



## **Parliamentary Elections in Croatia 2015: Victory without Actual Winners**

Election Analysis

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# Parliamentary Elections in Croatia 2015: Victory without Actual Winners

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## Introduction

The Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ*) has won yet another election in Croatia. After the success it had on the European and presidential elections, the so-called „Patriotic Coalition“, led by the aforementioned party has won 59 out of 151 seats in the Parliament. Their opponents, a slightly-altered version of the current leading coalition led by the leftist Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, SDP*), won 56 seats. However, the results are far from final. According to the Croatian Constitution, the party that would be given the mandate to form a government has to assure the support of 76 seats in the Parliament. So far, none of the new major parties has succeeded in that task.

The current situation is additionally complicated by the fact that the winner of the most recent elections is the newly formed initiative called MOST (*literally translated; „the bridge“*) which won 19 seats in the Parliament, and without which it is mathematically impossible to form a government. Given the fact that MOST is not a party, but a platform made out of 19 individuals, it does not have a clear party structure, ideology or discipline, and it is therefore almost impossible to predict the side it will eventually choose to form the government with. There are several conclusions that could be made when observing the most recent elections in Croatia; regardless of the continuing growth of criticism among the voters directed towards the two major parties, both have succeeded in preserving their dominance in the Croatian political scene. In spite of the large number of seats won by the initiative MOST, the two major coalitions won  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the overall seats in the Parliament, therefore proving the stability of the Croatian political party system. Furthermore, democracy needs parties to function properly; the emergence of a non-party initiative in the

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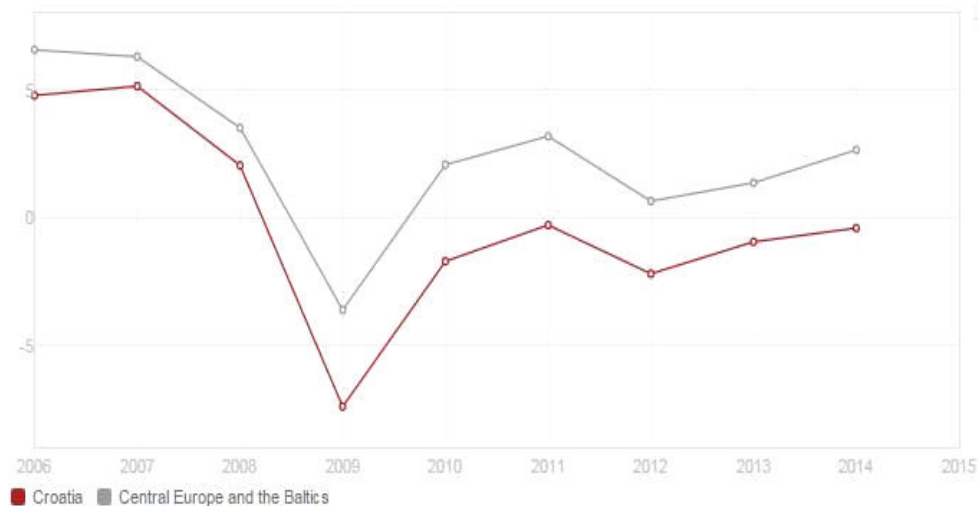
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political arena is more likely to damage the Croatian democratic practice than to improve it because of their lack of experience and disorientation on national level. Finally, the only true loser of these elections is the leader of the right party in Croatia, Tomislav Karamarko.

### The economic situation of the country

In 2011, the left coalition celebrated a landslide victory over the previous HDZ-led government, which lost the elections due to corruption scandals and the poor economic situation that it was not able to cope with. The voters in Croatia were thus motivated to change the government due to the economic downfall. However, the left coalition did not live up to the expectations of improving the economy. If anything, it additionally damaged it. At the very beginning of their term, Croatia had become the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the European Union. It had the misfortune of entering the Union at the time of the biggest Eurozone debt crisis, so the initial effects were negative. Even though there were a lot of expectations following the acquirement of membership, the government failed to take advantage of the resources offered by the Union, so the country soon became one of the very few that had given more than it had received from the EU. It has been estimated that by 1 December 2014, Croatia had extracted only 45% of the available resources from the EU funds, unlike Slovenia that had extracted 76%, Poland 82% and the Baltic countries more than 90%. Alongside the lack of success in European policy-making, the left-government had failed in the domestic political arena as well.



