

Croatia Moves to the (Far)-Right – The Parliamentary Election 2024

Executive Summary:

- The parliamentary elections in April marked the start of the 2024 “super election year” in Croatia. The election campaign began with a huge surprise when President Zoran Milanović announced that he would run against the incumbent conservative Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.
- As a result, the Croatian Constitutional Court played an important role in the election campaign. In the run-up to and aftermath of the election, the judges interpreted their own powers quite broadly and restricted Milanović’s candidacy plans.
- The election result confirmed the conservative HDZ led by Andrej Plenković as the strongest force in Croatia. Other election winners included the left-wing green party Možemo and the far-right Domovinski pokret. Despite widespread criticism of corruption against the HDZ, there was no mood for change.
- Domovinski pokret emerged as the kingmaker in the coalition negotiations and, after several rounds of talks, decided in favour of a coalition with the HDZ and several parties of the national minorities. However, the representatives of the Serbian minority were explicitly excluded from the coalition as a condition set by Domovinski pokret.
- Both the government programme and the coalition agreement indicate that a continuation of the HDZ’s previous policy approach can be expected in many areas. It remains uncertain, however, to what extent the existing rule of law problems will be improved by the new coalition: justified doubts are appropriate.

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In many countries in Europe, 2024 is a “super election year”, and Croatia is no exception to this: elections to the national parliament (Hrvatski sabor) in April, European Parliament elections in June and, lastly, presidential elections in December. These triple elections come at a time of great change for the almost four million inhabitants within the Adriatic coastal country. On 1 January 2023, Croatia was integrated into the Schengen area and the Kuna was replaced by the euro as official currency. This brings Croatia, where in some parts the idea of belonging to the “Balkans” has always provoked great opposition, even closer to what is referred to as “Core Europe”¹. Against this backdrop, the parliamentary elections 2024 were long considered a rather predictable affair. Although Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who has been in power since 2015, does not enjoy outstanding popularity ratings among the population, he can always rely on the broad membership and voter base of his conservative party HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica/Croatian Democratic Community) when it comes to elections.

The results of the parliamentary elections, which were originally planned for later in autumn and then brought forward to 17 April 2024, proved this to be true once more. The HDZ, with Plenković at its head, once again became the strongest political force with a clear lead. Apart from this somewhat unspectacular, but nevertheless essential, fact, the electoral campaign, results and coalition negotiations were characterised by various unexpected developments that necessitate a closer look.

1. The 2+3 Party System Before the 2024 Parliamentary Elections

In contrast to other countries in Southeast Europe, the Croatian party system can be characterised by a relatively high degree of stability. In recent decades, the majority of votes went to the two major parties on the left and right of the party spectrum. On one side, there is the aforementioned HDZ, which more or less follows

the Western European-style of a Christian democratic party, trying to win over the broadest possible group of voters from the right-wing nationalist fringe to liberal-conservative votes. On the other, the SDP (Socialdemokratska partija Hrvatske/Socialdemocratic Party of Croatia) presents itself as a centre-left party with a stronger focus on balancing social injustices and state intervention in the economy. The SDP has experienced some internal turbulence in the recent past. As a result of a dispute over the party leadership, a majority (17 out of 30 MPs) of the parliamentary party group (klub zastupnika) left the SDP and founded the new party “Social Democrats”, which does not play a significant role beyond its parliamentary seats, however.² The membership numbers give a clear indication of the two parties’ relative strength in the recent past: at the end of 2023, the HDZ had 213,000 members, roughly nine times as many as the SDP with 24,000 members.³

What Croatia does have in common with other countries in Southeast Europe is the formation of electoral alliances. This may involve parties of roughly equal strength (in electoral terms) joining forces or large parties forming alliances with several smaller, sometimes regional, parties. The latter is a frequent practice used by the HDZ and SDP. This increases the level of fragmentation in the party system, as many smaller parties are only able to cross the electoral threshold by allying with larger parties.⁴ The low thresholds for forming a parliamentary group leads to further fragmentation inside the parliament.⁵ Apart from the Conservatives and Social Democrats and their “alliance parties”, which rarely stand as independent contenders, there are three other parties worth mentioning since they played a significant role in the last elections.

One of them is the party Most (Bridge), which was founded in 2012 as a platform combining various elements of moderate populism, including a decidedly anti-elitist stance and a critical attitude towards the European Union merged with a strong liberal economic position.⁶ It was able to break the party-political duo-

1 See: *Andrea Califano / Simone Gasperin* (2019), Multi-speed Europe is already there: Catching up and falling behind, in: *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 51, pp. 152–167.

