



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:

An overview of key political events that shaped the political image in

Croatia in 2019

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An overview of key political events that shaped the political image in Croatia in 2019

Summary

In welcoming the year 2019, a vast majority of political actors in Croatia had every reason to feel pressure caused by the necessity to gather their political potential and prowess in order to appeal to Croatian demanding public opinion. The reason for such pressure lies in the two major elections that came within 2019; the European Parliament election and the Croatian Presidential election. The justification for the mentioned caution in the political sphere and skepticism in the sphere of public perception are other two major political events that caused both political and social turbulence and brought a negative connotation on the two elections. Those events are the forced reconstruction of Croatian government caused by suspicious charges of corruption of certain ministers, and a massive strike in educational system caused by dissatisfaction of teaching staff.

The European Parliament election

In both Croatia and Europe, the first half of 2019 was shaped by the preparation for and execution of the European Parliament election. Considering that it was the third election for the European Parliament that Croatia has faced, the expectation was that those elections were an opportunity for a showcase of democratic maturity by both the political actors and the general public. In line with that, Croatian ruling center right party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), member of the European People's Party, attempted to affirm its dominance by nominating a list of candidates comprising of youth and experience symbolizing HDZ's political course of development in harmony with European values. The main opposition party, the center left Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP), member of the Party of European Socialists, went forward with a more experienced group reflecting its necessity to achieve a strong result by presenting familiar faces to Croatian public. Other main contenders came from different sides of political spectrum, such as center left Amsterdam Coalition, anti-establishment and eurosceptic Živi Zid, right wing Croatian Sovereignists coalition, and a list headed by a political newcomer, former judge Mislav Kolakušić.

As expected, the campaign facing the elections was characterized by ideological and vague disputes, lacking the substance and content which could be conveyed in discussion on a

European level. Another, even though legitimate cause of concern, was that a major point of debate were the shortcomings of the European Union and membership itself. Considering that Croatia is faced with many issues that come with the migrant crisis since its beginning in 2014, and is still not a member of the Schengen Area, it is not a surprise that a high level of detachment and apathy towards the European Union has developed among the population. Such sentiment was recognized by anti-establishment and right-wing organizations and parties which managed to mobilize the voters and turn them away from the usual orientation on the main parties HDZ and SDP.

As a result, on the 26th of May 2019, the voter turnout was only 29.9%, with a surprising dispersion of votes along the spectrum. Unexpectedly for the ruling party HDZ, it won an equal number of seats in the Parliament as the opposition party SDP. Such outcome can be explained by the growing dissatisfaction with HDZ in the midst of corruption suspicions and charges of some ministers, negative political and social atmosphere kindled by inefficient judiciary system, poor state administration and low living standard. In line with that, SDP, as a primary opposition option, received a higher than expected number of votes and saw the election as an important victory. Remaining four seats out of twelve reserved for Croatia's representatives were divided by previously mentioned Amsterdam Coalition, eurosceptic Živi Zid, right wing Croatian Sovereignists coalition and independent list by Mislav Kolakušić. The latter, with 7.89% of the votes, was the biggest surprise of the election. With his atypical approach for everyday politicians and a soldierly vision of fighting corruption, Mislav Kolakušić received a high level of reasoning among the Croatian public and announced his run for presidency the day after the election.

Finally, the 2019 European Parliament election in Croatia, was less about European policies and values, and much more about setting up a strong position for further national elections, and an indicator of general public sentiment towards the main players on the Croatian political playfield. Coming from the election, both individual actors and parties, with an emphasis on HDZ which came out disappointed, received a strong public feedback and an impetus for further political actions.

Facing charges; the reconstruction of the Government of Croatia

As previously noted, the European Parliament election in Croatia were carried out in the shade of public distrust, apathy and general lack of both faith and interest in any matter political. The reason behind such negative perception of the political sphere in Croatian public lies in quite a large number of issues stemming from national economic and industrial development,

ineffective public administration of mammoth proportions and questionable competency of their political representatives just to name a few. But the early to mid-2019 was especially characterized by suspicions and charges of corruption of several ministers in the Croatian government, led by center right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In a few months stretch the Minister of Public Administration, Lovro Kuščević, Minister of State Property, Goran Marić, Minister of Agriculture, Tomislav Tolušić and Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds, Gabrijela Žalac, were all involved in suspicious claims, all of them researched by national media, about their property and assets. To a greater or lesser extent, each of the mentioned ministers were under a strong public and media scrutiny after it was published that their wealth and possessions exceed what is expected from a public servant.

As the social atmosphere was brewing in frustration towards the everyday reveals about the members of their Government, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković was under constant pressure to act accordingly and bring forward a solution to an issue that gradually took over all the headlines. Besides that, some of the major coalition parties such as Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS), repeatedly declared reluctance to remain in the governing coalition. Faced with a disappointing result from the above mentioned European Parliament election, low public rating, and the pressure of incoming Presidential election, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković undertook a drastic but publicly welcomed move; on 17th of July 2019 he ousted five ministers, all of the previously mentioned plus Nada Murganić, Minister of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy. Additionally, Minister of Labour and Pension System, who encountered a great deal of critique of his vision of pension reform, was announced as the new Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds, succeeding the deposed Gabrijela Žalac.

Prime Minister Plenković explained that such a move was not a product of media and public pressure but a "...necessary refreshment and a positive step with a goal of intensifying the effort to implement the program of the Government and working on the benefit of Croatian population". The newly appointed ministers Josip Aladrović, Mario Banožić, Ivan Malenica and Marija Vučković are exactly what was needed for the Prime Minister to strengthen the shaken Government; young, educated, politically brought up in an environment more in line with his vision of the Croatian Democratic Union's political direction. On the other hand, more experienced Vesna Bedeković replaced Nada Murganić in the Ministry of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy. The shake-up in Croatian government was a much-needed reform indeed, but it is yet to be seen whether it will imply a decisive stand against clientelism and corruption.

