

Croatia: Electoral setback for the Right

Marcel Rajecky Fri, 31/01/2020 - 13:25

Marcel Rajecky

In Croatia's elections earlier this month, the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica; HDZ) lost the country's presidency, in a major blow to the alliance of far-right governments consolidating its power across Central and Eastern Europe.

The winner of the election was Zoran Milanović, the former Prime Minister and candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He defeated the HDZ's incumbent president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, winning 53 percent of the vote in a runoff.

In a manner characteristic of Croatian presidential elections, turnout was a pitifully low, 55 percent, and the usual dominance of the two major parties in parliamentary elections was broken by a third candidate, this time by the far-right folk singer and independent, Miroslav Škoro.

Whilst the first president of independent Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, enjoyed extensive powers, the role of the president has since been reduced to little more than a ceremonial post. Nonetheless, the elections are a significant indication of the future outcome of this December's parliamentary elections, have noticeable effects on the internal workings of the major parties, and will attract particular attention this year as Croatia takes the rotating presidency of the EU Council.

Furthermore, the election result reveals serious contradictions within one of Europe's most established and successful right-wing parties. Alongside similar results in Spain, Portugal and Slovenia, the SDP's victory should prompt a re-evaluation of the predicted terminal decline of 'social democratic' parties, often termed 'PASOKification', a theory based on a misanalysis of 'centre-left' parties, of their relation to the state, and on the potential of 'left-populist' movements to democratically seize power.

HDZ

The ruling HDZ decided to fight the election on a platform of extreme nationalism. Whilst Croat-nationalism, irredentism, and a glorification of its country's fascist past are central to the character of the HDZ, the party went further than it previously had in certain ways. For instance, its candidate Grabar-Kitarović accepted an endorsement from Julianne Bušić, an American who hijacked an aeroplane in 1976 with her émigré husband to promote the cause of Croatian secession from Yugoslavia.

The HDZ also intensified its alarmist rhetoric against its neighbour Bosnia and Herzegovina. It defended the operations of its secret service in 'monitoring jihadists' in the muslim-majority state, reaffirmed its hardline opposition to opening the two countries' shared border to allow the passage of refugees to Central Europe and, through its Bosnian section, has been collaborating with Bosnian Serb political parties to delay the passing of key legislation, and to undermine its bid to eventually join the European Union. It also left open the possibility of completely militarising the border in the case of the return of what Grabar-Kitarović called the 'chaos' of 2015.

Despite a newfound alliance with the Bosnian Serbs, the party has done little to protect the rights of Serbs within its own borders, as they face increased discrimination and harassment. Whilst the Croatian government does not collect figures on hate crime, several high-profile, violent attacks on Serb individuals, establishments, and political leaders were recorded this year, and former servicemen routinely escape punishment for killings of Serb civilians committed during the war.

The HDZ also pledged to block the demands of a Serb campaign in Vukovar for road signs in the Cyrillic alphabet, alongside the Latin. Beyond this, Vukovar – the city that saw the most intense fighting between Croat and Serb forces during the war – has become a dog whistle for violent hatred against the Serbs. The government recently made 18 November, the date of the city's fall to the Yugoslav Army and Serb paramilitaries, a national holiday'.

In Vukovar and the surrounding Eastern Slavonia region, the International Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has complained about the Croatian government's non-cooperation in resettling refugees and guaranteeing civil and political rights to its citizens.

The party also stated that it would not necessarily allow the accession of Serbia to the European Union in a move that, amongst other things, would continue the 'hard border' between the two countries, which has particularly adverse effects on the lives of the country's Serbs who live along and regularly cross the border.

In addition to its increased use of nationalist rhetoric, the party has continued its long-standing commitment to conservative social policies. It maintained its firm opposition to rights for same-sex couples to adopt, insisting on the need for children to have 'both a mother and a father', an attack particularly grotesque in a country where 3,000 children are institutionalised, and therefore have neither.

The HDZ's turn even further to the right was prompted by several factors, not least the entry of a candidate considerably further to the right of it on the central questions of the Croatian Serbs, LGBT rights and the country's relation with Bosnia. Indeed, 'koro came within 42,000 votes of advancing to the runoff against Milanovi'.

Nonetheless, the nationalism that defines the party has always been its principal tool for commanding legitimacy and 'consent' for its programme of consolidating the rule of the post-war elite.

Formed in the final years of Socialist Yugoslavia, its founders were largely exiles, including those forced out because of their roles in the World War II 'Independent State of Croatia'. They formed the party with the help of nationalists inside – or recently expelled from – the Communist League of Croatia, of which its long-standing original leader, Franjo Tudjman had once been a member.

