

Right-wing nationalists regain Croatian presidency

Paul Mitchell
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Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was inaugurated as president on February 15. Her surprise, wafer-thin victory over Ivo Josipović—who is allied to the ruling Social Democratic Party (SDP)—makes it likely that the HDZ will win the general election later this year.

Just four years ago, in 2011, the SDP won a landslide victory over the HDZ, but since then it has pursued anti-working class policies, imposed austerity measures and cut public spending, driving the country into a seventh year of recession. (See: EU imposes harsh austerity on Croatia, its newest member)

The employment rate is among the EU's lowest and unemployment is around 18 percent and among young people (excluding students) is close to 50 percent. A growing number are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which already affects almost one third of the population. Wages continue to decline, with over half of employees receiving less than 5,000 kunas (€650) a month.

In the first round of the presidential election in December, Grabar-Kitarović received 37.2 percent of the vote, narrowly losing to Josipović's 38.5 percent. Ivan Vilibor Sinčić from the anti-eviction Human Wall movement polled 16.4 percent and Milan Kujundžić from Alliance for Croatia, a coalition of extreme nationalist and fascist parties 6.3 percent.

Because none of the candidates won more than 50 percent of the vote, a run-off election was held on January 11, in which Grabar-Kitarović scraped in with 50.7 percent of the vote.

The turnout for the first round was just 47.1 percent, an indication of the disconnect between the working population and the two main political parties that have alternated power over the last two decades. There is little to choose between them, with both espousing Croatian nationalism and an unwavering commitment to austerity.

The main role of the president is in the field of foreign affairs and as head of the armed forces, but Grabar-Kitarović made clear she was going to intervene in domestic matters. "We have come a long way but we have to completely change our current economic paradigm," she declared. "We must overcome party interests and implement changes that cannot be postponed. We must stop living off the money we're borrowing from future generations."

Grabar-Kitarović promised to continue the legacy of the late President Franjo Tuđman, who founded the HDZ in 1989. The party's extreme nationalism helped to hasten the fragmentation of Yugoslavia and its collapse into years of bloody civil war. Despite the perilous implications of Tuđman's demands for secession from the Yugoslav Federation, the US, Germany, Britain and France saw the independence of Croatia as best serving their own interests following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. There was no further value in upholding the unity of Yugoslavia, which, since the split between Stalin and Tito, had performed a valuable function as a buffer against a Soviet thrust into the Mediterranean. With the demise of the USSR, the Western powers regarded Yugoslavia's old, centralised state structure as an obstacle to the privatisation of state-owned industry and the penetration of Western capital.

They considered Tuđman an ally in breaking open these structures and limiting Serbian [and hence Russian] influence in the Balkans. Thus Slobodan Milošević was cast as the sole villain and Serbia was categorised as a "rogue state", while Tuđman, despite his authoritarianism and racist opinions, was portrayed in the most favourable light.

Since then the West has continued to see Croatia as a bulwark against Russia in the Western Balkans, hastened its integrating into NATO and the EU (it joined in July 2013 as the 28th member state) and cultivated its

politicians.

After graduating from Los Alamos High School in New Mexico in 1986 Grabar-Kitarović returned to Yugoslavia to complete a degree at Zagreb University. In 1993, she became an adviser, and then senior adviser, to then Deputy Foreign Minister Ivo Sanader, who assumed leadership of the HDZ following Tudjman's death in 2000. Grabar-Kitarović became Sanader's protégé, but has had to distance herself from him more recently. Last year, he was sentenced to a nine-year jail sentence after being convicted for embezzling millions of kunas whilst in office. The charges against Sanader threw the HDZ into crisis and contributed to it losing power to the SDP in 2011. (See: Croatia's ruling party in crisis).

From 1995 to 1997, Grabar-Kitarović served as head of North American relations in the Croatian Foreign Minister. After a spell at the Croatian embassy in Canada, she attended George Washington University as a Fulbright scholar in 2002–2003, then Harvard University and the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

In 2003 she became an HDZ member of the Croatian parliament, Minister of European integration, and then Foreign Minister from 2005 to 2008—overseeing Croatia's entry into NATO. In 2008 she stood next to US President George W. Bush as he signed the accession documents at the White House.

US cables from that period released by Wikileaks show the very close relationship between Grabar-Kitarović and US officials. One, for example, from 2007 reports a meeting with Undersecretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns who “then turned to domestic issues that Croatia should address... FM [Foreign Minister] Grabar-Kitarović responded that Croatia is aware of these problems and is working to resolve them.”

That Grabar-Kitarović was seen as a valuable asset and conduit for US policy was demonstrated in her appointment as Croatia's Ambassador to the US from 2008 to 2011 and then as Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy at NATO until 2014.

Her call to change Croatia's “current economic paradigm” chimes with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Commission. In November the IMF warned, “Reform fatigue is a risk, especially in view of approaching presidential and parliamentary elections.” It called for “steadfast fiscal consolidation” (i.e., more austerity) and “significant additional reforms.”

The measures demanded included implementing the

second phase of the labour law reform, reviewing the wage-setting system and streamlining public wage bonuses, improving the effectiveness and transparency of the social protection system (i.e., cut benefits), reducing access to early retirement, taking forward retirement age reform (i.e., reduce pensions), reforming the health sector, restructuring the local government system and state-owned enterprises and reducing their role in the economy.

Last year, Independent Croatian Unions President Kresimir Sever warned, “What those in power should be afraid of are spontaneous unrest and going out in the streets. While it is organised by the unions, they are under surveillance.”

This was a plea to the ruling elite not to forget the vital role the trade unions were performing in stifling popular opposition. With Grabar-Kitarović's election, Sever said “he expects even better cooperation” with her than he had with Josipović and that “we will find in her a strong champion for workers' rights, for decent wages and decent working conditions.”

The election campaign has heated up with both the SDP and HDZ trying to outdo each other in stoking up Croat nationalism, seizing on the provocative statements of Serb nationalist Vojislav Seselj following his release from The Hague on the grounds of terminal ill health.

The SDP government is attempting to reduce support for the Human Wall movement by introducing an “emergency” debt-relief initiative named “Fresh Start” this month. Many Croatians—an estimated 317,000 household and businesses—have had their bank accounts blocked and are unable to get credit. However, the proposals will only apply to around 60,000 people, with an income of less than 1,250 kuna (€160) a month and debt of less than 35,000 kuna (€4,500).



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