Graph 1: Annual GDP growth comparison; source: World Bank (20.11.2015.)

Just when the country's GDP growth had started to gradually recover from the global economic crisis from 2010 to 2011 (as seen on the graph 1), it dropped down from -0.3% in 2011 to -2.2% in 2012. However, the Croatian GDP started to grow in low intensity in every quarter since the end of 2014. Due to all of its wrong judgments and the overall lack of success, the left government gained a label of being the least popular government in Croatian history. It has been

estimated that even in the better part of its term, more than 70% of voters believed that the government was leading the country in the wrong direction. Considering all of the negative economic trends the left government caused during its previous term, one would have assumed that the opposition would get the majority in the following elections without any trouble. However, by assuring only relative instead of an absolute majority, the opposition had failed to take advantage of the momentum. The question remains: how was that possible?

### **Cleavages between the voters and the two parties**

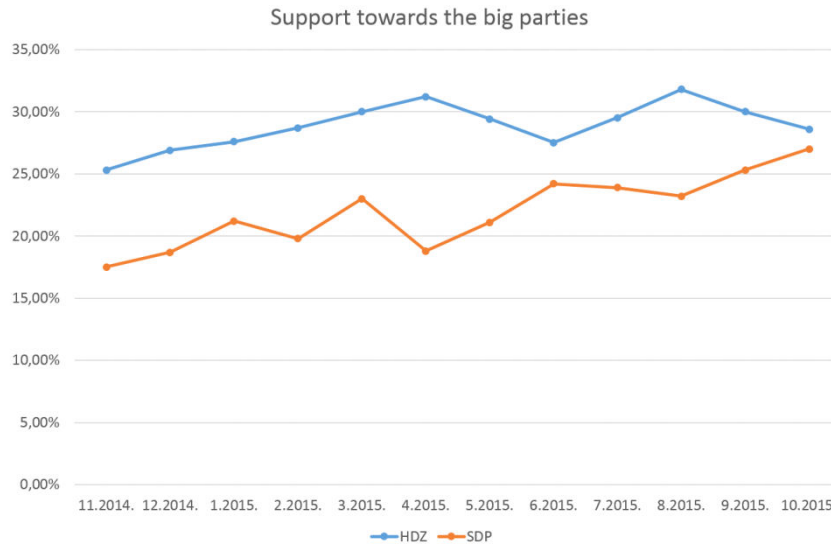
According to a research conducted by Josip Glaurdić of the University of Cambridge, the voters of the Western democracies in Europe have a tendency of voting predominantly by evaluating the economic performance of the current government. The same research was conducted in Croatia and it was expected that the economic performance of a given government would gradually overshadow voting inspired by identity politics. The results of the research were completely the opposite; they demonstrated that among the Croatian voters, economic performance was submitted to the identity towards a certain party, usually produced during the World War II.<sup>1</sup> Those powerful identities have almost unexceptionally been passed through generations in families, creating a very firm electorate for the two parties. Even though the voters might be disappointed by the poor economic performance or numerous corruption scandals, the voters will still vote for a given party primarily because of the animosity they feel towards the other party. That is one of the reasons which explains why HDZ and SDP have successfully maintained their stability and power in Croatian domestic politics since the foundation of democracy. These results place Croatia in a somewhat different position in regards to democratic development comparing to any other post-socialist country in Central Europe. Other Central and Eastern European countries have experienced a downfall of the parties that were dominant in the first stage of their democratic transition.

In Croatia, the animosity between the two parties and two electorates interdependently determines their stability. Ever since Croatia entered the European Union, the parties lost their common interest. Consequently, the rhetoric among the two sharpened as a result of the overall lack of mutual goals. On top of that, after the historically bad result on the elections in 2011, HDZ was forced to change its President in order to do some damage-control. Tomislav Karamarko, former intelligence service official and Minister of the Interior, filled the position. His initial idea was to detach the party from the center-right towards the radical right, with strong patriotic, anticommunist and Christian sentiment. As HDZ celebrated victory on two consecutive elections; European ones in 2014, and more importantly, the presidential ones in 2014/2015, Karamarko believed that intensification of such rhetoric could lead to another good electoral result. He failed to take into account, just like the former president Josipović, that current president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović won the elections by accumulating votes from the center and the

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<sup>1</sup> N.N. 2015. [Matematička analiza parlamentarnih izbora. Što je Hrvatima važnije: ekonomsko blagostanje ili ratna prošlost.](#) *Jutarnji list*, 24 October 2015 (accessed: 04 December 2015).

center-right. According to the victory on the presidential elections, but also due to the high unpopularity of the left government, most of the polls conducted prior to the recent parliamentary elections were announcing great advantage of the coalition led by HDZ.