Their greatest success was in transforming a movement based around the demands for political freedoms within a socialist, federal Yugoslavia into one which routinely employed slogans and imagery from the fascist 'Usta'a', and whose members would regularly call for an ethnically 'pure' Croatia. That this transformation was made easier in the face of significant human rights abuses at the hands of the Yugoslav National Army and its proxy militias, against which the HDZ could position itself as the 'defender' of Croats, makes this 'achievement' only slightly less incredible.

But it was precisely during the war and the years following it that the HDZ consolidated its power and established a state over which it has maintained almost total dominance ever since. One remarkable indication of this is the creation of what are almost two distinct entities in terms of voting patterns. The HDZ recruits the vast majority of its votes from areas that saw fighting during the war, whilst it is the largest party in very few areas that were not affected by the conflict.

In this election, for instance, its most convincing shares of the vote were in Lika, Vukovar, Dalmatia, Posavina, and Knin. By contrast, it failed to win even a fifth of votes in Istra, Medjimurje, and Zagreb. In line with this trend, the HDZ's share of the vote amongst eligible voters across the border in Bosnia and Herzegovina far surpassed that of any of the aforementioned localities, with 87 percent voting for Grabar-Kitarović in the run-off.

That Bosnian Croats, very few of whom are emigrants, but a constituent part of the Bosnian state, can vote in Croatia's elections, is both an instrument in securing the right-wing vote, and also of controlling internal procedures inside Bosnia.

This adds to the institutionalised political power that the party holds in Bosnia, where the post-war Dayton peace agreement all but guarantees it a seat at the incredibly dysfunctional three-man presidency, and consequently an effective veto over all Bosnian policy; despite accounting for just 15 percent of the population.

SDP

Equally central to the HDZ's consolidation of power in Croatia is the assimilation of the SDP into the fabric of the Croat-nationalist state, and its reduction to a pliant and weak opposition, which will generally rally behind the HDZ on questions of 'national importance'. Indeed, the victory of the SDP was less an enthusiastic endorsement of its politics than it was a grudging vote for the 'lesser of two evils'. The low turnout is an indication of this.

A fusion between the official successor to the Croatian League of Socialists, and its 'unofficial' pro-independence counterpart, the SDP functioned in the years following the country's first free election as a genuinely multi-ethnic, multi-confessional working class party. In 1990, the SDP was by far the most popular party amongst Croatian Serbs, with 46 percent of them voting for the party. Two years later, the party's share of the vote collapsed to 5.5 percent and it lost practically all of its Serb support to Serb parties. With the rise of the Serb national parties, and the failure of the SDP to preserve its multi-national character, the system of 'ethnic-clientelism' that dominates much more diverse former Yugoslav republics like Bosnia and Macedonia was established in Croatia.

The integration of the SDP into the clientelist system took place alongside a more fundamental transformation into a bourgeois liberal party, as it decoupled itself from the working class. Today, indeed, it maintains only the most tenuous links with organised labour, has entirely disassociated itself from its predecessor parties, and competes with the HDZ for the support of employers' associations. It neither enjoys the support of a clear majority of working-class voters, nor can claim to have the working class as its fundamental support base.

In the years following the war, the SDP rebuilt its vote and entered government between 2000 and 2003, and between 2011 and 2015, the only seven years in the last 30 that the HDZ has been out of government. During these brief periods, however, the SDP became every bit as implicated in the disastrous programmes of mass privatisation, labour 'flexibilisation', and imperialist war as its rival parties, and has shown little interest in reversing what is one of the most extensive fragmentations of the Trade Unions in Europe.

Despite the party's history and organisation, it did offer significantly different positions on several key issues during the election. It called for corrupt officials associated with the HDZ to face justice, for a withdrawal of Croatia's troops from Afghanistan, and for the legalisation of the adoption of children by same-sex couples. It also supported the use of the Serbian language and alphabet in Eastern Slavonia, alongside Croatian, and the liberalisation of abortion law.

The SDP also offered clear alternatives on the question of Croatia's relationship to its neighbours. Milanović affirmed his party's commitment to a united, multi-ethnic Bosnia and promised not to block Bosnian and Serbian attempts to join the European Union. He also criticised the HDZ's relationship with Hungary, and indicated his support for the EU in its attempts to defend the rule of law under Orbán.

