

Croatia's fallen Orešković government was a messy but healthy experiment in democracy

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The Croatian government collapsed earlier this month, with new elections expected by September. As [Višeslav Raos](#) writes, the hung parliament that emerged from the last elections in November 2015 resulted in a decidedly unorthodox government coming to power, headed by an independent PM and two Vice-PMs from two different parties. He argues that this episode indicates that Croatia is no longer obsessed with stability, and can now allow itself the luxury of having a dynamic and therefore healthier – though no doubt more chaotic – party system.



On 16 June, the non-partisan Prime Minister of Croatia, Croatian-born Canadian pharmaceutical accounting manager Tihomir Orešković, lost a vote of confidence, with 125 votes against him, 15 for him, and 2 MPs abstaining from the vote (9 MPs being absent). After a hectic weekend of cross-partisan bargaining, on 20 June, the Croatian Parliament passed a motion on dissolution, paving the way for early elections at the beginning of September.

It was the largest member of the government majority, the [Croatian Democratic Union](#) (HDZ, EPP member) that initiated the vote of confidence, despite the fact that Prime Minister Orešković, albeit independent, was, in fact, a cabinet member brought forward by this party. HDZ accused Orešković, among other things, of destabilising the government and in engaging in petty politics through misuse of the intelligence service. They pointed to an odd event whereby Orešković cancelled a scheduled weekly cabinet meeting in order to pay a visit to the head of the Croatian intelligence service. He cited national security priorities, yet never gave an explanation for his behaviour.

Prior to that, First Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Karamarko (HDZ president) faced political and media pressure because of recent business affiliations of his spouse with the Hungarian national oil company MOL. This company is currently in international arbitration with the Croatian government over INA, the Croatian national oil company, whose main shareholder is MOL. The other Deputy Prime Minister, Božo Petrov (president of newcomer party [Most](#), i.e. The Bridge) publicly demanded Karamarko's resignation, accusing him of betraying national energy interests and having conflicts of interest.

The main opposition force, the [Social Democratic Party](#) (SDP), headed by previous Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, filed a motion of no confidence against Karamarko, while he himself asked the Committee on Ascertainment of Conflict of Interest to deliver an opinion on his case. In an atmosphere of mutual accusations about the instability of the government, Prime Minister Orešković called upon both of his deputies to resign. However, Karamarko replied that he would resign only if both Orešković and Petrov would also leave their posts, and began actively working towards negotiating an alternative majority, without Petrov's party.

Since Croatia does not have an instrument of a positive vote of confidence (like Germany or Hungary), HDZ and Karamarko had to engage in two parallel processes – filing a motion to bring down Orešković (and thus their own government) and the gathering of enough support from minor parties, MPs representing ethnic minorities, and independents, in order to create a new parliamentary majority that would support a new prime minister. HDZ put forward the Finance Minister Zdravko Marić (non-partisan, yet close to HDZ) as their new candidate for the Prime Minister's office.



Orešković and Angela Merkel, Credit: Vlada Republike Hrvatske (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

On 15 June, the Committee on Ascertainment of Conflict of Interest delivered an opinion on Karamarko and declared that he was indeed in a situation that created a conflict of interest. Karamarko resigned from his government post, yet continued to call for Petrov to do the same and restated his claim that his party would soon form a new majority. Yet, despite many overconfident public statements by senior HDZ members, the vote on 20 June clearly demonstrated that potential coalition partners had turned their backs on Karamarko and his party and instead opted for early elections.

This sequence of events has brought down the 13th Croatian government since the demise of communism. With 147 days in office, this was the shortest lived cabinet in contemporary Croatian history, not counting the first post-communist government (86 days) that had, just like similar administrations in other Central and Eastern European countries, only a transitory character as part of the process of introducing democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is important to highlight that the government did not fall because of these recent events. These developments just served as a catalyst of a long-brewing conflict that lay at the heart of this cabinet, which was built upon a structurally unstable quasi-coalition arrangement. The government that finally emerged in late January was the result of 76 days of nerve-wrecking negotiations among three actors: the centre-right Patriotic Coalition, led by the HDZ and Karamarko, the centre-left coalition Croatia is Growing, led by the SDP and Milanović, and the newcomer party The Bridge (Most), led by Petrov. Most is not a unitary party, but rather a coalition of independent local lists and mayors, gathered around a common cause against the perceived duopoly of the major parties (HDZ and SDP) and what they claim to be an incoherent set of policies, including the territorial reorganisation of the country, judiciary and healthcare reform.

Wishing to capitalise on its kingmaker status after the [November 2015 elections](#) returned a hung parliament, Petrov insisted on a grand reform coalition of all three forces, headed by a non-partisan prime minister. After several twists-and-turns and lots of horse-trading and backroom deals, the Patriotic Coalition agreed to form a government with Most, supported in the parliament by the party of ex-SDP-now-independent mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić and several MPs of smaller ethnic minorities (excluding Serb MPs). This government, led by Tihomir Orešković, a person previously almost unknown to the Croatian public, did not base its programme on a proper coalition agreement: the leader of Most insisted that this was not a formal coalition, but a form of cooperation in a joint reform endeavour.

From its first day through to its last day, this cabinet showed an utter lack of mutual trust and of agreement on key policies. While Most acted as an internal opposition in the government and sought to prevent the appointment of HDZ members it deemed unfit, HDZ devoted a lot of time to symbolic politics in the cultural, media, and education sphere. Such actions followed a pattern of cultural warfare with the Social Democrats, as well as with media outlets and public personas of a centre-left and left ideological leaning. The parliamentary majority was threatened for the whole period, as HDZ and Most MPs regularly clashed, while the discipline of parliamentary groups dwindled, causing frequent lacks of quorum necessary to pass the legislation.

Despite the short and tumultuous life of this government, we can actually see such an outcome as a healthy sign of further institutional consolidation in Croatia. After much public and political obsession with government stability during wartime, and the long and arduous path towards NATO and EU membership, contemporary Croatia has the luxury of becoming just another 'ordinary' European country with a dynamic party system that might not always deliver clear-cut majorities and cabinets lasting for a whole term.

As for the effects on the future of Croatian party competition, the fall of the Orešković government will initiate a process of renewed soul-searching in HDZ. After missing out on a proper victory at the November 2015 election, entering an unhappy post-electoral marriage with Most and finally failing to find parliamentary support for another cabinet, Karamarko resigned as HDZ president on 21 June.

One of the strongest candidates for his successor is MEP Andrej Plenković, representative of the pro-European and moderate wing of the party. Plenković could move the party closer to centrist voters and increase the post-electoral coalition potential of the party. According to the polls, the Social Democrats are on the rise again and Milanović can hope to return to the Prime Minister's Office this autumn. However, the question remains whether the early election will produce a clear winner or if it will again open up space for unusual experiments.

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