



Elections During the Pandemic: Lessons Learned from the 2020 Early General Elections in Croatia

Election Analysis

Dario Čepo

Assistant Professor, University of Zagreb
dcepo@pravo.hr

Valentino Petrović

Independent Scholar
valentinopetrovic@hotmail.com

Antonio Karlović

PhD Student, University of Zagreb
antonio.karlovic@studenti.fpzg.hr

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 97-108

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.7

Elections During the Pandemic: Lessons Learned from the 2020 Early General Elections in Croatia

Dario Čepo, Valentino Petrović, Antonio Karlović*

Introduction

In 2019 the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) thought that the exposure and international visibility of their government and Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, during Croatia's term at the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, coupled with yet another record-breaking tourist season and the expected win of their candidate in the 2019-20 presidential elections, the incumbent, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, would all but assure their victory in the general elections scheduled for October or November 2020.

However, first Grabar Kitarović lost her re-election bid, with the left-of-centre Social Democratic Party's (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, SDP) candidate, Zoran Milanović, becoming the President of the Republic. This setback for HDZ was followed by the spread of COVID-19 through Europe, which meant suspending all but the necessary work of the rotating presidency, almost all of which was moved to a digital setting. Hence, HDZ lost the myriad opportunities for photo-ops and media coverage. The quarantine that the government imposed in mid-March came just a day before the 5.3 Richter magnitude earthquake which hit Zagreb and the surrounding area, devastating the downtown as well as some suburbs of Croatia's capital. This also threatened to become a liability for HDZ, as they were in a governing coalition with the much-hated Zagreb mayor, Milan Bandić, whose MPs, in turn, supported Plenković's government on the national level. In the end, the protracted quarantine, both in Croatia and in other countries, threatened the tourist industry, which, together with EU funds and remittances, is the major lifeline of Croatian GDP.

*Dario Čepo is an Assistant Professor at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Law. He teaches introductory courses in sociology and political science. He received his PhD in comparative politics in 2010 from the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Political Science. In 2013-2014 he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Columbia University in New York City. His major research interests are parliaments, conservative movements, and the European Union. He is the author of several scientific articles, the handbook *Introduction to Political Science* (co-authored with Slaven Ravlić), and a book, *Political Institutions of the European Union*.

Valentino Petrović is an independent scholar. He received his Master's Degree from the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Political Science. His interests lie in the research area of comparative politics and public policy, management, and development. He is an associate-writer for the China-CEE Institute.

Antonio Karlović is a PhD student in European Politics at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Political Science. He holds an MSc in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen. His broad research interests include Europeanisation, European Foreign Policy, and democratisation.

All of these issues worked together in pushing HDZ towards early elections after the initial success of the quarantine in abating the spread of the virus allowed for a respite in June. As the following analysis will show, the context which led to early elections is as important as their consequences for the Croatian political and party system, both in the short- as well as the medium-term.

This paper proceeds with an overview of the context in which the elections took place, followed by their results, which are compared with previous elections for added understanding of the similarities and differences. The second part of the paper enumerates the consequences of the elections for the political system, the political parties and individual actors, and the society at large. In the conclusion, a projection of the short- and medium-term influence of these elections is given.

Context of the elections

When announcing that the country would hold its parliamentary elections on the 5th of July, Croatia's PM Andrej Plenković of HDZ emphasised:

*"[A]fter showing in recent months how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic crisis, [...] and all the economic challenges Croatia faces in the future, the new mandate of the future Parliament and Government should be focused on the economic recovery of the country [...] The epidemiological situation in Croatia is such that we have practically single-digit numbers of infected people and with very responsible behavior of all fellow citizens we will have the opportunity to organise elections [...]."*¹

His first four years in power were marked by moments of instability which only a few thought he would politically survive: from the crash of the country's largest company Agrokor,² which ultimately led to clashes with the junior coalition partner The Bridge (*Most*) resulting in him kicking the party out of the government,³ to the longest teacher strike in Croatian history, and ultimately the global COVID-19 pandemic and disastrous earthquake hitting the capital.⁴