2 The categorisation of Croatian parties in the traditional right-left spectrum should always be viewed with some caution because the Croatian parties are strongly dominated by their leaders in terms of ideological orientation. This is particularly evident in the case of the HDZ, where Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is far more liberal on socio-political issues than broad sections of the party membership. Due to the high concentration of power on the leadership, substantive changes of party position are more likely and, additionally, the respective party leaders are not necessarily on the same page as their own party.

3 *Miroslav Filipović*, Koliko stranke imaju članova? HDZ sam ima više od cijele oporbe. Pogledajte brojke, <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/kvantiteta-ili-kvaliteta-hdz-sam-ima-vise-clanova-od-svih-oporbenih-stranaka-zajedno-evo-brojki/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

4 See: *Dario Nikić Čakar / Goran Čular* (2022), Democratic Consolidation and Electoral System Change in Croatia: What Is Wrong with the Proportional Representation?, in: *Political Studies Review*, 20 (4), pp. 546–577.

5 In the previous parliamentary term, 16 deputy clubs and within them 23 different parties were active in the Sabor. See: *Oliver Kannenberg* (2022), More Parties, More PPGs, More Problems? On the Minimum Personal Requirement of Parliamentary Party Groups in Croatia, in: *Političke analize*, 11 (42), pp. 17–26.

6 See: *Marijana Grbeša / Berto Šalaj* (2018), Populism in Croatia: The Curious Case of The Bridge (Most), in: *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju*, 14 (1), pp. 7–30.

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poly between HDZ and SDP with surprising success in the 2015 parliamentary elections (13.2 per cent/19 seats). This sudden rise put the party in the role of the “kingmaker” in the coalition negotiations. The decision in favour of an alliance with the HDZ brought Croatia its fourth change of government since independence (previously in 2000, 2003 and 2011). The HDZ-Most-coalition was labelled a “messy but healthy experiment”⁷ and lasted for just one year. New elections were called early, which eventually led to a continuation of the coalition between Most and HDZ after Most had secured 13 seats and 9.9 per cent of votes. Hardly surprising, the fundamental lines of conflict and intra-coalition behaviour did not change and strained the relationship between the two governing parties. In the course of the so-called “Agrokor affair” in 2017, cooperation was ended once again and Most entered opposition. From then on, the HDZ ruled as a minority government with the support of ethnic minority representatives and a number of minor parties.

Whereas Most positioned itself ideologically between the two major parties and thus provided an equally attractive alternative for voter groups from both camps, the other two notable parties can be found on the political fringes. The party *Možemo!* (We Can!) was founded in 2019, emerging from several left-wing ecological movements and initiatives. Despite its comparatively short history, the party has already been able to initial electoral successes. This included the run-off election for mayor in the capital Zagreb in 2021, where Tomislav Tomašević won with 63.9 per cent of votes against the far-right candidate, the former musician Miroslav Škoro. Škoro had already made a (political) name for himself in the presidential elections one year prior, when he came third with just under 25 per cent of votes. Building on this popularity, he founded the party *Domovinski pokret* (DP / Homeland Movement), which became a new political home for those who were dissatisfied with the more liberal and moderate positioning of the HDZ under Plenković. In contrast, *Domovinski pokret* takes political positions that range from right-wing to far-right, particularly on the issues of EU-integration, (remembrance) culture, women rights, and migration. With many former HDZ members within their ranks, the party achieved a notable result of 10.9 per cent in the 2020 parliamentary elections, obtaining eleven seats in the Croatian Sabor.

