

Just one month before the general elections in Croatia the opposition coalitions and that of the outgoing government are running neck and neck in the polls.

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Analysis

Abstract:

The Croats are being called to ballot on 8th November next to renew the deputies in the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber in Parliament. On 28th September last the 123 MPs present voted unanimously for the dissolution of parliament.

Just a month before the election the gap separating the right and left-wing forces is tight. According to a survey by Promocija+, published on 4th October, the opposition coalition (right) led by the Democratic Union (HDZ) and Tomislav Karamako is due to win 32.9% of the vote, with 31.9% going to the government coalition (left) led by Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic's Social Democratic Party (SDP). The latter immediately recalled that just a year ago the polls all forecast victory for Ivo Josipovic (SDP) in the presidential election that took place on 28th December and 11th January last, whilst in the end it was won by Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic (HDZ). This victory might have been the first step in the return to office on the part of HDZ.

A COUNTRY IN CRISIS

The «Kukuriku-Alliance for Change» coalition led by outgoing government head Zoran Milanovic has been in office in Croatia since 2011. It comprises four parties: the Social Democratic Party, the People's Party- Democratic Liberal Party (HNS), the Democratic Assembly of Istria (IDS) and the Pensioners' Party (HSU). When they entered office they promised the country's economic recovery after three years of recession.

Four years on the results have been poor even though growth has been recovered: the GDP is due to increase by 1.1% this year. However

government debt remains high (78% of the GDP), government deficit lies at around 5.5% of the GDP and unemployment totals 17.5%.

The government stands accused of not having succeeded in reforming the country and notably of having made government sector cuts. Croatia is the poorest state in the EU. Its economy is still largely dominated by the State; i.e. the weak development of the private sector and notably that of SMEs, is one of the country's main problems.

Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic repeats: «*there is no alternative to the neo-liberal policies that we are undertaking.*» He maintains that the HDZ is only offering further tax increases and more budgetary

cuts, whilst the outgoing government has done everything to resist austerity. *"We do not need a valley of tears but a Croatia that believes,"* he said adding that if he is re-elected for a second mandate he will focus on reducing the debt.

On 3rd September the government announced several measures regarding the under privileged. *"This is about helping the poorest and not buying votes,"* said Zoran Milanovic. Amongst the new measures feature the end of heating and electricity cuts in the *"most vulnerable households"* (this measure will be financed by a solidarity tax on energy); the provision of a hot daily meal to 17,500 school children (cost: 2.6 million €); school support and help with homework for children in difficulty and the end of free transport for the elderly living in the country's isolated regions of the country. These measures, just like those taken a few months ago to help people earning the lowest wages and those with the most debts, have improved the outgoing government's image somewhat in the polls.

Likewise the Croats approve the Prime Minister's decision to open the border to allow passage to Western Europe by Syrian and Afghan refugees travelling from Serbia on whom Hungary had closed its doors. The Croats who just twenty years ago were in a state of war appreciated the humanitarian gesture on the part of their head of government.

In the general election on 8th November the Social Democratic Party will lead a coalition that comprises the People's Party- Democratic Liberals, the Pensioners' Party, the Labourists-Labour Party (HL-SR), the Native Farmers' Party and the Zagorje Party (a region in the north east). The Democratic Assembly of Istria, a member of the outgoing government has chosen to leave the coalition.

This left-wing coalition might run into competition, and might be countered, by the "Forwards Croatia-Progressive Alliance" (NH-Ps), created on 31st March last by former President of the Republic Ivo Josipovic (2010-2015), who has just joined forces

with the People's Party- Reformists (NS-R) led by Radimir Cacic in view of the general elections.

After his failure in the presidential election Ivo Josipovic decided to leave the Social Democratic Party, accusing it of not having worked enough to reform the country.

