

Croatia: Right-wing Social Democrat wins first round of presidential elections

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The first round of the presidential election in the newest EU member state Croatia was won by the Zoran Milanović, the Social Democratic candidate (SDP). There will now be a run-off vote on January 5, in which Milanović will compete against the right-wing incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović from the governing party HDZ.

Milanović received about 30 percent of the votes, while Grabar-Kitarović received about 27 percent. The non-party right-wing extremist Miroslav Škoro won 24 percent of the vote and was supported by various nationalist and openly fascist parties. All other candidates, who mostly represented regional or other small parties, lay far behind and played no role.

Although the president's duties are essentially ceremonial, a defeat for the HDZ would weaken it considerably in the run up to the parliamentary elections next year. Moreover, Croatia will take over the presidency of the European Union from January 1, 2020 and also aims to join the eurozone.

All candidates are deeply hated and discredited among broad sections of the population. Accordingly, turnout in the elections was barely 39 percent.

Grabar-Kitarović's HDZ forms the government in Zagreb, which under Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stands for a ruthless right-wing course. Brutal "push-backs," i.e., illegal deportations, across the border to Bosnia-Herzegovina, are unofficially ordered by the government. At home, the government is constantly harassing refugees and foreigners. In recent months, tensions with Serbia have again increased.

In order to meet the demands of the EU and IMF, the HDZ is implementing anti-social reforms. This year, a pension "reform" was passed, labour laws tightened, and further social cuts implemented. At the same time, the government is massively increasing military

spending. Currently, 6.7 billion kuna (€900 million) are being spent on the military; the budget is to be increased by 40 percent by 2024. Other NATO demands include the modernisation of equipment.

Most recently, the government, in cooperation with the courts, attacked workers' basic democratic rights. For example, a strike by road workers was banned. Last year, a strike at Croatia Airlines was banned on the grounds that it would damage the company.

Grabar-Kitarović is now vying for the votes of Škoro and the extreme right in the run-off vote. The folk musician and businessman Škoro was himself a member of parliament for the HDZ for a long time. Like other former HDZ politicians, he came into conflict with the party leadership over the move to join the EU. Meanwhile, he is active in fascist circles that supported his candidacy. Among other things, Škoro has called for soldiers to be stationed at the border to keep immigrants out and to further intensify the already inhumane border policy. He also spoke out in favour of pardoning convicted war criminals.

The acting president deliberately held her final rally in the city of Vukovar, in the east of the country. She is being glorified by Croatian nationalists as a symbol of Serbian atrocities for the siege by Serbian soldiers during fighting in the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. This alone was a clear signal to the extreme right around Škoro.

The HDZ itself is the product of aggressive Croatian nationalism. The party was founded in 1989 under Franjo Tuđman, who only a few years later took the country into a bloody civil war and, as president and army supreme commander, was personally responsible for the expulsion of 400,000 Serbs from Croatia. Although the HDZ adopted an EU-friendly course, to serve the interests of the narrow upper class, the

nationalist forces always set the tone.

The fact that Milanović received the most votes has nothing to do with broad popular support. From 2011 to 2016, the former diplomat headed a social democratic government, which took the country into the EU in 2013. Before that, the social democrats and HDZ had pushed through brutal cuts and privatisation measures fuelling unemployment and social misery.

During this period, the government undertook harsh actions against refugees on the Balkan route. Milanović had the border sealed off and deported refugees to Hungary, knowing full well that the right-wing Orban government had set up concentration camps in the border area. After the election defeat in 2016, Milanović campaigned for the nationalist Kosovar president Edi Rama, among others.

During the election campaign, Milanović promised “normality,” trying to present himself as a moderate candidate who stood against nationalism. Croatia must finally put behind it the war against Serbia, which brought death and devastation to the country from 1991 to 1995, but also independence, he said.

In fact, Milanović stands for the same reactionary nationalist politics as the HDZ. In 2015, he described Serbs as “barbarians” and declared Croatia was “older and wiser.” Before the last parliamentary elections, he held a big military parade in Zagreb to mark the anniversary of the reconquest of Serbian Krajina.

No matter which candidate wins the run-off election in early January, they will speak for the reactionary social and political interests of a ruling elite which, as in other countries, is reacting to the growth of class struggle with a sharp turn to the right.

For a long time, the population has expressed growing rejection of all the establishment parties responsible for the social and political catastrophe. Up to the beginning of December, teachers had been on strike for 36 days and 20,000 people demonstrated in Zagreb. Almost all schools remained closed, and many students joined the protests. It was the biggest strike since the country’s independence almost 30 years ago. Teachers used it to protest against low wages and unsustainable working conditions.

Only after extensive government efforts, with the help of the trade unions, could the strike be stifled. The agreement reached provides for a wage increase of about 6 percent over two years. This will only further

consolidate low wages and will not change the bad working conditions and abysmal provision of equipment in schools.

The trade unions, working closely with various party cliques, presented this betrayal as a victory. “We have made a good compromise, which enabled us to achieve what we wanted from the beginning,” said Branimir Mihalinec, head of the teachers’ union NSZSSH.

Premier Plenković was also satisfied with the result. Under no circumstances should the strike continue or be extended, he said, as protests and work stoppages are becoming increasingly frequent in other companies and sectors. Since October, for example, there have also been strikes at the industrial company Djuro Djaković. The manufacturer of locomotives, freight cars, tanks and other military and construction vehicles has been in financial difficulties for some time.



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