The reason for holding the elections earlier than planned, while most other countries were postponing elections, was officially grounded on the belief that the virus would spread more slowly during the summer and that a second wave of the pandemic would hit the country in autumn: therefore it would be wiser to carry out the elections in the summer. However, most would agree that the governing HDZ's plan to swiftly capitalise on its arguably successful handling of the first wave of the pandemic by holding the elections before it became obvious how much the lockdown had hurt the Croatian economy (and the tourist season on which, it is estimated, more than 20% of the Croatian economy depends⁵) was

¹ V.P.P. 2020. [Pao dogovor: Sabor se raspušta u ponedjeljak; ovo su datumi kada bi mogli na birališta.](#) *tportal*, 14 May 2020 (accessed: 25 August 2020).

² N.N. 2017. [Agrokor, the Supermarket whose Collapse threatens the Balkans.](#) *The Economist*, 10 August 2017 (accessed: 3 September 2020).

³ N.N. 2017. [Croatian Coalition Shatters as PM Sacks Junior Partner's Ministers.](#) *The Irish Times*, 27 April 2017 (accessed: 3 September 2020).

⁴ Walker, Shaun. 2020. [Zagreb hit by earthquake while in coronavirus lockdown.](#) *The Guardian*, 22 March 2020 (accessed: 3 September 2020).

⁵ Knoema. [Kroatien - Gesamter Beitrag des Reise- & Tourismussektors am BIP - % Anteil](#) (accessed: 3 September 2020).

at least as, if not more, important a factor in determining the election date. It seemed that Plenković regarded this as a strategically wise move.

Yet, as the election drew nearer, the tables seemed to turn as the number of infections in the country started to dramatically rise and, simultaneously, HDZ's support started to drop in the polls. Almost all the polls showed that the Restart coalition, built around SDP, which was at the time led by the arguably un-charismatic Davor Bernardić as their PM candidate, would win the elections. But, it was clear that Restart – despite being in the lead – could hardly form a stable government. Therefore, all eyes turned to other actors who could potentially get into the parliament and enter into coalition deals with either HDZ or the Restart coalition. While the landscape on the left wing of the political spectrum (with potential for winning an MP) was almost empty (very much due to the fact that the Restart coalition already consisted of most of the mainstream center-left parties), the right wing was populated by the Homeland Movement (*Domovinski pokret*, DP), a coalition of far-right parties and individuals headed by popular folk singer-songwriter Miroslav Škoro, who ran for the president in 2019 and won almost 25% of the votes.⁶ The second main actor on the right was the conservative-religious party *Most*, which had a turbulent history with HDZ.⁷ Other parties were expected to finish well under the electoral threshold, with the small possibility, which grew as the date of the elections drew closer, of the left-green coalition We Can! (*Možemo!*), getting into parliament as well.

The campaign was mostly uninspiring, with HDZ focusing its messages on security (alluding to the fact that they led the country through the first wave of the pandemic), the Restart coalition leading a very unpersonalised campaign filled with stock-like messages like “For a Croatia without corruption,” and Škoro almost repeating the campaign from his 2019 presidential bid, which was marked by a very hostile tone towards the HDZ. However, Škoro's political past (for decades he had been an HDZ member, once their MP, a consul in the Croatian diplomatic mission in Hungary, and their mayoral candidate for the city of Osijek) and his clear right-nationalist political views made it clear that he would be very much open to forming a post-election coalition with HDZ (and 'cashing in' on his results with a crucial position in the executive). But would that be enough? Would Plenković and Škoro have enough MPs to form a majority (of at least 76 MPs)? If yes, what concessions would Škoro demand from the HDZ? Would the country witness another period of tiresome party negotiation resulting in a series of unstable governments, as had been the case in 2015 and 2016?⁸ Those were the main questions ahead of election day.

