

**European
Elections monitor**

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Croatians are being convened again to ballot on 11th September next for their first snap election.

Corinne Deloy**Analysis**

On 21st June last the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber of the Croatian Parliament was dissolved in a vote in which 137 voted in support 2 against and 1 abstained; this became effective on 15th July following a vote of no confidence against the government which had taken place five days earlier: 125 of the 142 MPs present against 15 and 2 abstentions voted in support of the resignation of the head of government Tihomir Oreskovic, a first in Croatia. This vote was initiated by the country's main party, the Democratic Union (HDZ) which accused the Prime Minister of destabilising the government via his decisions and acts.

After the vote of no confidence the HDZ had 30 days to achieve the confidence of parliament regarding the name of a new head of government. Since this was not done the President of the Republic, Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic (HDZ) was obliged on 16th July to convene a snap election which she set for 11th September, which is the first of its kind organised in the country since independence in 1991. The election will be taking place less than a year after that of 8th November 2015.

According to the polls two-thirds of the Croats want early elections so that the country's political crisis can be brought to an end.

Seven months of crisis

The opposition (right) came out ahead in the general elections on 8th November 2015 which were organised some months after Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic's win (HDZ) in the presidential race on 11th January 2015 with 50.74% of the vote against outgoing head of State Ivo Josipovic (SDP). The Domoljubna Koalicija coalition (Patriotic Coalition), led by the HDZ rallying 6 other parties, came out ahead with 33.36% of the vote and 56 seats. It drew ahead of the coalition Hrvatska Raste (Croatia is growing) led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) of outgoing Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic,

rallying five other parties, which won 33.2% of the vote and 56 seats.

Since they did not have the absolute majority the right-wing parties negotiated with Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists), a party founded in 2012 by Bozo Petrov, who took third place in the election with 13.51% of the vote (19 seats). These talks led to the formation of a government on 22nd January 2016 that brought together the Patriotic Coalition and Most-Nezavisnih Lista, supported in parliament by the party of the Mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandic, called Milan Bandic 365 (MB 365).

The parties agreed to appoint Tihomir Oreskovic, a Croatian-Canadian businessman without any political experience as Prime Minister whilst their respective leaders Tomislav Karamarko and Bozo Petrov, were appointed Deputy Prime Ministers. The choice of certain personalities appointed as ministers was the source of contention. Hence revisionist historian, Zlatko Hasanbegovic, nostalgic of the independent Croatian State (1941-1945) of Ustaše Ante Pavelic, was appointed Minister of Culture.

Under the leadership of Tomislav Karamarko, the HDZ became increasingly nationalistic. Once in power the party said it wanted to control the media, give more precedence to the church and to challenge

some social rights; it also cut the subsidies granted to some cultural institutions and NGO qualified as "neocommunist". It revised the judgment given to the war crimes committed by the Ustase during the Second World War. In April this year the Jewish community and the country's Serb minority boycotted a commemoration organised at the death camp of Jasenovac, symbolic of the crimes committed by the Ustase regime, in protest against the relativisation of the latter's crimes.

Relations between the two main government parties rapidly deteriorated and their fragile alliance finally came to an end. Tihomir Oreskovic's government will therefore have been the shortest in Croatia's history (147 days).

The crisis really started when at the beginning of May when the weekly newspaper *Nacional* revealed that Ana Saric Karamarko, the HDZ's leader's wife, owner of a communication agency had received 60,000€ between 2013 and 2015 from the lobbyist Josip Petrovic. The latter was working for a Hungarian oil company MOL, whilst discussions were underway for the privatisation of the Croatian oil and gas company INA. Over the last few years, Croatia has tried to increase the share it holds in this company (presently at 44.8%) of which Budapest controls 49%. In 2014, the Croatian government asked for international arbitration against MOL in a bid to annul an agreement dating back to 2009 which allowed the Hungarian company to become INA's major shareholder.

A return to Social Democratic rule?

The HDZ is standing alone in the election on 11th September, outgoing Finance Minister Zdravko Maric (independent) is its candidate for head of government. On 21st June last the HDZ elected a new leader in the shape of Andrej Plenkovic, a more moderate MEP than his predecessor. "*Croatia needs a new approach, a modern political programme and it needs to do a strategic u-turn,*" he said after being elected.

"The shift of the HDZ towards the centre is a setback for right-wing populism in Central

and Easter Europe," maintains the Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Zagreb Zarko Puhovski. "*The illiberal trend that exists in Hungary and Poland has not taken hold in Croatia,*" he said.

For its part the SDP has joined forces with three other parties (the People's Party (HNS) led by Ivan Vrdoljak, the Farmers' Party (HSS) led by Kreso Beljak and the Pensioners' Party (HSU) led by Silvano Hrelja) within the People's Coalition. "*Our coalition brings together all of those who support a progressive Croatia,*" stressed former Prime Minister (2011-2016) Zoran Milanovic who said that "*work and education are the two priorities of the People's Coalition.*"

The coalition could come out ahead in the elections because voters might want to "punish" the HDZ, but it will have to find the support of a partner if it is to achieve the absolute majority for government. Tihomir Cipek, professor of political science at the University of Zagreb believes that the Social Democrats will try to form a coalition with the parties representing the ethnic minorities and will avoid joining forces with Most.

