Croatian Presidential Elections 2019-2020: The Anti-Corruption Myth

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Election Analysis

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Winning of the "lesser evil"

Presidential elections held in Croatia on 22 December 2019 (first round) were the seventh presidential elections since Croatian independence in 1991. The presidential elections ended on 5 January 2020 in the second round with Zoran Milanović as the winner with a relative majority of 52.66% of the vote. Milanović defeated the conservative incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who received 47.34% of the vote. This was a disappointment for her party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica,* HDZ), especially because of the upcoming intra-party and parliamentary elections.

Milanović, a member of the main center-left political party in Croatia, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, or SDP), and who had previously served as Prime Minister of Croatia (2011-2016), become the 5th president of Croatia. Western media acclaimed social democrat Zoran Milanović's election victory as a victory for the "left".[1] However, it is more likely a win for the "new extreme center" in Croatia, keeping in mind that during his premiership he "…implemented neoliberal reform of labor law severely slashing workers' rights, introduced a controversial bankruptcy settlement law, and led a final phase of large-scale privatization of public infrastructure and resources".[2] This analysis will show why Milanović's victory must be seen primarily as a consequence of fear on the part of Croatian civil society, who chose the "lesser evil" in order to defend itself from the growing and radicalizing right.

In the first round of the elections held on 22 December 2019, there were 11 candidates for president. I was one of them, representing the Worker's Front and Socialist Labor Party of Croatia. I was officially nominated by the left-wing party the Worker's Front on 18 December 2018 and officially started the campaign on 21 January 2019. The campaign was focused on elaborating and promoting both the idea of radical change in the Croatian economy, and politics approaching democratic socialism of 21st century. I came in eighth place, with 1.14% of the vote and total of 21,387 total votes in the first round of elections.

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[1] France 24. 2020. Leftist former PM Milanovic Wins Croatia Presidential Election, 6 January 2020 (accessed: 8 February 2020).

[2] Čakardić, Ankica and Mislav Stublić. 2020. A new Extreme Center in Croatia. *Jacobin*, 29 January 2020 (accessed: 8 February 2020).

Zoran Milanović finished the first round in first place, with a relative majority of 29.55% of the vote, followed by incumbent president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who received 26.55% of the vote. It was close call for the liberal and left when Miroslav Škoro, a right-wing candidate, finished the first round with 24.55% of the vote. Milanović won with lowest number of votes received by any candidate to date—1,034,170 votes—and with serious doubts that he would have won these elections if Škoro had been his opponent in the second round. Škoro, on the other hand, received the highest percentage of votes for a candidate who did not advance to the run-off, and the highest number of votes as third-place candidate since the 2000 elections. Miroslav Škoro, a famous Croatian pop-folk musician and right-wing politician, was favored by election polls until after the final TV debate. Many people in Croatia felt that as presidential candidate, Miroslav Škoro presented a serious threat for democracy in Croatia. Škoro proposed changes to the Constitution that would give the president greater authority than Franjo Tuđman had in his now-defunct semi-presidential system.[3] The semi-presidential system was overthrown in 2000 when Croatia switched to a parliamentary system. Miroslav Škoro relativized the history of the so-called Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, NDH).[4] As an independent candidate, he was supported by right-wing parties (HSK, Hrast, Most, Green List) and famous public right-wingers, including some members of the HDZ (Stevo Culej). Election polls predicted that Miroslav Škoro would win in the second round with either Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović or Zoran Milanović as his opponents.[5]

Before the debate, Škoro had more than 23% in the election polls,[6] but after the debate he came in with only 18.0%.[7] In the actual elections Škoro received 24.45% of all votes, close to Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Zoran Milanović. Škoro's failure to enter the second round was partially the result of the political attack from the left. However, the irony is that the danger of Škoro wining the elections was the major reason for the relative poor results of the authentic left (including myself). Many voters choose Zoran Milanović in the first round as a "lesser evil," only to make sure that Miroslav Škoro would be eliminated from the second round; before then, polls had predicted poorer results for Milanović.

