



## **Weekly Briefing**


**Croatia political briefing:  
Tactics of political parties in forming the list of candidates for the  
Euro-parliamentary election 2019**

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# **Tactics of political parties in forming the list of candidates for the Euro-parliamentary election 2019**

## **Summary**

*The leading Croatian political parties are in a phase of presenting its list of candidates for the upcoming election for the European Parliament. Each of them is using some specific tactic to gain more voter's support and underplay other rival parties. The Amsterdam Coalition is trying to present itself as a real alternative for civic and liberal values and a defender against primitivism of ethno-nationalism; therefore they want to overtake the traditional political role of SDP in society. Meanwhile, SDP has been waging intra-party conflicts and has finally come to conclusion to temporarily set aside interests among factions, creating a candidate list for the Euro-parliamentary election which would lead to minimum compromise among the belligerent sides of the party. Similarly, HDZ has also been in intra-party conflicts, but the party leadership and its chairman Andrej Plenković has decided to deal with its opposing right-wing party faction, by placing for the position as the leading candidate completely unknown and inexperienced young member Karlo Ressler, in order to demonstrate that they could win the election and gain enough voter support without the influence of the right-wingers. If Plenković succeeds in winning an election with Karlo Ressler, it would be evidence that its faction has power within party and the society and influence to absolutely marginalise the right-wing faction from party politics.*

## **Introduction**

Ever since a coalition of seven liberal parties, the so-called The Amsterdam Coalition, presented in February its list of candidates for the Euro-parliamentary election, the lists of major political parties - the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) - were eagerly awaited in the public. The Amsterdam Coalition has already taken over the political discourse of the struggle for liberal values, specifically by advocating for an advanced, free and prosperous Croatia and Europe, emphasizing that they are against intolerant and primitive Croatia and the European Union, which put additional pressure on the mentioned major, pro-European parties, namely, their challenge of finding a way to differentiate their political messages from the Amsterdam Coalition which would reach to the voters. In addition, both HDZ and SDP have been for months waging intra-party conflicts, and because of these

conflicts between factions and the inability to find a solution to their parties' consolidation, they have gained a negative rating in public opinion. The HDZ's party president and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, whose government is burdened with numerous corruption scandals of its ministers, have particular difficulty. Plenković, who seeks to present HDZ as a pro-European, Christian Democratic political party and himself as the leader of the Europeanization of Croatia, must take into account that the HDZ consists of various factions and that the right-wing of the HDZ does not look favourably on its direction of HDZ to the centre-right of the ideological spectrum. SDP, on the other hand, has not succeeded since the arrival of Davor Bernardić at the head of the party in 2016 to consolidate the party and calm factional conflicts, losing meanwhile numerous famous party members and even more voter support. SDP, therefore, had to present a list uniting the belligerent factions within the party, at least to the lowest common denominator, in order to preserve the position of the leading opposition party in the party system.

### **Amsterdam Coalition and SDP**

Gathering of seven liberal parties from centre to centre-left into the Amsterdam Coalition, the Coalition ambitiously believes it will be able to achieve a significant result as a coalition of parties when the leading opposition party, SDP, is currently unconsolidated and is increasingly losing public support. Playing on the tactic of civic and liberal values in the foreground, the Amsterdam Coalition thinks it can take away the traditional SDP's role as a public's defender against HDZ's ethno-nationalist policies. The attempt of the Amsterdam Coalition was logical, but when the SDP presented its candidate list for the Euro-parliamentary elections, it was clear that such a transfer of political influence among the opposition parties would not occur. SDP presented its list of candidates for European Parliament elections in mid-March. An insight into the list of candidates shows that factions within the SDP have made a temporary peace and suppressed struggles for influence within the party. The main conflict was led on issue of candidate for future presidential election. The ruling SDP faction did not want former party president Zoran Milanović as party's presidential candidate, which would mean his return to active politics and the possible overthrow of Bernardić's leadership. Candidates more inclined to the Bernardić's faction, as well as those who are more inclined to Milanović, and neutral, are presented on the candidate list for the European Parliament with an equal chance of winning a seat. Even party president Davor Bernardić himself has opted out of the list so as not to appropriate any good or bad result by his personality. This intra-party compromise is the tactic of the SDP to present to the public the image of party unity and to gain back voters support.

