



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

Is Conservative Agenda Losing its Momentum in Croatia?

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Summary

In 2018 there were two initiatives to change the nation's legislation, both initiated by conservative forces in the country, and both failed. Croatia nurtures liberal values, but it is perceived also as a country where conservative values are taking stronghold. Is this the case will be discussed in this brief.

Introduction

Croatia joined the European Union on 1 July 2013. Only five months later, on 1 December 2013, a referendum on the definition of marriage was held. The referendum asked if a marriage is a union between a male and a female and a positive outcome required an amendment of the Croatian constitution to add a definition of a marriage as a union between two different sexes. In reality, this creates a prohibition of same-sex marriages in Croatia. 37.9% of eligible voters casted their ballot of which 65.87% voted yes and 33.51% voted no, while 0.57% were invalid. The referendum took place after a civic initiative *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) collected more than 700,000 signatures demanding a referendum. Conservative political parties and the Catholic Church supported the referendum. The government led by Social Democrats at the time, as well as liberal political forces and human rights NGOs opposed the referendum. The successful referendum led to the change of the constitution. This success further encouraged conservative civic groups to demand other changes of the Croatian legislation – the election law and the law on abortion among else. The conservative groups also take a very restrictive view on migration.

The conservative discourse has been growing in the Croatian public space for several years. With this discourse, there has been a perception of the growth of the strength of conservative groups and their ability to influence policy making in the country. However, in 2018 two defeats of conservative initiatives bring into question this rising trend of conservatism in Croatia.

The initiative to change the election rules

In May 2018 a civic initiative named *Narod odlucuje* (The People Decides) submitted boxes with collected signatures of more than 400,000 citizens who demanded a referendum on amending the article 72 of the Croatian constitution. Under Croatian law, any initiative to call for a referendum must obtain as a minimum 375,000 signatures, or 10% of the electorate, in two weeks. This referendum initiative had two proposals. The first one demands a reduction of the number of seats in the Parliament (defined to be any between 100-160, currently 151) to 120 seats, a reduction of the election threshold from five to four percent, redrawing of election districts, preferential voting for at least three candidates from the current one, and a possibility to vote via mail and online. The second proposal aims to reduce the voting power of ethnic minorities' representatives in the Croatian Parliament (eight seats) by stripping them off a right to vote on a confidence vote for the Croatian Government and on voting for the state budget.

The Government, led by conservative Christian-Democratic HDZ, opposed the referendum. By Croatian law, the signatures need to be verified after which the Constitutional Court decides if the proposed questions are in line with the constitution and the current laws.

In October 2018, the Government finished the process of verification. The Minister of Public Administration gave a statement in which he said that his Ministry found insufficient number of valid signatures to call for a referendum. In the case of the first proposal, the Ministry found that out of 412,325 signatures collected, 371,450 were valid while 40,875 were invalid. In the case of the second proposal, the Ministry concluded that out of 407,835 signatures submitted, 367,169 were valid while 40,666 were invalid. Thus, in both cases, The People Decides did not collect enough valid signatures (375,000 as a minimum) for a referendum to be called.

The Istanbul Convention

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as Istanbul Convention, is a document that highlights the fight against the violence against woman and domestic violence. The debatable part of the Convention is the definition of gender and related Articles made a lot of noise in the media. Although Croatia signed the Convention in 2013, it did not ratify it because of the lack of financial means necessary for its implementation. Leading opponents of the Convention were the conservative NGO *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) and the citizens' initiative *Istina o Istanbulskoj* (Truth about Istanbul [Convention]), both enjoying high levels of support in the Catholic Church. Following the Prime Minister's announcement that Croatia will ratify the Convention, they organised a protest in the Croatian capital in April 2018. Thousands of people joined the protest. The conservative groups presented the Convention as an attempt of violating of the Christian values and Croatian culture. However, these protests did not stop the ratification in the Croatian Parliament. On 13 April 2018, 110 MPs (out of 151) voted in favour of the ratification.

In May 2018, along with the referendum initiative to change the election law, these two conservative NGOs tried to collect enough signatures for the referendum on the Istanbul Convention and the withdrawal of the ratification.

In October 2018, the Ministry of Public Administration, after the process of verification, stated that out of 390,916 submitted signatures, 345,942 were valid while 44,974 were invalid. Therefore, the initiatives In the Name of the Family and the Truth about Istanbul Convention did not gather enough signatures for a referendum to be called. There have been many duplicated signatures, names of those deceased long ago, as well as the names of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the list. Even with all of them, they failed to collect enough signatures. Yet another unsuccessful initiative.

Leaders of the conservative movement

Conservative forces in Croatia have different prominent figures. The two often interviewed and perceived as informal leaders are Vice John Batarelo and Zeljka Markic. The second entered Croatian politics in 2013 with the referendum on the successful referendum on the definition

on marriage. Ever since, Markic and her initiative In the Name of the Family are active participants in any discussion on social issues, but also on a number of other topics.

Batarelo was born outside Croatia and he came to Croatia during the Homeland War. Batarelo founded Vigilare, an NGO promoting conservative values in the society. Vigilare seems to be successful in collecting funds from international and local donors to promote its program and goals. Every year it organises TradFest that gathers more and more participants form year to year and enables conservative leaders, experts and activists to promote their values. Minorities are often in the focus of their publications, but their ability to impact the lives of majority in the Croatian society is still limited.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church exerts a significant influence on the Croatian society. More than 86 percent of the population declares to be Catholic. The state provides funds for educational, social, health and cultural areas and for priestly salaries. It is not rare that a bishop comments on political issues and takes sides in public discussions. Although the Catholic Church is homogeneous on most issues, there are also individual priests who voice dissenting opinion on certain issues.

Abortion remains one of the biggest issues for the Catholic Church. Through the whole year of 2018, prayer circles for women about to undergo the procedure were organised in the vicinity of hospitals. There are also many doctors and other specialists calling the invocation of conscience and refusing to carry out the procedures. Even though abortion is legal in Croatia during the span of the first ten weeks of pregnancy, it is not available to many women because of the invocation of conscience of doctors. The Catholic Church is supporting initiatives that seek to make abortion illegal, while NGOs fighting for the rights of women are against that. At present, the situation has not changed. Abortion is still legal but there are also doctors who use conscientious objection to refuse to perform an abortion.

Conclusion

Conservative groups are vocal in the Croatian public sphere, but they are not the only ones. There are also liberal civic groups, although, with a populist trend across Europe, their advocacy power seems to be weakened. The Catholic Church has a high degree of influence on citizens. Along with conservative NGOs they have a prominent position in the society. However, as the two referendum initiatives demonstrated, their power is not unlimited. The Government led by Christian Democrats prefers to keep Croatia closer to the political centre. It succeeded in ratifying the Istanbul Convention and pushed for a detailed verification of submitted signatures for referendum initiatives. As a number of other countries, Croatia is ideologically divided. As long as there is a strong democratic framework it should not be a problem for different opinion to be voiced and debated in a free society. There is no need for uniform opinion, but there is a need for mutual respect and the respect for rules and values Croatia adopted when it joined the European Union.

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