



Weekly Briefing

Croatia Political briefing:
Fragmentation of the political scene in Croatia
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Fragmentation of the political scene in Croatia

Summary

A long, hot, uneventful summer season in Croatia is ending quite unexpectedly in fragmentation of the political scene. Old parties are losing members, coalitions are breaking up, new parties are being formed. The future of political life in Croatia seems to bring new actors and reconfiguration of the political scene.

HDZ expels a longtime party member

The ethics committee of the ruling party – Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – unanimously decided on 3 September to expel Darko Milinovic from the party. Milinovic is a prominent party member, a former Minister of Health and Social Welfare (2008-2011) and currently serves as a mayor of Lika-Senj County. The decision followed a disciplinary measure that the HDZ Presidency, of which Milinovic is a member, took against him for a grave breach of party obligations.

The decision followed a rally on 29 August of around 200 men from Lika-Senj County in front of the HDZ headquarters in Zagreb. Milinovic organized this protest demanding a decision on the election date for HDZ branch in his county. The elections were postponed several times in 2018. HDZ decided, following the rally, that the elections would take place on 9 September. Milinovic, who led the HDZ branch in Lika-Senj County until January 2018 has made a bid for the same position at the next county party elections. The party leadership, on the other hand, openly supports Marijan Kusic for the position of the county branch president.

Friction between Milinovic and the party leadership exploded early this year. Milinovic resigned in protest in January over appointment of a new director of Plitvice Lakes National Park which is located in Lika-Senj County. A

selected candidate was not the one proposed by Milinovic. He and his supporters took this as grave disregard of the local will.

After being expelled, Milinovic cannot run as a candidate in party elections. It is unclear if he will remain the county's mayor. If he decides to leave this post, he can return to the Parliament and become an independent MP. This would leave the government's majority with only 76 MPs, a thin margin taking into account that the Croatian Parliament has 151 seats.

SDP loses another party member

Bojan Glavasevic, a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and a son of a Croatian war hero, left the party on 27 August. He explained that his decision is a result of his dissatisfaction with the party losing competence and ability to respond to any meaningful and relevant question regarding the country's future.

SDP has been suffering a series of internal blows in the last few years. The party, which led the Croatian government in 2011-2015, has been consistently losing members. Many are accusing the party president – Davor Bernardic – for incompetence. Internal turf wars escalated after the former party president and the prime minister Zoran Milanovic left politics in November 2016 to move into business.

Bernardic is young and many ascribed initial mistakes to his inexperience. However, the patience of party members dissipated significantly in the last few months. In July 2018, 90 party members signed a letter demanding from Bernardic to step down if he has party's interests at heart.

Glavasevic's departure leaves SDP, the biggest opposition party, with only 33 seats in the Parliament. Glavasevic, however, does not plan to leave the Parliament and says he will complete his term. This makes another independent MP in the Croatian Parliament.

Amsterdam coalition breaks

The Amsterdam coalition was made of three relatively small parties: Glas (The Voice), Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) and Pametno (The Smart).

Glas is a breakaway party of the Croatian People's Party (HNS), formed in 2017 following HNS joining HDZ in reshuffling the government. It is led by Vesna Pusic, a former Foreign Minister (2011-2015), and Anka Mrak Taritas, a former Minister of Construction and Spatial Planning in the same mandate. HNS's specific is that it has been hinging on around a few per cent electoral support for years, while managing to raise its value during negotiations on coalition formation. One has to give them credit for being able to extract from large parties higher returns than what they seem to bring into coalitions. HNS was a junior partner to SDP in 2011 and is a junior partner to HDZ in the current government.

Glas is a liberal Euro-enthusiastic party. It commits to civic liberal values and is a strong supporter of the European integration.

IDS is a senior member of the Amsterdam coalition. The party was formed in 1990 as a center-left regionalist liberal political party. It is focused on Istria and has governed this region since its formation. On the national level, IDS was in power on a couple of occasions in coalition with SDP-led governments in 2000-2004 and 2011-2015. It is a liberal, Euro-enthusiastic party.

Pametno translates as 'smart'. It is a party formed by a married couple, an internationally recognized Croatian physicist and his wife, an engineer. They started as a local party in the city of Split intend to influence the local government to build a school. The party espouses aura of intellectualism, decency, zero tolerance for corruption, civic values. A party is small but grows slowly but steadily.

The Amsterdam coalition was broken by Pametno who left on the account of IDS member suspect of a conflict of interest in the Uljanik shipbuilding company. Pamento, apprehensive of any smear of conflict of interest or corruption scandals to be associated with it, instantly broke the coalition. The other two members regret the move.

New parties on the horizon

Dalija Oreskovic was a prominent Chair of the Committee on the Prevention of the Conflict of Interest. She was elected to this position in 2013 as quite inexperienced young lawyer. Due to a mixture of conviction about the benefit of reducing the conflict of interest of public officials and personal ambition to make a change, she quickly made herself and the body she led a visible public corrector of misdoings of public officials.

During her mandate (2013-2018), the Committee investigated and found guilty Zagreb mayor who had to pay a fine of 30.000 Croatian kuna (around 4000 euro) for changing the regulation on election posters. The Committee investigated the current Croatian president Grabar Kitarovic over what was suspected was a private trip to the US presented as an official one. The Committee brought charges for a conflict of interest against then a deputy prime minister and HDZ leader Tomislav Karamarko in 2016 who, faced with the charges, stepped down from all positions. This was followed by both the party and general elections that brought to power Andrej Plenkovic, the current prime minister and the leader of HDZ.

In 2018 Dalija Oreskovic was not reelected to the position of the Chair of the Committee on Prevention of the Conflict of Interest. The Croatian Parliament, in which the majority votes are controlled by Plenkovic's coalition, selected another female candidate. Oreskovic now announces formation of a new party.

Vlaho Orepic, a former interior minister in 2016-2017, a former member of the Bozo Petrov's Most (The Bridge), announced on 4 September that he would form a new party. The name of the new party is the New Party, aimed at uniting the right and the left in Croatian politics. Most was in two HDZ coalition governments recently, but left the coalition in 2017 over disagreements with HDZ in handling the crisis of the Agrokor, a large Croatian company. Orepic

afterwards left his party Most to be an independent MP in the Parliament and now has formed his own party.

Conclusion

Fragmentation of the political scene in Croatia may not disturb the current distribution of power. However, deflections or expulsions of party members reduce the number of votes both SDP and HDZ control in the Parliament. A first test of the power of the existing parties will be the upcoming European elections. The next general elections in Croatia planned for 2020 seem as if they will bring new actors on the political scene.