Graph 2: Support towards the two parties during the election year, Source: IPSOS Pulse, Crobarometar (20.11.2015.)

Graph 2 represents support towards the two big parties conducted in consecutive months before the elections. As evidently shown in the graph, the support toward the ruling party was relatively low one year before the elections, but it had recovered greatly in one year.

On the other hand, the opposition party had lost its initial advantage, with a decrease in popularity for a couple of months, resulting with an insignificant advantage before the elections. Furthermore, the immigrant crisis sharpened the discord between the two parties as they had different strategies to manage the problem. SDP leaders made good use of the crisis to accumulate support from the voters; they were certain that the refugees had no intention of staying in Croatia, so they used it to promote the humanitarian approach. One can argue that voters believed that the management of the crisis should be guided by the principle of humanitarian help rather than radically, as suggested by HDZ. As seen on the graph above, the approach of the government was perceived as the more positive one, given the fact that their support began to grow in September when the crisis escalated. On the other hand, the opposition's support began to decline.

### Campaign

HDZ failed to accumulate the disapproval of the government into its own success. Karamarko used radical patriotic rhetoric during the campaign and the main point of the campaign was to stress the negative effects the previous government had made in its term. Also, they used the slogan *“Together for better Croatia”*, accompanied with a lot of suggested reforms and changes,

alluding that with their leadership the country would overcome the economic and social crisis. On the other hand, SDP decided to fully personalize their campaign; the main actor was the president of the party who turned out to be better spoken than his opponent. HDZ recognized that and chose to evade any direct confrontation between the two party presidents. This could be characterized as one of the fatal mistakes of the right-wing party, as their avoidance of confrontations was presented by the media and their opponents as an expression of their unprofessionalism. One of the fairly used slogans at the time directed towards Karamarko was “Come out and fight”, emphasizing that that his abolishment of the debate was damaging the established democratic practice during the campaign. It has to be said that debates are common practice in other European democracies, such as Denmark, the UK, Poland and Spain. Likewise, SDP presented the aforementioned opposition’s slogan and suggested reforms as a relapse to corruption and recession.

	2000		2003		2007		2011		2015	
	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of votes</i>
<b>HDZ</b>	40	24,38%	62	33,23%	61	34,92%	44 (coalition)	23,50%	56 (coalition)	33,36%
<b>SDP</b>	71 (coalition)	40,85%	43 (coalition)	23,28%	56	32,51%	80 (coalition)	41,08%	56 (coalition)	33,20%
<b>Other parties</b>	29	20,84%	35	30,40%	23	24,14%	16	15,66%	28	25,80%
<b>Failed votes (under 5%)</b>		13,93%		13,09%		8,43%		19,76%		7,64%

Table 1: Seats in the Parliament and percentage of votes in the previous elections, Source: Croatian State Electorate Commission (20.11.2015.)

Table 1 shows the results of parliamentary elections in 10 national constituencies which are represented through 140 parliamentary mandates. Seats reserved for the national minorities are therefore excluded from this analysis, and so are the diaspora votes. Failed votes represent the amount of votes given to the options that did not pass the threshold of 5% within the constituency in which they ran for mandates. As seen in the Table 1, the parties have turned back to their harshly polarized electorate. The table also shows the high percentage of failed votes in the 2011 elections (19.76%) significantly decreased on the 2015 elections (7.64%) which proves that MOST managed to homogenize and accumulate those votes into their benefit.