"Most-Nezavisnih Lista will have to change its strategy and tactics in comparison with the previous elections, when the party said it was neither on the left or the right but for the implementation of reforms, a discourse that enabled it to attract both right and left wing voters," maintains Berto Salaj, a political expert from the University of Zagreb. Most-Nezavisnih Lista, which is undoubtedly less a party than an assembly of opponents to the two main parties, embodied by the HDZ and the SDP, might however win some of the HDZ's electorate on 11th September next.

According to a most recent poll by CRO Demoskop, published at the beginning of August the SDP is due to come ahead on 11th September with 34.4% of the vote ahead of the HDZ, which is due to take 26.4%. Most-Nezavisnih Lista is due to win 10.4% and Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ), led by Ivan-Vilibor Sincic, 6.4%.

Hence the constitution of a majority will be difficult if Most-Nezavisnih Lista or Zivi zid (and the others) do not join forces with one of the two "big" parties. This is however vital so that the Croats can have a stable government that can work towards improving the country's economic and political situation.

The Croatian Political System

The Croatian parliament has been monocameral since 2001, the year in which the Chamber of Regions was abolished. The Hrvatski Sabor comprises around 150 MPs. Their number varies depending on the legislature; however there cannot be below 100 or over 160 of them. MPs are elected every four years by a proportional system within 10 constituencies each of these electing 14 people.

The 11th constituency, which comprises Croatians living abroad (and who have a house in the country), elected three MPs in the last general elections on 8th November 2015. Their vote traditionally leans in support of the HDZ, but the influence of the diaspora on the election result is weak. The 12th constituency appoints the MPs representing the national minorities (3 for the Serbs, 1 for the Italians, 1 for the Hungarians, 1 for the Czechs and the Slovaks, 1 for the Albanians, the Bosnians, the Macedonians, the Montenegrins and the Slovenians and 1 for the Austrians, the Bulgarians, the Germans, the Jews, the Poles, the Roma, the Romanians, the Ruthens, the Ukrainians and the Vlachs, i.e. 8 in all).

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

Represented in the Hrvatski Sabor at present are:

- the Domoljubna Coalition (Patriotic Coalition), that rallies the Democratic Union (HDZ) founded in 1989 and led since June by Andrej Plenkovic, the Farmers' Party (HSS) led by Kreso Beljak, The Rights Party-Dr Ante Starcevic (HSP-AS) led by Ivan Tepes, the Pensioners' Bloc (BUZ), the Social Liberal Party (HSLs), the Growth Party (HRAST) and the Christian Democratic Party (HDS), with 56 seats;
- Hrvatska Raste Coalition (Croatia is growing), which rallies the Social Democratic Party (SDP), created in 1990 and led by Zoran Milanovic, the People's Party-Liberal Democrats (HNS) of the centre left, founded in 1990 and led by Ivan Vrdoljak, the Pensioners' Party (HSU) founded in 1996 and led by Silvano Hrelja, the Workers-Labour Party (HL-SR) of Tomislav Koncevski, the Native Farmers' Party and the Zagorje Party (a region in the country's north-east) with 56 seats;
- Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists), a party founded in 2012 by Bozo Petrov, has 19 seats;
- Our Rights Coalition has 3 seats;
- the Labour and Solidarity Coalition has 2 seats;
- the Democratic Alliance of Slovenia and Baranja (HDSSB), a party founded in 2006 and led by Dragan Vulin, has 2 seats;
- Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ), led by Ivan-Vilibor Sincic who caused a surprise when he took third place on 28th December 2014 in the first round of the presidential election with 16,42% of the vote as he stood as an anarchist candidate – 1 seat;
- the Victorious Croatia Coalition has one MP.

Reminder of the general election results of 8th November 2015 in Croatia

Turnout: 60,82%

	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
Hrvatska Raste (Croatia is growing)	746 626	33,36	56
Hrvatska Raste (Croatia is growing)	742 909	33,20	56
Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists)	302 453	13,51	19
Our Right Coalition	42 193	1,83	3
Work and Solidarity Coalition	74 301	3,32	2
Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB)	30 443	1,36	2
Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ)	94 877	4,24	1
Victorious Croatia Coalition	34 573	1,54	1
Others	169 628	7,64	0

Source : <http://www.izbori.hr/140zas/rezult/1/nrezultati.html>

The Democratic Union (HDZ) surprised everyone as it came out ahead in the snap general election in Croatia

Corinne Deloy

Results

The Democratic Union (HDZ), led by Andrej Plenkovic, MEP came out ahead in the general elections on 11th September in Croatia. The first snap election organised in the country since independence in 1991 followed the dissolution of the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber in parliament on 21st June, which itself followed a vote of no-confidence against the government led by Tihomir Oreskovic five days earlier. The HDZ proved the opinion polls wrong and won 36.6% of the vote and 61 seats (+ 5 in comparison with the previous general election on 8th November 2015).

