



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:

Local Politics in Croatia: Investigation of a County Prefect Suspected of Breaching the Official Duty

Valentino Petrović


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Local Politics in Croatia: Investigation of a County Prefect Suspected of Breaching the Official Duty

Summary

This article will present a recent case that happened in Eastern Croatia, in Vukovar-Srijem Country, whose prefect was arrested over suspicion of breaching official duty. The case originates from April 2022 when Damir Dekanić, the county's prefect, was involved in a car accident, claiming that he was in the passenger seat. However, as reported by the media, the case began to unravel with Dekanić being suspected that he was the one who was driving a car under the influence of alcohol, therefore, causing the accident. Dekanić did not resign, but his obligations in the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) are put on hold.

Introduction

In mid-March, a Vukovar-Srijem County Prefect and member of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party, Damir Dekanić, was arrested on suspicion of breaching official duty during the last spring's car accident in which he was allegedly involved as a passenger in a car that provoked the accident. However, from the information that began circulating in the media after he was put into custody, apparently Dekanić was the one who was driving the car under the influence of alcohol, while his original claims that he had a chauffeur were false. Immediately after his arrest, rumors started circulating that Dekanić was protected by people who were higher in the hierarchy of HDZ, while some members of opposition parties went so far as to claim that Dekanić enjoyed the protection of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković himself. Of course, it is safe to say that such claims will never be officially confirmed since both the Prime Minister and the party managed to stay in power even when the opposition sought to charge them with serious accusations over country-wide corruption scandals. Nevertheless, this is yet another example of how political accountability of Croatian politicians remains weak as they try to retain power even when faced with police or court persecution.

The Context of the 2022 Car Accident

To begin with some context, a brief timeline of the case will be provided. On 17 April 2022, at 1 AM, a driver of a car in which Dekanić was reportedly in a passenger seat lost control of the vehicle, turned into another lane, and struck another car. The accident happened in a small town in Eastern Croatia, in a county where Dekanić is a prefect. The driver was under no alcohol influence, while Dekanić was found with 1 g/kg of alcohol in his blood. In the aftermath of the 2022 accident, Dekanić claimed: "I think that the attention to that event was artificially induced, but time will tell what the truth is. I repeat, I feel the responsibility, but I do not think it is nearly as big as it is shown in the public"¹.

Here, it is important to note that this was not an isolated case; in 2019, Dekanić was under the influence of alcohol when he struck a car with four nuns, with one of them being mildly injured. But his statement "time will tell what the truth is" worked against him, because on 15 March 2023, he was arrested on a suspicion of breaching official duty, which could mean that he was the one who was in the driving seat in the 2022 accident and that he provided false information to the police on what exactly happened. Additionally, five other people were arrested: a policeman who tested Dekanić for alcohol, a policeman who was investigating the case, a traffic police shift leader, Dekanić's cousin who was allegedly "driving" the car, and the owner of a house who saw the accident and did not report².

Was the Accident Part of a Larger Cover-Up?

Since Dekanić is a member of the ruling HDZ, and the party itself was faced with numerous accusations over various illicit activities, especially with regard to people who are positioned relatively high in the party hierarchy, it did not take long before representatives of opposition parties began questioning whether the case of Dekanić was part of a larger cover-up scheme that included some of the party leaders. Additionally, the prevailing paradigm in Croatia is that local officials, such as Dekanić, are those who are spearheading unethical and unlawful

¹ tportal.hr. 2022. Župan Dekanić: Moja krivnja nije ni približno onolika kolika se hajka digla <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/zupan-dekanic-moja-krivnja-nije-ni-priblizno-onolika-kolika-se-hajka-digla-20220429>.

² Khan, Amzad. 2023. Uhićen Dekanić Arrested: Why was Vukovar-Srijem prefect charged. PKB News <https://pkbnews.in/uhičen-dekanic-arrested/>.

affairs, thereby, conducting the so-called "dirty work" from which their party can benefit at elections.

Taking this into account, representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Bridge (Most) party, Arsen Bauk and Nikola Grmoja, commented that Dekanić is merely a personification of the manner in which HDZ works, which includes capturing the state and using it for its own interest without any responsibility or accountability toward the citizens, with Grmoja claiming that the patron of such system is the Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković³. Unsurprisingly, Grmoja's opinion was shared by President Zoran Milanović, the one who is often accused to be the genuine leader of the opposition. Milanović argued that almost a year-long cover-up which included a prefect of a county that is considered rather important to HDZ could not go unnoticed and without any knowledge of the Prime Minister, underlining that Dekanić should have resigned from his position in Vukovar-Srijem County⁴. During the same day, it was reported that HDZ put Dekanić's party membership obligations on hold until the end of the investigation.

Illicit Activities on the Local Level in Croatia

The information that was put to the public about the accident and its cover-up immediately brought back the narrative of the illicit activities that Croatian politicians at the local level are unfortunately accustomed to. Here, it could be interesting to introduce the findings of the research that was conducted by the renowned Croatian economist Vuk Vuković. The topic of the research is corruption in public procurement and its influence on the possibility of the reelection of local politicians in Croatia. Vuković investigated public procurement procedures in 300 cities and municipalities from 2009 to 2011 and found out that the rise of corruption activities (here, Vuković is referring to suspicions public tenders), increases the possibility that a politician will be reelected, meaning that people often tolerate corruption as long as they get some benefit from it. As a solution, he suggests putting a limit to the number of mandates a politician can enjoy (maximum two mandates of four years) and reducing the number of municipalities since this would require more people to vote; therefore, the

³ N1info.hr. 2023. Uhićeni župan Dekanić, troje policajaca i još dvije osobe: Oglasio se odvjetnik <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/uhicen-vukovarski-zupan-dekanic-i-troje-policajaca/>.

⁴ Lukić, Ines. 2023. 'Dekanić? Očekuju da nas par milijuna idiota vjeruje da to nije zataškano. Vladi bih prije dao virus iz Wuhana nego novac'. Jutarnji.hr <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/dekanic-ocekuju-da-nas-par-milijuna-idiota-vjeruje-da-to-nije-zataskano-vladi-bih-prije-dao-virus-iz-wuhana-nego-novac-15316499>.

“corruptive” winning coalition would be harder to achieve⁵. Even though the case presented in this article does not possess the necessary features that Vuković investigated, it does reflect the manner in which local politics in Croatia is conducted, with politicians often denying their involvement in suspicious affairs, not resigning, and even manipulating the evidence to stay in power. Furthermore, a go-to mantra of party leaders is that they were not informed about anything related to a person who is suspected, thereby, transferring the responsibility to other instances. How this will work in the example of Dekanić's arrest, one still needs to see because the investigation is pending.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, not much can be said about what is about to happen since the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK) and the police are still looking at the evidence of the case. By looking at Dekanić's comments, it is unlikely that he will resign unless someone higher in the hierarchy of HDZ suggests him to do so. Furthermore, it is also unlikely that this will bring damage to the party rating because Croatian citizens, as shown by Vuković's research, do not punish the irresponsible behavior of politicians or corruptive activities they are involved in. Therefore, one can argue that, regardless of the outcome, the situation in local politics in Croatia will remain the same.

⁵ Jutarnji.hr. 2023. ISTRAŽIVANJE O KORUPCIJI Hrvati skloni lokalnim šerifima koji su 25% korumpirani <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/istrazivanje-o-korupciji-hrvati-skloni-lokalnim-serifima-koji-su-25-korumpirani-694216>.