

Croatia: Towards further fragmentation of the party system

ANDRIJA HENJAK

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections in Croatia were held in a very different political environment than previous EP elections. Economic conditions have improved as GDP growth resumed in 2015, unemployment has declined by more than half, and the government's fiscal position has improved as well. However, the entry into the EU and expiration of the restrictions on the free movement of labour produced mass emigration of mostly younger Croatians towards countries of Western Europe. Thus, despite the migrant crisis that affected Croatia in 2015 and 2016, and the constant pressure of migration on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was emigration – rather than immigration – that was at the core of public debates in the two years preceding the 2019 EP elections. Emigration particularly affected the eastern part of the country, which suffered huge population losses and turned a fertile and potentially prosperous region into a symbol of the country's failure to manage its own development and to take advantage of its EU membership. The Croatian economy was largely unable to tap new markets in the EU, it is heavily dependent on tourism and it suffers from a weak export sector and lack of innovation capacity and competitiveness. This resulted in Croatia becoming one of the countries with the lowest GDP per capita in the EU.

THE CONTEXT

In two years prior to the European Parliamentary elections, the government, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), was faced with many challenges: the collapse of the largest company in the country, the bankruptcy of more than half of the shipbuilding industry (one of the few remaining significant industries in Croatia), internal political infighting between various wings of the HDZ itself, pressures from trade unions (which mobilised huge support in opposition to a proposed pension reform), and pressures from conservative and nationalist groups (by challenging party leadership when HDZ had moved to a more centrist position after 2016 under the leadership of Andrej Plenković). For two years, the fight between the prime minister and his more nationalist and conservative opponents on the right was played out very publicly, affecting the undisputed perception of HDZ as the sole credible representative of voters on the right.

At the same time, the period preceding the EP elections was characterised by infighting within the main opposition Social Democrat Party (SDP), which saw numerous but ineffective challenges to its even more ineffective leader Davor Bernardić. These challenges resulted in expulsions, suspensions and defections from the party, reducing party strength in the parliament and its credibility with voters. As a consequence, the party lost almost half of its support in the polls. At the same time, the party Most failed to effectively position itself in the Croatian party system. This party emerged as the anti-establishment reform party in 2015, seeking to break the two-party duopoly. Most won significant support in parliamentary elections in 2015 and 2016, briefly participated in two governments, and brought both of them down in short order. Yet, it was overall unable to clearly define its identity and suffered from splits and defections, losing support along the way. On the populist end of the party spectrum, *Živi Zid* (Human Blockade), which also emerged in 2015, had fewer problems defining its message, which consisted in opposing Croatian membership in the Eurozone and NATO, calling for political control over the central bank, and suggesting leaving the EU. The party almost rose to second place in the polls, but it declined immediately thereafter, as new political actors with similar appeals entered the stage at the beginning of 2019.

Overall, between the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament elections, the party system in Croatia underwent further fragmentation, primarily as a result of popular demand for new political actors. However, none of these parties were able to effectively establish a functional organization and presence on the ground. These parties were often reduced to, and therefore completely dependent on, a few prominent personalities acting as the public face of the party. These parties also struggled to form candidate lists that had visibility for the EP elections, and struggled to sustain political activity. Sheer numerical fragmentation did not help. To compensate for this and prevent the wasting of votes, parties formed coalitions which often included four, five or even more members.

As a consequence, on the eve of the 2019 European elections the combined support in the polls for the two largest parties (HDZ and SDP) had dropped from over 60% before the 2015 parliamentary elections to around 40%. The combined vote share of the four largest parties was approximately 60%, having fallen from over 80% compared to the 2015 parliamentary elections, and there were about ten parties polling below 3%.

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign for the 2019 EP elections was more visible than at the previous EP elections. After six years of membership, it appears that in this campaign the electorate was more familiar with the role of the European Parliament and somewhat more engaged with the issues facing the EU. Furthermore, parties or individual candidates, mostly MEPs, were even making statements about how they see the future of the EU, which was not really the case in previous elections.

