



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The cohabitation of irreconcilable opponents will persist in Croatia even after the presidential elections



There is every possibility that, on Sunday, in the presidential **elections**, Croatia will once again opt for the cohabitation of the centre-right government and the social democratic president, which they have had for five years.

For approximately 3.5 million voters in the newest member of the European Union (admitted in 2013), the presidential election on 29 December marks the conclusion of a super-election year, following the parliamentary elections in April and the European Parliament elections in June.

Outgoing president Zoran Milanović, who is running as an independent candidate but with the support of the second-strongest Social Democratic Party, has the best chances of winning.

With just over 35% of support in the polls, he is unlikely to win the first round on Sunday, but he is the overwhelming favourite to secure a new mandate two weeks later, on 12 January.

Mr Milanović has a double-digit lead over his main rival, also an independent candidate, Dragan Primorac, who is supported by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and his centre-right coalition.

There are no other candidates who could potentially influence the outcome of the race. The two most successful candidates from Sunday's elections will move on to the second round on 12 January.

A race between a veteran and a newcomer

Apart from the significant difference he already has in relation to his main rival, the current president, Zoran Milanović, will be able to count on the support of parties from the left, from the green bloc, and smaller parties that gather pensioners and farmers in the second round.

One should not underestimate Mr Primorac's potential vote base in the second round, as he

is likely to garner support from the extreme right and influential associations of veterans from the 1990s war, when Croatia gained independence following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia.

Croatia will enter a new multi-year period of cohabitation from January

President Milanović is a veteran of Croatian politics, having already been prime minister from 2011 to 2015, when Croatia became a member of the European Union. On the other hand, his opponent Dragan Primorac, a prominent **scientist** and doctor, has no political experience, nor enough political charisma, which is often an irreparable handicap in the young Croatian democracy.

If the pre-election expectations come true, Croatia will enter a new multi-year period of cohabitation from January. Cohabitation has burdened political life and overcoming economic hardships until now.

Clash of two policies

President Milanović and Prime Minister Plenković are irreconcilable political rivals, often in sharp verbal duels but also in conceptual clashes over their policies. The centre-right government is strongly in favour of common EU policies and is committed to the NATO alliance.

On the other hand, during the entire mandate, which is coming to an end, dissonant tones have been coming from President Milanović, which often portrayed him as a Eurosceptic, even an **opponent** of European support for Ukraine, particularly participation in joint aid programmes run through NATO.

Two years ago, President Milanović even tried to blackmail NATO partners regarding the admission of Finland and Sweden. He made Croatia's consent conditional on concessions from the West regarding a local problem and

changes to the electoral law in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would benefit the Croatian community there.

Milanović has had the image of an unreliable partner within NATO

Since then, Milanović has had the image of an unreliable partner within the alliance, ready to jeopardise the unity of NATO with blackmail in the critical moments of the first months of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The Croatian president supplemented his actions with a rhetoric of fear from Russia, describing NATO's expansion as akin to "poking an angry bear with a sharp object." Since the start of the Russian aggression, his scepticism about NATO's support for Ukraine has been evident, and he has strongly opposed Croatian soldiers' participation in the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) mission, agreed upon at a summit in Washington last July.

"His pro-Russian views are very apparent," said recently the minister of foreign affairs, Gordan Grlić Radman, from the centre-right coalition. Regarding the campaign that Milanović is leading for the new presidential mandate, he said that it "was probably financed by some Russian sources, given his behaviour."

Affairs affect the candidate of the ruling bloc

However, Milanović's popularity is still high thanks to the widespread impression of PM Plenković's government's inability to solve major economic problems, which is why a large number of younger Croats continue to leave the country for wealthier EU members.

Furthermore, there are accusations of widespread corruption in connection with the ruling circles and big business, particularly in the tourist regions on the Adriatic coast. These regions contribute between 20% and 25% to the national GDP, which is the highest share of

tourism among all EU member states.



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The recently revealed health care corruption scandal, which led to the arrest of the Minister of Health, Vili Beroš, dealt a serious blow to the presidential candidate of the ruling right-wing bloc.

In the case of Milanović's new victory on Sunday and the second round on 12 January, Croatia will remain "stuck" in sharp political polarisation, which will be reflected in the new cohabitation of irreconcilable political competitors.

Centre-right pro-EU and pro-NATO parties won the parliamentary elections in April, as well as the **elections** for the European Parliament in early June. This decision of the Croats speaks of their still high **support** for membership in NATO, which at 77% is above the average among the members of the Alliance.

Additionally, the majority of Croatian citizens express satisfaction with the introduction of the euro on 1 January 2023 and their simultaneous entry into the Schengen Area, which came before Bulgaria and Romania, despite these two countries joining the EU six years before Croatia. These are still strong government assets, but they are only enough to maintain, not win the presidential mandate.