

Political stalemate following Croatian parliamentary election

Markus Salzmann
12 November 2015

The November 8 parliamentary election in Croatia has led to a political stalemate. The right-wing Patriotic Coalition, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), under former secret service chief Tomislav Karamarko, won 59 seats. The Croatia is Growing Coalition, anchored by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the previous majority in parliament, took 56. The latter coalition had 73 seats in the last parliament.

A majority in the *Hrvatski sabor* (Croatian parliament) requires 76 seats. The recently formed party, Bridge of Independent Lists (MOST), which advocates a neo-liberal program, won 19 seats and can now play the role of “kingmaker”.

The HDZ conducted a vile campaign based on crude nationalism at the expense of refugees. Since mid-September, some 330,000 refugees have crossed the Balkan state. The former Social Democratic-led government is responsible for the terrible conditions they faced. For months refugees were forced to march by foot to the Slovenian border. Now camps have been set up, but basic provisions and services—food, sanitation, medical care—are in short supply.

Leading figures in the HDZ have called for the construction of fences at crossings along the country’s 240-kilometre [150-mile] border with Serbia. In October Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (HDZ) met with Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán and praised the latter’s draconian policies against migrants. In a letter addressed to the HDZ’s final election campaign rally, the ultra-reactionary Orbán called for support for Karamarko.

The HDZ used the refugee crisis to whip up nationalist sentiments against its neighbours and gave leading places in its list of candidates to veterans of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia as part of an effort to secure the votes of right-wing circles.

For its part, the Social Democrats adopted a similar strategy. The party’s leading candidate, the former prime minister Zoran Milanović, severely criticised Serbia, claiming that the country was responsible for the high number of refugees seeking to travel through Croatia.

Karamarko epitomises the orientation of the HDZ. In common with Grabar-Kitarović, Karamarko stands in the tradition of the former head of state, Franjo Tuđman, who founded the HDZ in 1989. The nationalist policy of Tuđman, with the full backing of the German government and its intelligence service (BND), contributed significantly to the break-up of Yugoslavia and the region’s descent into bloody civil war.

Karamarko was active in Catholic student organizations before joining the HDZ in the early 1990s. In 1982 he came into conflict with the Yugoslav government after raising a Croatian flag in the Vatican. The Catholic Church in Croatia has remained a bastion of the far right. Last August the chairman of the Croatian Bishops’ Conference, Zelimir Puljić, spoke out in favour of introducing the fascist Ustashe salute in the Croatian army. In World War II the Ustashe collaborated with the Nazis in the liquidation of at least 400,000 Serbs, Jews and Roma.

In 1991 Karamarko headed the cabinet of the government of Josip Manolić, regarded as a right-wing hardliner within the HDZ. When the two men fell out, bitter fighting ensued between rival wings in the party between 2002 and 2010, and Karamarko assumed senior positions in the police and secret service. In 2011 he re-entered the political arena and the following year took over as HDZ leader from Jadranka Kosor.

The party to make the most gains in the recent election was the relatively new Bridge, led by the

36-year-old Dalmatian politician Božo Petrov. The party is just three years old and won 13.2 percent of the popular vote and 19 seats. The party represents a pro-European Union (EU) program and favours a program of privatisations and draconian austerity measures.

Both the HDZ and the SDP carried out radical “reforms” before Croatia’s entry into the EU in July 2013. Today 16 percent of Croats and more than 50 percent of young people are officially unemployed. The country has been in a recession for the past seven years. State debt stands at 89.2 percent of GDP this year and is expected to rise to above 91 percent in 2016.

Bridge took advantage of the general disgust with both the HDZ and the SDP. It accused the two parties of being incapable of reform, because they were both only concerned with filling the pockets of their own officials. The old parties were only interested, declared the Bridge campaign, in providing their backers with lucrative posts in the administration and state-owned enterprises. All of which was no doubt true.

“Public confidence in traditional political parties is decreasing”, explains the journalist Drazen Curic. “They are looking for a new option. And when things do not change quickly in the major parties, then the result will be the so-called Slovenian syndrome. In Slovenia the last three elections have been won by parties founded just a short time before.”

Four years ago the SDP won the election with 40 percent of the vote, with the HDZ trailing behind with 24 percent. At the time, the very existence of the HDZ was in doubt following a massive corruption scandal. Now the HDZ is back as winner of the election due to the rotten, unpopular policies of the SDP. The SDP increased the retirement age last year from 64 to 67 years and agreed with Brussels to reduce its budget deficit from 4.6 to 3 percent.

Petrov, the Bridge leader, has sought to commit both the HDZ and SDP to even more drastic austerity measures. He has agreed to tolerate a minority government, but only if it implements harsh reforms. If the government wavers from this course it will be toppled, he asserts.

Petrov was formerly mayor of the town of Metkovi?, where he sharply cut the city budget. Core elements of his “reform program” are massive job cuts in the public sector, the privatisation of the remaining state-owned enterprises and the implementation of the austerity

measures demanded by the EU and international financial institutions.

At the same time Bridge also plays the nationalist card and calls for greater protections for the country against refugees. The Croatian political scientist Nenad Zakosek said on Deutschlandfunk that the party closest to Bridge was the German far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact