

European  
Elections monitor

Corinne Deloy

ANALYSIS

# Will the Democratic Union (HDZ) remain in power in Croatia?

On 15 March, the President of the Republic of Croatia, Zoran Milanovic, announced that general elections would be held on 17 April. This election is the first in a series to be held in the country in 2024: European elections on 9 June and presidential election at the end of the year. 3.7 million people are expected to vote on 17 April.

Croatia has been governed since 2016 by the Democratic Union (HDZ), led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, allied with the Serbian Independent Democratic Party (SDSS), led by Milorad Pupovac. The outgoing head of government is also the longest-serving prime minister. His coalition is supported by the Social Liberal Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja, the People's Party-Reformists (NS-R), the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Croatia, the Roma Alliance of the Republic of Croatia, the Union of Albanians and the Croatian Party of Pensioners (HSU).

However, the Democratic Union is struggling somewhat. It has been criticised for appointing Ivan Turudic to the post of public prosecutor. This choice was confirmed by parliament: 78 MPs voted in favour, against 60 and 2 abstentions. Ivan Turudic's critics point to his links with controversial figures such as Zdravko Mamic, a former manager of Dinamo Zagreb football club who was convicted of tax fraud and fled to Bosnia to escape justice, and a number of senior Democratic Union officials suspected of corruption.

The government also faced several demonstrations last March in the country's five largest cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek and Varazdin) - organised by several left-wing opposition forces (Mozemo ("We can" in Croatian)

and a coalition of 6 parties led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) - which called on Croatians to rally under the slogan "*Enough is enough*". Afterwards, Social Democrat leader Pedja Grbin promised to "*finish the job at the polling stations*".

## ZORAN MILANOVIC'S "COUP"

The electoral campaign witnessed an unprecedented moment when Croatian President Zoran Milanovic announced at a press conference in mid-March, alongside Pedja Grbin, his candidacy for the general elections as head of the SDP list in Zagreb ... in the first constituency in which the outgoing Prime Minister, Andrej Plenkovic, is running. "*Sometimes you have to leave your comfort zone if you want to have solid majority and form a government of national salvation*," declared the head of state.

Asked to rule on this unprecedented situation, the Constitutional Court stated on 18 March that it was absolutely impossible for the President of the Republic to stand as a candidate in the general elections. "*The candidacy of the current President of the Republic in general elections is incompatible with the Croatian Constitution and the principle of the separation of powers. The President is a strictly non-partisan person and cannot take part in the activities of any political party. If he wants to be a candidate, he must resign*", the Court ruled. Nor is the head of state authorised to campaign in favour of a particular list, at the risk of annulling the election. Zoran Milanovic responded by describing the members of the Constitutional Court as "*illiterate peasants*"; he stated that he would only resign once election victory was certain, and that he was therefore in a position to succeed Andrej Plenkovic as head of government.

Zoran Milanovic, President of the Republic since 2020, was Prime Minister between 2011 and 2016.

### THE POLLS

According to opinion polls, the Croatian president's candidacy has "boosted" the voting intentions of the social democrats and, beyond that, of the left-wing opposition.

In the latest poll carried out for the public television channel Htv and published on 11 April, the Democratic Union is still leading the polls with 31% of the vote, but the gap with the SDP (25%) has narrowed from 10 to 5 points in recent weeks. The Patriotic Movement (Domovinski Pokret, DP), formerly the Patriotic Movement of Miroslav Skoro (DPMS), a right-wing populist party founded by Miroslav Skoro and led by Ivan Penava, (which is running in coalition with Agrameri, Law and Justice, the Democratic Peasant Party, the Green List and the Bloc for Croatia) is said to be next with around 8%. The Bridge (Most), a liberal party led by Bozo Petrov, is expected to take 7%, as is We Can! (Mozemo), a left-wing environmental party. Two-thirds of those surveyed said they were certain to vote on 17 April.

### THE NOVELTY OF WEDNESDAY

Zoran Milanovic triggered another crisis when he chose to set the polling date for 17 April, i.e. a Wednesday rather than the traditional Sunday (the general elections of 3 January 2000 were held on a Monday). Since the Constitution makes it compulsory to vote on a day that is not a working day, 17 April was declared a public holiday, causing numerous organisational complications in the country. According to Deputy Prime Minister Branko Bacic (HDZ), this decision is likely to cost the country €350 million.

Some political analysts explain this choice by the fact that a public holiday in the middle of the week will encourage voter mobilisation and increase turnout, which should ultimately favour the left-wing parties. However, Croatian voters in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who generally support the Democratic Union, may find it

difficult to travel to the polls on this day. Dragan Covic, leader of the Democratic Union in Bosnia-Herzegovina, announced that 17 April would also be a public holiday for Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Zoran Milanovic is a man of strong character. He has often clashed with the Prime Minister over military and intelligence appointments, as well as over the management of the health crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic. Since 2022, he has been cautious about supporting Ukraine against Russia and has expressed numerous reservations about the policy of the European Union and NATO towards Russia, refusing to allow his country to take part in the European mission to train Ukrainian soldiers. He described the 2014 Maidan revolution in Ukraine as a "coup d'état" and said Russia needed "security guarantees" from NATO. Zoran Milanovic is also opposed to Kyiv joining NATO. He regularly highlights his friendship with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (Fidesz-MPSZ) and with Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### THE OPPOSITION COALITION

The Social Democratic Party is running in coalition with 8 other allies. This coalition, called *Rivers of Justice*, brings together the Democratic Party of Istria (IDS), the Alliance of Primorje-Gorski (PGS), the Reformists, the Centre Party (Centar), the Workers' Front (DO i SIP), the Civic-Liberal Alliance (GLAS) and the Peasant Party (HSS).