2. Crises, Corruption and a “Cunning” (Non-) Candidacy – The Road to the Election

The second term of Prime Minister Plenković was characterised by several domestic and foreign policy challenges. The term began in June 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the capital city of Zagreb was hit by a severe earthquake shortly afterwards, followed by a second one in December of the same year. The Plenković government’s handling of the pandemic can be described as inadequate. Particularly in the summer months, restrictions were largely lifted in the coastal state heavily dependent on tourism, regardless of indicators such as vaccination or hospitalisation rates. Between the various waves of the pandemic, Russia launched a war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. A member of NATO since 2009, Croatia has a much smaller proportion of Russo-phile population groups than its neighbouring NATO-ally Montenegro or Serbia, who also share the Eastern Orthodox faith with Russia. Accordingly, political support and social solidarity with Ukraine were initially very strong. In addition, as the Southeastern external border of the EU, Croatia is a hotspot for migration and refugee movements via the so-called “Balkan route”. For several years, there have been regular reports of violent attacks by border officials and illegal pushbacks, in which refugees were forced back into the territory of the non-EU country Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to deny them European asylum rights.⁸ As a result of the increased migration and refugee movement since 2015, voices critical of migration have gained more traction in Croatia. At the same time, Croatia, like almost all other countries in Southeast Europe, is experiencing an increasing exodus of young, educated skilled workers to other EU countries, primarily Austria and Germany.

While the Plenković government handled the multiple crises with very mixed results, the omnipresence of corruption remains the biggest problem in Croatian politics. None of the four years of government in the past electoral term went by without at least one major corruption scandal. These range from the investigation into the HDZ’s past, as in the case of the former Prime Minister Ivo Sanadar, to the scandal surrounding the gas and oil company INA, in which several members of the ruling HDZ were involved. Throughout Plenković’s

7 Višeslav Raos, Croatia’s fallen Orešković government was a messy but healthy experiment in democracy, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/06/29/croatias-fallen-oreskovic-government-was-a-messy-but-healthy-experiment-in-democracy/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

8 See: Human Rights Watch, “Like We Were Just Animals”. Pushbacks of People Seeking Protection from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/05/03/we-were-just-animals/pushbacks-people-seeking-protection-croatia-bosnia-and-herzegovina> (accessed 21 May 2024); Asylum Information Database, Access to the territory and pushbacks. Croatia, <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/asylum-procedure/access-procedure-and-registration/access-territory-and-push-backs/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

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entire time in office (since 2016), almost 30 ministers resigned from their positions. Several of them were confronted with allegations of corruption before or after their resignation.

In February 2024, the opposition parties organised protests in Zagreb. In addition to the general disapproval of the HDZ government, this was caused by two other highly controversial decisions of the Plenković government. First, a law was passed that criminalises the disclosure of police investigation documents and information to journalists. In the interpretation of the opposition and media representatives, the government wanted to protect itself in particular from unwelcome publications of corruption investigations. This prosecution of whistleblowers was vehemently criticised by numerous media associations and the law was nicknamed “Lex Andrej Plenković” by the public.

In the midst of this already tense situation, the government appointed Ivan Turudić as the designated attorney general. The attorney general is proposed by the government and must be confirmed by an absolute majority in parliament. In addition to long-standing friendships with high-ranking HDZ politicians, Ivan Turudić is also criticised for his frequent contacts with prominent figures from a criminal background.⁹ Immediately after Turudić’s confirmation on 7 February, with the votes of the government majority, all opposition parties (SPD, Most, Možemo and DP) called for new elections. One week and one failed motion to dissolve the parliament at the request of the opposition later, the ruling coalition relented to popular pressure and proposed its own motion of self-dissolution for parliament. A clear majority of 143 out of 151 MPs voted in favour of it.

One day later, President Zoran Milanović – following the constitutional procedure – called new elections to the Croatian Sabor for 17 April 2024. At the same time, he announced that he would take part in the election as a candidate for parliament in the first electoral district and as an SDP candidate for the office of prime minister. The latter is – comparable to the German Spitzenkandidat – not an official office. The decision sent shockwaves through the Croatian political landscape. Constitutional concerns were immediately voi-

ced from various directions about the official candidacy for parliament and the unofficial candidacy as prime ministerial candidate.¹⁰ In the event of the SDP winning the elections, the latter would mean that the Croatian President Milanović would hand over the mandate to form a government to the designated Prime Minister Milanović. To justify his decision, Milanović referred to the legal right of the president to take part in elections to the European Parliament. In the view of the president and the SDP, this should also enable participation in national elections. As if this had not already caused enough of a stir, scheduling the election on a Wednesday was also criticised. Traditionally, parliamentary elections in Croatia are held on a Sunday. The deviation to what is actually a regular week- and workday, which thus becomes a public holiday, caused a great amount of confusion for businesses, retailers, schoolchildren and their parents. The motivation for this decision was said to be Milanović’s desire to reduce the participation of the traditionally HDZ-affiliated diaspora, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who would find it more difficult to travel on a working day.

