

Croatia: Negative results for the government coalition

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European parliament (EP) elections in Croatia took place only a year after the special EP elections held in 2013 just before Croatia's accession to the European Union (EU). Croatian entry into the EU, unlike the accession of other countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007, was not an event marked by palpable enthusiasm and high expectations, but rather, it was a market with subdued optimism or indifference. It was seen by the public both as a chance to change the direction of the stagnant economy and improve the functioning of institutions and as an inevitable development with uncertain prospect for the country that might not be fully prepared to take the benefits of membership. The first year of membership in the EU was marked by Croatia's relatively peripheral position in most important developments in the EU related to dealing with the fallout of the euro crisis. While affected by the Eurozone crisis, Croatia is not a member of the Eurozone and its economic problems started well before the accession and are unrelated to the EU. Therefore, Croatia was mainly an observer in debates about response to crisis and future directions of the EU economic governance. Furthermore, the first several months of membership were characterised by the dispute that the Croatian government had with the EU over the implementation of the European arrest warrant, which resulted in government humbling if not humiliating climb-down after six months of argument with the European Commission. But in general, the Croatian public was neither sufficiently informed about current developments in the EU, nor was it informed about the debates regarding the future direction of the EU. As a result, EU and European questions in general featured very little in public debates before the EP elections.

The context

In the year after the accession, Croatian politics was characterised by persistent attempts of the opposition coalition led by Croatian Democratic Union

(HDZ) to challenge the government and mobilise their political base through heavy emphasis on symbolic politics and identity issues. Leader of HDZ Tomislav Karamarko relied heavily on radical nationalist rhetoric aimed at delegitimising the government led by the Social Democrat Party (SDP) as ‘people who never wanted and never loved Croatia’ and stating that government policies are undermining independence of the country. Radicalisation was fuelled by the dispute over the introduction of the Cyrillic script, mandated by the Constitutional Law on the Rights of the National Minorities, in the city of Vukovar, a place that is heavily symbolically loaded, being besieged and destroyed by the Yugoslav Army in 1991. An organisation called Headquarters for the Defence of the Croatian Vukovar challenged government authority and repeatedly disrupted the implementation of the law, receiving substantial support from HDZ leadership in the process and for their attempts to collect signatures to overturn the provision mandating the introduction of the minority language in the city if the minority population reaches one-third share in the city. Radicalisation was further supported also by the referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage, which took place in December of 2013.

While main opposition parties attempted a radicalisation strategy, the government parties were beset by conflicts and internal division taking place in SDP and the second strongest member of the government coalition Croatian People’s Party–Liberal Democrats (HNS-LD). At times, it appeared as if SDP leader and prime minister Zoran Milanović is more preoccupied with fighting his critics and opponents within the party rather than running the government, at times even undermining ministers in his own government. This led to a general perception that the government is ineffectual and directionless with no discernable long-term policies. In this context, a dynamic figure of SDP minister of finance Slavko Linić dominated the government agenda with his focus on fiscal discipline, until he was forced out of office by the prime minister just a week before the European elections. The work of other government ministers was more or less characterised by apparent lack of coordination, fixed policy priorities and clear policy measures.

Despite aggressive attacks on the government and radicalisation strategy used by HDZ and its minor coalition partners, the government maintained slight advantage in the polls for most of the preceding year. However, combined support for both government coalition led by SDP and opposition coalition led by HDZ slowly declined to approximately 50%. At the same time, a number of new parties contesting political space out of the main left-right division emerged based on identity and symbolic issues. Slow decline of support for the government and persistent weak support for the opposition, as well as rising support for new political parties and coalitions indicated that a significant share of Croatian citizens cannot be still electorally mobilised with symbolic and identity issues based on divisions formed in the Second World

War and after, attitudes towards history, religion and views about the role of Croatia in wider political unions, which dominated Croatian politics since first democratic elections. This does not necessarily mean that old political identities based on these factors are losing their strength and the ability to shape political identity of citizens. But the decline of support for the left and the right bloc in opinion polls indicates the possibility that for a large share of the electorate party, choice is separated from dominant political identities of the left and the right, or at least that political identities are not anymore identified with parties of the left and the right coalitions so clearly.

The campaign

Before the elections, opinion polls predicted that the left and the right coalitions will fight for electoral support with four other parties and electoral coalition groups. The oldest of these emerging in 2011 parliamentary elections is the Labour Party. Characterised by strong left-wing rhetoric and criticism of past and present government policies as implementation of neoliberal economic model, the Labour Party had close to 10% of support in opinion polls. The second group is a centrist group formed from a newly emerged National Forum Party formed by successful businessmen and medical doctors on the platform calling for government of experts, and what is left from the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLP), which for most of 1990s was the main opposition to HDZ government and which tried to establish itself as an alternative to left and right in previous parliamentary elections. The third group is Alliance for Croatia formed from Croatian Democratic Assembly of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB), a regional party that split from HDZ in 2005, taking most of HDZ support in the eastern region of Slavonia, and several smaller conservative and nationalist parties. The alliance was formed most likely with a rationale of increasing the likelihood for HDSSB to win a seat in the EP by aggregating votes from small parties on the nationalist and conservative right nationally, or out of its regional base. The fourth group formed just before the elections was ORAH (Sustainable Development of Croatia), a party of left and green orientation, formed by a former SDP environment minister Mirela Holy after she was expelled from the party a year ago after a conflict with the prime minister. A party identified by voters mostly for its leader, ORAH gained support quite quickly, offering disgruntled voters of the left coalition led by SDP a credible alternative on the left. Support for this new party grew very quickly, reaching more than 10% in national opinion polls just before the European elections.