Political analysts all agree that one of the major reasons for Miroslav Škoro's decline as a result of the debate was his unwillingness to clearly answer my question on the statement he gave earlier that day - that he as president would pardon Tomislav Merčep. Merčep is a war criminal sentenced to five-and-half years in jail for war crimes against civilians in Pakračka poljana in central Croatia in 1991. Merčep is held responsible for the killing of 43 civilians. His division "Merčepovci" was famous for its cruelty and severe torture of victims, including the killing of 12-year-old Aleksandra Zec and her family. Škoro's confusion and clear uneasiness while answering the questions about why he

[3] Duka, Zdenko. 2019. Opasni zahtjevi. Škorine promjene Ustava Hrvatsku svrstavaju uz bok Turskoj i Azerbajdžanu. *Novi list*, 25 June 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[4] KK. 2019. Škoro: prekopat ćemo Jasenovac. *Index*, 16 November 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[5] Bago, Mislav. 2019. Veliko iznenađenje u rejtingu: Grabar- Kitarović, Milanović i Škoro unutar statističke pogreške. *Dnevnik.hr*, 6 December 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[6] Bago, *Veliko iznenađenje u rejtingu: Grabar- Kitarović, Milanović i Škoro unutar statističke pogreške*;
[7] Bago, Mislav. 2019. Posljednje istraživanje uoči izborne šutnje: Milanović i Grabar-Kitarović vode mrtvu trku, Škoro zaostaje. *Dnevnik.hr*, 20 December 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

stated that he, as president, would pardon Merčep definitely played a role in the negative general public perception of him. He said that his willingness to pardon Merčep was "a humanitarian question" because Merčep is old and in bad health. The answer was not very well received among his voters.[8] The media commented that Škoro was "knocked out",[9] his performance looked like the "breakdown",[10] that he was "demasculinized".[11] After the debate, the final polls before elections showed that Miroslav Škoro fell drastically while Zoran Milanović, for the first time, overtook Grabar-Kitarović.[12] The polls themselves probably had an influence on the final result.

Other candidates

Besides these three candidates and myself, there where seven other candidates. Former judge Mislav Kolakušić, now a member of the European Parliament, came in fourth place (5.87%) with fewer votes than the election polls predicted (around 7%). He presented himself as anti-establishment independent candidate focusing on anti-corruption and reduction of the public sector. He promised to lay off 700,000 people in the public sector. He did not manage to win more than the 600,000 votes that he himself proposed as a minimum number of votes for his participation in the next parliamentary elections.

Comedian Dario Juričan, an independent candidate, came in fifth place (4.61%), which was a great surprise. Juričan limited his campaign to anti-corruption satire with only one person at the center of that satire—Zagreb's mayor Milan Bandić, who is suspected in several corruption cases. Juričan's satirical performance resembles the famous Slovenian performance "Three Janšas".[13] He also tried to legally change his name into "Milan Bandić," but he did not manage to do it during the campaign.

Dalija Orešković came in sixth place with 2.90% of the vote. The former chair of the Conflicts of Interest Committee of the Croatian Parliament (2013-2018) was also running on an anti-corruption campaign.

Right-wing populist anti-establishment candidate Ivan Pernar, a member of the Croatian Parliament nominated by the party that is named after him (Party of Ivan Pernar), came in seventh place with 2.31% of the vote.

Dejan Kovač, a candidate of the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLS) received 0.95% of the vote, coming in ninth place. Anto Đapić, an extreme right-wing candidate, received 0.21%, and Nedjeljko Babić, a candidate of a small regional party (HSSČKŠ), received 0.16% of the vote.

[8] Ante Prkačin, Škoro's political adviser, commented on Osječka TV with anger that Škoro made a mistake by framing that answer within a "humanitarian perspective": YouTube. 2020. V&P Tretmann, 7 January 2020 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

[9] Vujica, Darko. 2020. Intervju s Katarinom Peović: Demokratizirati prakse odlučivanja na svim razinama. *Prometej,* 20 January 2020 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

[10] Klancir, Đurđica. 2019. Sad znamo tko je stvaran, a tko projekt: Raspad Škore, Milanović pokazao da mu je stalo, a Kolinda žilavost uz jednu bizarnu izjavu. *Net.hr*, 18 December 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

[11] Šimićević, Hrvoje. 2020. Godina nasilja i pobune. *Novosti*, 3 January 2020 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

[12] R.I. 2019, Zadnja anketa prije izbora: Milanović prestigao Kolindu, Škoro drastično pao. *Index*, 20 December 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

[13] In 2007, three Slovenian performance artists changed their names and surnames to Janez Janša, the Slovenian Prime Minister and right-wing politician. They filmed a documentary about the name change and participated in the Slovenian national elections.

The anti-corruption myth

If we were to identify a theme in the 2019 presidential elections—it would be one of anti-corruption. The focus on anti-corruption reveals the many similarities and overall consensus of the candidates. However, the consensus that corruption is a major problem of Croatia points out how all of the candidates remain within the similar political and economic framework. From right-wing candidates Mislav Kolakušić, Ivan Pernar, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and Miroslav Škoro, to left-wing Dalija Orešković and Dario Juričan, and to center Dejan Kovač and Zoran Milanović, all candidates claimed more or less the same thing: if Croatian politicians have enough strength to eliminate corruption, everything will be better.

