

New worries for Brussels after the triumphant re-election of the Croatian president

by Pierre Lévy,* France



Pierre Lévy. (Bild <https://ruptures-presse.fr>)

(CH-S) In the past months and in the months to come, government elections have been and will be held in several EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe. This concerns Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria, Germany and

the Czech Republic.

Pierre Lévy is a French journalist who has been critically following and describing developments in the European Union for many years.

In this article, he analyses the political situation in the aftermath of the recent presidential election in Croatia.

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On 12 January, the Croatian president was triumphantly re-elected in the second round with 74.7 per cent of the vote. Zoran Milanović had only just missed out on victory in the first round, with 49.1 per cent. Five years ago, he only received 29.5 per cent of the vote in the first round, before going on to win by a narrow margin with 52.7 per cent.

Never before has Croatia, a country of 3.8 million people that emerged from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, elected a head of state with such a high margin. Zoran Milanović, who served as a social democratic prime minister from 2011 to 2016, was backed by a coalition that included his former party but forged his popularity through a tone that his opponents decry as “populist”. Some even refer to him as the “Trump of the Balkans”.

He has mainly argued with corruption scandals that have largely shaken the current govern-



Zoran Milanović casting his vote on 12 January 2025. (Image screenshot)

ment. For example, the health minister was arrested in November on suspicion of money laundering, abuse of office and illegal influence peddling.

The government, and in particular Prime Minister *Andrej Plenkovic*, suffered a bitter defeat. The candidate they supported, *Dragan Primorac*, a former education minister, received less than 26 per cent of the vote in the election on 12 January, which was characterised by a low turnout of 44.2 per cent of registered voters.

The governing party has thus suffered another setback after losing 4.1 percentage points (34.4 per cent) in the parliamentary elections last April. The HDZ was the party of the “father of independence”, *Franjo Tudjman*, and has ruled the country with few exceptions since 1991. It was the HDZ that put Croatia on the path to the EU, which it joined in 2013 as the last country.

Plenkovic, who has led the government since 2016, is a staunch supporter of European integration and NATO. His enmity with the head of state is well known, especially since the latter tried to stand as a member of parliament in the prime minister’s own constituency last year. The Constitutional Court ultimately prevented this unexpected candidacy, which prompted the president to call the judges “uneducated peasants”.

Critical statements about Brussels

However, it is not the president’s often provocative directness that is annoying the government

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and the right-wing majority, but rather his very critical statements towards Brussels; for example, he denounces the European Commission as “autocratic and unrepresentative”. Above all, his refusal to involve the country in military support for Kiev makes many voters appreciate his role as a counterweight.

While the head of state does not hold real power, which lies with the government, he represents Croatia abroad and has a say in the implementation of foreign policy. He is also the supreme commander of the armed forces.

This gives him a certain amount of influence and has allowed him to oppose the delivery of weapons to Ukraine and the participation of the national military in the training of Ukrainian soldiers under the aegis of NATO. “As long as I am president of the republic, no Croatian soldier will fight in other people’s wars,” he recently made clear.

Of course, that was all it took to spark Plenkovic’s anger. The head of government condemned his rival’s “dictatorial and pharaonic” style and accused him of playing into the hands of Moscow, alienating Zagreb from its Euro-Atlantic allies and thus destabilising the country. In short, the Prime Minister warned shortly before the election, “the difference between Zoran Milanovic and Dragan Primorac is simple: one leads us to the east and the other to the west”. Plenkovic emphasised: “We need a president who wants to anchor Croatia in the west.”

The president had condemned Russia’s decision to start a war in Ukraine. But his refusal to let the country take on its share of the support for Kiev led to accusations that he was a “Moscow puppet”.

The fact that almost three quarters of the electorate voted for his re-election under these circumstances is anything but trivial. Of course, the corruption scandals and the economic and social situation influenced the voters. Croatia really does have the highest inflation in the euro-zone. And emigration to other countries is massive, leading to a serious labour shortage in the country.

But the rejection of the alignment with EU and NATO pressure certainly played a role in the election, especially since the president has dip-

lomatic and military prerogatives, in contrast to domestic politics.

Increasingly critical positions on support for Kiev

With its vote on 12 January, Croatia seems to be joining the camp of EU states in which military and political support for Kiev is significantly controversial – a camp that is now becoming increasingly strong.

Hungary set a good example when Prime Minister *Viktor Orbán* triumphed on this basis in the 2022 elections. Slovak Prime Minister *Robert Fico* (who, like Mr Milanovic, comes from the social democratic family, which rejected him) has followed a similar path, especially since Bratislava is working to resume Russian gas supplies. In this country, a poll found that support for the idea that Russia is a security threat has dropped from 68 per cent to 49 per cent.

In Austria, the *Freedom Party* (FPÖ), which advocates peaceful relations with Moscow, could win the chancellorship, even though there is immense pressure to prevent this.

In Romania, the presidential elections in November 2024 were simply cancelled after the “pro-Russian” candidate unexpectedly won; they are now scheduled for May this year.

Bulgarian voters will most likely go to the polls for the eighth time in four years as parties considered close to the Kremlin are gaining strength. Even the very pro-EU *Boyko Borisov*, who ruled the country for a long time, has just questioned the wisdom of signing a cooperation agreement between Sofia and Kiev, despite the fact that it has been negotiated for many months.

Finally, in the coming months, Germany and the Czech Republic will call their voters to the polls in February and October respectively. In the first case, the AfD, which radically criticises the current government’s commitment to war, could achieve an unprecedented result. And in the second case, observers predict a victory for *Andrej Babiš*, who is politically close to Orbán.

However, Croatia has already been added to the list. It is difficult to imagine that this sequence is a mere coincidence.

Source: <https://freeassange.rtdc.live/europa/232985-kroatien/>, 15 January 2025

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