THE RIGHT-WING OPPOSITION

The main opposition party led by former secret services head Tomislav Karamako, the HDZ formed a patriotic coalition with 6 parties in view of the general elections in Vukovar (a town in which more than 250 people – mainly Croats were murdered between 18th and 21st November 1991 by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA)). Apart from the HDZ, this coalition comprises the Farmers' Party (HSS), the Party of Rights-Dr Ante Starcevic (HSP-AS), the Pensioners' Bloc (BUZ), the Social Liberal Party (HSLs), the Growth Party (HRAST) the Christian Democratic Party (HDS).

The HDZ programme entitled "5+ Croatia" focuses on five themes; employment, health, social justice, stability, the rule of law and questions of society, demography, education and science.

The party is promising GDP growth of 5% by 2019 and the creation of 100,000 jobs, financed by European funds over the next four years, a measure that should help young Croatians to remain in the country. The HDZ also wants to step up the fight to counter the black economy which is said to cost Zagreb 1.3 billion € per year.

The party's programme also includes a special section on national issues and on the war of independence (1991-1995). It hopes to strengthen patriotism within the younger generation, protect the country's national traditions and values, protect Croatians of the diaspora, notably those living in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and bring in a law to protect the dignity of veteran soldiers. When the patriotic coalition was launched in Vukovar Tomislav Karamako said that the coalition would be true to

the traditional values of the war of independence and the ideals for which people died in the town.

Dozens of people demonstrated about a year ago outside of the Ministry for Veteran Soldiers in Zagreb. They demanded the resignation of the Minister for Veterans Predrag Matic (independent) and of several of his associates, as well as the adoption of a law to guarantee the rights granted to them by their status, notably those linked to social protection, which they deem is under threat. Demonstrators accuse Zoran Milanovic's government of not adequately acknowledging the value of the sacrifice they made during the war of independence.

They have the support of the HDZ and the President of the Republic Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who also appointed one of them to be advisor on issues war related issues. For the time being veterans have not expressed their support of either one, or the other parties in the general elections.

THE CROATIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Croatian parliament has been mono-cameral since 2001, the year in which the Chamber of Comitats was abolished. Its only assembly the Hrvatski Sabor, comprises around 150 MPs. Their number varies in fact depending on the legislatures: they can number no less than 100 or be more than 160. MPs are elected every four years in a proportional vote within 10 constituencies each electing 14 people. During the last general elections on 4th December 2011 the 11th constituency which comprises Croats living abroad elected three MPs. Only people who are domiciled in the country are allowed to take part in the general election. The vote of Croats abroad goes traditionally in support of the HDZ but the influence on the election result is weak. The 12th constituency appoints 8 MPs representing the national minorities.

A political party has to win a minimum 5% of the vote to be represented in the Hrvatski Sabor. The distribution of seats is undertaken according to the d'Hondt method.

12 political parties represented at present in the Hrvatski Sabor:

The Kukuriku-Alliance for Change Coalition:

- the Social Democratic Party (SDP), created in 1990 led by outgoing Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic, with 61 MPs ;
- the People's Party- Democratic Liberals (HNS), centre-left party founded in 1990 and led by Vesna Pusic, with 13 seats;
- Democratic Assembly of Istria (IDS), a regionalist party founded in 1990 to defend the interests of the inhabitants in the regions of Istria and Kvarner, led by Ivan Jakovcic, with 3 MPs;
- the Pensioners' Party (HSU) aims to defend the interests of the retired (around 700,000 in Croatia). Founded in 1996 it is led by Silvano Hrelja, with 3 seats.

The opposition coalition:

- Democratic Union (HDZ), the main opposition party, founded in 1989 and led by Tomislav Karamako, comprises 41 MPs ;
- Civic Party (HGS), founded in 2009 led by Zeljko Kerum, with 2 seats;
- the Democratic Centre (DC), created in 2000 led by Vesna Skare-Ozbolt, with 1 seat;
- the Workers-Labour Party (HL-SR), created in 2010 led by Nansi Tireli, with 6 seats;
- the Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB), a right-wing party founded in 2006 and led by Vladimir Sisljagic, with 6 MPs;
- the Independent List Ivan Grubisic 2 seats;
- the Farmers' Party (HSS), led by Branko Hrg, 1 seat ;
- the Party of Rights-Dr Ante Starevic/ Party of Pure Rights Ruza Tomasic 1 MP.

