



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:

Two years after the Zagreb earthquake: What has been achieved?

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Two years after the Zagreb earthquake: What has been achieved?

Summary

The two-year anniversary of the March 2020 Zagreb earthquake has reinvigorated criticisms towards the Croatian government and their lack of action regarding the reconstruction of the capital city and the affected, surrounding areas. The damage caused by this earthquake alone is estimated to be around €11.5 billion¹, yet the funds granted to Croatia from the European Union Solidarity Fund (managed by the European Commission) as aid to rectify the damage caused have not yet been spent. Indeed, this anniversary has illuminated general public sentiments towards the government. Moreover, the evidence which has resurfaced certainly indicates that the renovation process has predominantly been delayed because of internal flaws within the government, rather than factors which were beyond the government's control, such as the context of the time in which the earthquake occurred.

Introduction

In the early morning of the 22nd of March 2020, Zagreb was hit by the strongest earthquake to hit the city since the infamous 1880 quake. Two years on and not much progress has been made in repairing the damage caused by the Mw5.3² earthquake. There are a few factors, such as the context of the time and the nature of Zagreb as a city, which somewhat explain why it has been so difficult to commence reconstruction. While the small number of human casualties (27, including one fatality) might be attributed to the simultaneous lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic³, it was certainly more difficult to react to the earthquake initially because of these unprecedented circumstances. Croatia's GDP dropped by 8% in 2020⁴ as a result of the pandemic and, throughout 2020 and 2021, much attention was dedicated to dealing with COVID-19. Therefore, the pandemic somewhat explains why the government's

¹<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/61366-2nd-anniversary-of-zagreb-quake-marked-in-anticipation-of-full-scale-reconstruction>

²Sources vary between Mw5.3 and Mw5.5.

³https://research.ncl.ac.uk/learningfromearthquakes/outputs/So%20et%20al_2020_%20The%20Zagreb%20earthquake%20of%2022%20March%202020_compressed.pdf, p10.

⁴<https://intellinews.com/outlook-2022-croatia-231645/>

initial reaction to the earthquake was delayed. Nevertheless, after two years, there is little ground to blame the pandemic for the Croatian government's short comings regarding renovations in Zagreb. Indeed, Croatia's GDP recovered rather quickly in 2021⁵, and thus, there are other reasons why appropriate action regarding the earthquake hasn't been taken.

Another possible factor might be that the extent of the destruction in Zagreb can be explained by the many historic buildings in the city. The city centre is, in particular, abundant with Austro-Hungarian architecture and architecture from other time periods, which are predominantly made of brick. Thus, the city centre was not built to withstand strong earthquakes. This is evident in that many newer buildings (built post-1964⁶) were not so greatly affected. Similarly, many newer, illegally built extensions and constructions were impacted⁷, adding to the large number of destroyed homes.

However, the aforementioned truths do not negate that the government has not yet spent much of the €683.7⁸ million granted to Croatia by the EU commission for the general reconstruction of the city. Indeed, since 2020, Croatia has only spent 2%⁹ of the initial fund given for the most pressing repairs required when the catastrophe occurred. Similarly, the process of renewing homes has been drawn out because of issues with the legislation and policies regarding the rebuilding process and other internal problems within the government. Indeed, aforementioned, the recent anniversary of the earthquake has brought these issues to light once again, thus begging the question; what is the main reason so little has been done?

Are external factors to blame?

Firstly, it is important to note that the Croatian government has been particularly ineffective regarding private properties in and around the city of Zagreb. For instance, many public buildings, such as schools and Croatian Parliament Palace, have been repaired. Also, those who undertook reconstruction¹⁰ on public buildings themselves have been rewarded

⁵<https://intellinews.com/outlook-2022-croatia-231645/>

⁶<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/311901608097332728/pdf/Croatia-Earthquake-Rapid-Damage-and-Needs-Assessment-2020.pdf>

⁷<https://www.iiconservation.org/content/update-rebuilding-zagreb-after-2020-earthquake>

⁸<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/61366-2nd-anniversary-of-zagreb-quake-marked-in-anticipation-of-full-scale-reconstruction>

⁹ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/croatian-minister-no-one-asked-for-extended-solidarity-fund-deadline/

