



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:
The Forecast of Political Events in Croatia after the COVID-19
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The Forecast of Political Events in Croatia after the COVID-19

Summary

The forecast on the upcoming period of Croatian politics is mostly seen through the lens of parliamentary election, to be held on July the 5th. Today, when the COVID-19 crisis is stabilized but second wave is still a possibility, politicians have decided to sharpen their tools (unfortunately, not their political programs) and enter the arena, which always marks the beginning of unofficial campaign. With Civil Protection Directorate being compromised for their political bias, it seems that two major parties, HDZ and SDP, are far from reaching the necessary parliamentary majority which counts 76 votes.

Introduction

When writing an annual forecast of political events back in January 2020, nobody expected that Croatian, as well as global political landscape will be highly dependent on current circumstances around the COVID-19 emergency. In Croatia, January 2020 marked a new beginning for Zoran Milanović, a former Prime Minister who was elected as the new president of the Republic. This event was also a turning point for Social Democratic Party (SDP), the largest opposition party in Croatian Parliament, since their popularity started to go upwards leading them to become the first option in public opinion polls. These two cases sounded an emergency bell in Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), whose president and current Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, was quite confident when discussing the results of upcoming parliamentary election, proclaiming a certain victory of HDZ with a vast majority of votes.

Even though his Government was often accused of corruption, due to a large number of ministers who had to step down from their duties for various unethical reasons, and for undermining the State's institution that have contributed to a growing concern of democratic deficit, HDZ remained a most popular party and it was expected that they will create a stable parliamentary majority after the parliamentary election. Some analysts even argued that Plenković should have gone for a snap election back in 2019 to make his majority in Parliament more clear and stable because of the fact that HDZ is today much dependent on a number of defectors from another parties. However, the COVID-19 crisis has shifted the priorities of

Croatian political actors in another direction but, as soon as it was obvious that the COVID-19 is on the ropes, political elites have started to make plans for upcoming election.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Parliamentary Election's Date

A few months ago, when novel coronavirus was still around 5 000 miles away from Croatia, the general perception of every citizen who has interest in politics was that the parliamentary election will be held somewhere in autumn. But, as the virus was progressing and reaching European territory, and finally affecting Croatia, the debate on politics was put on hold to deal with the health and economic emergency. A Civil Protection Directorate was established and took charge of sustaining the virus. Every day, in the past two months, they were in front of cameras and TV reporters, and were informing Croatian public on latest events and number of affected citizens and those who have eventually died. The head of the team was Davor Božinović, Minister of Interior, and Vili Beroš, a recently appointed Minister of Health. At first, the work of Civil Protection Directorate was met with praise. Everyone was hailing their efficiency and expertise, especially of Alemka Markotić, the Director of 'Fran Mihaljević' Clinic for Infectious Disease. Another important figure was Krunoslav Capak, the Director of Croatian Institute for Public Health.

The four people were quite popular and their management of crisis was reflected in the revival of HDZ's support among citizens. As the movement restrictions have been slowly lifted, the talk of parliamentary election has yet again entered a public sphere. Soon afterwards, HDZ made a decision to dissolve the Parliament and President Zoran Milanović had no choice but to call an election during summer time. The precise date is July the 5th. The reactions were divided, but generally, the Government was accused of taking advantage of current situation. It is obvious now that Plenković wanted to avoid having the parliamentary election in autumn when it is clear that economic crisis is on our doorstep and will strike significantly by the end of 2020. Furthermore, the Civil Protection Directorate popularity has slumped and they are not seen as 'superheroes' anymore. Rather, they are perceived as pawns who make their decisions in accordance with HDZ's interest. Some even argued that Markotić and Capak will be on HDZ's lists for Parliament, but they have neither denied nor confirmed that yet. A number of questions will need to be answered. First and foremost, how the election is going to be conducted and what will be the turnout, when there are still some restrictions regarding larger gatherings. It seems that political rallies and parades will have priority over the much needed and widely spoken measures of social distance.

Croatian Political Landscape in 2020

The campaign for parliamentary election has not yet started, but most of political actors have already occupied their starting positions, eagerly waiting for July 5th. Some coalitions have been presented to the public, together with their election programs. Be that as it may, it is highly unlikely that two of the biggest parties in Croatia, HDZ or SDP, will be able to form the majority in Parliament without having to give up some positions in future Government to their partners, whether they will be from left or right side of political spectrum. At the first glance, HDZ has somewhat larger potential for post-election coalition. Aside from SDP, two of the biggest opponents or actors in Croatian political system nowadays are the list of Miroslav Škoro, the so-called Homeland Movement, and already known the Bridge of Independent Lists (MOST). Both of these actors can be understood more in terms of movement than parties, even though MOST have turned their way and eventually became a party. Škoro, on the other hand, can be perceived as a leader of political movement that assembles different people from different backgrounds that have been, or still are, in charge of some minor parties on the right.

Most analysts are claiming that HDZ has compromised everything that was good during the COVID-19 crisis and some even say that they would not be surprised if SDP wins a majority of seats in Parliament. But both Škoro and MOST are belonging to the right side of political spectrum, although MOST was very reluctant to admit so, but some of their actions and previous decisions clearly put them closer to HDZ than SDP. For this reason, it can be expected that whoever ends up in a third place will be at least ideologically closer to HDZ and that the majority and the Government will be created out of HDZ and that third player. But one has to take into account the fact that MOST was already two times member of HDZ's Government, in 2015 and 2016, and in both cases they had to leave and join the opposition. In 2016, the divorce papers between HDZ and MOST were signed on a harsh terms and since then MOST has become a loud opponent of current Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković. Miroslav Škoro and his conservative entourage also do not have an especially positive opinion on Plenković. They believe that Plenković is not authentic enough to serve neither the interest of HDZ nor of Croatia; rather they see him as a Brussels oriented politician who is only on disposition to his friends from the European Union. HDZ, on the other hand, are clearly pointing fingers at Škoro who they hold responsible for the loss of presidential election when he invited his voters to cross their ballots and not vote for either Grabar Kitarović or Milanović.

SDP have formed a pre-election coalition with center-left parties and their leader, Davor Bernardić, publicly announced that he does not want to enter a post-election coalition with Škoro or MOST. That maneuver almost certainly suggests that SDP will not be able to form a

parliamentary majority since the aforementioned actors are seemingly necessary to do so. It would be hard to imagine that SDP will go together with Škoro, but maybe Bernardić was supposed to be wiser when ruled out the possibility to make agreement with MOST.

Conclusion

Everything that has happened in early 2020 and later during the COVID-19 crisis has led to long-awaited parliamentary election. With the possibility of second wave of infection and economic downfall that are both coming to us probably in autumn, politicians are working hard to secure their paychecks by taking position in Parliament or Government. A stable parliament majority will be hard to reach, therefore, it is still pretty vague how the political situation will unfold.