A few days later, the constitutional court issued an official warning to the president, which mainly focussed on two points: As incumbent president, he was not allowed to take part in the election as an official candidate on one of the SDP lists. Secondly, he was ordered to maintain party-political neutrality, which is why he was prohibited from actively participating in any election campaign activities for one of the parties or making partisan statements.¹¹ In order to actively participate in the elections, he would first have to resign as president, which Milanović ruled out from the very outset.

While the SDP leadership around its chairman Peđa Grbin pledged to adhere to the requirements of the constitutional court in the wake of this warning, Milanović was much more critical and described the decision as a constitutional coup. At the same time, he confirmed that he would definitely become Croatia’s next prime minister. The SDP’s electoral coalition, which comprised a total of six parties, gave itself the name “Rijeke pravde dolaze” (The Rivers of Justice are Coming) in reference to a popular pop song from the

9 These accusations were substantiated shortly before the vote in parliament through the publication of private chats. The Supreme Criminal Court also criticised Turudić’s behaviour concerning his frequent meetings with people subject to legal investigations.

10 See, for example, the statement by the independent NGO GONG, Gong o Milanovićevoj kandidaturi: HDZ-ove nepravde ne treba ispravljati udarom na politički sustav, <https://gong.hr/2024/03/16/gong-o-milanovicevoj-kandidaturi-hdz-ove-nepravde-ne-treba-ispravljati-udarom-na-politicki-sustav/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

11 Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, Upozorenje u povodu izjave Predsjednika Republike Hrvatske g. Zorana Milanovića da će se kandidirati na izborima za zastupnike u Hrvatski sabor raspisanima odlukom Predsjednika Republike Hrvatske od 15. ožujka 2024., <https://sljeme.usud.hr/Usud/Praksaw.nsf/C12570D30061CE54C1258AE400450E70/%24FILE/U-VII-1263-2024.pdf> (accessed 21 May 2024).

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1980s. Following the controversial announcement of Milanović's (non-)candidacy, two parties left the SDP's electoral coalition. Additionally, Možemo decided to stand for election independently and not, as previously speculated, as part of a joint electoral coalition with the SDP and its partners. Meanwhile, the HDZ condemned the "unconstitutional behaviour" of their opponents and concentrated on emphasising its own political achievements during the previous term of government.

These first turbulent days of the election campaign were followed by a phase of increased polarisation in the debates between the parties and candidates. This resulted in the formation of two blocks. On the one side stood the HDZ and its partners¹², emphasising their past performances. On the other side were the SDP, Možemo, Most and DP, each with their own campaigns, but united in their primary thrust drawing on all kinds of accusations against the HDZ rule under Andrej Plenković. Meanwhile, Milanović used each and every opportunity to proclaim the need for a "Government of National Salvation" against the HDZ's corruption and the erosion of the rule of law. As the election campaign progressed, he became less and less offensive in formulating who should be the head of this government. Despite the relatively short campaign period, momentum in the campaigns slowed considerably. This was partly caused by the fact that the polls showed a slightly positive effect of Milanović's (non-)candidacy on the expected election result for the SDP, but did not reflect a clear mood for change.

3. Plenković's Hat Trick and Winners on Both Wings – The Electoral Result

The Croatian Sabor is elected by the principle of proportional representation. The 151 members of parliament are elected in three different kinds of constituencies. In each of the ten national constituencies, which are organised according to the equal distribution of eligible voters, 14 MPs are elected. The electoral

threshold of five per cent of the votes is applied at constituency level, resulting in an effective national electoral threshold of just 0.5 per cent and having a strong impact on the seat-to-vote ratio. Three representatives are sent to the Sabor from the eleventh constituency for Croats living abroad. Finally, the twelfth constituency, from which the eight representatives of the 22 recognised national minorities come, covers the whole of Croatia.¹³ Individuals belonging to one of these national minorities can decide before the election whether they want to use their right to vote via the national list of minorities or the regional constituency list of the national parties. The electoral district boundaries were changed during the last electoral law reform in 2024 after the constitutional court repeatedly pointed out the high level of disproportionality between them. The ruling HDZ majority decided against fundamental changes to the electoral law and in favour of minimal corrections.¹⁴

tion day, people had to queue for a long time in front of some polling stations, especially in Zagreb.¹⁵ The voter turnout was 62.3 per cent, more than 15 percentage points higher than four years earlier, when, in the midst of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lowest turnout since independence had been recorded at just 46.4 per cent. The 2024 turnout, on the other hand, was the second-highest figure since 2000. In the run-up to the election, there had been plenty of speculation about the question how much the polarised election campaign combined with the unusual date would influence voter turnout.¹⁶

