

The Meaning of Democracy in Change? Parliamentary Elections in Croatia

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Surprising Snap Elections

It came as a slight surprise: the announcement that Croatia will hold snap elections on July, 5th, instead of fall 2020 as it was expected and scheduled. Caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the country, like many others, rescheduled the elections out of necessity. This is the official explanation to provide a justification for this move by the government and to suspend the parliament, the Croatian Sabor. The real reason for the snap elections might be the apprehension of the main ruling party, the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, HDZ) that after a possible future economic setback leading to social dissatisfaction in late summer, their re-election in autumn 2020 might be at risk. Not only was the country struck by the COVID-19 crisis but also by devastating earthquakes, with the most severe (5.5 M_L) on March 22, 2020, that induced massive destruction in the capital Zagreb.

Historic Discrepancies of HDZ

The election of the Social Democrat Zoran Milanović as the 5th President of the Republic of Croatia (since its independence 1991) on January 5th, 2020, – shortly after the start of Croatia’s EU Presidency – was a sign of possible political change in the country. Such resumptions were based on the shrinking popularity of the hitherto President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, due to her efforts to please both the conservative-nationalist voter base in the country as well as neighbouring countries and international partners. However, Grabar-Kitarović was not the first HDZ politician to show contradictions in performing. In fact, that discrepancy might be traced back to the founding history of HDZ end of the 1980s, and the contradictory role her founder and long-year leader Franjo Tuđman played during and after the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Instead of a political change, the parliamentary elections of 2020 have rather confirmed the continuation of the HDZ led government.

Low Voter Turnout

With 46.9% voter turnout, these parliamentary elections have shown the lowest participation in all of Croatia’s history since the independence in 1991. Especially young people share a widespread disappointment about the political elite and common resignation that pushed huge parts of this group into an apolitical position, or emigrant group. The two largest parties, HDZ and the SDP-led coalition “Restart Croatia”, competed with rather uninspired campaigns that were not able to convince people and get them to the ballot boxes. It is not unusual for Southeast European countries that public broadcasting services, which are actually state funded and are obliged by constitution to remain politically neutral as well to distribute a broad picture of all parties, are in fact openly lobbying for the governing party. Croatia is not different in that case, the national public television, HRT, was favoring the HDZ under Andrej Plenković in every moment – mostly aiming at the older population of the country, who is not following modern media and who is a major voter base for his party.

Immediately Formed Government

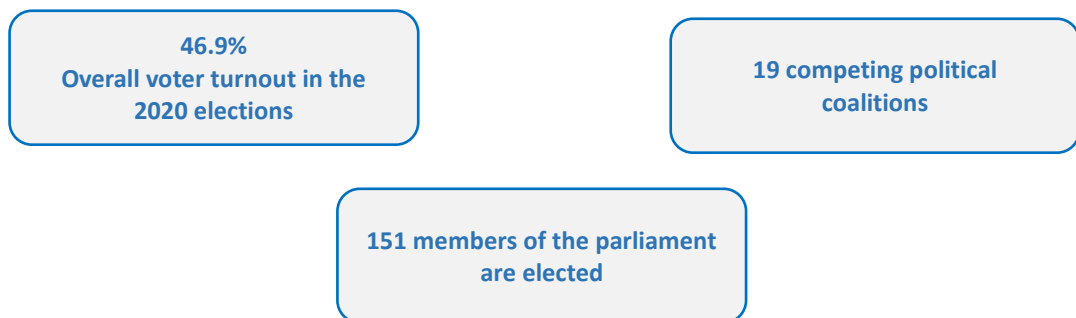
With the absence of large parts of the young population and the elder population giving their support to the HDZ, the latter was able to even strengthen its position in the Sabor. And, while some feared a possible coalition of the conservatives with the far-right Homeland Movement, Andrej Plenković decided just one day after the elections to form a government with the Croatian People’s Party (HNS), the Reformists and the Minority parties. In doing so, he collected 76 seats, one more than the 75 required to get a majority

**Neo-Fascist
Party at 3rd
place**

to govern Croatia for the next four years. As a result, the involvement of the far-right Homeland Movement appeared no longer necessary so that the possible “kingmaker” – as it was previously called – will remain in opposition as a quite serious factor. Distressing is the fact, the ultra-right, neo-fascist party Homeland Movement, led by the pop folk singer Miroslav Škoro, achieved 16 seats in the Croatian parliament. Its voter strongholds are mainly in Eastern and Western Slavonia, especially around Vukovar (33,32%) and Erdut (19,9%), where recurring war time narratives and ethnic tensions are fertile ground for right-wing extremists, who have almost no elaborated strategy to improve the economically backward situation in this region.