Election results

The early general elections were held on 5 July 2020, in a week in which the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise after a brief hiatus. Only two days before the election day Croatia reported 96 new cases, a record high number of infected people at the time.⁹ The widespread health uncertainty led to advice

⁶ Republika Hrvatska. Državno izborno povjerenstvo Republike Hrvatske. [Konačni rezultati izbora zastupnika u Hrvatski sabor 2020](#) (accessed: 3 September 2020).

⁷ For more details see Nikić Čakar, Dario and Višeslav Raos. 2018. Croatia: Political Development and Data for 2017. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 57, 53–60.

⁸ Čakar and Raos, *Croatia*.

⁹ Worldometer. [Total Coronavirus Cases in Croatia](#) (accessed: 19 July 2020).

issued by the State Electoral Commission (DIP) that people tested positive would not be allowed to vote due to public health security, while those in self-isolation would exercise their right by casting their ballots from home with the assistance of members of the electoral committee. The document itself was a subject of widespread criticism by constitutional experts and opposition actors, who claimed that DIP had no power to make decisions that would deprive people of their voting rights.¹⁰ A few days later, the document was amended, thus allowing people diagnosed with COVID-19 to vote through a third person who would fill in the ballot and hand it over to members of the electoral committee.¹¹ With a considerable number of ambiguous decisions issued by the Civil Protection Directorate – a nominally independent body constituted of experts, but one that played an important pro-HDZ role before the elections – and the general distrust in state institutions, the turnout was the lowest in the history of Croatian democracy. However before tackling further details, an overview of election results will be presented.

After the unexpectedly poor results in the 2019 European elections and the loss in the 2019/2020 presidential election, HDZ became the clear, albeit unexpected, winner of the 2020 early general elections. The dominant party of the Croatian political system won 63 out of 151 seats in the Parliament, a slight improvement over the 2015 and 2016 elections, when HDZ won 56 and 59 seats, respectively.¹² The largest opposition block, the Restart coalition, led by SDP, failed to capitalise on repeated corruption affairs involving HDZ ministers and lower-ranked members. Furthermore, it seems that constant criticism of the Civil Protection Directorate had backfired and caused disorientation among SDP members. Eventually, the Restart coalition won only 41 seats, thereby losing any opportunity to form a government, given the fact that their coalition potential had been limited even before the results were announced. Prior to the events on 5 July “polls had predicted (...) elections to be a neck-and-neck race between HDZ and Restart, with even a slight edge for the center-left platform”.¹³

Regardless of their election results, if we take a closer look at the previous parliamentary race, both major parties (in the case of SDP we are using the coalition votes) recorded a significant drop in their overall number of votes. HDZ lost around 80,000 votes compared to 2016, while the Restart coalition suffered even more with their numbers, losing around 220,000 votes in relation to the 2016 SDP-led People’s coalition.¹⁴

¹⁰ N.N. 2020. Ustavni stručnjaci Barić i Smerdel: DIP je oduzeo pravo glasa zaraženima. *Telegram*, 30 June 2020 (accessed: 19 July 2020).

¹¹ State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia. 2020. Izmjene i dopune: Tehničke upute Državnog izbornog povjerenstva pripremljene u suradnji s Hrvatskim zavodom za javno zdravstvo: Glasanje na dan izbora i osiguranje epidemiološke zaštite svih sudionika na biračkim mjestima, 5 July 2020 (accessed: 20 July 2020).