The Croats also elected their president every 5 years by direct universal suffrage. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic (HDZ) won on 11th January last the 2nd round of the presidential election with 50.74% of the vote ahead of the outgoing Head of State Ivo Josipovic (49.26%). Turn out totalled 59.06% (47.14% in the first round on 28th December.2014).

Reminder of the general elections on 4th December 2011 in Croatia

Turnout : 61,77%

Political parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
Kukuriku-Alliance for change Coalition			
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	958 312	40,40	61
People's Party-Democratic Liberals (HNS)			13
Democratic Assembly of Istria (IDS)			3
Pensioners' Party (HSU)			3
Right-wing coalition			
Democratic Union (HDZ)	554 765	23,40	41
Civic Party (HGS)			2
Democratic Centre (DC)			1
Laborists-Labour Party (HL-SR)	121 785	5,10	6
Democratic Alliance of Slavonia & Baranja (HDSSB)	68 995	2,90	6
Independent List Ivan Grubisic	66 266	2,80	2
Farmers' Party (HSS)	71 450	3	1
Rights Party-Dr Ante Starevic/Party of Pure Rights	66 150	2,80	1
Party of Law (HSP)	72 360	3	0
Social Liberal Party (HSLs)	71 077	3	0
Pensioners' Bloc - Primorje-Gorski Alliance - Workers Party	66 239	2,80	0
Others	247 689	10,40	0

Source : <http://www.izbori.hr/2011Sabor/rezultati/rezultati.html>

The right-wing opposition takes the lead in the Croatian general elections

Abstract:

The right-wing opposition coalition Domoljubna Koalicija (Patriotic Coalition), led by the Democratic Union (HDZ) and Tomislav Karamarko, rallying the Farmers' Party (HSS), the Rights Party-Dr Ante Starcevic (HSP-AS), the Pensioners' Bloc (BUZ), the Social Liberal Party (HSLs), the Growth Party (HRAST) and the Christian Democratic (HDS), came out ahead in the general elections that took place on 8th November in Croatia. It won 59 of the 151 seats in Parliament.

The coalition Hrvatska Raste, (Croatia is growing), led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and outgoing Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic, which rallies the People's Party-Liberal Democrats, the Pensioners' Party, Labour-Workers' Party (HL-SR), the Native Peasants' Party and the Zagorje Party (region in the country's north-west) is due to take 56 seats.

As in Poland, two weeks ago, the right-wing opposition has won the general elections just a few months after the victory of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic (HDZ) in the election for the country's presidency on 11th January with 50.74% of the vote (49.26% for the outgoing head of State Ivo Josipovic (SDP). The right-wing has not however won the absolute majority and will have to start talks to be able to form a parliamentary majority.

Four other parties rose above the 5% voting threshold necessary to be represented in the Hrvatski Sabor, the only house of parliament. Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists), a party founded in 2012 by Bozo Petrov, is due to take 19 seats. He declared before the vote that he would join forces with neither of the country's leading parties after the election: "We shall keep our word. We are not going to join a coalition." However he did indicate that his party would support a government that puts forward a reform of the legal system and the civil service and which supports businesses. "The breakthrough by Most shows that voters no longer want a two party system and political elites are beginning to drift into a separate world, distant from the people," analyses

Davor Gjenero, a political expert.

Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ), led by Ivan-Vilibor Sincic, who caused surprise on 28th December 2014, as he took 3rd place in the first round of the presidential election with 16.42% of the vote by standing as an anarchist, is also due to enter parliament, as will Milan Bandic 365 (MB 365), a populist party led by the present Mayor of Zagreb.