On other issues, such as the deployment of intelligence services to Bosnia and the country's treatment of refugees, Milanović obediently defended the interests of the Croatian ruling class. On questions of 'national security', the two parties were effectively competing to prove their methods were the most effective in securing the goals of the state.

Radnička Fronta

Workers' Front (Radnička Fronta; RF) is a positive, recent development, as an openly socialist political party, which used its platform to attack the HDZ where the SDP would refuse to, and also to articulate the disillusion that most Croats had with both major parties, from an unashamed left perspective. Given the nature of the presidential election, their share of the vote, just over a single percent, is less important than the demands they raised during the campaign.

To this end, it raised proposals for public ownership and full employment, for climate justice and withdrawal from NATO and established clear distance between itself and the established parties.

Perhaps more important than any of its policies was the demonstration of its independence from bourgeois parties, as it refused to endorse the SDP in the second-round run-off. On this it stood alone, as parties with genuine links to the working class like the 'Croatian Labourists' and, disgracefully, the official 'Marxist-Leninist' Socialist Labour Party called on their supporters to vote for Milanović.

Going forward, RF faces many of the same dilemmas as the other parties of the Balkan 'new-left'. The questions it will have to confront all revolve around which side of the line between 'left-populist' and socialist parties it will come down on, a line that is often blurred in South-East Europe. The two significant, comparable parties in Slovenia and Macedonia - both named 'Levica' - have both made disastrous concessions to reformism and to nationalism. The attempts of the Slovene party to eject its Marxist 'discourse', and the posturing of its Macedonian counterpart against laws ensuring the use of the Albanian language, both carried out entirely cynically in the name of expanding its share of votes, will not only fail on their own electoralist terms, but will render both parties incapable of confronting the rotten neoliberal, communitarian, corporatist character of their respective states.

PASOKification theory - left-populist triumphalism

The return to power of centre-left parties in the Balkans, as well as in Spain and Portugal, is beginning to discredit the 'PASOKification theory' that came into vogue following Syriza's remarkable victory in Greece's 2015 elections.

There were good reasons why the theory, which describes a terminal decline of the long-established European centre-left parties, and their replacement with new, radical, 'populist' formations, gained such traction. With the collapse of PASOK, and later of the French Socialist Party, the German Social Democrats, and the transfer of the revolutionary potential of Greek and Spanish street movements into 'left-populist' political parties, the prophecy appeared to be coming true. That the Labour Party in Britain was able to avoid this trend by electing a leader the left-populists erroneously claimed as one of their own, Jeremy Corbyn, only added credibility to the theory.

If 'PASOKification theory' could survive the capitulation of Syriza and the hands of its EU and IMF creditors, the electoral successes of 'social-democratic' parties in Spain, Portugal, Slovenia and now Croatia are bringing it into question. Indeed, in Spain and Portugal and, until recently, in Slovenia, the role

of the 'left-populist' parties has been little more than propping up the reformist parties as junior partners in coalitions. Whatever minor concessions they have been able to force have been dwarfed by these coalitions' defence of their 'own' states, with most terrifying consequences in Spain's repression of peaceful demonstrators in Catalonia.

What is equally remarkable is that, despite initial surges, the development of left-populist parties that played central roles in mass protests in countries like Spain, Macedonia and Croatia has translated into higher shares of votes for the established centre-left parties than for the left-populist parties themselves, and the victory of the centre-left in elections.

The reasons for this are certainly complex and numerous, but this trend points to the self-defeating nature of electoralism, and its most reckless manifestation of abandoning class as the basis for political organisation, and its replacement with vague, discursive and often nationalistic appeals to 'the people'.

Another lesson to be drawn from the 'recovery' of European social-democrats, is that their parties are not simply participants in a contest of ideas, but organisations with deeply rooted connections to the state itself that can ultimately be recruited by the ruling class as a counter-revolutionary force, by turning the revolutionary potential of mass protest into support for its reformist programme.

Even in the case of Croatia, the opposition to the HDZ's increased nationalism has only translated into victory for a party that has proven in two spells in government either unable or unwilling to provide meaningful reforms to its supporters.

The defeat of the HDZ, if not the election of the SDP, is a victory, but one which will very easily be overturned without the defeat of the Croatian state in its entirety, and the nexus of the various national ruling classes across the region. This is a task that can only be carried out by the working class of the whole of the Balkans under the leadership of an international, revolutionary socialist party. Socialists must make a clean break with the destructive influences of nationalism and reformism, and fight for a Balkan Socialist Federation.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/croatia-electoral-setback-right>