¹⁰<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/61366-2nd-anniversary-of-zagreb-quake-marked-in-anticipation-of-full-scale-reconstruction>

compensation. While this is not necessarily true for impacted public buildings across the board, the disparity between the reaction to public and private properties impacted by the March 2020 earthquake is clear. Similarly, rebuilding in the Banovina region, which was hit by a stronger earthquake of Mw6.4 in December 2020, has been somewhat more successful. Two months ago, Deputy Prime Minister Tomo Medved, claimed that 1300 houses in the Banovina region had been repaired and more than 1000 were in currently being repaired¹¹. Indeed, the reconstruction in Banovina has also been limited, especially regarding the extent of destruction in the region. Nevertheless, it still stands that the government has been even less effective regarding the reconstruction of houses and apartments in and around Zagreb. In Zagreb, planned renovations are not yet underway and the distribution of compensation for those who have completed repairs themselves has only begun as of late; two years after the incident.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has attributed the prolonged process to the coronavirus pandemic and the fact that the December 2020 earthquake further damaged buildings which had already been affected in March that same year. Moreover, he insinuated that, because Zagreb was effectively hit twice, rapid reconstruction had not been possible¹². As a result, in February 2022, the European Commission extended Croatia's deadline for the use of the fund until Summer 2023. Therefore, one might deduce that the process of reconstruction has been particularly slow as a result of factors which were beyond the government's control.

Is the government, in fact, at fault?

Nevertheless, there is evidence of internal issues within the Croatian government which should be considered as an explanation for the prolonged process of reconstruction. Indeed, Darko Horvat, the former Minister of Construction, was arrested on suspicion of the illegal distribution of 2.6 million HRK¹³. Discourse regarding corrupt individuals in government has been, aforementioned, particularly prominent, since Horvat's arrest preceded the two-year anniversary of the earthquake by only one month. In this way, because the anniversary, which reminds people of limited government action regarding the earthquake, somewhat coincided with news of corrupt ministers, scepticism towards the government has increased. Horvat, who

¹¹<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/medved-pozive-za-obnovu-od-potresa-raspisujemo-na-tjednoj-bazi---694948.html>

¹²<https://vlada.gov.hr/news/extension-of-deadline-for-using-eu-quake-relief-successful/33927>

¹³ <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/uhicen-darko-horvat/2340830.aspx>

had been in charge of the renovation of Zagreb, was replaced by Ivan Paladina in February 2022. Although, Horvat may have been incompetent as Minister of Construction¹⁴, this example showcases one of the many internal issues with which the government has had to deal with amidst the impending reconstruction of the city. Paladina may certainly prove more competent than Horvat in the long run. However, the replacement of the Minister of Construction two years into the scheduled reconstruction of buildings in Zagreb should be viewed as a set-back. Paladina himself asserted that the job comes with a learning-curve, meaning that, rebuilding may be further delayed¹⁵ until he fully understands the situation and his responsibilities in overseeing the project as a whole.

Similarly, it has been reported that the legislation enabling people to apply for compensation or to schedule renovations on their property complicates the process for residents who are eligible for aid, rather than easing it. Former Minister of Construction, Anka Mrak-Taritaš, has criticised the reconstruction law. She claims that the reconstruction of Zagreb has not yet begun, not only because of external factors, but predominantly because of the failings of the government to produce effective legislation which would enable the swift reconstruction of many damaged homes.¹⁶ Indeed, the law has been altered and revised, but few actual changes easing the process have occurred.

Many share this similar sentiment that the government is to blame. For instance, the Society of Architects in Zagreb (DAZ) claim that they are not regarded as equals by the government and that they often advise the government, in vain, on how to proceed with renovations¹⁷. Indeed, they claim that their advice is usually ignored and that the government continues to act only as they see fit.

¹⁴<https://china-cee.eu/2022/02/23/croatia-political-briefing-the-price-of-poor-reconstruction-united-opposition-against-the-most-incompetent-minister/>

¹⁵ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2022/3/22/dvije-godine-od-razornog-potresa-u-zagrebu-puno-price-malo-rezultata>

¹⁶ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2022/3/22/dvije-godine-od-razornog-potresa-u-zagrebu-puno-price-malo-rezultata>

¹⁷ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/domidizajn/interijeri/drustvo-arhitekata-zagreba-nismo-prihvaceni-kao-ravnopravni-sudionik-obnove-nakon-potresa-15143536>

Conclusion

Therefore, it is undeniable that 2020 was a difficult year for the Croatian government. Indeed, they had to deal with a lockdown and, simultaneously, react to the destruction caused by the March 2020 earthquake. Moreover, the initial inefficiency of the government might be attributed by these unprecedented circumstances. However, now, in 2022, one should acknowledge that it is in fact the intra-governmental problems which are causing further delays. Indeed, Horvat's arrest, the government's inability to produce coherent laws and policies and their reluctance to follow professional advice, among other issues, have taken their toll on the rebuilding of Zagreb.

Now, two years on, citizens are becoming ever frustrated with the government's lack of action. The government's prolonging of the reconstruction of Zagreb has, in turn, illuminated many internal problems. In the last few weeks, the reshuffling of government has been suggested. While, this is certainly not a direct result of the delayed reconstruction of Zagreb, it is somewhat valid to claim that the anniversary of the 2020 quake has certainly amplified dissatisfaction with the current government.