Having incumbent MEPs produced significant advantage in the campaign, especially if those MEPs had managed to remain visible to the Croatian public throughout their term. Here SDP enjoyed a particular advantage as both of their MEPs were quite well-known and popular among the general public. A similar advantage was enjoyed by the group of nationalists and conservative parties forming the coalition of Croatian Sovereignists headed by the well-known and popular MEP Ruža Tomašić, the only Croatian MEP member of the ECR group.

Perhaps the biggest risk was taken by HDZ, which advanced a list of relatively new and unknown candidates and failed to include any prominent members from the right wing of the party. Additionally, the list did not include two prominent MEPs representing former HDZ coalition partners, both of whom likely enjoyed significant support among the party adherents, despite not being party members. Thus, despite having perhaps the most organized and resourced electoral campaign, HDZ struggled to raise the profile of their candidates. Also, the HDZ campaign, in comparison with previous EP elections, did not rely as heavily on symbolic politics based on history and values. Instead, influenced by the prime minister and his centrist strategy, it emphasized dangers of populism and extremism for the EU. This message was directed both at the populist parties like *Živi Zid*, and HDZ's competitors on the right such as Independents for Croatia and Croatian Sovereignists. The party leadership was using this election campaign to place the party firmly in the centre of the party system and the European mainstream; and attendance at the party's final rally of Manfred Weber and Angela Merkel served to emphasize this appeal.

The SDP campaign was led by their EP candidates as the party leader entered this race with a weakened position – the party had been suffering in the polls for quite some time and dissatisfaction in the party was palpable. Most, which entered the campaign as the fourth party in the polls, focused their message on the criticism of HDZ. However, as the list was topped by the party leader and a majority of the MPs from the national parliament, it failed to present a clear candidate or message for the EP election, and offered only a weak and somewhat directionless Eurosceptic appeal. Similarly, the nationalist Independent for Croatia were focusing on their domestic message and criticism of the current HDZ leadership, but otherwise did not have a clear position or a candidate for this election, as their most prominent candidates indicated that they will remain in the national parliament. *Živi Zid* was the only party promoting a clear Eurosceptic message, but their campaign also lacked a prominent candidate for the EP and there was a relatively weak presence of the party in the media. Other parties and lists varied greatly in their focus and the tone of their campaign, as some emphasised their candidates and others focused on domestic issues.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Croatia

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	EPP	244,176	22.9	4	-18.5	
Social Democrat Party (SDP)	S&D	200,976	18.9	4	-11.0	+2
Croatian Souverenists (HRAST-HKS-HSP AS-UHD)	ECR	91,546	8.6	1	+8.6	
Independent list Mislav Kolakušić	NI	84,746	8.0	1	+8.0	+1
Human Blockade (Živi Zid)	EFD	60,847	5.7	1	+5.7	+1
Amsterdam coalition (HSS-GLAS-IDS-HSU-PGS-D-HL-SR)	ALDE	55,806	5.2	1	+5.2	
Bridge od independent lists (Most)	NI	50,527	4.7		+4.7	
Independent list Marijana Petir	NI	47,385	4.5		+4.5	-1
Independents for Croatia (NZH - HSP)	NI	46,970	4.4		+4.4	
Independent Democrat Serb Party (SDSS)	NI	28,597	2.7		+2.7	
Croatians People Party-Liberal Democrats (HNS)	ALDE	27,958	2.6		+2.6	-1
Party of anticorruption, development and transparency (START)	NI	21,744	2.0		+2.0	
Party of Labour and Solidarity (BM 365)	NI	21,175	2.0		+2.0	
We Can - Political platform (Možemo - Nova Ljevica - ORaH)	G-EFA	19,313	1.8		+1.8	-1
Smart (Pametno)	ALDE	15,074	1.4		+1.4	
Others		47,521	4.5			
Total		1,064,361	100	12		+1
Turnout (%)			29.86			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			29.9			

Note: Single national district with 11 (12 after Brexit) seats allocated according to d'Hondt formula. Voters cast a single vote either for a party list or as a preference. Preference votes can change the ordering of candidates on the list when 10% of the total votes cast for the party list indicate a preference vote for a candidate. Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/rezultati/index.html>

RESULTS

European parliament elections in Croatia are conducted under a PR system where eleven seats (twelve after the UK exits the EU) are allocated in a single national district using the D'Hondt method. Voters can also indicate a preference for a single candidate, but this can change the order of candidates on the party list only if 10% of voters cast a preference vote for a specific candidate.

