After  1945 Croatia was a republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This new federation was intended to satisfy the national aspirations of all its peoples, but a centrally controlled Communist Party and a supranational push for Yugoslav unity undermined this structure. By the 1960s Croats had grown increasingly critical of the economic centralization that appropriated part of the republic’s income for investment in other parts of the federation.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the Yugoslav government instituted a number of economic reforms and attempts at political liberalization and decentralization. These reforms contributed to the flowering of a “Croatian Spring” in 1969–71. The movement took the shape of a cultural and national revival, expressed in large part through the activities of the cultural organization Matica Hrvatska, but it soon culminated in calls for greater Croatian autonomy. The political restrictions were not alleviated by the 1974 Yugoslav constitution: although the republics gained greater autonomy within the federation, they were still controlled by their single-party regimes.

In 1989, as communist hegemony was challenged throughout eastern Europe, the Slovene and Croatian communists agreed to free multiparty elections. The right-wing, nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica; HDZ), led by Franjo Tudjman (a former party member who had been jailed during the suppression of the Croatian Spring), was victorious in the Croatian elections of 1990.

Turning to oppose Croatia’s independence, a larger contingent of army forces attacked the new regime. In the ensuing war, the city of Vukovar in Slavonia was leveled by bombardment, Dubrovnik and other Dalmatian cities were shelled, and about one-third of Croatian territory was occupied by Yugoslav forces. Warfare was halted by an agreement whereby European troops, sponsored by the United Nations (UN), were installed in the disputed areas in order to stabilize and demilitarize them. Although Croatia was granted international recognition in 1992, the government’s control over its own territories remained incomplete.

Croatia recovered full sovereignty over eastern Slavonia in 1998, and, with the withdrawal of UN troops from the Prevlaka Peninsula in 2002, Croatia finally had full control of its territory.

Tudjman died in December 1999, and Stipe Mesić, who had broken with the HDZ over Tudjman’s autocratic rule, was elected president in February 2000. Croatia continued to suffer deep economic and political divisions, particularly over cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which indicted several Croatian generals who, according to many Croats, had heroic wartime reputations.

On April 1, 2009, NATO officially welcomed Croatia as a member of the alliance.

Thousands celebrated in Zagreb on July 1, 2013, when Croatia completed its decade long accession journey to become the 28th member of the EU.