The general elections were the first organised in Croatia since the country's entry into the EU on 1st July 2013.

During the electoral campaign many analysts pointed out that neither of the two main parties were putting forward credible reform to save the country's economy that has been sorely affected by the crisis. "Neither of the two major coalitions has said clearly that it would address the biggest economic issues. Their messages remained general with populist overtones," deplored the Croatian business owners association (HUP). "Neither of the two main parties has provided any serious response to major issues," maintained Davor Gjenero.

Croatia is one of the poorest States in the European Union. After six years of recession (- 13% GDP contraction since 2008), the country is due to recover growth in 2015 (1.1%). The unemployment rate totals 16.2% (last September's figure), and lies at 43.1% amongst young people; the budgetary deficit lies at 5.5% of the GDP.

The Croatian economy is still largely dominated by

Results

the State: the public sector is very big and the weak development of the private sector and notably of SMEs, is one of the country's main problems.

Outgoing Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic multiplied his promises during the electoral campaign, notably committing to the reduction of the government debt that is over 90% of the GDP. The opposition has criticised the Social Democrats results at the State's helm. Tomislav Karamarko promised to introduce plan called "Croatia +5" to enable GDP growth of 5% by 2019, a 5% reduction of unemployment and finally a 5 point reduction in the VAT rate. The Democratic Union's leader also promised to create 100,000 new jobs.

The issue of refugees crossing Europe as they flee war in Syria and Afghanistan entered the electoral campaign in the few weeks preceding the election. Zoran Milanovic showed a mix of firmness regarding the neighbouring countries and humanity towards the 350,000 refugees who have transited through Croatia since mid-September. The Prime Minister condemned Hungary's decision to build a barbed wire fence on its border with Serbia and criticised Serbia for the way it managed the crisis. The HDZ, which stands as a defender of "patriotic values", accused the government of having been lax and of poor organisation in terms of managing the refugees. Tomislav Taramarko suggested the use of the armed forces and the introduction of barriers as solutions to reduce the number of migrants crossing the country. According to political analyst Ivan Rimac "the

extremely human approach adopted by the government affected the citizens, who remembered their own situation during the war years in the 1990's (this led to 500 000 refugees)" Davor Gjenero stressed that the refugee theme had succeeded in diverting attention from economic difficulties. "The government was fortunate in that this crisis made all other themes in the electoral debate secondary," he declared.

After the election Tomislav Karamarko is due to become the next Croatian Prime Minister. Aged 56, he originates from Zadar. A graduate in history from the University of Zagreb, he was one of the founders of the Democratic Union in 1989. Head of Cabinet of two Prime Ministers (Josip Manolic, 1990-1991 and Franjo Greguricil, 1991-1992) and also of the leader of the lower house of parliament (when there were two houses) (1992-1994), Stjepan Mesic, he became Director of the police force of Zagreb in 1992. In 2000, he led Stjepan Mesic's electoral campaign (People's Party, HNS), the candidate in the Presidential election on 23rd January and 7th February. After his victory with 56.01% of the vote Tomislav Karamako became head of security to head of State and Director of the National and Security Office.

In 2002, he became Director the Information Agency (POA) and two years later he became leader of the Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA). He was then appointed Home Affairs Minister, a post he occupied until the return of the Social Democrats to office in 2011. He became leader of the HDZ in 2012.

Results

Political Parties	Number of seats
Domoljubna Koalicija (Patriotic Coalition)	59
Hrvatska Raste, (Croatia is growing)	56
Most Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists)	19
Democratic Assembly of Istria (IDS)	3
Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB)	2
Milan Bandic 365	2
Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ),	1
Uspješna Hrvatska (Success Croatia)	1

Source : <http://www.izbori.hr/140zas/rezult/1/nrezultati.html>
<http://www.24sata.hr/politika/sdp-u-zagreb-rijeka-osijek-i-varazdin-hdz-u-split-zadar-446022>

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