The teaching staff strike and the value of education

The summer of 2019 was a relatively calmer period which gave an opportunity to reflect on the previously described events and focus on the build up of presidential campaign which took most of the media and public attention. But the prolonged issues in Croatian educational system were to reach its pinnacle in the shape of the greatest strike in educational system that Croatia has ever witnessed. In the basic perspective, the cause for the strike lies within a long-term indignation of the teaching staff in Croatia because their salary coefficient is the lowest of all public employees with a university degree. Accordingly, different educational staff unions, craftly organized, arranged and mobilized the frustrated teachers and others who supported them in order to create an impetus for the Government to act in their behalf.

After the initial proclamations of dissatisfaction were not treated in an expected manner, in October 2019, the strike began. It is important to note that the current school year, already prolonged, and scarred by the strike, was the year when the implementation of the *School for life* initiative, as a part of the educational reform by the Ministry of Science and Education, was to begin its implementation. In that way, a significant message of vulnerability was sent to the Government. Furthermore, in order to prevent the negative image that could come out of the strike as damaging to the students, and disruptive in the process of teaching, a circular method was adopted in execution of the strike. That meant that every day of the week, schools in a different county will be in strike. Such approach was skillfully organized and also enabled a prolonged strike.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Plenković kept a distance from facing the issue, trading the burden of responsibility between the Minister of Science and Education Blaženka Divjak, disguised necessity not to irritate the rest of the public sector, and the failings of previous governments. Soon enough, the strike became frontal, culminating in a massive protest on the main square in the capital, Zagreb. Pressure from the teaching community, media, and members of the coalition such as Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS), urged the Prime Minister to begin talks with the protesters.

After several failed meetings, in early December, Prime Minister Plenković announced that a quality compromise had been achieved, and that the teachers' salaries could increase gradually through 2020, all confirmed in a proposed annex to the collective agreement. At the time of writing, the strike has finished and the students are back in their schools. The final agreements with the Prime Minister's proposal are still to come from certain teachers' unions. It must be noted that the described issue of Croatian educational system is only a single part in

a spectrum of concerns reaching from the quality of the curriculum, obsolete approach in teaching methodology, to troubling infrastructure.

The 2019 Presidential election

A single occurrence that followed all of the above-mentioned events which shaped the political landscape of Croatia in 2019, are the incoming Presidential election. The seventh presidential elections since the first ones, held in 1992, will be held on 22nd of December 2019, after the time of the writing. Even before the official candidacy, and gathering the required 10000 signatures from Croatian citizens, the main candidates were known and were heavily present in the media discourse, even if some were not quite present in person.

The final list of candidates consists of eleven names, more or less known to Croatian public. For example, right wing candidate Anto Đapić is a veteran of Croatian politics, while the names like Nedjeljko Babić and Dario Juričan, are not instantly recognizable, at least from the political perspective. Be that as it may, there are four main candidates who received the highest media exposure and level of reasoning with the general public. The sitting President of Croatia Kolinda Grabar Kitarović decided to run for presidency once again, even after speculation that she will not receive support from the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), or that she is disinterested in the candidacy because of promises of prestigious positions in international organizations. Thereafter, the former Prime Minister of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, supported by the center-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) and other center-left and liberal options, decided that it is the time for his return to the political playfield, with an emphasis on his character, knowledge and determined attitude. Third candidate of significance is a musician Miroslav Škoro, running as an independent candidate but with a strong backing of some center-right and right-wing political options. In his unusual, for Croatian political environment hybrid approach, of interlinking his career as an entertainer with the one of politician, Škoro designed his political vision as a look to the future through preserving traditional values, stressing the necessity for a constitutional change which would enable a higher authority for the president. The final candidate who received a high level of recognizability is previously mentioned Mislav Kolakušić. A lawyer and a former judge, now a Member of the European Parliament, Kolakušić represents himself as an independent candidate, looking to fight corruption and societal issues such as overwhelming public administration and clientelism by constitutional change which would enable the president power over several segments in both legislative and executive spheres of governing. Another candidate with maybe not so great chances of achieving result, but a pedigree for becoming a welcomed refreshment of Croatian politics is Dejan Kovač, an

economist with a clear and ambitious social-liberal worldview, who graduated from Princeton University.

All of the candidates set forth, began their campaign with different approaches, depending on the means of their support channels. It can be noted that the use of social media was the primary communication method of a high number of candidates, especially Miroslav Škoro, while Mislav Kolakušić took the longest time to activate in the public and media domain since the European Parliament election. The polls suggest a tight contest between the most experienced candidates, President Grabar Kitarović and former Prime Minister Milanović. Nonetheless, the drop of support for both of them in the final years of their mandates as public officials, and a wide dispersion of votes perceived at the European Parliament election, prove that a strong shift in sentiment of Croatian voters is occurring. Hence, there is a not so insignificant possibility that some of the other mentioned candidates could give the two a tough challenge.

Conclusion

Taking everything discussed into account, the year 2019, was as tumultuous as every other in Croatia's political sphere. With the two major elections, one on a European level, one still to be conducted, and many key political and social events which conditioned and shaped not only public perception, but also responsiveness of the Government, the finishing year has set forth a basis for further development and initiatives encompassing a vast spectrum of issues. As it is evident, the general public, strengthened by vital performance of the media, is slowly developing a tougher stance on the actors and institutions shaping their reality. Hence, those actors and institutions would have to adapt to such a trend through actions worthy of the profession and nation they represent.