Turnout in 2019 elections was just over 1.1 million voters, or 29.9%, which is a noticeable increase from 2014 EP elections when just over 950,000 voters participated in the elections (25.24%) or than special elections held in 2013, where just above 780,000 voters participated (20.84%). Seats were won by six lists of individual parties, coalitions or political platforms. However, the result still left more than 31% of the voters unrepresented in the EP, which was likely a consequence of high party system fragmentation.

Apart from the large share of “wasted votes”, the election saw a significant drop in the share of the two largest parties to just above 41%. Though two parties had fought several previous EP and national elections in wider coalitions, this level of support is their lowest recorded since the first multiparty elections in 1990. For the SDP, which has suffered a precipitous drop in support since the 2016 parliamentary elections, 18.9% of the vote and four seats was actually an increase compared to indications in pre-electoral polls. For HDZ the result of 22.9% was lower than polls had predicted. Winning four seats was less than the party expected, and as a share of votes it is the worst result in the party's history in nationwide elections. Apparently, the risky strategy of the party leader and prime minister Andrej Plenković – aimed at promoting new names from the centrist wing of the party – did not appeal to the core of the party base. This was an ominous sign given the strong party organization which even at the height of HDZ unpopularity managed to turn out more voters. SDP's result might just be a consequence of the fact that the party has the oldest electorate of all parties, which translated into a turnout advantage.

The alliance of conservative and nationalist parties called Croatian Sovereignists won 8.6% of the votes, and this success is in large part likely due to MEP Ruža Tomašić, who won around 76% of the preference votes cast for the list, and the largest number of preference votes of all candidates. The biggest winner, perhaps, is the independent candidate Mislav Kolakušić, a former judge of the commercial court running on a fairly populist message, who managed to gain 8.0% of the votes despite being the only publicly known figure on the list. Somewhat less successful were *Živi Zid*, a Croatian version of the Italian Five Star Movement, and a group of seven centrist, left and liberal parties called the Amsterdam coalition, winning one seat each, but failing to gather as many votes as expected and underperforming in comparison to predictions in the pre-electoral polls. Around nine lists won more than 1% of the votes, including another three nationalist or conservative groups with a combined vote share of around 13%, and six parties or lists broadly on the left with around 12% of the votes. The elections saw a surge in support for more radical conservative and nationalist parties which gained around 14% of the votes. The elections also demonstrated the strength of in-

cumbency, with all MEPs who managed to maintain some visibility during their term in office securing sizable support, even if not all of them won seats.

CONCLUSION

The elections demonstrated increasing fragmentation of the Croatian party system, where splits in established parties and inability of new actors to join forces or form a viable political organisations created parties with few members, almost no organisation, and scarcely any figures or policies capable of attracting public attention. These parties could not pass the electoral threshold and were either forced to join a coalition with similarly small and weak parties or end up collecting “wasted” votes. If this process continues, electoral volatility and turnover of parties is likely to increase, as most new actors have insufficient appeal, organisation or leadership to stabilise their support. Furthermore, the elections may indicate that after almost three decades of successfully incorporating nationalist and conservative groups within HDZ, new parties representing these groups are emerging to the right of HDZ, significantly reducing the electorate available to the party. The fragmentation of the party systems is also likely to make the formation of governing coalitions at the national level more difficult in the future. It may be that this process could lead to the formation of new parties from the fragments of the current party system under pressure of election results. However, the near future is likely to be characterised by higher volatility and party turnover.