Also, the list was presented as a list of experts and experienced MEPs, namely Tonino Picula and Biljana Borzan, who lead the list. The combination of expertise and unity is the political capital which SDP invested in the European Parliament election. This is a moderate tactic to achieve a modest goal: neither winning nor losing an EP election. Many SDP's politicians have stated that the party expects to win three seats in the European Parliament, which is the same result they achieved in the 2014 European Parliament election.

### **HDZ: Croatia for Generations**

When SDP presented its list of candidates for the election for the European Parliament, HDZ had not yet found its model of candidate list that would best suit the interests of the leadership. It has been speculating that the leading candidate would be Miro Kovač, former foreign minister and one of the main opponents of Plenković's leadership, or the completely unknown to the public 28-year old Karlo Ressler, vice president of the Youth of the European People's Party and adviser of Andrej Plenković. At the end of March, HDZ's main decision-making bodies decided that young Karlo Ressler would be the leading candidate and that his youth and experience would be the leitmotif of a campaign that would bring together different generations within the HDZ as one united community, thus presenting toward the public the desired conservative image of community where there are no sharp factional conflicts, rather a harmony of diverse interests aimed at benefiting the whole - young and old - of Croatia. Therefore, the main HDZ's slogan in the campaign will be "Croatia for Generations". The leadership of Andrej Plenković concluded that by surviving numerous, very dangerous corruption affairs of ministers and overcoming previous ideological crises by moving more towards the centre, that the Plenković's faction is now strong enough to completely marginalize the right-wing of HDZ, the wing led by Milijan Brkić and Davor Ivo Stier, after the success in the European Parliament election. Only victory is enough and Plenković's current will take over all the party's commands. Putting young Karlo Ressler in the public sends a message of party's unity, while essentially the left-wing the party is willing to finish with influence of the party's right-wing, risky investing in anonymous candidate to lead the list for Euro-parliamentary election. If HDZ wins the European Parliament election with a list led by unknown, relatively inexperienced and young Karlo Ressler, it will be a clear sign that HDZ won thanks to Andrej Plenković, not Karlo Ressler, which means that Andrej Plenković's leadership has sufficient support among the electorate to do whatever he can to further his rule within the party. HDZ did not state decisively the number of seats in the EP that would make leadership and members

satisfied. However, they do not hide that a clear win over other lists would be the only appropriate scenario.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the leading Croatian parliamentary parties have chosen tactics in line with the external and internal relations of power in the party system. Seven liberal political parties assembled in the so-called The Amsterdam Coalition chose the tactic of taking over the SDP's primacy over defending citizens from the ethno-nationalist policies of HDZ, emphasizing in the campaign two Croatias and two Europes: those liberal and tolerant versus other primitive and intolerant ones. Their tactic is very ambitious, especially in light of the newly formed consolidation of the leading opposition party SDP. By presenting the list of candidates, SDP has sent a message to the competition and the rest of the public that the party has succeeded in creating a minimum consensus within the party. The SDP's list, presented in mid-March, shows that both belligerent factions of SDP are fairly represented and the experts and experienced MEPs are leading the list. The temporary peace in the party has been concluded, the fight to win the voter's support is ready. HDZ, on the other hand, has a different modus operandi of compiling the list. The leadership of HDZ, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, has been hit hard by corruption scandals of his ministers, and his faction has largely managed to overcome and emerge in public as the victor of intra-party conflicts. This is precisely why Plenković's current makes a risky and ambitious move by placing young, relatively inexperienced HDZ member Karlo Ressler as the leading candidate. The victory of HDZ at the election for the European Parliament would, thus, prove that the Plenković's faction has convincing support among HDZ's voters and, therefore, the superiority in the party that would allow them to marginalize the right-wing faction within HDZ and secure for themselves even greater power and influence within the party and in the society.