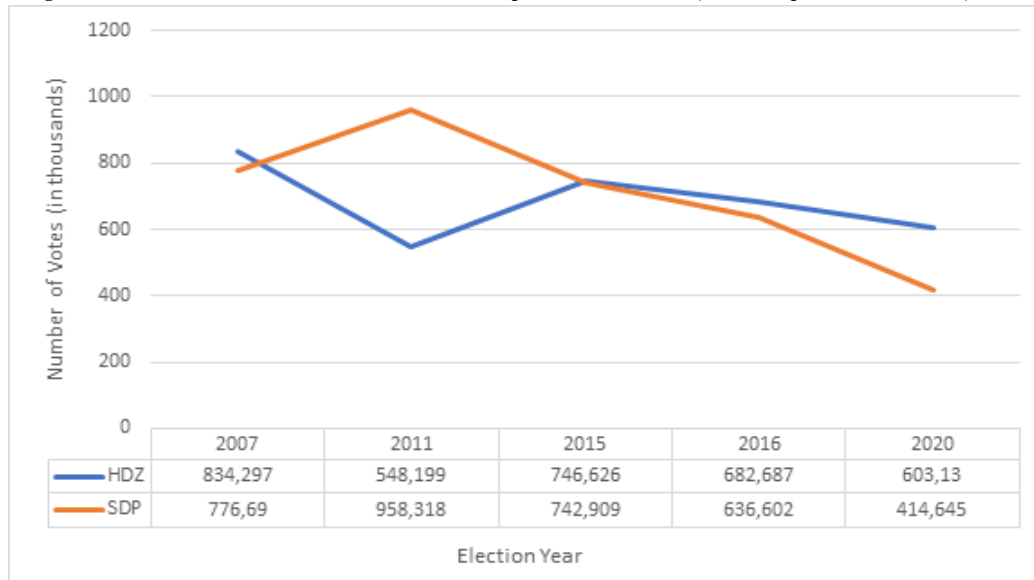
¹² The number of seats does not include the diaspora seats.

¹³ Trubić Macan, Tea. 2020. Croatia’s ruling HDZ scores unexpected win in parliamentary elections. *Euractiv*, 6 July 2020 (accessed: 20 July 2020).

¹⁴ Karlović Sabolić, Marina. 2020. HDZ i SDP osvojili osjetno manje glasova nego prije četiri godine, samo rijetki profitirali: evo u čemu leži glavni razlog debakla Restart koalicije. *Slobodna dalmacija*, 6 July 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).

Elections During the Pandemic:
Lessons Learned from the 2020 Early General Elections in Croatia

Diagram 1: Number of votes HDZ and SDP won in previous elections (coalition partners included)



Source: adapted by authors from the State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia.

The outcome of the elections could be further analysed if we take into account the overall turnout, which was only 46.9%. According to Goran Čular of the University of Zagreb there are at least three reasons for such an alarmingly low number. He underlines “the psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as elections being held during the summertime, and lastly, the unwillingness of left-oriented voters to support the SDP after an unconvincing pre-election campaign”.¹⁵ Furthermore, Čular argues that the SDP miscalculated in their attempt to represent the work of the Civil Protection Directorate as politically biased, a mistake which is evident from the number of preferential votes that Vili Beroš, Minister of Health and a public face (although not an official member) of the Directorate, won in his electoral constituency. Beroš received 35,678 votes, even more than Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who won 32,208 votes in his district.¹⁶ A point of concern for the SDP could also be found in the first electoral district, which includes the capital’s downtown and its western parts with some surrounding areas. The Restart coalition won only 22.27% of votes in this district, while in previous elections the percentage was significantly higher, peaking at 45.65% in 2011.¹⁷

¹⁵ Srdoč, Silvana. 2020. Milijun birača manje: Je li HDZ trijumfirao zbog najgoreg odaziva ikad i je li za taj pad kriv samo koronavirus. *tportal*, 8 July 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).

¹⁶ State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia. 2020. Izvešće o provedenim izborima za zastupnike u Hrvatski sabor 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).

¹⁷ Arhiva izbora (accessed: 21 July 2020).

Table 1: Results in the first electoral district (coalition partners included)

	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	2020
HDZ	21.12%	25.93%	31.04%	18.39%	26.04%	31.63%	28.32%
SDP	50.83%	29.63%	42.06%	45.65%	39.15%	39.36%	22.27%
Third option	12.19%	10.74%	6.43%	7.68%	18.39%	10.41%	21.12%

Source: State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia.

Domovinski pokret won 16 seats, thus becoming the third party. Prior to the election day, many analysts believed Škoro would be a crucial factor in the process of forming a government, with his party becoming a kingmaker. Škoro even went so far as to claim that he would not support Andrej Plenković as the head of government if DP were in a position to form a majority with HDZ. When the results came in, their enthusiasm quickly dropped for two reasons. First, since HDZ won by a large majority, it was evident that Škoro and his partners would not have a role of any kind in the future government. Second, if we compare the number of votes Škoro got after the first round of presidential election in December 2019 and the overall number won by DP in the parliamentary elections in July 2020, it is obvious that Škoro, as a newly-established political actor, lost over 280,000 votes in just seven months. Of course, these numbers are to be taken with a pinch of salt due to the difference in the type of elections.

Two political parties whose campaigns found the right balance between outside activities and social media content were *Most* and *Možemo!*. Prior to the elections, *Most* got rid of some of their more moderate members and acquired several new faces, mostly from the nationalist and conservative-religious side of the ideological spectrum. Those included Nino Raspudić and Marija Selak Raspudić, both from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, whose uninspiring academic profiles were surpassed by their positions as TV personalities and steadfast conservative commentators. Eventually, the party won eight seats. Even though their result was far from 2015 and 2016, when they had 19 and 13 MPs respectively, they did better than some polls predicted, which had them hovering around the electoral threshold of five percent. But probably the most pleasant surprise of the elections was *Možemo!*. They won seven seats by mostly tapping into the dissatisfaction of left-leaning voters in SDP strongholds in the capital and the western-most districts, helped by the SDP's lacklustre campaign and uninspiring boss. They managed to use their work in Zagreb City Assembly as a catalyst for a nation-wide election race by highlighting several topics including the Zagreb earthquake, green economy, and an anti-corruption campaign, in all of which areas both HDZ and SDP were struggling to offer any concrete ideas.

A liberal centrist coalition, gathered around Dalija Orešković, the former head of the parliamentary conflict of interest committee – who was toppled by HDZ's governing majority – won three seats, predominantly focusing on anti-corruption messages and highlighting the need to cut the heavy tax burden. Surprisingly, the left-liberal Croatian People's Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka*, HNS), who

abandoned the SDP in 2017 and gave their support to the new Plenković government, thus prompting a widespread criticism from party's members, voters, and many of their MPs (leading to the breakup of the party), managed to get one mandate, despite widespread projections of the party's demise. Another liberal option, People's Party - Reformists (*Narodna stranka - reformisti*), led by former HNS president Radimir Čačić, also won one seat. After being an important actor for the past four years, Milan Bandić's party, BM365, did not win a single mandate, thus losing their blackmail potential in the national parliament and becoming vulnerable, as will be seen in the concluding part of this paper, in the 2021 local elections.

Finally, national minority representatives were crucial in forming a parliamentary majority, with their 8 mandates helping Plenković to secure the necessary number of 76 seats. Boris Milošević, a member of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*, SDSS), eventually became a Deputy Prime Minister in charge of coordinating social affairs and human rights portfolios. The winning governing coalition consists of HDZ and SDSS. It is supported in the parliament by 63 representatives from HDZ, as well as the three diaspora representatives elected from the HDZ list, all eight representatives of national minorities (including the three Serb minority representatives from SDSS), and one representative each from HNS and *Narodna stranka - reformisti*, respectively. Thus, the minimal winning coalition of 76 was established and is projected to be much more stable than the similar majority Plenković's previous government had.

Consequences of the elections

The 2020 early elections in Croatia were unique in many respects, not least because they were held in the time of a global pandemic, with many citizens afraid to venture to the polling stations out of fear of contracting a potentially fatal disease.

We can observe several novel elements that could have a trend-setting potential for the future. Firstly, it is obvious that the country turned to the right. Centrist and left political options won less than 35% of parliamentary mandates. The split in the left and centre-left vote meant that HDZ became a relative winner even in electoral districts where they usually had no chance of winning (e.g. the first electoral district encompassing central and western parts of the capital). This, compounded with the use of the d'Hondt method, meant that HDZ was rewarded disproportionately, especially when voided and unsuccessful ballots are taken into account. The rightwards-shift was sealed with the relative, albeit smaller than projected, success of the right-nationalist *Domovinski pokret*, as well as the steady support for *Most* party. On the other side, there was a success for *Možemo!*, however the steep decline in support for the mainstream centre-left SDP, meant that the narrative of the 2020 elections was built around the loss for the left and the success for the right.