**Left-Green
Newcomer**

What was indeed surprising in these elections was that the newly formed green-left, pro-European and anti-fascist party coalition Možemo (“We can!”) managed to get seven seats for the Sabor. This can be considered as a tremendous success despite the fact that this party mainly relied on modern social media campaigning and had very limited funds. Due to their huge success in Zagreb (23,08%), Rijeka (10,39%) and Dubrovnik (9%), it can be deducted that not only but mostly urban young people, disenchanted by the current politics and still eager to be politically active, have voted for this new alternative. An additional mobilizing effect in favor to Možemo might have come from the far-right, since Miroslav Škoro had started a discriminating and thus deeply polarizing abortion debate. As a result, a broad women solidarity movement emerged throughout Croatia that was also joined by the former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who as many other posted a picture showing her outstretched middle finger. In relation to Croatia’s socio-economic reality, such provocation from the far-right appeared highly inappropriate.



**Socio-Economic
Problems and
Emigration**

Croatia has plenty of economic problems for which political decision-makers have hitherto hardly offered answers. As a goal to a more prosperous future, the EU membership cannot be called upon anymore, since Croatia’s EU accession has not led – as previously expected – to a better living standard for the majority of the Croatian population. Consequently, since Croatia’s EU accession, mostly young people take the advantage of the newly achieved freedom of movement in the EU and leave to work in Germany, Austria or Ireland. Without the necessity for a visa to settle to any country in the Union, the exodus is even more severe than in neighbouring Serbia. While in the latter mostly academic educated young people pack their suitcases, in Croatia even craftsmen and retailers are leaving more rural areas. In the town of Sisak, a place with almost 50,000 inhabitants, bakeries closed down and shops went out of business simply due to labour shortage. Of all the promises the HDZ led government under Andrej Plenković has made, the outcomes might be called insufficient at best. The child bonus of 1,000 Euro per family has not been realized, the plans of tax reliefs were put on hold, similar to plans for an increased taxation on property. Despite the fact that there is a massive work emigration, the present government tried to sell the related decrease of unemployment in Croatia as a success of its own policies and politics. A quite ironic course of rhetoric, while young Croatians emigrate, the gap they leave, especially in the

tourist sector, is filled by Serbians, Montenegrins, Bosnians and North Macedonians willing to work for less salary in hotels, bars, cafes and restaurants.

Consistency in Problems, not in Solving Strategies

Even though it emerged as the second strongest party in the elections, the Restart Coalition (Restart Koalicija) still appeared as a loser. This combined list, in which the Social Democrat Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske, SDP) plays a leading role, unites parties with a liberal, centre-left, pro-European and anti-nationalistic agenda. As a first consequence, Davor Bernardić resigned from his function as SDP and Restart Coalition party leader. Ironically, the SDP-led government (2012 to 2016) lost in public support during their mandate for almost the same reasons as the HDZ administration has been criticized now. Even though the promised “cut” with the corrupt past of several HDZ cabinets, like under Ivo Sanader and a shift to work in the interest of the people, political reality revealed the high ideals of the SDP to be empty words almost alike. In order to get the Slovenian approval for the EU accession of Croatia, Milanović signed an agreement with President Janez Janša to stop lawsuits against his country concerning the Ljubljana bank issue. In 1991, the financial institute had closed down and refused to reimburse its clients from all former Yugoslavia states, thousands of Croatians lost their savings. First signs of Euro-skepticism arose when with only a signature the hopes of these citizens to retrieve their money were swept away.

Questions to Democracy as Such

With the announcement to form the new government based on splinter and minority parties, the hitherto and future Prime Minister Plenković will continue with his administration as kind of “business as usual” for the next political period in Croatia to come. This means as well that the traditional set-up of the government, with which so many citizens are unsatisfied, will continue to work as before. Maybe a rather dramatic political turmoil was just postponed by the elections on Sunday, July, 5th 2020. Obviously, the main loser of this parliamentary election is the political or democratic system as such. With a turnout of less than 50%, the legislative as well as the executive finally lack legitimacy. The main reason why more than half of those entitled to vote refused to go to the polls was not primarily widespread insecurity regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic, but rather rising system criticism regarding widespread corruption and clientelism and severe socio-economic difficulties that the majority of the population has to face – let alone precarious housing and working conditions for young people. Not only in the context of EU enlargement, the state of democracy, checks and balances, human and civic rights as well as public-service broadcasters within EU member states should be increasingly questioned and examined.