The initial reactions interpreted the result as an overall electoral victory for the HDZ. Despite the loss of seats and votes, the party led by Prime Minister Plenković was once again able to maintain its position as strongest political force in Croatia. Shadow candidate Milanović did not manage to translate the existing dissatisfaction with the HDZ government into a far-reaching mood of change. Among other things, this was due to a number of tactical failures on the side of

12 The HDZ ran in an electoral coalition with the HSL (Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka / Croatian Social-Liberal Party), the HNS (Hrvatska narodna stranka / Croatian National Party), the HDS (Hrvatska demokršćanska stranka / Croatian Demochristian Party) and the HSU (Hrvatska stranka umirovljenika / Croatian Pensioners Party).

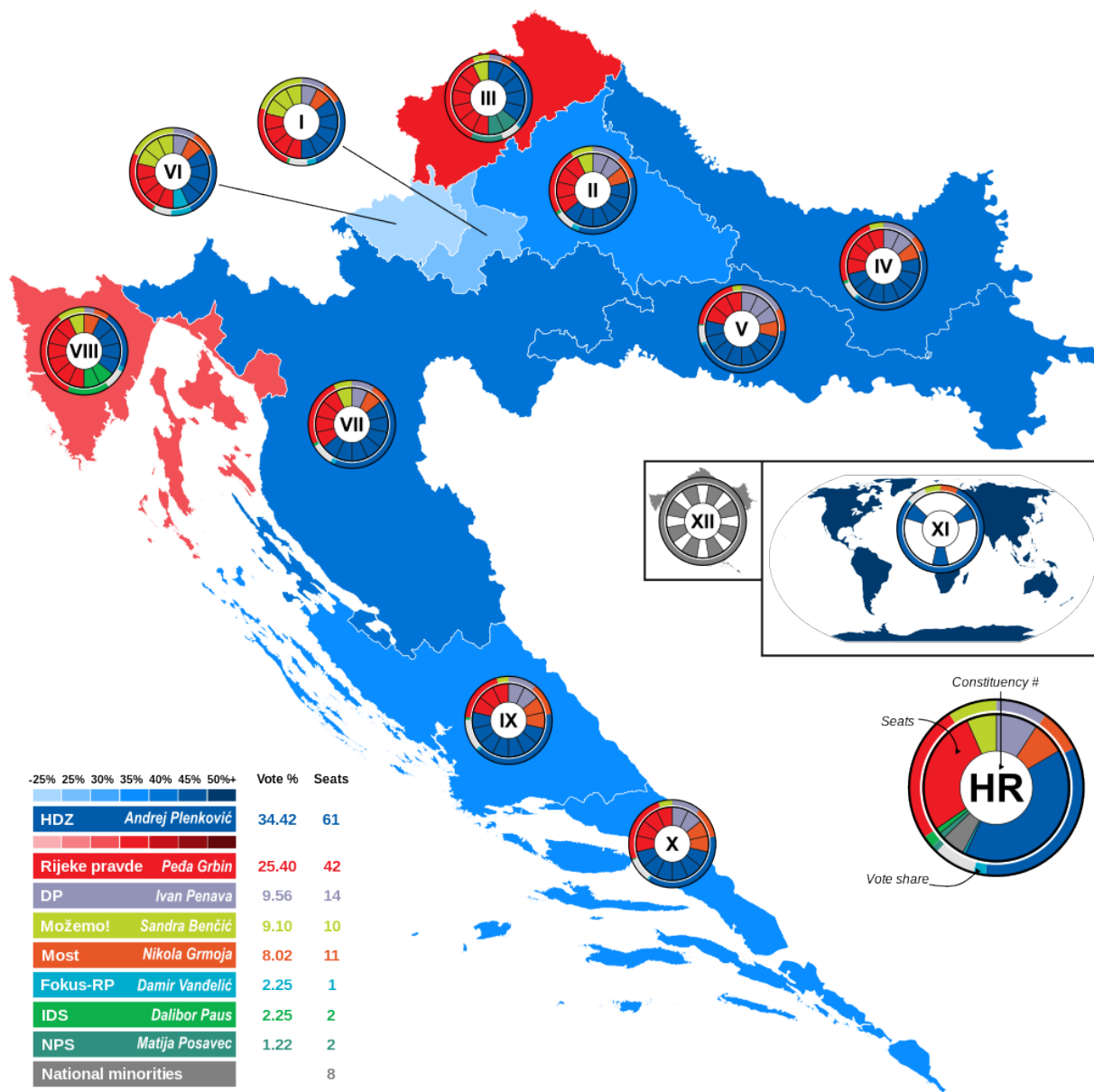
13 The eight minority representatives are made up as follows: three members for the Serbs, one each for the Hungarians and Italians, one joint representative for the Czechs and Slovaks, one deputy for the Albanians, Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Slovenes, and one MP for the remaining minorities (Austrians, Bulgarians, Germans, Jews, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Turks, Ukrainians and Wallachians). The affiliation to one of these minorities is determined by the parents at birth and can be changed by the person concerned from the age of 14.

