



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:
An outlook – political year 2019 in Croatia
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An outlook – political year 2019 in Croatia

Summary

At the end of year 2019 regular elections for the President of Croatia are set to take place. The current President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic prepares for the campaign, keen to win the second mandate. Names of other potential candidates are not yet known. On a different front, Croatian media speculates of a possible government reshuffle if a new parliamentary majority is created. Croatian Democratic Union leads the government with the support of several small parties and independent MPs, including liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS). A Parliamentary Club of the party of Zagreb mayor Milan Bandic grew by the beginning of 2019 to 13 members. These MPs support the government, thus it is not clear why the Prime Minister would initiate a reshuffle if he can control the majority in the Parliament and run a relatively stable coalition government.

Presidential elections

In the winter of 2019/20 Croatia will elect a President for the 2020-2025 mandate period. The current President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic has expressed interest to continue her work and complete initiatives that she started in the current mandate. Therefore, it is expected that she will officially announce her candidacy in due time. Some analysts would say that she never stopped campaigning, that is that her current mandate has been a constant election campaign.

She is perceived as a populist politician, keen to gain support of her voters and public at large. This is no surprise because a President in Croatia is elected by a popular vote, unlike any other official in the country. This gives credibility to the elected candidate and political weight which stems from direct votes he or she receives. Yet, a role of the President is quite limited in executive powers. The only two policy areas over which the President has decision-making power are foreign policy and defense. Thus, there is a certain disparity between the popular vote a President receives and limited executive powers s/he has.

Duality in decision-making in areas of foreign policy and defense has created frictions before, not only when it comes to selecting new ambassadors, but also more seriously when it comes to situations in which the government and the President disagree over a foreign policy or a security issue. One stark example was in 2003 when the then Croatian Prime Minister

expressed willingness that Croatia participates in the US-led Coalition of the Willing against Iraq while the President at the time, Stjepan Mesic, blocked this decision.

Another example is a more recent. At the beginning of her mandate, Grabar-Kitarovic demanded a dismissal of the director of the State Intelligence Agency (SOA), but the Prime Minister at the time, Tihomir Oreskovic, postponed and delayed his consent for more than a month due to, most probably, procedural disagreement with the President. Whatever the reason, however, the disagreement between the President and the Prime Minister in this case meant that Croatia did not have a director of the state intelligence for exactly 50 days. According to some analysts, this represented a grave threat to the security of the country and should never happen again.

However, as long as the Croatian Constitution divides power in the current way, frictions, occasional disagreements and almost constant competition to vie for public attention will remain a constant of Croatian politics. The popularity contest sometimes becomes heightened than is politically necessary or diplomatically decent, but otherwise it is a quite rational outcome from the 'rules of the game' provided by the Constitution.

A popularly elected politician wants to gain as much attention and as much public support as possible for initiatives that he or she undertakes to differentiate himself or herself from the government and fill in his or her mandate with meaningful tasks. This dichotomy in state leadership led in the past to discussion on the need to change the Constitution in a way to limit the role of the President to a representative one. There was no discussion on the possibility that a President gains more executive powers. Croatia had a semi-presidential system (in reality almost a fully presidential system) until early 2000 and there seems no desire in the country to return to this model.

Grabar-Kitarovic took office in early 2015 as the first female President in Croatia. She comes from diplomacy and held visible public functions in the past, among these being a minister of foreign affairs, Croatian ambassador to the United States and a NATO Assistant Secretary for public diplomacy. She speaks very good English and has brought with her mandate a desire to promote Croatia in the world with a more positive image than before. On the national front, her ambition has been to reach common people, listen to their problems and undertake initiatives that would resolve some of these problems.

To reach people, she started a novel practice of relocating her office to different regions in Croatia. Since she took office in 2015 until the end of 2018, she relocated her office 19 times. She uses periods of relocation to meet with local officials, church and other civic leaders, as

well as citizens. In December 2018, Grabar-Kitarovic dismissed her longtime advisor and employed another one with a specific task to coordinate relations with the government. The dismissal caused a brief uneasiness for the President, but Christmas holidays pushed this incident away from the public eye. The President seems to be trying to patch up relations with the government, as media writes, in an effort to get HDZ's support for her candidacy. She was elected as HDZ candidate in 2015, but she had to cease her party membership once elected. Due to constant, although hardly, dramatic disagreements with the Prime Minister, it is still unclear if HDZ will support her candidacy.