Figure 1: 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Croatia Results

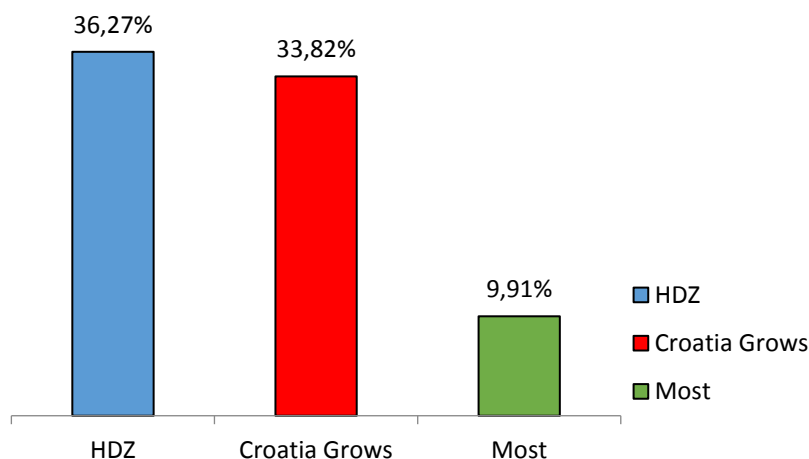
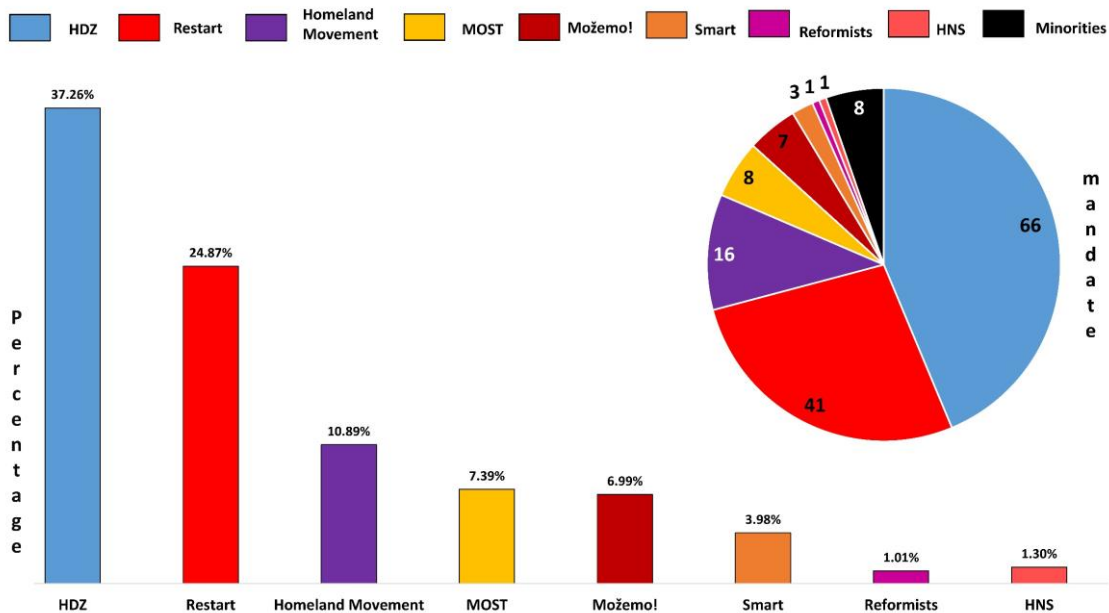


Figure 2: Preliminary Results of the Parliamentary Elections in Croatia 2020 – Total of Acquired Seats in the Parliament



Source: State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia, *Državno Izborno Povjerenstvo Republike Hrvatske*, <https://www.izbori.hr/site/>; Telegram: Izbori 2020, <https://www.telegram.hr/parlamentarni-izbori-2020/>

Party	Main candidate	Political Ideology (Affiliation EP)
Restart Coalition	Davor Bernardić	centre-left, liberal, pro-European (PES)
HDZ	Andrej Plenković	centre-right, conservative (EPP)
Homeland Movement Miroslav Škoro	Miroslav Škoro	far-right extremism, Eurosceptic, anti-Serbian
MOST	Božo Petrov	Liberal-conservatism
Možemo	Collective leadership	Eco-socialism, liberal
Smart	Marijana Puljak	Liberalism (ALDE)
Croatian People’s Party	Predrag Štromar	Centre-left (ALDE)
Reformists	Radimir Čačić	Liberal (EDP)

The highly complex situation in Croatia was discussed during the online panel discussion that was organized by the cooperation partners on July 2nd, 2020. (For more information see: <http://www.idm.at/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsarchiv/veranstaltungsarchiv-2020/item/parliamentary-elections-in-croatia-online-panel-discussion>).