



# Weekly Briefing

**Croatia political briefing:**  
**Green-Left Platform Možemo! Announces Its Prime Minister**  
**Candidate**  
**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](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **Green-Left Platform Možemo! Announces Its Prime Minister Candidate**

## **Summary**

*Approximately one year before the 2024 parliamentary elections, opposition parties have started to reveal segments of their programs, as well as candidates for the position of the country's prime minister. Green-left platform We Can! (Možemo!) announced its candidate to be Sandra Benčić, a well-known face to the Croatian public and one of the most active members of the Croatian Parliament. Benčić candidacy was expected, however, only a few weeks after the decision was made, the media started speculating about details of Benčić's past, such as her education and references for such an important position.*

## **Introduction**

This article will discuss the latest political events concerning the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections in Croatia, especially the late September news that Sandra Benčić, one of the most recognizable figures in the green-left platform We Can! (Možemo!), will be the platform's candidate for the position of prime minister. Ever since the last parliamentary elections, the one in which Možemo! entered the national stage by gaining seven seats in the Croatian Parliament (together with its partners), Benčić was considered somewhat an informal leader of the platform, given that Tomislav Tomašević, the other high-ranking figure in Možemo!'s hierarchy, was preoccupied with his mayoral duties in the country capital.

That said, the information that Benčić will spearhead the platform in its 2024 parliamentary race was not considered unusual or unexpected, neither to Možemo!'s political sympathizers and opponents nor to the political analysts and the public. However, there were question marks raised about whether this was the right time to announce such news, taking into account that the exact date, even the time of the year, of the 2024 elections is still unknown. Thus, it is considered that early candidacy can either raise the visibility of a person running for

office<sup>1</sup>, or it can hurt its chances if a person loses momentum and suffers from pre-election fatigue, or the public simply loses its excitement over the candidate.

### **Disjointed Opposition Ahead of 2024 Parliamentary Elections**

Before we further tackle into the candidacy of Sandra Benčić as Možemo!'s prime minister candidate, a few words shall be said about the general state of affairs in other opposition parties that hope to overthrow the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). To begin with the largest of those, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), things have not changed for the better despite numerous opportunities to gain an advantage over HDZ, or at least level the odds, particularly after the disclosure of several corruption scandals involving HDZ ministers and other highly ranked officials. Only a few days before Benčić announced her candidacy, SDP confirmed that its leader, Peđa Grbin, would assume candidacy for the prime minister position regardless of his low personal rating in the public<sup>2</sup>. Critics often argue that Grbin is not suited to lead such a large party, let alone take the highest political responsibility in the country. This prompted many concerns about whether he is the right person for a prime minister in case the SDP-led coalition ends up winning the election; however, as things stand now, this should not bother the party too much as it seems almost impossible for such a scenario to happen. SDP's public support is declining and there are fears that 2024 could mark the worst result in the party's history.

In several of the last parliamentary elections in Croatia, the two largest parties, HDZ and SDP, appeared to have led a highly personalized campaign, almost as if that was the race for the prime minister's office. But one must not forget that it is the race to gain control over 76 seats in the Croatian Parliament. And yet, from both perspectives, Peđa Grbin seems to lag behind the HDZ's leader and the current prime minister Andrej Plenković. If one attempts to personally compare Grbin and Plenković, the former is no match for the prime minister as his reputation in the public is already damaged due to poor leadership since he became SDP's president and due to his insecure public appearance in general. From the perspective of gaining

---

<sup>1</sup> Raos, Višeslav. 2023. Plenković je u izrazitoj prednosti, a evo kako rana kandidatura može pomoći Benčić. Tportal.hr [https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/plenkovic-je-u-izrazitoj-prednosti-a-evo-kako-rana-kandidatura-moze-pomoci-bencic-foto-20230919?meta\\_refresh=1](https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/plenkovic-je-u-izrazitoj-prednosti-a-evo-kako-rana-kandidatura-moze-pomoci-bencic-foto-20230919?meta_refresh=1).