The main opposition movement, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) led by former Prime Minister (2011-2016) Zoran Milanovic that had joined forces with three other parties (the People's Party (HNS) and the Pensioners Party (HSU)) within the People's Coalition lost ground. It won 33.5% of the vote and 54 seats (- 2).

Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists), a party founded in 2012 by Bozo Petrov, also lost

ground even though it maintained its third place with 9.8% of the vote and 13 seats (- 6). Finally, Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ), founded to counter expropriation and foreign banks, whom it accuses practicing exaggerated interest rates, led by Ivan-Vilibor Sincic, made a breakthrough with 8 seats (+ 7).

Turnout was lower than that registered in the previous election on 8th November 2015: - 8.23 points. It came to 52.59%.

General Election results 11th September 2016 in Croatia

Turnout: 52.59%

	Number of votes won	Number of seats
Democratic Union (HDZ)	36,60	61
People's Coalition (Social Democratic Party, SPD, Peoples Party, HNS, Farmers' Party, HSS, and Pensioners' Party, HSU)	33,50	54
Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists)	9,80	13
Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ)		8

Source : <http://www.izbori.hr/140zas/rezult/1/nrezultati.html>

"It is difficult to foresee a major victory on one side or another. A similar scenario to that produced in the previous elections might repeat itself," said Berto Salaj, Professor of Political Science at the University of Zagreb ahead of the election. The formation of a majority will indeed entail forming an alliance with other parties.

The leader of Most-Nezavisnih Lista, Bozo Petrov, did not want to speak his intentions. He seems however to be leaning more to the HDZ and its new leader Andrej Plenkovic. Together the two parties would have 74 seats in Parliament, i.e. just two short of the absolute majority. For its part Zivi zid has said it supports neither the HDZ nor the SPD.

"I am convinced that we are the party that will be privileged to form the next government in Croatia and that this one will be stable," declared Andrej Plenkovic after the results were announced. The new HDZ leader (he was appointed in July) created a surprise enabling the party to retain first place, and this, without the support of other parties within the coalition, as was the case in the last elections on 8th November 2015. Andrej Plenkovic has reoriented his party toward the centre. "I am changing the HDZ to position it in the centre," he has repeated since he took over as leader, saying that he wanted to distance the party from the nationalist positions of his predecessor Tomislav Karamarko. "I have been elected for the future, not for the past," maintained Andrej Plenkovic.

The HDZ chose outgoing Finance Minister Zdravko Maric (independent) as its candidate for Prime Minister.

Zoran Milanovic's party however lost its wager. The social democratic leader, who promised "a government of progress and tolerance," was quick to encourage nationalist tension during the electoral campaign. During a meeting with veterans of the war of independence (1991-1995), he said that Serbia was led by a "pitiful arrogant group", he spoke of the past of some Serb leaders, notably Aleksandar Vucic (Progressive Party, SNS) the Serb Prime Minister and threatened to block Belgrade's bid to join the European Union. The daily *Jutarni List* also revealed the content of a conversation between Zoran Milanovic and representatives of some veterans' associations when he indicated that Serbia is an arrogant nation and that Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a real country and that it could not function as a State. "At least my mother was not a doctor in the Yugoslav army," he declared suggesting that Andrej Plenkovic's mother was on the Serb side during the war.

Whilst the HDZ has been repositioning in the centre, the SPD has chosen to play the nationalist card, undoubtedly to attract voters who might have been upset by the HDZ's redirection. "Zoran Milanovic tried to show the electorate that people on the left are also good patriots like those in the

General elections in Croatia 11th September 2016

HDZ," stressed Kresimir Macan, a consultant in political communication. *"This electoral campaign was marked by provocation between Croatia and Serbia. A little game that some politicians in both countries play when they have nothing else to offer,"* analysed Toni Gabric, the editor-in-chief of the on-line information site H-Alter (<http://www.h-alter.org>) adding, *"the political parties are adopting a neoliberal policy and are surfing on a certain kind of Eurosceptic feeling. But in reality they do not have a great deal to offer the citizens."*

As in the previous elections in November 2015 none of the parties indicated during the electoral campaign the way they thought they might improve life for the Croats who live in one of the poorest countries in the EU. After six years

of recession (-13% of GDP contraction since 2008), Zagreb recovered growth in 2015 (1.6%). Unemployment is high - 15.8% in 2015 (more than 40% amongst young people), government debt lies at 86.7% and the budgetary deficit at 4.9%. The Croatian economy is still mainly dominated by the State: the public sector is very big and the feeble development of the private sector and notably of SMEs is one of the country's main problems.

The election on 11th September has strengthened the HDZ. Let us hope that the next government that is formed in Croatia will have adequate strength and legitimacy to bring the country out of the political and economic crisis in which the country has been entrenched for the last few years.

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