14 For detailed explanations of the changes to the electoral law, see: *Višeslav Raos*, Hrvatske muke po izbornim jedinicama: što ne valja s Vladinim rješenjem?, <https://analihpd.hr/hrvatske-muke-po-izbornim-jedinicama-sto-ne-valja-s-vladinim-rjesenjem/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

15 There is no provision in Croatian electoral law for voting by mail.

16 An initial analysis of the question which parties have benefited from the higher voter turnout can be seen at: *Berto Šalaj*, (Ne)naučene lekcije. Izlaznost i koalicijske strategije: analiza parlamentarnih izbora u Hrvatskoj 2024, <https://analihpd.hr/nenucene-lekcije/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

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The shaded colours represent the strength of the election winner in the respective constituency. The circles show the number of the constituency, the distribution of votes and mandates.

Source: Wikimedia/Gust Justice, A map of the 2024 Croatian parliamentary election, showing the largest party and the distribution of seats within each constituency, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Croatian_parliamentary_election#/media/File:2024_Croatian_parliamentary_election_map.svg

	HDZ	SDP	DP	Možemo	Most	Fokus	IDS/NPS
Votes	729,949	538,748	202,714	193,051	169,988	47,715	73,485
Seats	61	42	14	10	11	1	4
Win/Loss (to 2020)	-6	+2	+2	+5	-1	-1	+1

Source: Croatian State Electoral Commission

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the SDP. On the one hand, Milanović's decision not to run as a proper candidate, alongside his resignation from the presidency, can be seen as a lack of commitment to the candidacy (which was not an actual candidacy). In addition, the SDP lacked a convincing plan in the wake of the HDZ's apparent surprise at the president's (non-)candidacy. Milanović repeatedly emphasised that he had a "cunning plan" to replace the HDZ and his long-time antagonist Plenković, but did not divulge what this plan actually involved. Likewise, his calls for a "third Croatian republic" quickly petered out after the (non-)candidate had no answer to the question in which way a two-thirds majority, which is necessary for constitutional changes, could be achieved without the HDZ. On top of that, there was no classic TV debate between the two main candidates for the office of prime minister due to Milanović's (non-)candidacy. Traditionally, the TV debates between the Spitzenkandidaten are one of the highlights of the election campaign, attracting the most attention from the public and the media. Although Milanović's participation would have been difficult to reconcile with the constitutional court's warning, he constantly emphasised his willingness to face Plenković at any time. The prime minister refused to debate with Milanović, referring to his non-participation in the elections. Plenković also rejected the offer of a debate with SDP leader Grbin or representatives of smaller parties.

The other parties satisfied with the result were Možemo and especially Domovinski pokret. The former was able to double its number of seats from five to ten, thereby consolidating its position in the Croatian party system and managing to gain votes outside of its core electorate in the capital and urban areas. One reason for this may have been Milanović's candidacy, whose populist nature led some segments of the more left leaning/progressive electorate to vote for Možemo. Domovinski pokret was able to win an additional two seats, and therefore further strengthened its initial electoral success from four years ago. More importantly, it was already evident on election night that DP would play the role of kingmaker in the upcoming coalition negotiations.

4. The Courting of the Far-right – Coalition Negotiations and Government Formation

In order to elect the prime minister, an absolute majority of 76 votes is required in the Sabor. Two realistic coalition scenarios emerged from the election results, which also led to subsequent negotiations between

the parties. In the first scenario, the HDZ would form a coalition with Domovinski pokret. However, as they only hold 75 votes, either the participation of one (or more) minority MPs would be necessary or another party from the former opposition camp would have to be won over. The minority representatives form a joint parliamentary party group in the Sabor and generally supported the government unanimously in the past, so it was likely that they would do so again.