### **MOST – the initiative and its voters**

Due to the sudden and unexpected success of the initiative MOST, it is natural to wonder who are the people behind this initiative, what does it represent, whose votes did it get and which party did it damage the most. As previously stated, the 19 elected representatives of the platform do not function as a common party; all of them are independent and have different ideological backgrounds. The foundation of their platform was the urge for reforms that have not been initiated by any of the two major parties. One of the main questions asked after the elections was: who did the initiative damage the most? A survey conducted by Dragan Bagić on 34 353 respondents indicated that the majority of MOST’s voters (38%) were voters who had voted for some of the third parties in the previous elections. Thus, the majority of voters did

not greatly damage the steady electoral body of the two major parties, HDZ and SDP.

However, if the former voters of the two parties are analyzed specifically, Bagić states that former voters of the left-coalition make 30% of the MOST electoral body, while the former voters of the right-wing coalition make only 12%. Considering this data, it is hard to argue that HDZ failed to get an absolute majority because of the emergence of initiative MOST.

### Final remarks

The elections held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 ended with the following result.

	Seats	%
Patriotic Coalition	56	33,36%
Left coalition; „Croatia is Growing“	56	33,2%
MOST NL	19	13,51%
IDS-PGS-RI; „Our Own Right“	3	1,83%
Bandić Milan 365; Labor and Solidarity Coalition	2	3,32%
HDSSB	2	1,36%
Zivi zid	1	4,24%
Reformists; „Successful Croatia“	1	1,54%
Representatives of Croatian citizens living abroad	3 (mandates won by Patriotic Coalition)	
Representatives of national minorities	8	
Failed votes		7,64%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>151</b>	

Table 2: Results of the most recent elections in Croatia, Source: Croatian State Electoral Commission (20.11.2015)

As seen in Table 2, both of the Patriotic Coalition and the Left Coalition garnered the same result. Given the fact that it is mathematically impossible to form a government without assuring the support of the representatives from MOST, the process of forming the government entered a stalemate phase.

An already complex situation was additionally complicated by the fact that the representatives of MOST had notarized a statement against forming a coalition with either of the parties, accusing them of destroying the economy of Croatia. The representatives have found themselves in an undesirable situation in which they either have to violate the promise given to their voters by colliding with either of the parties in question, or to trigger new elections in Croatia. It has to be noted that the new elections would surely damage the good result MOST achieved as the voters would blame them for irresponsible behavior. On the election night, while the votes were still being counted, both of the party leaders proclaimed their victory. Zoran Milanović, the president of SDP, expressed his gratitude towards the voters and has invited all the parties

interested in reforms to support him as a leader. He also invited the representatives from the platform MOST to shape the future executive branch, as equals. On the other hand, Tomislav Karamarko gave a speech when HDZ had greater advantage in seats according to unofficial results; he believed that their advantage is going to additionally grow through the night. He thanked all of the voters and coalition partners, declaring a glorious victory and better times ahead for Croatia, forgetting to invite other parties (primarily MOST) to cooperate until he was reminded of it by one of the coalition partners. In this case, much like during the campaign, Milanović had shown a certain political wisdom and put himself in a better negotiating position.

Today, both of the coalitions are negotiating with the representatives from MOST, trying to find common ground for pushing the reforms. By now, most of the minority and regional representatives have declared their support for the left coalition as a response to the the radical right-wing rhetoric of Karamarko. Moreover, other parties that have passed the electoral threshold are also more likely to support the left government than the right one but none of them has officially declared their support, leaving the possibility of giving support to the right-wing government. In the quest of reforms initiated by MOST, it seems like Karamarko could be more generous in his willingness for reforms and offering some key positions in the executive branch because his position in the party is jeopardized by unexpected low result. On the other hand, Milanović's position in the party is not as questioned. Even if he fails to form a government he is less likely to be replaced within his own party. To sum up, two major parties continue to reign over the political system of Croatia. Even though they both won almost the same amount of mandates, the left coalition can be more satisfied considering that it saved the possibility of forming another government regardless of their bad governmental performance and the lack of support in the pre-election polls.

The right-wing coalition won the elections by a relative majority, but it cannot be satisfied with the result as it expected to win an absolute majority, given the fact that the previous left-wing government performed poorly during the last term. MOST seems shocked with the amount of the mandates won which became evident during the government-forming process by their confusing behavior and inexperienced communication within the highest level of national politics. Despite the big disturbance MOST caused on the Croatian political scene, by winning the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the seats in the Parliament, the two major parties have proven to be the only stable and solid options – that trend is unlikely to be changed in the future.

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