<sup>2</sup> Picula, Boško. 2023. Peđa Grbin – premijer u muzeju iluzija. Tportal.hr [https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/peda-grbin-premijer-u-muzeju-iluzija-foto-20230911?meta\\_refresh=1](https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/peda-grbin-premijer-u-muzeju-iluzija-foto-20230911?meta_refresh=1).

the necessary majority in the parliament, SDP under Grbin appears to have a low degree of centripetal force to unite the other opposition parties and lead them in the battle against the ruling party. On the contrary, Grbin's public statements could often be understood as if he is trying to reduce the number of potential coalition partners, rather than opening the door for cooperation arrangements. Therefore, it is doubtful whether Grbin is the right candidate to face Plenković; however, the party has not produced any suitable challenger.

As for the other opposition parties and their leaders who could be considered candidates for the position of prime minister, the situation is pretty vague. Looking at the center-right political spectrum, the Bridge (Most) party still did not present a person who would be its candidate. The party leader, Božo Petrov, has been absent from the public eye for quite some time and often it seems that he would not enjoy such a responsibility, taking into account that the most vocal people from the party are Nikola Grmoja, as well as Nino Raspudić and Marija Selak Raspudić who are not members of Most, but have entered the parliament on the party's list in 2020 election. Rumor has it that Selak Raspudić has been considered as the party's prime ministerial candidate which would be sensible for several reasons. First, a woman as a candidate in the center-right option would reject those who label Most as the far conservative party. Second, her academic background (formerly she was an associate professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb) and intellectual advantage makes her compelling to such an electorate. Third, she has been quite active as a member of the Croatian Parliament, showing no fear of entering discussions with political opponents.

### **Sandra Benčić as Možemo!'s Candidate for Prime Minister**

Coming back to the main topic of this article, which is Sandra Benčić's appearance as Možemo!'s candidate, the comments by the platform's supporters have been predominantly positive due to her perception among the center-left electorate who like to think of her as a person who is well equipped in knowledge and skills to fight the long-lasting problems that the country is facing, most of all inefficient institutions and widespread corruption. As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, it was no surprise that Benčić was unanimously supported by the platform's council. Over the past few years, Možemo!'s supporters have labeled her as the future prime minister. Tomislav Tomašević, who is considered the leader of the platform, lost some of his support due to his perceived inability to solve problems in the capital since he became mayor in 2021. But it needs to be taken into consideration that issues

in Zagreb have roots in 20-year-long corruption and it is impossible to think that they can be resolved only in one mandate. Nevertheless, Tomašević was never genuinely considered or thought of as a future prime minister, and it appears that it was not his ambition as well. On the other hand, Benčić fearless discussions in the Croatian Parliament provided her platform to build trust among the Croatian public.

However, not everyone welcomed the Benčić's prime ministerial race. It did not take too long for the right-wing portals<sup>3</sup> to start writing about the longevity of her education. Without going further into the details of the case, it appears that Benčić enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb in 1996, while she gained the academic degree only in 2014. Likewise, the news circulated that she repeated the second year one time and the fourth year three times. This information was not confirmed or denied by Benčić or any other member of Možemo! platform, but it is hard to believe that it will hurt her chances among the center-left electorate who consider this as an attempt of right-wing media to compromise her image in the public. This will only further consolidate her supporters and bring closer her political adversaries who would not vote for her or Možemo! anyway. Thus, the whole campaign aimed at discrediting her academic path seems rather like a short-term plan to aim a couple of poisonous darts at Benčić, but without real purpose or a long-term effect. What could be considered as a meaningful political attack on Benčić would be to challenge her actions or activities in the parliament, that is, the ideas and the program she proclaims and tries to implement.