The position of the left government before the elections was further complicated by the developments in SDP after Prime Minister Zoran Milanović

initiated a conflict with finance minister Slavko Linić and forced his resignation from the government just a week before the elections, which could only damage the electoral prospects of the left coalition. The position of the opposition in the preelectoral period was supported by an apparent unity of HDZ and its coalition partners, by the abandonment of the radicalisation strategy a few months before the European elections, and by the greater shift on economic issues in the campaign and its political discourse. Although the campaign was relatively subdued, hampered by strict campaign finance regulation and lack of resources all parties face, HDZ was mostly able to focus their messages on the relative failure of the government to absorb structural funds and on economic issues. HDZ could also rely on efficient party organisation capable of mobilising a large number of activists. European issues were largely absent from the campaign, and domestic issues dominated campaign and electoral behaviour of Croatian voters. Four challengers to the left and the right coalitions tried to mobilise support by criticising established parties and trying to establish themselves as alternatives to old political actors. The already-subdued campaign was suspended after the floods hit east of the country and 11,000 people were evacuated from the affected area. At the same time, the focus of media shifted to floods and its consequences while parties pledged to stop campaigning and donate remaining funds to flood relief. Thus, in the last week before the elections, there was virtually no campaigning.

The results

Elections for EP in Croatia are conducted with proportional (PR) system where 11 seats are allocated between party lists. Voters can also indicate a preference for a particular candidate, but this affects the order of candidates only if 10% of the voters of a particular list indicate a preference for an individual candidate.

The turnout in 2014 EP elections in Croatia was approximately 25%, were more than 950,000 of 3.7 million voters turned out to vote. This represents a significant increase from 20% turnout (780,000 voters) in special EP elections in 2013. While the difference in support of HDZ and SDP electoral lists in 2013 elections was less than 6,000 votes, this time, increased turnout mostly benefited HDZ. Since HDZ has far stronger party organisation than other parties capable of more effectively mobilising its voters and it is more stable and has a loyal electoral base, it was in any case more likely to benefit from lower turnout. This result may also indicate that new party leadership after a significant period of turbulence and lacklustre performance managed to consolidate party organisation and give it a renewed sense of purpose. HDZ-led

coalition won more than 100,000 more votes than SDP-led coalition, ending with six Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to four MEPs of SDP-led coalition. Furthermore, the SDP leader and the prime minister suffered a personal rebuke from voters when 48% of SDP voters cast a preferential vote for an SDP MEP Tonino Picula, initially placed by the party leader on the fifth place on the party list, propelling him to the top of SDP list of elected MEPs. Given that Tonino Picula is in a low-level conflict with the party leader and presents a calm and competent image in opposition to arrogant and combative, but not particularly effective, prime minister, this was interpreted as a vote of censure for the prime minister. The final Croatian MEP was won by ORAH, which won more than 85,000 votes and of which party leader Mirela Holy won more than 60,000 preferential votes. Given that Mirela Holy was expelled from SDP after a conflict with the prime minister after being forced to resign as an environment minister, the good result of ORAH and its party leader personally was also considered as a sign of criticism of Prime Minister Zoran Milanović.

The big loser of these elections is Labour Party, which failed to gain more voters than in previous EP elections and lost their only MEP. Alliance for Croatia gained close to 7% of the vote and came very close to gaining one MEP, whereas the coalition of National Forum and HSLs failed to gain sufficient support despite strong showing in the polls and is most likely heading into political oblivion. The support for Labour Party, being the oldest of the new parties, suffered most likely because their voters did not find sufficient motivation to vote in elections, which were clearly not considered important in the national context and since they support a party that is already established as an alternative to the left and the right in national parliament. Similarly, ORAH benefited from the surge of support from voters who wanted to register their support for this new alternative on the left.

In conclusion

The results of the EP elections in Croatia led to a swift resignation of the Labour Party leader Dragutin Lesar. Given that Lesar was an efficient and energetic parliamentary performer, his resignation might have an effect on party support and reception of it as a credible alternative to the left and the right bloc. However, since he stays in parliament, Labour Party might recover their fortune by next elections. The elections stabilised HDZ and its support and gave it a new sense of confidence for parliamentary elections due in late 2015. Given that results were interpreted as a failure of the SDP leader and prime minister Zoran Milanović, and as a success of his critics, relatively weak result

Table 1. Results of the 2014 EP elections – Croatia

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2013)	Seats (change from 2013)
Croatian Democratic Union Alliance (HDZ, HSP-AS, HSS, BUZ)	EPP (HSP-AS in ECR)	41.4	6	+8.6	0
Social Democrat Party Alliance (SDP, HNS-LD, IDS, HSU)	S&D	29.9	4	-2.1	-1
Sustainable Development of Croatia (ORAH)	G-EFA	9.4	1	+9.4	1
Alliance for Croatia (Savez za Hrvatsku—HDSSB, HRAST, HSP...)		6.9	0	+3.9	0
Labour Party (Hrvatski laburisti – stranka rada)	GUE-N-GL	3.4	0	-2.4	-1
Others		9.0	0		
Total		100	11		-1
Turnout (%)		25.3			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		5%			

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

of SDP, which after coalition partners won two MEPs, down from five won in 2013, is likely to further tension in SDP and may even turn into a full-blown conflict, in which case the stability of government majority might come into question and new elections might take place.

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