility to Protect", Croatia organized yesterday's special event on protecting women and girls, directly affected and often targeted in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Croatia reaffirms its strong commitment to a rules-based international order and to uphold international law, two essential ingredients of peaceful coexistence and cooperation among states. We support the role of the International Criminal Court and call upon those member states yet to ratify the Rome Statute, to do so.

Promoting the rights of women and children, confronting hate speech, calling for an abolition of the death penalty, protecting minorities and

actively promoting ‘casualty recording’ and the mandate on truth, justice and reparations are among our human rights priorities at the UN.

Croatia is still searching for 1,858 of its own citizens that are still missing or unaccounted for from our 1991-1995 Homeland War. It is a lasting painful burden for the affected families, not to mention the toll on our society’s desire to move on. That the fate of the missing is unknown some thirty years later is especially excruciating.

We urge other neighbouring states to cooperate in good faith and to respect their declared commitments and international agreements. I confess that I cannot understand the lack of information sharing and access to archival leads on the possible locations of individual and mass graves, so many years after the conflict.

Mr. President,

It is impossible not to recall the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11, twenty years ago. Terrorism continues to be our era’s formidable security threat. On the other hand, it has also ushered in unprecedented cooperation on, and unwavering resolve to counter terrorism.

Cyber security is perhaps one of our fastest growing concerns. Trends appear to indicate an increasing diversification of malicious efforts, perhaps state-sponsored ones being the most worrisome. Particularly upsetting incidents involve cyber-attacks targeting our critical health infrastructures, already exhausted in the struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Croatia is proud to have contributed to 19 UN peacekeeping operations. We also aspire to join the UN Peacebuilding Commission and continue our engagement from previous mandates.

Nuclear weapons and the corresponding technology still loom large in the security calculus of leading global powers. Nightmare scenarios can greatly be avoided by sincere commitments to the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), a foundation of global nuclear order. We hope to see progress in the NPT’s review conference.

But while nuclear weapons cast large shadows, let us not lose sight of lingering threats posed by illicit small arms and light weapons trafficking. We know this first hand from the armed conflicts and organized crime activity in the Western Balkans. We will continue advocating for effective multilateral action on tackling illegal arms transfers and build-ups.

Thank you.