Corruption is usually addressed in two ways. First, there is the standard narrative of aspirants for power who see corruption as a problem of greedy, immoral individuals who came to power in order to gain personal benefits. This moral understanding proposes a simple recipe for dealing with the problem of corruption. It is enough that people on election day wisely choose non-corrupt individuals who will then, because of their higher moral ground, change things radically. Corrupt politicians should be overthrown and replaced with new and morally superior ones.

In the latest Croatian elections, candidates for president directly stated or indirectly implied that they themselves present more appropriate persons for the presidential role exactly because of this morality.
Zoran Milanović accused Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović of being a morally corrupt person, surrounded by corrupt individuals (from Zagreb major Milan Bandić, to her political advisers from HDZ), on the other hand, he saw himself as a morally superior future president who would choose non-corrupt associates and politicians that could serve high state positions, such as the President of the Supreme Court or Director of Security and Intelligence. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović did provide solid grounds for accusations of corruption. Not only had she pardoned defendants convicted of economic crimes related to donors in her previous presidential campaign, but she also sang for Milan Bandić at his birthday party, where she stated that she would "bring Bandić cookies in jail," if he were imprisoned.[14]

Nevertheless, Zoran Milanović himself can also be described as a corrupt politician. As premier he defended corrupt members of his party, including the same Milan Badić (then a member of the Social Democratic Party, SDP). Milanović, at the time president of SDP, supported Bandić's candidacy for Zagreb city major in 2009. Milanović also defended other corrupt party members such as Marina Lovrić Merzel (former MP of the county of Sisak, convicted of bribery and money laundering) and Željko Sabo (sentenced for bribery), as well as a corrupt member of another party - Andro Vlahušić from the Croatian People's Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka*, HNS). Vlahušić was sentenced for bribery. Milanović also appointed Tomislav Saucha as a head of the Prime Minister's Office, who was later charged in an affair involving faked travel orders.

[14] Grabar-Kitarović, Kolinda. 2019. Grabar-Kitarović odgovorila kritičarima: Ako Bandića osude, nosit ću mu kolače u zatvor. *RTL.hr*, 2 December 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

Other candidates who did not have any form of political power had more credibility while advocating against corruption. However, their campaigning against corruption implies the same logic of moral disqualification and simplifies the problem and its resolution. Politicians who stand against corruption and derive their credibility only from the fact that they have not previously participated in any form of politics can prove different the moment they step into the shoes of their predecessors.

Dario Juričan was among those that claimed that they were different. His anti-corruption campaign focused only to one person - Zagreb city major Milan Bandić. Juričan's satirical motto was "corruption for all, not only for them/few." Political commentators noted his "Zagreb-centralism," a perspective common to the urban population that does not see beyond the capital city of Croatia, and also his problematic individualization of the guilt—a reduction of the problem to the mentality and character of one person.[15] After his campaign, Juričan made a few comments demonstrating his total incompetence on the issue (he said that corruption is demonstrated by the high non-commercial prices of tram tickets).

Miroslav Škoro described himself as "a man of the people," trying to distinguish himself from corrupt politicians. In his announcement of candidacy, Škoro said that Croatia is governed by two parties with "trading partners," that political "elites have completely alienated themselves from the people," and that "hundreds of thousands of Croatian daughters and sons" are contributing to the prosperity of other countries with their work because they have no chance in Croatia without being a member of one the ruling parties, HDZ or SDP.[16] However, Miroslav Škoro himself gained all of his wealth and power precisely as a member of HDZ, and even today he prospers because of his lucrative contracts with the state.[17]

Such an approach is obviously a simplified populist attempt to win the hearts of people who have little trust in politicians and politics. The second approach, however, is subtler. It starts from the premise that we should not seek the causes for the corruption only in the problematic psychological profile or morality of a politician, but in the formal, procedural, normative opportunities for the corruption—non-transparent procedures, inadequate legal framework, non-existence of systems of control, etc.

Dalija Orešković's platform fits into this category. She also pledges a moral component, seeing herself as morally superior to present politicians. But, she is also a person with experience, and program that proposes concrete legal measures for solving the problem of corruption: the "Plan for Croatia".[18] She presented a draft of the proposal of the strategy for suppression of corruption that includes measures such as fiscal transparency, access to information, use

[15] Radak, Andrea. 2019. Ljevica i logika "manjeg zla". *Slobodni filozofski*, 28 Decembre 2019 (accessed: 16 February 2019).
[16] Škoro, Miroslav. 2019. Miroslav Škoro – izbori predsjednika RH,. *YouTube*, 22 June 2019 (accessed: 8 February 2020).
[17] Đikić, Ivica. 2019. Izbavitelj Škoro. *Novosti*, 28 June 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[18] Orešković, Dalija. 2019. Plan za Hrvatsku. *Startzahrvatsku.hr* (accessed: 28 January 2020).

of information technologies, participation of citizens in the formation of public politics, the formation of an office for the suppression of corruption, and systematic analyses of corruption risks, among other things.