The second option, which was publicly supported by the SDP immediately after the election, involved the formation of an "anti-HDZ coalition" consisting of all parties except the HDZ. Depending on whether the minority representatives would be included or not, this coalition could be made up of 82 to 90 votes. This would require MPs from the green-left Možemo to work together with the far-right representatives of the DP, at least in the investiture vote. Based on this constellation, it was soon apparent that Domovinski pokret would play the decisive role in the coalition negotiations.

Being aware of its favourable position, DP quickly adapted to this new role and proved to be a sophisticated negotiating partner for both sides. As they categorically rejected both formal cooperation with Možemo and the three representatives of the Serbian minority party SDSS, the possibility of forming a minority government consisting of SDP, Most and DP, which would be supported by Možemo (as well as the smaller and minority parties), was put forward. This limitation by DP, however, also affected the coalition negotiations with the HDZ, which in principle insisted on the participation of all minority representatives. Nevertheless, both sides courted the DP's favour immediately after the election.

A week after the election, the constitutional court announced another decision that caused great commotion. The majority opinion of the judges¹⁷ negated Milanović's opportunity to be nominated as a candidate for the office of prime minister and subsequently elected by the parliament. This would apply regardless of whether he resigned as president beforehand or not. In their published "dissenting opinion", the three opposing judges described the decision as being out of line with the constitution. Numerous other legal experts were highly critical of this far-reaching and unprecedented cut into parliamentary autonomy, while Milanović himself accused the constitutional court (once again) of an attempted coup d'état. Irre-

17 The decision was made by seven to three votes.

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spective of this highly debatable decision, there was growing acceptance among the ranks of the SDP during the coalition negotiations that Milanović would not be a viable candidate for the office of prime minister.

In the course of the negotiations, another SDP option was brought into play: technical, parliamentary cooperation for a limited period of time. Its main objective should be to elect the president of parliament so that they can then put the three most important issues on the parliamentary agenda. Those issues are: firstly, the withdrawal of the controversial whistleblower law (“Lex Plenković”), secondly the dismissal of Turudić as attorney general and thirdly the more far-reaching electoral law reform favoured by broad parts of the opposition. Afterwards, parliament was to be dissolved and new elections held according to this scenario. The SDP reasoned that this allowed the HDZ’s most serious decisions to be reversed without the heterogeneous parties having to agree on a long-term compromise.

This exceptional form of government qua speaker of the parliament did not materialise, however, as there were already indications of an agreement between the HDZ and Domovinski pokret, which was ultimately reached on 8 May. Following several rounds of negotiations, the two parties agreed on a formalised coalition with the participation of some minority representatives and the exclusion of the SDSS (as demanded by the DP). Of the 18 ministries in total, three will be appointed from the ranks of the DP. In addition to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Economy, these include the newly created “Ministry of Demography”. However, the “Culture” and “Media” ministries originally demanded by the DP will remain with the HDZ. The distribution of portfolios has been interpreted as an indication that the “financial” wing of the DP has prevailed over the “ideological” wing. It remains to be seen to what extent this will be reflected in subsequent government work.

Plenković managed to collect a total of 78 signatures of support from MPs and subsequently received the official mandate to form a government from President Milanović without further delay. The 78 signatures break down as follows:

- 61 and thus all MPs from the HDZ electoral list,
- twelve votes from DP MPs after two deputies pub-

licly declared that they would not vote in favour of a coalition with the HDZ. This decision was accepted by the party leadership and the MPs remain in the party and parliamentary party group (for the time being),

- four representatives of national minorities,
- and finally Vesna Vučemilović, who was elected to parliament as a member of the “Hrvatski suverenisti” (HS/Croatian Sovereignists) party via the combined electoral list with Most. Vučemilović, the sister of DP founder Miroslav Škoro, was expelled from the HS party shortly after announcing her signature.

