

## Signs of Hope in Croatia

**Article by Tena Prelec**

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Promising results for Green and like-minded forces in Croatia and Montenegro are cause for cautious optimism despite an uphill battle against corruption and discontent elsewhere in the region.

In summer 2020, Croatia was one of the first countries in Europe to hold elections while the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was paralysing societies and politics across the globe. The Croatian government handled the pandemic well in the spring, bringing new daily infections to zero in May. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković thus decided to cash in and ran an efficient campaign that portrayed his ministers and the coronavirus task force as superheroes.

The gamble paid off as the incumbent centre-right Croatian Democratic Union easily won the July election, forming a government with the backing of representatives from the national minorities. For the Social Democrats, the traditional opposition party, this election was the worst result since the 1990s, when the post-Yugoslav war wounds were still too fresh for a non-nationalistic party (and the successor of the Yugoslav Communist Party, at that) to make a strong showing.

On the other hand, the biggest surprise was the performance of the Green-Left coalition *Možemo! (We Can!)*. Born as a civic activism platform, the coalition graduated from its activity in the Zagreb City Council, where they have been present since 2017, ceaselessly probing the mayor's many corruption scandals. Three years on, these activists turned politicians joined forces with other left-wing parties to achieve an outcome that exceeded the rosier expectations: seven seats in the national parliament.

This result was a galvanising beacon of hope for like-minded constituencies in South Eastern Europe. Indeed, another Green success followed shortly thereafter: the Montenegrin Green party URA doubled its number of MPs from two to four and became the kingmaker of the new government. It was Montenegro's first democratic transition of power in its modern history.

Elsewhere in the region, the situation is not as auspicious. In Serbia, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party wiped out the competition at the June parliamentary election characterised by a boycott by most opposition parties. Under the increasingly autocratic rule of Aleksandar Vučić, environmental problems have increased considerably. Air pollution has risen and non-transparent foreign investments in heavy industry have gone hand in hand with deteriorating environmental and living standards. The next opportunity for Green and progressive parties is the 2022 local election in the capital, Belgrade.

In Croatia, the Green breeze this summer did not mark a watershed in the everyday life of the country. New corruption cases fill the newspapers every few weeks, anti-Serb sentiments are raging, the judiciary is still urging for a complete makeover, and GDP fell 15 per cent in the second quarter. Croatia relies heavily on tourism, which is worth almost 20 per cent of GDP. This dependence underpinned a daring relaxation of Covid-19 rules in the summer. The government opened up Croatia's borders to visitors from all over the world, turning the country into an epidemiological red zone by late August. What seems to have somewhat changed, however, is the level of debate in the Croatian parliament. The tenacious probing of corruption scandals by several new MPs gives scope for some cautious optimism about transparency going forward.



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