These elections seemingly turned around the long trend of steady decline in public support for the country's two largest parties. Although the parties won fewer votes than almost ever before, the percentage of parliamentary mandates for the two largest parties increased. This has one major consequence: nobody mentioned the need for a great coalition, which would stop any radical elements

from the right (or possibly the left) from coming to power and influencing the policy trajectory. During the pre-election season this idea was the most touted projection of the 2020 results by pundits and experts, as it would work in the short- to medium-term for the stabilisation of the system. The example of Germany was taken as a model for such a collaboration between the mainstream party of the right and the mainstream party of the left. However, as shown previously, the rise in relative public support for the two mainstream parties was not followed by an increase in the overall number of votes for either of the two. What this points to is widespread political apathy and reluctance to vote or waste votes on parties or coalitions with no chance of surpassing the electoral threshold.

This takes us to the third conclusion, linked to the low turnout during 2020 elections. There is still debate as to whether the reason for such a low turnout was short-term and unique – the fear of the virus – or if there was some long-term development, e.g. political apathy, ignorance of the importance of voting due to the lack of civic education in schools, etc.

The fourth consequence is that a major party, for the first time since 2007, has the prospect of forming a stable government with a minimal winning coalition (Fagen 1963). At the same time, HDZ will, for the first time since the wartime years, lead a government during a major economic crisis, unlike previous occasions when they played the role of a conflicting, unsupportive, and destabilising opposition actor.

Plenković, also, gets to govern as he pleases, without offering any major concessions to coalition partners, outside supporters, and even potentially veto players (although this is less likely, as the power of the veterans' groups and the Catholic Church is too strong for Plenković to ignore). Veto players, although dissatisfied with Plenković from time to time, have seen during the 2020 elections that any challenger from the right is still too weak to tackle the HDZ machinery, which means that, for their appetites to be satisfied, the veto players will have to show loyalty to Plenković in the short- to medium-term. The coalition partners – the Serb minority party, the rest of the minority representatives, and the MPs from miniscule liberal parties – will be even more loyal and supportive of this government. The minority representatives, including the three MPs from the Serb minority party, see in Plenković's faction of the HDZ the only guarantee against a rise in nationalistic sabre-rattling. The outside supporters in liberal parties know that their opposition to Plenković will not get them anything and might lock them out of lucrative positions in public enterprises for their members. The intra-party opposition within HDZ has also been soundly defeated in the party elections that were held earlier in 2020. With that, and with the lacklustre performance of right-wing parties which could have served as their backup positions in the future, those who oppose Plenković can only show loyalty and support for him and the government.

This internal stability will be strengthened by the external support coming from the European Union, especially from the European Council, where Plenković is a proactive member, as well as from the European Commission, which is, more or less, in the hands of the EPP, where Plenković is seen as one of the success stories and where his clout will only grow. This could already be seen in the

unprecedented move by the some EPP members of the European Commission, including the president Ursula von der Leyen, to actively participate in the electoral campaign by giving support to HDZ and Plenković. This drew fire from many circles as the tradition was to keep the European Commission away from the political activities of member states.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the short-term success of the SDP, who saw their candidate winning the 2019/2020 presidential election against the HDZ incumbent, has not translated into a win in general elections. Not only that, but the result SDP received was the lowest in almost three decades. Some of the reasons for their loss stem from the HDZ government's manipulation of the date of the elections and their open use of independent and professional institutions (like the anti-COVID committee) for their gain. Other reasons include the emergence of a viable left-green option, which gave the opportunity, for the first time since Croatia's independence, for voters with those positions to move away from the SDP and not have their vote wasted. However, a lot of the blame can be attributed to the leadership of the SDP, which was the weakest it had ever been. This means that SDP will need to focus in the medium term on reforming itself in order to gain relevance and bring back the support they have lost. This will also play an important role in the stability of Plenković's government, because SDP will neither be as effective in challenging the government's positions, nor will it be able to offer other political parties a coalition potential large enough to get them to helm the government.

