

The Democratic Union (HDZ) surprised everyone as it came out ahead in the snap general election in Croatia

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Results

The Democratic Union (HDZ), led by Andrej Plenkovic, MEP came out ahead in the general elections on 11th September in Croatia. The first snap election organised in the country since independence in 1991 followed the dissolution of the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber in parliament on 21st June, which itself followed a vote of no-confidence against the government led by Tihomir Oreskovic five days earlier. The HDZ proved the opinion polls wrong and won 36.6% of the vote and 61 seats (+ 5 in comparison with the previous general election on 8th November 2015).

The main opposition movement, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) led by former Prime Minister (2011-2016) Zoran Milanovic that had joined forces with three other parties (the People's Party (HNS) and the Pensioners Party (HSU)) within the People's Coalition lost ground. It won 33.5% of the vote and 54 seats (- 2).

Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists), a party founded in 2012 by Bozo Petrov, also lost

ground even though it maintained its third place with 9.8% of the vote and 13 seats (- 6). Finally, Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ), founded to counter expropriation and foreign banks, whom it accuses practicing exaggerated interest rates, led by Ivan-Vilibor Sincic, made a breakthrough with 8 seats (+ 7).

Turnout was lower than that registered in the previous election on 8th November 2015: - 8.23 points. It came to 52.59%.

General Election results 11th September 2016 in Croatia

Turnout: 52.59%

| | Number of votes won | Number of seats |
|---|---------------------|-----------------|
| Democratic Union (HDZ) | 36,60 | 61 |
| People's Coalition (Social Democratic Party, SPD, Peoples Party, HNS, Farmers' Party, HSS, and Pensioners' Party, HSU) | 33,50 | 54 |
| Most-Nezavisnih Lista (Bridge-Independent Lists) | 9,80 | 13 |
| Zivi zid (Human Shield, ZZ) | | 8 |

Source : <http://www.izbori.hr/140zas/rezult/1/nrezultati.html>

"It is difficult to foresee a major victory on one side or another. A similar scenario to that produced in the previous elections might repeat itself," said Berto Salaj, Professor of Political Science at the University of Zagreb ahead of the election. The formation of a majority will indeed entail forming an alliance with other parties.

The leader of Most-Nezavisnih Lista, Bozo Petrov, did not want to speak his intentions. He seems however to be leaning more to the HDZ and its new leader Andrej Plenkovic. Together the two parties would have 74 seats in Parliament, i.e. just two short of the absolute majority. For its part Zivi zid has said it supports neither the HDZ nor the SPD.

"I am convinced that we are the party that will be privileged to form the next government in Croatia and that this one will be stable," declared Andrej Plenkovic after the results were announced. The new HDZ leader (he was appointed in July) created a surprise enabling the party to retain first place, and this, without the support of other parties within the coalition, as was the case in the last elections on 8th November 2015. Andrej Plenkovic has reoriented his party toward the centre. *"I am changing the HDZ to position it in the centre,"* he has repeated since he took over as leader, saying that he wanted to distance the party from the nationalist positions of his predecessor Tomislav Karamarko. *"I have been elected for the future, not for the past,"* maintained Andrej Plenkovic. The HDZ chose outgoing Finance Minister Zdravko Maric (independent) as its candidate for Prime Minister.

Zoran Milanovic's party however lost its wager. The social democratic leader, who promised "a government of progress and tolerance," was quick to encourage nationalist tension during the electoral campaign. During a meeting with veterans of the war of independence (1991-1995), he said that Serbia was led by a "pitiful arrogant group", he spoke of the past of some Serb leaders, notably Aleksandar Vucic (Progressive Party, SNS) the Serb Prime Minister and threatened to

block Belgrade's bid to join the European Union. The daily *Jutarni List* also revealed the content of a conversation between Zoran Milanovic and representatives of some veterans' associations when he indicated that Serbia is an arrogant nation and that Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a real country and that it could not function as a State. *"At least my mother was not a doctor in the Yugoslav army,"* he declared suggesting that Andrej Plenkovic's mother was on the Serb side during the war.

Whilst the HDZ has been repositioning in the centre, the SPD has chosen to play the nationalist card, undoubtedly to attract voters who might have been upset by the HDZ's redirection. *"Zoran Milanovic tried to show the electorate that people on the left are also good patriots like those in the HDZ,"* stressed Kresimir Macan, a consultant in political communication. *"This electoral campaign was marked by provocation between Croatia and Serbia. A little game that some politicians in both countries play when they have nothing else to offer,"* analysed Toni Gabric, the editor-in-chief of the on-line information site H-Alter (<http://www.h-alter.org>) adding, *"the political parties are adopting a neoliberal policy and are surfing on a certain kind of Eurosceptic feeling. But in reality they do not have a great deal to offer the citizens."*

As in the previous elections in November 2015 none of the parties indicated during the electoral campaign the way they thought they might improve life for the Croats who live in one of the poorest countries in the EU. After six years of recession (-13% of GDP contraction since 2008), Zagreb recovered growth in 2015 (1.6%). Unemployment is high - 15.8% in 2015 (more than 40% amongst young people), government debt lies at 86.7% and the budgetary deficit at 4.9%. The Croatian economy is still mainly dominated by the State: the public sector is very big and the feeble development of the private sector and notably of SMEs is one of the country's main problems.

The election on 11th September has strengthened the HDZ. Let us hope that the next government that is formed in Croatia will have adequate strength and legitimacy to bring the country out of the political and economic crisis in which the country has been entrenched for the last few years.

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