If looking back at some of the previously held elections, the right-wing attacks on center-left candidates and platforms were based on the latter's involvement in various activities related to civil society organizations. Perhaps the most vivid example of this is Tomašević vs Miroslav Škoro race for the position of Zagreb's mayor in the 2021 local elections. Back then, Škoro, who was a leader of a right-wing Homeland Movement, aimed to discredit Tomašević's work for various civil society organizations, claiming that they receive financial support from donors abroad and not contribute to anything to increase the quality of life in Croatia. The profile of Benčić follows a somewhat similar path of Tomislav Tomašević. Before she entered politics, she was working on the preparation and implementation of EU-funded projects, either as a

---

<sup>3</sup> Narod.hr. 2023. Doznajemo: Benčić je čak četiri puta padala godine na fakultetu, a studirala je ukupno 18 godina <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/doznajemo-bencic-je-cak-cetiri-puta-padala-godine-na-fakultetu-a-studirala-je-ukupno-18-godina>.

consultant or member of civil society organizations<sup>4</sup>, but the work in the latter gave her more prominence and recognition that helped her enter politics. Therefore, one could claim that Benčić's skills and experience include managing various stakeholders, which is a constituent part of work on EU projects, while her work as a consultant only adds up to her expertise, making her, at least on paper, a person who could navigate large systems. To what extent this could be used in a hypothetical scenario of her becoming a prime minister, is to be seen.

### **The Relations Between Možemo! and SDP**

According to the words of an associate professor at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb, Višeslav Raos, Benčić's advantage could be seen in the gender dimension of her candidacy; however, as Raos argues, this has already been seen in Croatia due to the fact that women held various important positions in the country<sup>5</sup>. To mention only a few, Jadranka Kosor was a prime minister in the period between 2009 and 2011 after Ivo Sander of HDZ resigned, and she successfully led the country towards EU membership in 2013. In 2015, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović was elected President of the State in the race against then-incumbent President Ivo Josipović of SDP and was quite popular during her five-year mandate, even though the president of the state is usually considered the most popular politician according to various polls. Raos also mentions Jasna Omejec who was the president of the Constitutional Court between 2008 and 2016, as well as Marina Matulović Dropulić, the mayor of Zagreb between 1997 and 2000, just before the infamous rule of the late Milan Bandić. Nevertheless, the gender dimension could likely benefit Benčić, especially the fact that gender equality has been a major topic in her career, both professional and political. It could also draw some votes for Možemo!'s list from those people who would usually vote for the SDP-led list.

Speaking of the dynamics between Možemo! and SDP, the two decided not to enter the pre-election coalition. Even though there is still some time before the 2024 election, and arguably things could change, it is unlikely that Možemo! will break its promise over the past several months to enter the parliamentary race alone, that is, without its older brother (SDP). Rumor has it that there will be no coalition with the Center party either, which, as its name

---

<sup>4</sup> Mozemo.hr. 2023. Zastupnice i zastupnici. Sandra Benčić <https://www.mozemo.hr/zastupnice-i-zastupnici/sandra-bencic/>.

<sup>5</sup> Raos, Višeslav. 2023. Plenković je u izrazitoj prednosti, a evo kako rana kandidatura može pomoći Benčić. Tportal.hr [https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/plenkovic-je-u-izrazitoj-prednosti-a-evo-kako-rana-kandidatura-moze-pomoci-bencic-foto-20230919?meta\\_refresh=1](https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/plenkovic-je-u-izrazitoj-prednosti-a-evo-kako-rana-kandidatura-moze-pomoci-bencic-foto-20230919?meta_refresh=1).

suggests, aims to represent liberal parts of the electorate. Analyzing the consequences of such a decision, one could argue that HDZ can already open the champagne to celebrate victory since SDP, Možemo!, and the Center party are in no position to win enough mandates to get a parliamentary majority. Likewise, they are losing the synergy effect that would get them more mandates if they decided to enter the race in coalition. As underlined by political analyst Goran Vojković<sup>6</sup>, without SDP, Možemo! does not possess the field infrastructure to cover all constituencies and remains the platform that can only achieve success in Zagreb and neighboring areas. And finally, even if by some miracle Možemo! and SDP end up forming the post-election coalition to get 76 seats, the question is who will be the prime minister candidate, Benčić or Grbin.

