



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
Croatian Prime Minister Plenković's Meeting with Serbian
Counterpart Brnabić: The Occasion and Results**
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Croatian Prime Minister Plenković's Meeting with Serbian Counterpart Brnabić: The Occasion and Results

Summary

This article will present the circumstances around the visit of Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković to Serbia, and his meeting with his counterpart Ana Brnabić. This was the first time Plenković visited Serbia since he took the office of Prime Minister in 2016, with the main reason being the opening of the Croatian House in the city of Subotica. Plenković and Brnabić discussed other bilateral topics, but if members of the Croatian opposition are asked, the visit was unprepared and did not shed light on the real matters at hand. The article will also touch upon the role of Tomislav Žigmanov, the leader of the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (DSHV).

Introduction

On 23 June, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković visited Serbia for the first time since he took office as the head of the Croatian Government in 2016. Plenković attended the opening of the Croatian House in the city of Subotica where he met with his Serbian counterpart, Ana Brnabić. As reported by the media, Croatian House will serve as a home ground for three Croatian community institutions – the Croatian National Council, the Vojvodina Croats Cultural Institute, and the Hrvatska Rijec newspaper publisher¹. Apart from a bilateral meeting with Brnabić, Plenković held working meetings with representatives of the Croatian minority in Serbia; however, he did not meet with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Minister of Foreign and European Affairs in the Croatian Government, Goran Grlić-Radman, argued that there was no need at the moment for the Prime Minister to meet with Vučić, since the two met at the World Economic Forum in Davos back in January 2023. Nevertheless, Plenković's visit to Serbia could hypothetically mean a warming up of the relationship between the two countries, but to bring some concrete conclusions more time would be needed.

¹ N1info.hr. 2023. PM Plenkovic and Serbian PM Brnabic meet in Subotica <https://n1info.hr/english/news/pm-plenkovic-and-serbian-pm-brnabic-meet-in-subotica/?comments>.

Tomislav Žigmanov – A New Minister in the Government of Serbia

The Prime Minister's visit was organized under the auspices of the president of the Croatian National Council (HNV) in Serbia, Jasna Vojnić, and the leader of the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (DSHV), Tomislav Žigmanov. An ethnic Croat, Žigmanov also holds the function of minister of human and minority rights and social dialogue in the Government of Serbia since the October of 2022, and the claim is that his appointment in Brnabić's government eventually led to better relations between Zagreb and Belgrade². However, as Nacional, a well-known Croatian weekly news magazine, reported in the March of 2021, Croatian diplomacy was not in favor of having Žigmanov as the leader of Croats in Vojvodina due to his conflict with the Croatian ambassador in Belgrade, Hido Bišćević. The conflict began after Žigmanov sent a letter to the Foreign Affairs Minister Grlić-Radman claiming that he is disappointed with the manner in which the Croatian diplomats act towards the Croatian minority in Serbia who were threatened with death³. As a counterattack, Bišćević wrote an article in which he accuses Žigmanov of ethno-business and connected him to the Bridge (Most) party, an opposition party in the Croatian Parliament, which is heavily critical of the Croatian ruling party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)⁴.

The Meeting Between Plenković and Brnabić

Afterward, Žigmanov was supported by the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in his race for the Serbian parliament in the April of 2022, before his eventual appointment to the position of minister of human and minority rights and social dialogue in the Government of Ana Brnabić. Fast forward to the events that happened in Subotica during Plenković's visit, Serbian Prime Minister Brnabić said: "The Croatian House will not only serve as a center for the promotion of Croatian culture and art, but will also be a meeting place for people from both countries. Today we clearly show that we are ready to build and strengthen our relations, to invest in a common future and to respect and appreciate our common heritage"⁵. During the visit, Brnabić underlined the importance of establishing friendly relations

² Jutarnji.hr. 2023. Plenković prvi put u mandatu u posjetu Srbiji: O svemu će razgovarati s Brnabić, s Vučićem se neće sastati <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/plenkovic-prvi-put-u-mandatu-u-posjetu-srbiji-o-svemu-ce-razgovarati-s-brnabic-s-vucicem-se-nece-sastati-15348354>.

³ Nacional.hr. 2022. 'Službeni Zagreb ne želi da Tomislav Žigmanov vodi Hrvate u Vojvodini' <https://www.nacional.hr/sluzbeni-zagreb-ne-zeli-da-tomislav-zigmanov-vodi-hrvate-u-vojvodini/>.

⁴ Nacional.hr. 2022. 'Službeni Zagreb ne želi da Tomislav Žigmanov vodi Hrvate u Vojvodini' <https://www.nacional.hr/sluzbeni-zagreb-ne-zeli-da-tomislav-zigmanov-vodi-hrvate-u-vojvodini/>.

⁵ N1info.hr. 2023. PM Plenkovic and Serbian PM Brnabic meet in Subotica <https://n1info.hr/english/news/pm-plenkovic-and-serbian-pm-brnabic-meet-in-subotica/?comments>.

with neighboring countries, in this case Croatia, as well as in advancing the bilateral cooperation which could eventually lead Serbia to the path of joining the European Union (EU). In this context, it is worth mentioning Brnabić's recent visit to Zagreb when she argued that each time an official from either the Croatian or Serbian government visits the other country, this should not be regarded only as a visit, but as something more important for both people. Apart from topics related to the opening of the Croatian House and the general direction of bilateral relations, Plenković and Brnabić discussed other topics such as transport connectivity and Southeast Europe's stability.

No Meeting with Aleksandar Vučić

However, the question in the media was raised why Plenković did not meet with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. The recent comments of Vučić towards official Zagreb were either decent and diplomatic or filled with suspicion over Croatia's role in providing support to anti-government forces in Serbia. The latter was reflected primarily amid anti-government protests that took place in Belgrade after the high school shootout when a 13-year-old child ended the lives of 9 of his school colleagues. Vučić then argued that Croatia, along with other neighboring countries, does not want Serbia to be strong and independent of their influence. And yet, in January 2023, Vučić held a meeting with Plenković at the World Economic Forum in Davos when the tension was non-existent. Truth to be said, the tone of the discussion and comments by either side depend on the nature and purpose of the event; therefore, it would be quite peculiar to see the representatives of two countries going verbally against each other at the meeting such as the one held at the World Economic Forum. At the same time, the January meeting was the reason why the Croatian Prime Minister find no purpose in meeting with Vučić again, with the Croatian Foreign Affairs Minister Grlić-Radman underlining that the two will talk when there is a genuine need, rather than having one just to satisfy the curiosity of other politicians and media. Speaking of politicians, Croatian opposition parties criticized Plenković's visit to Subotica on the grounds of the lack of purpose and not solving any real issue between the two countries.

Conclusion

Finally, from the position of those who make decisions, every meeting with representatives of other countries is justified. However, the ongoing issues between Croatia and Serbia, such as those related to the people who went missing during the Homeland War, are far from being resolved, even though Brnabić claimed that Serbia delivered all the documentation that was asked by the Croatian Government. This was something that was criticized the most by the members of the Croatian opposition and will continue to deteriorate the relations in the upcoming period. For how long this will be the case, it remains to be seen.