



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Croatia political briefing:  
New Rearrangement of Party Relations in Croatia  
After the 2021 Local Elections  
Nikica Kolar**


### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

# **New Rearrangement of Party Relations in Croatia**

## **After the 2021 Local Elections**

### **Summary**

The 2021 local elections in Croatia significantly shifted Croatian party politics. The HDZ and SDP no longer govern the two largest cities (Zagreb and Split), as a result of new options such as *the Homeland Movement* party and *We Can!* platform, whose success created an earthquake on the political scene. After the death of the former mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić, the success of *the Homeland Movement* marked a disintegration of the previous party politics and dynamics, and new fierce factional conflicts emerged. The *We can!* platform success in Zagreb emphasizes the existing factional conflicts in the SDP. It seems we are witnessing a new constellation of party relations in Croatian politics, where traditional social democracy is disappearing and giving way to a new centre-left option, while the danger of growing right-wing populism temporarily disappears after the sudden collapse of rising right-populist party *the Homeland Movement*.

### **Introduction**

The 2021 Croatian local elections confirmed a significant change in Croatian party politics that has long been speculated about. In these elections, the leading centre-right and centre-left parties, HDZ<sup>1</sup> and SDP<sup>2</sup>, finally felt what it was like when their electorate chose other parties from their ideological community. SDP completely lost its reputation in Zagreb in front of the newly formed platform *We Can!*<sup>3</sup>, and HDZ was also defeated in Zagreb by the new right-populist party *the Homeland Movement*<sup>4</sup>. Both SDP and HDZ were thus defeated by the new parties in the capital. In SDP, fierce intra-party conflicts continue, which have recently resulted in the expulsion of prominent members and MPs from the party. HDZ, on the other hand, although statistically achieved electoral victory in a larger number of counties, cities and municipalities than before, was defeated in the two largest cities — in Zagreb and Split. In Zagreb, HDZ chose Davor Filipović to be their candidate for mayor, a university professor of

---

<sup>1</sup> HDZ – Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (eng. Croatian Democratic Union)

<sup>2</sup> SDP – Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske (eng. Social Democratic Party of Croatia)

<sup>3</sup> Možemo! (eng. We can!)

<sup>4</sup> Domovinski pokret (eng. The Homeland Movement)

economics unknown to the general public. Critics have said that Filipović was HDZ's false candidate and that their real candidate was current mayor Milan Bandić, but Bandić died a couple of months before the elections. However, right-wing voters made it clear to HDZ that HDZ has strong competition on the right as they came out to vote in large part for *the Homeland Movement*. In Split, on the other hand, HDZ's candidate Vice Mihanović tried to defeat university physics professor Ivica Puljko from the new liberal party *Centre*<sup>5</sup> in the local election, but voters chose the new liberal politician. The overall result is that usually leading parties, HDZ and SDP, are not in power in either Zagreb or Split. Such a significant outcome from the new political options could not pass without additional consequences to the balance of power in the party system.

### **The beginning of the disintegration of Homeland Movement**

Despite the fact that the election result in Zagreb was the best result for *the Homeland Movement* as well as its key candidate and party president Miroslav Škoro, this did not prevent a serious crisis in the party shortly after the local elections. Namely, in mid-July, i.e. little more than a month after the second round of local elections, Škoro announced on his official Facebook page that he was irrevocably resigning from the position of president of *the Homeland Movement*. He soon confirmed his decision to the press and stated that the reason for his resignation was of a personal nature. Other party members expressed surprise at his sudden resignation from the presidency. In spite of the fact that Škoro lost in all three elections (presidential, parliamentary and local), the party was young and fresh; according to relevant party actors, much had been done in the meantime to build the party's organizational infrastructure. Such a sudden and unexplained decision from Škoro to resign from the presidency of a rising party recalls the situation in 2009, when the then Prime Minister Ivo Sanader informed the entire public that he was irrevocably resigning from the position of Prime Minister without ever fully explaining the move. Shortly afterwards, former Prime Minister Sanader tried to flee the judiciary and was arrested on charges of corruption and organized crime. An investigation into the suspicious business relations of the recently deceased and former mayor Bandić is underway, and Škoro had received very lucrative locations from Bandić by way of the suspicious Zagreb Advent business project. Given the circumstances it is possible that Škoro is doing the same as Sanader, namely, that he will try to escape justice. In the meantime, a very intense intra-party factional conflict escalated in the Homeland Movement.