Mislav Kolakušić, a typical right-wing populist, also (to some extent) transcended the narrative of the addressing corrupt individuals with technocratic solutions. He also claimed that he was capable of "solving things" in a legal manner. He ran a strict anti-corruption campaign, claiming that Croatian laws are written for narrow group of people, such as in the case of the specially written law for the company Agrokor (a company that almost went bankrupt until the government stepped in with a law that settled the crisis). Kolakušić founded a non-governmental organization called "Anti-corruption" with the goal of "creating a movement of determined, professional, and responsible people with a final aim to transform the Republic of Croatia into a land that respects justice and fairness".[19] This second approach seems more objective because as it strives to abstract the personal aspect of corruption, it reduces moralization and individualization. However, it still is a simplification that excludes the wider socio-economic basis for corruption.

Corruption and poverty

Corruption presents itself as a serious problem of Croatia today. Croatia is ranked as the most corrupt country in Eastern Europe.[20] However, anti-corruption politics do not address elite power and inequality as the source of systemic corruption.[21] If, hypothetically, corruption practices vanished and meritocratic procedures were established, there is no guarantee that majority of people would prosper and benefit. Corruption in the form of clientelist employment, for example, would not disappear, since the gap between the demand for relatively secure and well-paid work and its social offer in the capitalistic semi-periphery would not be abolished. On the contrary, the gap would even widen with layoff of the workers in the public sector, which every anti-corruption politician promises to do.[22]

Corruption is not only a matter of morals, nor it is an outcome of inadequate legal procedures.[23] Corruption comes form economic underdevelopment, the economically unfavorable position of the domestic economy in the global division of work, a low overall level of employment, huge social inequalities, and a relatively low degree of satisfaction of the basic needs of the population. Corruption tends to thrive amid a culture of impunity and a low degree of

[19] Kolakušić, Mislav. 2019. *Antikorupcija.hr* (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[20] Panopticum. 2019. Croatia – Most Corrupt Country in Eastern EU, 16 October 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[21] Fogel, Benjamin. 2018. Against "Anti-Corruption". *Jacobin*, 10 May 2018 (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[22] Štefan, Hrvoje. 2020. Zapošljavanje „preko veze" u historijskoj i polit-ekonomskoj perspektivi. *Novi Plamen*, 29 January 2020 (accessed: 9 February 2020).
[23] Corruption is perceived from the point of view of the "index of perception of corruption," data issued by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2019). Perception of corruption is nevertheless a subjective category. Distrust in the legal system is related to high trust in EU institutions and the idealization of the Western European countries that are not without corruption scandals. Let us only remember that the ex-president of the European commission Jean-Claude Junker was caught in scandal when he was a prime minister of the Luxembourg. Junker favored private companies (around 300 companies including Amazon, Apple, and Pepsi) by lowering taxes.

development.[24] Corruption emerges from the poverty that limits the possibilities for having a job and steady payment that can satisfy basic human needs such as living space, healthy food, healthcare, and education.

Toxic cynicism is typical for systemic corruption and will in any case make it easier for a public official to justify corrupt exchanges. Illicit transactions become expressions of "friendship" and "solidarity" rather than self-interest (Fogel). Anti-corruption politics, unfortunately, often delegitimize the struggle of the masses as a vehicle for meaningful change. Anti-corruption focuses on moral and technocratic framework and dismisses radical change—profound changes within the political and economic framework—as Utopian.
29 years since the beginning of the transition from socialism to capitalism, Croatia finds itself at the forefront of Europe. The country has been to a great extent deindustrialized, with high numbers of unemployed people and even more at risk of losing their jobs. Croatia has seen a huge emigration of its working population. About 300,000 people have emigrated, around 14% of the population, compared to the EU average of 3,8%.[25] Since the beginning of the 2007/08 crisis, every 11th working position has been lost.

Atypical contracts (3 month contracts) make up 6.9% of the contracts in Croatia, while the European average is 2.3%.[26] France has the second-highest average, with 4.8% of employment based on temporary or atypical contracts. At the beginning of the crisis in Croatia, only 12.3% of workers were temporarily employed—today, that number has doubled. 22.2% of Croatian workers work in precarious job positions.

