

Social Democrat Milanović wins presidential election in Croatia

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Social Democrat Zoran Milanović won a run-off vote for the presidency in Croatia on Sunday. He unexpectedly won against the incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who ran for the right-wing Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ).

With 52.7 percent of the votes, Milanović's lead over Grabar-Kitarović (47.3 percent) was quite clear. The Social Democrat had already won the first round in December. Turnout in the run-off, at 55 percent, was higher than in the first round. Although the office of president is largely ceremonial, the election in the newest EU member state is regarded as an indicator of the likely results in the parliamentary elections set for October of this year.

Milanović's victory is above all a rejection of the HDZ's right-wing, ultranationalist policies. In the run-off election, the incumbent had hoped to receive the votes of those supporting the extreme right-wing singer Miroslav Škoro who received 24 percent of the votes in the first round. Former HDZ member Škoro openly advocated pardoning convicted Croatian war criminals.

Grabar-Kitarović directed her entire campaign towards right-wing extremist and openly fascist elements. The band Thompson, which regularly chants the slogans of the fascist Ustasha at concerts, called for her election to "stop the communists".

A few days before the election, the HDZ published a video in which Julienne Busic called for the election of Grabar-Kitarović. In 1976, Julienne Busic, together with her husband Zvonko Busic and two other accomplices, had hijacked a passenger plane on a flight from New York to Chicago in order to advocate for Croatia's independence from Tito's Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. HDZ deputy chairman Milijan Brkić declared Busic a "Croatian heroine".

Moreover, the election campaign was marked by the

ugly witch-hunting of refugees. In recent months, the HDZ has intensified its measures against refugees on the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nationalist rhetoric towards Serbia has also increased. It has become increasingly clear that the HDZ—contrary to all assertions—has never abandoned its arch-reactionary, nationalist roots and continues to pursue the policies that led to the civil war of the 1990s.

Political analyst Davor Gjenero told the news agency BIRN that many had voted for Milanović in protest against the HDZ candidate's "deeply nationalist campaign". The biggest loser of the election was the right wing of the HDZ, he said.

The election could trigger fierce conflicts within the HDZ. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is controversial, and the party is deeply divided on EU issues. There are signs that the party's ultra-right wing could try to wrest power from Plenković. One potential candidate is Miro Kovač, close confidant of the first Croatian president Franjo Tuđman. Kovač worked in Tuđman's notorious secret service and has close contacts with open fascists.

Under these circumstances, Milanović was perceived as a lesser evil. He won by a wide margin in all major cities: Zagreb, Split, Osijek and Rijeka. More than 60 percent of the inhabitants of the capital voted for him; in Istria it was over 80 percent. His opponent could only win a majority of votes in rural areas and among Croats living abroad.

From 2011 to 2016, Milanović himself had headed the Croatian government, which took the country into the EU in 2013. Previously, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and HDZ had pushed through brutal cuts and privatisations, fuelling unemployment and social misery. During this period, the government took harsh action 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.

During the presidential election campaign, Milanovi? promised “normality”. He tried to present himself as a moderate candidate who stood against nationalism. Croatia must finally leave behind the war against Serbia, which had brought death and devastation to the country from 1991 to 1995, but also independence, he said.

In fact, Milanovi? does not stand for a fundamentally different policy than the HDZ. In 2015, he had called Serbs “barbarians” and declared that Croatia was “older and wiser”. Before the last parliamentary elections, he had held a big military parade in Zagreb on the anniversary of the conquest of Serbian Krajina.

Milanovi? combines the right-wing policies with a pro-European course, so his election was mostly well received in European capitals. At the turn of the year, Croatia took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months. This period will probably include the withdrawal of Britain from the EU. “It is ironic that the newest member state has to deal with the [UK] withdrawal,” said Irena Andrassy, Croatia’s permanent representative to the EU, at a recent event in Brussels.

At the same time, preparations for the EU’s future financial framework (MFF) are on the agenda, over which there are already fierce conflicts between member states. The government in Zagreb is in favour of an increase in contributions from EU states, which many strictly reject.

Milanovi?’s victory will fuel political conflicts until the parliamentary elections in autumn. Both Milanovi? and Plenkovi? have already pointed to various sources of conflict, above all tensions over foreign policy. “Conflicts between the prime minister and the president on foreign policy issues are likely,” noted analyst Gjenero. For example, there are different views on military engagement in Afghanistan, where Milanovi? advocates the withdrawal of Croatian troops, while Plenkovi? rejects this.

At the same time, the representatives of HDZ and SDP agree on opposing the growing protest in the working class with all their strength. Recently, there was a nationwide teachers’ strike, in which tens of

thousands protested against low wages and the precarious conditions in schools.

Meanwhile, economic tensions in the country are growing. Parts of the arms manufacturer Djuro Djakovic face insolvency proceedings, with several hundred workers going on strike in recent months to obtain outstanding wages. Financiers and the government are currently negotiating a restructuring plan for the company, which is partly under public ownership. Many jobs are at stake there, as well as at the state-owned airline Croatia Airlines, where preparations are being made for privatisation.



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