Seventy-nine MPs voted in favour of the Plenković III government, one more than originally expected. Of the 141 deputies present, 61 voted against, with one abstention. The presented government programme largely reads like a “shortened HDZ programme”¹⁸ with only a few, mostly minor, concessions to Domovinski pokret. Numerous demands of the DP, such as an extension of tax relief for returnees, the introduction of compulsory military service or the construction of a museum for communist crimes, are not reflected in the programme. Commitments in favour of a pluralistic media landscape, an open and tolerant society as well as protection of minority rights are prominently featured, which can be interpreted as a further concession by the DP to the HDZ. Additionally, in the policies regarding education, border security or the rights of migrant workers, it is almost exclusively the HDZ’s known position that is reflected. Only the upkeep of the public funding for the Serbian minority newspaper “Novosti” remains unclear. The cessation of public funding was one of Domovinski pokret’s main concerns during the election campaign.

Although the presented government agenda and the distribution of ministerial portfolios suggest at first glance that Domovinski pokret will only have a limited influence, it is advisable to keep a critical eye on the new Croatian government’s work in the coming months and years. Paper does not blush and actions speak louder than words. This is particularly true in the context of the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament and the office of president, scheduled for later this year.

18 Sanja Despot, Andrej Plenković nadigrao DP: Program Vlade skraćena je verzija programa HDZ-a, <https://faktograf.hr/2024/05/17/andrej-plenkovic-nadigrao-dp-program-vlade-skracena-je-verzija-programa-hdz-a/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

5. Croatia at the Crossroads – Outlook

The election result and the subsequent formation of a government is a double-edged sword for Andrej Plenković. On the one hand, the coalition with Domoinski pokret is seen as a defeat for him. A large proportion of DP members and the electorate were previously members and/or voters of the HDZ. Despite all the HDZ's claims to the contrary, entering a coalition with them represents a major shift to the right and therefore away from their more centrist orientation of the past few years. On the other hand, for the third time, Plenković won an election for the HDZ, which undoubtedly strengthens him internationally as Croatia's most important political figure. At the same time, rumours persist about the HDZ leader's ambitions for a leading position in Brussels. Ahead of the upcoming elections to the European Parliament, in which Plenković is running in first place on the HDZ list, there have been increasing speculations that he has a chance of succeeding Ursula von der Leyen as commission president.¹⁹ This would allow the HDZ to adopt a more conservative profile that would be satisfactory to all sides if the chairman of the party were to be 'promoted' to Brussels. In particular, the former defence minister Ivan Anušić is said to have higher ambitions of becoming prime minister, which were already evident in his increased media presence on and after election day.

For the old and new opposition parties, the main task now is to organise themselves for the upcoming European elections. Especially SDP and Most are still in the midst of personnel debates. While Most has to overcome the resignation of two prominent MPs following the candidate selection for the European Parliament elections, SDP leader Grbin is clearly being challenged from many directions. For constructive and effective work in the opposition, these debates about persons and positions should be resolved as soon as possible in order to avoid getting lost (again) in long-lasting infightings.

Apart from these party-personal developments, most attention will be focussed on the future cooperation within the HDZ-DP coalition. The HDZ is keen to avoid the past negative experience of the conflict-ridden time in government with Most (see above). At the same

time, it will be important to observe closely whether the smaller coalition partner succeeds in moving the HDZ's policy orientation further to the right or, on the contrary, whether the dominant Croatian party of the last century succeeds in demystifying their far-right coalition partner and winning back previously lost voters. Based on the government programme and the impression from the coalition talks, the HDZ is pursuing an accommodation strategy towards the far-right DP.²⁰ So far, the conservative party has acted from a position of strength and already been able to take advantage of first conflicts within the DP. Whether this relation of power can be maintained throughout the entire legislative period considering the upcoming elections, remains to be seen.

Another important question will be how the new governing coalition will address the existing (and partially self-created) rule of law problems and whether a far-right party can act as a corrective for the ubiquitous HDZ. Given that the DP quickly forgot its corruption accusations against the HDZ in the coalition negotiations, not much change is to be expected here. Considering the latest political developments, it is uncertain whether Croatia will return to the path of democratic consolidation and stabilisation or if it will take a further step into the group of EU states with a flawed rule of law. The next few months, including the European and presidential elections, will show what the first steps on this crucial crossroads will look like.

19 See: Barbara Moens / Nicholas Vinocur / Jakob Hanke Vela, Who could take on von der Leyen for Commission president?, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-alternative-election-eu/> (accessed 21 May 2024).

20 See for an overview of possible strategies, responses and experiences with far-right parties in Europe: Léonie de Jonge, Anna-Sophie Heinze: How to respond to the Far Right, *VerfBlog*, 2023/8/14, <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-to-respond-to-the-far-right/> (accessed 4 June 2024).