This hypothetical scenario envisages Možemo! likely to be a junior partner in such a coalition, with the expectation that SDP is about to receive more mandates. This would suggest SDP push for their candidate, in this case Grbin, to take the role of a prime minister. But since without Možemo! SDP can hardly form a majority; one can assume that the former will insist on Sandra Benčić as the new prime minister. Such a hypothetical problem only shows the weaknesses of both Možemo! and SDP in reaching a pre-election agreement that would see them overthrow Plenković and HDZ. But even if the result of the 2024 election ends up being tight, the experience of an independent viewer can confidently suggest that Plenković is by far better at negotiating with individuals or platforms over their support for HDZ. To again rely on physics vernacular, Plenković possesses a higher degree of centripetal force to attract those undecided, while center-left individuals or platforms, at least from the position of the author of this article, lack the negotiating potential and often put unrealistic demands that minimize the probability of establishing a coalition. This is apparent not only in terms of creating a country-wide, center-left coalition but also in terms of being unable to speak between themselves (Možemo! and SDP) to resolve their differences and maximize their winning odds.

### **The Timing of Benčić's Candidacy**

Again, parliamentary elections should primarily be seen as a race between political parties to gain control over the legislative body, not as an individual race between their leaders to

---

<sup>6</sup> Vojković, Goran. 2023. Možemo ide samostalno na izbore. Plenković može početi slaviti. Index.hr <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/mozemo-ide-samostalno-na-izbore-oni-ocito-ne-zele-doci-na-vlast/2475093.aspx>.

become prime ministers of the country. However, one does not exclude the other, and quite often the political party's success heavily depends on the attractiveness of its candidate who is expected to take the role of a prime minister. But the issue of timing of announcing such a move is also important. In the case of this article, Možemo! proclaimed Benčić as its candidate well before the announcement of the exact date of the 2024 parliamentary election. This can either benefit a candidate as it will provide more time for the general public to get to know the candidate, or on the other hand, the public can become fed up with a candidate due to his or her subsequent appearances on television or the internet. Furthermore, early candidacy can cause some sort of fatigue and a person can lose momentum right before the race becomes heated. Therefore, political parties need to be aware of what would be the impact of having a candidate introduced early on, what is the trade-off between various factors and how will this reflect in the race against other parties and the overall result.

Luckily for Možemo!, one can assume that the outcome of Benčić's early candidacy will be to a larger extent positive, most of all since everyone who partially follows politics and news already expected that Benčić will be the one nominated by the platform. Benčić is known for her public appearances in various TV shows and programs related to daily politics, and if she has not managed to provoke negative emotions in the public about herself, it is hard to imagine that it will be the case in a year prior to the elections. On the other hand, those who dislike her will only confirm their position. However, early candidacy leaves Benčić just enough time to influence those who have a general idea of who she is, but are not familiar with her policies. To beat HDZ, it is considered that the election turnout needs to be high and that parties need to influence those who are undecided and who would rather stay at home than vote. With the right strategy, Možemo! and Benčić could do that, but such strategy needs to be inclusive and not judgmental towards those who have second thoughts about nominated lists and candidates, or those who are ideologically different from them. To increase their chances, they should ensure people that even those who are not interested in green policies and consider them not a real issue can find a niche in Možemo!'s political program.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the political landscape in Croatia is slowly revealing the actors and agencies before the 2024 parliamentary elections. The ruling HDZ, by looking at the party rating and all polls that have been conducted, continues to be the front-runner despite numerous issues and



affairs that the party has been dealing with during the last three or four years. When listening to Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and other party officials, they appear relatively calm and confident in their victory. The economy is on a good trajectory, the party enjoys support from international partners, and the opposition battles between themselves. Even though it is still too early to announce the victors, it would be hard to imagine someone else winning the 2024 parliamentary elections and becoming a prime minister, then HDZ and Plenković, unless he decides to leave the spot for someone else in the party and joins his EPP family.

As for Benčić and Možemo!, it will be interesting to look at their campaign and compare it to the one in 2020 when their efforts were pointed only in the direction of Zagreb. The relation with SDP is also to be considered, as well as the relation between Benčić and SDP president and prime minister candidate Peđa Grbin. Despite negotiating to enter the pre-election coalition, the two parties decided to run separately; however, the doors have remained open for post-election cooperation if it shows necessary to gain control over the parliament. In that case, the two would have to solve their differences, as well as decide whether Benčić or Grbin are more suited to assume the prime minister position. Možemo! would have more bargaining power, but it would not be unusual if they decide to stay in opposition and continue to claim experience on the national stage through activities in the parliament.