A phenomenon of crossing floor in the Parliament

By January 2018 a number of 18 Members of the Parliament (MP) crossed floor in the Croatian Parliament since the general election in 2016. By November 2018 this number rose to 22 MPs who 'changed the jersey' in the 151 seats Parliament and by January 2019 this number grew to 23. Crossing the floor or changing the jersey describes MPs who were elected on one party list only to find themselves either leaving a party and becoming independent or joining another political party in the Parliament. The biggest loss suffered the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which lost eight MPs and now numbers 30 seats in the Parliament. The biggest gain was recorded by the Parliamentary Club of the party of Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandic, called Bandic Milan 365 – Labor and Solidarity Party. This party won only one mandate in the elections while at the end of 2018 it numbered twelve MPs and grew to thirteen members in January 2019.

There were floor crossings in the Parliament before but never to this extent, warn a number of analytics and NGOs. This phenomenon, according to their view, brings into question the legitimacy of the representation in the Parliament because MPs, in a number of cases, were elected on party programs that they no longer represent. The biggest shift was recorded when the Croatian People's Party (HNS), which stood at the 2016 elections with SDP on a center left ideological position, joined the government and moved to the center right. Analysts explain that by doing so HNS betrayed their voters. The party split with several MPs creating a new party Glas. forming their own Parliamentary Club and remaining in opposition. The party president at the time, Ivan Vrdoljak, the former minister of economy in the SDP-led government until 2015, stepped down from the party chairmanship only to return as the party president when situation calmed down a bit.

The junior partner in the government, HNS, as they did in previous governments in which they participated, negotiated a good deal for itself. In other words, HDZ, as before SDP, was

generous in giving HNS ministerial positions, seats in state companies and other benefits. Media in Croatia speculates that this may end in 2019 as HNS has only five MPs, one of them being a former SDP high ranking official who was under investigation for corruption and left the Party in February 2017. The Parliamentary Club of Bandic Milan 365 numbers 13 MPs and could be potentially a more appealing partner to HDZ, which has 55 seats in the Parliament. The government is also supported by four MPs from a HDS-HDSBB- and eight national minority MPs. However, it is questionable if Milan Bandic would like to change the position of his Parliamentary Club. The Prime Minister Andrej Plankovic can count on their votes and thus he may not be inclined to initiate a second reshuffle in his mandate. His government seems stable. The only reason why a reshuffle may take place is if Milan Bandic requests this.

However, the Zagreb mayor has full hands in running the city and has experienced a series of health problems lately. He may also decide that he is in a more comfortable position to blackmail the government or push his specific agenda as his Parliamentary Club did in December 2018 when they threatened not to support a law on school books unless the government finds funds to distribute free school books to all elementary school children in Croatia. This populist measure brought Bandic into the spotlight while his ratings grew as he came out victorious from the scuffle with the government. It is also a question if he would politically profit from joining the government. By the power of the number of seats he controls, Bandic can choose policies he will focus on, while retaining independence to criticize the government when he chooses so, which he also what he does occasionally. For example, his Parliamentary Club decided to allow its members to vote by conscience on ratification of the so-called Istanbul convention, a convention that prevents violence against women.

Bandic does not reveal his plans. In the year of Presidential elections, he may even decide to try his luck once again. He ran as a candidate in 2009 elections when he lost to the former President Ivo Josipovic. However, this may not seem likely if rationally analyzed because as the mayor of Zagreb Bandic is the second most powerful man in Croatia. HDZ supports Bandic in the Zagreb City Assembly and this partnership in the state and the city parliaments seems mutually rewarding to both Plenkovic and Bandic. Therefore, neither of the two may be for the time being willing to challenge this favorable status quo.

Conclusion

The year 2019 will be marked by presidential elections. The campaign has not yet started, candidates are not known, but the current President seems keen to fight to secure the second mandate. Unless she gets an attractive offer for an international job, she seems most likely to submit her candidacy for the elections.

Although media speculates about the government reshuffle, at the moment this does not seem very likely because the Prime Minister and the Zagreb mayor do not need to be in an official coalition to fruitfully cooperate.

There are, of course, other pending and ongoing political events that will mark this year, but for the purpose of this brief, the above two topics were selected as among most relevant ones.