Conclusion

The 2020 early general elections in Croatia will have some profound consequences on both the national situation in Croatia and the international standing of the country. From the international point of view, the EU institutions, especially the European Commission, will be satisfied with the more moderate tone the government, consisting of both HDZ and SDSS, will strike in the foreseeable future. By locking more radical political elements out of government, Croatia will, in the eyes of the EU, be much slower in going towards the path of Poland and Hungary. At the same time, Plenković, with his long-term ambitions of becoming a major player in the institutional structure of the European Union, will, at least outwardly, project a cooperative, pro-European face, thus becoming a dependable actor during the turbulent times the European Union seems to always be in.

From the national point of view, however, the path toward more conservative and possibly illiberal positions, is much higher. After capturing almost all independent agencies,¹⁸ the HDZ will focus on those still critical of their government, like the Ombudswoman's Office, and the Conflict of Interest Committee. The major opportunity for their complete dominance over the system, however, will come mid-2021, through local elections. Although the HDZ is already a dominant player in local and regional arenas, their failure to capture the capital (where they did not have a mayor of their own since 2000) looms large.

¹⁸ Čepo, Dario. 2020. Structural Weaknesses and the Role of the Dominant Political Party: Democratic Backsliding in Croatia since EU Accession. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 141-59.

With the all-but-certain political demise of Milan Bandić and the weakness of the local SDP, HDZ has the once-in-generation opportunity to capture the capital, thus solidifying their rule in the medium-term. However, the success of *Možemo!*, which is predominantly focused in Zagreb and very popular among its citizens, might prove to be a much larger hurdle than expected.

In the end we can conclude that these early general elections in Croatia showed several interesting effects, which could lead to more general conclusions when we take the pandemic into account.

These elections were characterised by a very low turnout. It is the lowest turnout in any general elections since Croatia gained independence thirty years ago. A combination of apathy, fear of the disease, and weak mainstream opposition were the leading factors of the low turnout, especially among non-HDZ voters. This can be seen in HDZ's convincing win, which meant that their voters were disciplined and loyal, unlike those of other parties. Hence, HDZ was the clear winner of these elections.

Another winner is *Možemo!*, whose focus on Zagreb paid off, with a huge mobilisation of voters disaffected with mainstream political parties, including the weak SDP. This turned them into the surprise of the elections, especially bearing in mind the difficulty left and green political options usually have among the electorates of Central and Eastern Europe. Other winners were the representatives of national minorities, especially the party of the Serb minority, who became kingmakers in forming the ruling coalition. Thus, their influence is much stronger than it was during Plenković's last government, where they also played an important role but where their dissent could be overcome with support from the myriad of easily-acquired 'independent' MPs, which Plenković took advantage of indiscriminately.

The losers of these elections were Škoro's DP movement, the SDP, Milan Bandić, and Croatian voters. Škoro, who is leading a very loose coalition of mainly dissatisfied former HDZ members and marginal right-wing individuals and political parties, thought that the pivotal position polls were projecting for him would give him enough blackmail potential to block Plenković from heading another government, him being the only viable option for HDZ to retain the government, as any other option either did not have enough support, or was simply inconceivable. However, with a less than stellar performance by DP, combined with the unexpected landslide-like win by HDZ, DP lost any opportunity to influence the government in any shape or form. Another actor with a lot of blackmail potential who lost any chance of influencing the government was Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić. Not only did his party fail to enter parliament, but the performance of this six-term mayor in Zagreb districts was abysmal. This does not bode well for him considering the local elections are scheduled for mid-2021, in which he will not only fight for his political survival but for immunity from prosecution.