The Croatian economy is uncritically integrated in global markets, and current politics are deepening the dependence on international economic, financial, and political centers; i.e. the state is reducing the degree of freedom of management of the conditions of social and economic development. Croatia is consistently loosing control of strategic companies, and ruling parties lack systematic industrial policies or plans for stopping deindustrialization (currently, Croatia is loosing its shipbuilding industry, one of its last export industries). Current politics lack a plan for putting an end to the trade deficit (and consequently, to rise of external debt).

Increased corruption is related to poor socio-economic indicators. However, mainstream anti-corruption politics do not address the problem of the economic system itself, but only peripheral outcomes of that system—symptoms of economic issues. The majority of the opposition candidates remained within the already established framework of capitalist methods of production; more specifically, those of capitalism on the periphery of Europe. The presidential campaign remained more or less within the given political and economic framework, and did not address the socio-economic problems that lead to corruption.

[24] Fogel, *Against "Anti-Corruption"*.
[25] Eurostat. 2018. EU citizens in other EU Member States (accessed: 28 January 2020).
[26] Eurostat. 2019. Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data (accessed: 28 January 2020).

Current policy offers more or less the same recipe—more neoliberal reforms, austerity policies, curtailing social and workers rights—that is responsible for the deepening of the social gap between rich and poor and between the majority, whose living standards have declined over last 29 years, and the few rich who are constantly increasing their wealth. There are 260 multimillionaires in Croatia with assets of 170 billion HRK (kunas), while the annual Croatian GDP is around 130 billion.

The president will be the best friend of the premier

Zoran Milanović is perhaps the first candidate to enter a presidential campaign without a published program. He focused solely on his personality, using the slogan "president with character." The second round was an opportunity for him and his opponent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović to present programs and clarify their political standpoints—at least at the three public TV debates.

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović's campaign with the slogan "real Croatia," counted on right and conservative voices, advocating unity and patriotism with numerous references to the war of the 1990's. Zoran Milanović, on the other hand, campaigned as a "character" with a liberal worldview: he used the slogan "normal Croatia," promoting equality for all citizens. During his campaign, Milanović stated that "the wars are over," standing firm against nationalism and intolerance.

Human rights, as invoked by Milanović, are economic rights—the right to have healthy food, housing, publicly available and free education, and healthcare. They are, however, endangered by the neoliberal measures that Zoran Milanović and his government have implemented in Croatian society during his mandate as prime minister from 2011 to 2016. During the campaign, Milanović stated that today there are no more workers, and that a substitute for "worker" is "citizen," claiming thus that he will fight for citizens.[27] Of course, precarious and "flexible" work, "zero working contracts" and work without syndicate protection are the current reality of those who work and try to earn a living. Working conditions have changed for the worse and have brought about a different definition of work—more unstable work in unstable conditions. Social democracy should not simply abandon these disfranchised and disempowered people: the more than half of the total number of pensioners that live in poverty, the 14% working people that have migrated, the young people that cannot afford to live in Croatia working several jobs at a time, those on tenuous working contracts, and those working without contracts at all. Social democracy in Croatia, led by Milanović's Social Democratic party the SDP, contributed to these conditions in the first mandate, when SDP's Ivica Račan led government from 2000 to 2003, and even more so in the second mandate, that of Zoran Milanović.

Milanović will take office on 18 February 2020, during Croatia's EU presidency. Current Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has been destabilized by Grabar-Kitarović's defeat. The presidential elections in Croatia did not bring many changes in regard to the material conditions of the majority. The popular thesis is that the presidential function is meaningless, and that Milanović is simply good enough in accordance with his own "program": he promises nothing more than to be "normal." However, the president has real, formal powers - he is

[27] Pre-election rally at Zagreb's Tvornica at 9 November 2019.

president-in-chief of the armed forces, he is foreign policy co-creator, and he appoints the prime minister, among others. But even more importantly, the president is a symbolic figure that should support the impoverished by criticizing dangerous and ineffective austerity measures and "reforms" that only serve the rich.[28] During his campaign, one of the few real statements that Zoran Milanović made about his standpoint on the premier of current government in Croatia, Andrej Plenković, is that he will be his friend.[29] As such, the disfranchised majority cannot expect much better.

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[28] Recent tax reform introduced the a reduction in the tax rate for those with the salary higher than 17.500 HKN. Only 3,1% of working people fits this category.

[29] Milanović, Zoran. 2019. Ako budem izabran, bit ću prijatelj Plenkoviću, znam ga bolje nego Škoro i Kolinda. *Novi list*, 18 October 2019 (accessed: 28 January 2020).

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