---

<sup>5</sup> Centar (eng. Centre)

The intra-party conflict grew rapidly; soon Škoro's party colleagues rebranded Škoro from a traditional and conservative leader to an adulterer and a squanderer of party finances. The entire political success of the party imploded at their prime moment in politics - just as they had become serious competition to HDZ, and as soon as Bandić and his party *Bandić Milan 365 - Labour and Solidarity Party*<sup>6</sup> were no longer politically relevant in Zagreb.

### **Pasokification and regionalization of the SDP**

Compared to the fast-paced fireworks display that was the Homeland Movement's collapse, the SDP's decline has been more drawn out and quiet. The SDP has been in a deep crisis for years at all levels of the organization. Ever since the current President of the Republic, Zoran Milanović, resigned from the position of party president, there has been an open conflict between factions in the SDP. Yet this conflict of factions is not the source of the party's problems, nor is Milanović's departure from official party involvement. The causes of the SDP's downfall lie much more outside the party than within the party itself. Namely, the SDP is experiencing a belated process of devaluation of traditional social democracy and centre-left politics, the so-called pasokification process (named after the long-standing leading Greek social democratic party PASOK, which was marginalized due to the inability to manage the Greek financial crisis and whose place of main opposition in the party system has been taken by the SYRIZA party<sup>7</sup>). The crisis is one of political identity, so deep in the party that it is difficult to distinguish which SDP public policies are different from its main opponent HDZ. To that extent, voters across election cycles developed distrust towards the SDP and sought a new centre-left option, making the SDP politically even weaker. As the SDP began to politically deteriorate, the factional struggle for positions in the party became more expressed, resulting in a lower party rating in public opinion alongside the suspension and expulsion of prominent members from the party. It is a vicious cycle of identity crisis, inappropriate policies and factional struggles from which the SDP is unlikely to escape and survive. However, the SDP still retained certain positions in local politics, such as the city of Rijeka and the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, and almost won the Istrian County, which is typically a stronghold of the regionalist party IDS<sup>8</sup>. These results reveal that the SDP is regionalizing towards the western part of Croatia. However, the future is not certain in party politics, as we have seen in case of *the Homeland Movement*. The future political success of the SDP depends not only on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Milan 365 – Stranka rada i solidarnosti (eng. Bandić Milan 365 - Labour and Solidarity Party)

<sup>7</sup> More about Pasokification here: [Pasokification - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>8</sup> IDS – Istarski demokratski sabor (eng. Istrian Democratic Assembly)

situation within the SDP but also on the success of the new *We Can!* platform which, according to the latest opinion polls, has taken the position of the second political option, a position which SDP held for decades. If *We can!* accomplishes its pre-election promises and brings about tangible, positive change in Zagreb, the SDP will be permanently marginalized like many other European social democratic parties in the last ten years.

### **Conclusion**

No matter how we look at the current situation in the Croatian party system, it is certain the status quo the country once knew has changed. For the time being, the SDP does not have the political capacity to recover in the foreseeable future, burdened by its identity crisis with the HDZ and hampered by ongoing factional conflicts. . The SDP, therefore, is currently on the path of slow and steady self-marginalization. On the other hand, a weakened HDZ managed to somewhat re-consolidate its political position after the party's main rival on the right imploded. After the sudden resignation of Miroslav Škoro from the position of Homeland Movement president and the ensuing factional conflicts and discreditment, the leading right-populist party will find it harder to prove to its electorate that it is a credible right-wing party which cares about political ideas and voters, not the particular interests of its individual party members. *The Homeland Movement* practically ended its political journey, and thus left open space for another populist party.