The gallery of losers is completed by the SDP, which recorded its lowest vote count in the last 20 years and consequently saw their leader resign. The party, now in shambles, faces a tough period of reconsolidation and another four years in opposition benches, while the older and the younger wing of the party fight for

dominance. However, their main issue is that another actor, *Možemo!*, has seemingly captured the hearts and minds of (particularly urban young) left-leaning voters in Croatia who previously either did not vote or, if they did, regularly voted for the SDP (albeit choosing it as a lesser evil). This, hence, has a medium- to long-term potential of endangering the SDP's position as the second strongest political option in the country and the strongest party of the left.

In the end, we can say that these elections were more a defeat of the mainstream left than a win for the mainstream right, with Croatian citizens being the major losers. The number of far-right MPs increased significantly, with some of them even coming from the newly-purged HDZ. A lot of mainstream politicians are plagued by corruption, nepotism, and other malfeasance charges, especially within the ruling HDZ. Despite that, voters did not punish the HDZ, which showed that not only are the judicial institutions uninterested in resolving high graft and corruption, but even voters do not take these accusations seriously enough to punish the perpetrators and their enablers. The only possible exception might be Bandić, but it is reasonable to suggest that his downfall in these elections had more to do with him struggling to deal with the consequences of the Zagreb earthquake and less with his corruptive practices. Hence, while in the short-term, voters (s)elected security and stability, long-term trends, visible in the rise of political apathy, spoilt ballots and citizens voting with their feet, do not augur well for the stability of democracy in Croatia.

Bibliography

- Čepo, Dario. 2020. Structural Weaknesses and the Role of the Dominant Political Party: Democratic Backsliding in Croatia since EU Accession. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 141-59.
- Karlović Sabolić, Marina. 2020. HDZ i SDP osvojili osjetno manje glasova nego prije četiri godine, samo rijetki profitirali: evo u čemu leži glavni razlog debakla Restart koalicije. *Slobodna dalmacija*, 6 July 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).
- Knoema. Kroatien - Gesamter Beitrag des Reise- & Tourismussektors am BIP - % Anteil (accessed: 3 September 2020).
- N.N. 2017. Agrokor, the Supermarket whose Collapse threatens the Balkans. *The Economist*, 10 August 2017 (accessed: 3 September 2020).
- N.N. 2017. Croatian Coalition Shatters as PM Sacks Junior Partner's Ministers. *The Irish Times*, 27 April 2017 (accessed: 3 September 2020).
- N.N. 2020. Ustavni stručnjaci Barić i Smerdel: DIP je oduzeo pravo glasa zaraženima. *Telegram*, 30 June 2020 (accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Nikić Čakar, Dario and Višeslav Raos. 2018. Croatia: Political Development and Data for 2017. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 57, 53–60.
- Srdoč, Silvana. 2020. Milijun birača manje: Je li HDZ trijumfirao zbog najgoreg odaziva ikad i je li za taj pad kriv samo koronavirus. *tportal*, 8 July 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).
- State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia. 2020. Izmjene i dopune: Tehničke upute Državnog izbornog povjerenstva pripremljene u suradnji s Hrvatskim zavodom za javno zdravstvo: Glasanje na dan izbora i osiguranje

- epidemiološke zaštite svih sudionika na biračkim mjestima, 5 July 2020 (accessed: 20 July 2020).
- . 2020. Izvešće o provedenim izborima za zastupnike u Hrvatski sabor 2020 (accessed: 21 July 2020).
- Trubić Macan, Tea. 2020. Croatia's ruling HDZ scores unexpected win in parliamentary elections. *Euractiv*, 6 July 2020 (accessed: 20 July 2020).
- V.P.P. 2020. Pao dogovor: Sabor se raspušta u ponedjeljak; ovo su datumi kada bi mogli na birališta. *tportal*, 14 May 2020 (accessed: 25 August 2020).
- Walker, Shaun. 2020. Zagreb Hit by Earthquake while in Coronavirus Lockdown. *The Guardian*, 22 March 2020 (accessed: 3 September 2020).
- Worldometer. Total Coronavirus Cases in Croatia (accessed: 19 July 2020).