It has announced that if it wins on 17 April, its first actions will be to sack public prosecutor Ivan Turudic and cancel the Lex AP bill, which proposes to punish the unauthorised disclosure of investigative documents or evidence with up to 3 years' imprisonment.

The liberal Fokus party has chosen not to join the coalition led by the Social Democrats. "I am aware that the Social Democratic Party is aiming for victory, but we find it unacceptable that the price to be paid should be the undermining of the constitutional order, assaults in the public arena and political demonstrations. This is why Fokus will go its own way", declared Davor Nadi, leader of the party. He regretted the absence

of discussions on an electoral programme. *Mozemo* has also decided to go it alone, also unhappy with the behaviour of the President of the Republic.

### CAN THE DEMOCRATIC UNION WIN THE ELECTION?

Following Zoran Milanovic's announcement, Andrej Plenkovic, outgoing Prime Minister, warned against a candidate who could throw Croatia "into the arms of Russia". "At exactly the time when elections are being held in Russia, is it a question of taking Croatia out of the Western community, out of the European Union, out of NATO, out of the partnership with the United States, and sending it into the arms of Russia?" he asked, referring to the head of state's decision to stand in the general elections.

Andrej Plenkovic justified the decision to hold general elections in the spring rather than in the autumn, which had been envisaged for a time, by the fact that he wanted them to take place before the summer season, which is particularly important in a country that is highly dependent on tourism, accounting for almost a fifth of GDP.

Andrej Plenkovic highlighted his record of nearly 8 years at Croatia's helm. "We have preserved social cohesion and increased salaries by 60% and pensions by €220," he said. "The number of people in employment is the highest in the country since 1991, and the unemployment rate is 6.5%, the lowest in the country's history", he added. He promised to increase the salaries of 245,000 civil servants and pledged that the average salary in Croatia would reach €1,600, i.e. 80% of the European average, and that the minimum gross salary would be €1,250 by the end of the next legislature.

The outgoing Prime Minister announced the adoption of new energy aid measures, indicating that his government would stabilise gas, electricity, and fuel prices. He also announced new measures to help pensioners (a 20% increase in pensions). All those receiving pensions of up to €840 will be included in this measure. The smallest pensions will receive the most assistance, affecting around 800,000 people.

The Democratic Union has chosen "For all challenges" as its slogan for the elections on 17 April.

### THE CROATIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The *Hrvatski Sabor*, the Croatian parliament, has been unicameral since 2001, when the *Chamber of Counties* was abolished. It has around 150 MPs. The number of MPs varies from one legislature to the next but cannot be fewer than 100 or more than 160. MPs are elected every 4 years by proportional representation in 10 constituencies, each of which elects 14 people. An eleventh constituency covers Croatians living abroad (and who have a residence in the country), who elect 3 MPs. A twelfth constituency covers the whole country and elects 8 MPs representing the 22 national minorities recognised by the government: 3 seats for Serbs, 1 for Italians, 1 for Hungarians, 1 for Czechs and Slovaks, 1 for Albanians, Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Slovenes and 1 for Austrians, Bulgarians, Germans, Jews, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Ukrainians and Vlachs.

The nationality of voters belonging to national minorities is registered at birth on the basis of a declaration by their parents but can be changed at any time up to two weeks before the general elections. On entering their polling station, minority voters choose whether to take part in the elections as members of their minority and therefore vote in the twelfth constituency, or to vote for the candidates of the constituency to which their polling station is attached.

A political party must obtain at least 5% of the vote to be represented in Parliament. Seats are distributed using the d'Hondt method. MPs are elected by multi-mandate proportional representation on semi-blocked lists. Voters can cast a limited form of preferential vote for a candidate on the list for which they are voting. This measure, introduced in 2015, allows candidates who have won more than 10% of the total votes allocated to their party in their constituency to be placed at the top of the list and to be allocated a seat as a priority in the event that their party wins one. All electoral lists must include a minimum of 40% women candidates. To be allowed to take part in the ballot,

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independent lists must obtain the signatures of at least 500 voters and lists representing national minorities a minimum of 100.

Croatians also elect their President of the Republic every 5 years by direct universal suffrage. On 5 January 2020,

Zoran Milanovic (SDP) won with 52.66% of the vote ahead of the outgoing Head of State, the independent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who was supported by the Democratic Union (47.34% of the vote). Just over half of Croatians (54.99%) turned out at the polls for this 2nd round of voting.

### Results of the general elections in Croatia on 5 July 2020

Turnout: 46.44%

Political Parties	Number of votes	% of votes cast	Seats
<b>Democratic Union (HDZ)</b>	621 035	37.26	66
<b>Coalition for a New Beginning led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP)</b>	414 645	24.87	41
<b>Miroslav Skoro's Patriotic Movement (Domovinski Pokret, DPMS)-Sovereign Coalition</b>	181 493	10.89	16
<b>Most-Nezavisnih Lista</b>	123 194	7.39	8
<b>(Bridge-Independent Lists)</b>	116 483	6.99	7
<b>Left-Green Coalition</b>	66 399	3.98	3
<b>Centre Party (Centar)</b>	21 727	1.30	1
<b>Croatian People's Party-Liberal Democrats (HNS-LD)</b>	16 900	1.01	1
<b>People's Party-Reformists (NS-R)</b>	143 810	6.31	0
<b>Others</b>			8

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Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

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