

Following a disappointing presidential election, Croatia's government now faces a challenge to hold on to power

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On 11 January, Croatia held the second round of its presidential election, with Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, backed by the opposition Croatian Democratic Union, narrowly beating incumbent President Ivo Josipović. [Dimitar Bechev](#) writes that with parliamentary elections scheduled for later in the year, the Croatian government led by Prime Minister Zoran Milanović now faces a challenge to hold on to power.

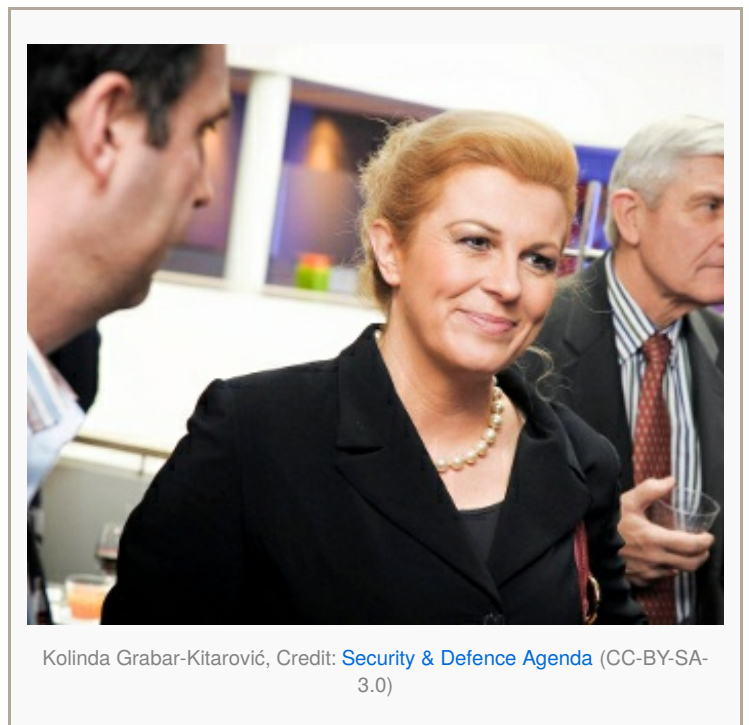


It was a nail biting evening in Croatia, high on political drama. As [expected](#), the two competitors in the presidential race, the incumbent Ivo Josipović and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, were running neck and neck. Initial exit polls gave Grabar-Kitarović the edge, but later on Josipović, backed by the ruling [Social Democratic Party of Croatia](#) (SDP), came forward. He soon saw his advantage narrowing down as results from polling stations abroad were announced. It all ended with a photo finish, social media commentators noted, with Grabar-Kitarovic winning by 32,435 votes – a little less than 2 per cent of the overall vote. The president-elect, supported by the centre-right [Croatian Democratic Union](#) (HDZ), garnered just over 50.7 per cent against the almost 49.3 per cent for Josipović, who conceded his defeat at 22:40 Zagreb time.

Several points emerged from the election which are worth noting. First, the diaspora vote weighed in heavily, yet it did not quite decide the outcome. Up to 90 per cent of Croatian citizens living abroad, including across the border in Herzegovina, have a strong preference for HDZ. They have supported the party loyally since the days of Franjo Tudjman, Croatia's nationalist leader credited for independence from Yugoslavia and also winning in 1995 the so-called Homeland War (*Domovinski rat*) against separatist Serbs. Yet, one should not overlook the fact that even without the diaspora (a term which sits oddly with Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina in any case) Grabar-Kitarović would have carried the day by a razor-blade thin margin of 1,989 votes.

Second, Josipović bled support in core constituencies. Even in urban areas, which would typically back the left-liberal candidates, Josipović underperformed. Compared to the presidential elections of 2009-10 he lost an estimated 50,000 votes in the capital Zagreb. Meanwhile, HDZ improved its score from the first round, finishing a very close second. Grabar-Kitarović overtook Josipović in Split and Osijek after trailing behind. Out of the big cities, only Rijeka remained loyal to the now ex-president, but even there he has performed worse than in 2009-10 (50.4 per cent as opposed to 66.7 per cent in the previous election).

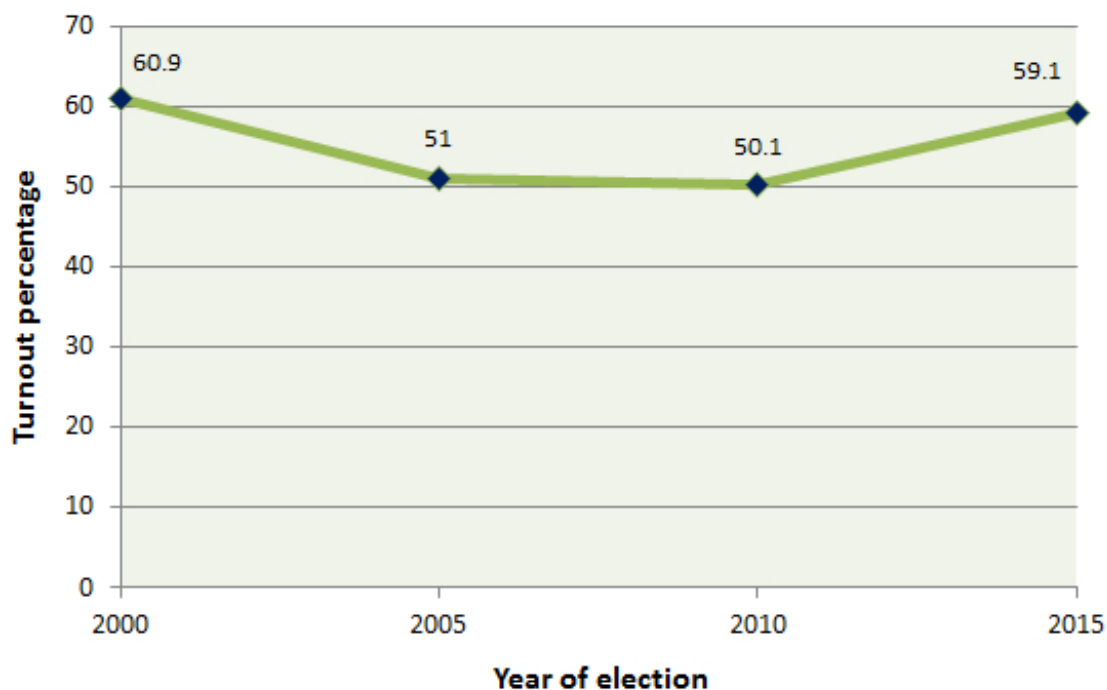
Third, the campaign made a difference, but only to a point. Josipović led a lacklustre campaign, coming across as bookish and devoid of charisma. That is not necessarily a bad thing given Croatia's turbulent past. Yet it was certainly a problem given that he, figuratively speaking, was forced to row against the tide. As [observed](#) by the old



Croatia hand Marcus Tanner, voters have punished the incumbent. Those who went for the radical activist Ivan Vilibor Sinčić, who finished third in the opening round with a respectable 16.4 per cent, did not come to Josipović's rescue. Instead they heeded the call to cast invalid ballots or did not make it to the polling stations. By contrast, Grabar-Kitarović succeeded in rallying the HDZ faithful by promising to "start where Franjo Tudjman stopped" (the presidency hasn't been in HDZ's hands since 1999) while also projecting a folksy image ("I was taking care of cows on the family farm as a child") and highlighting economic hardship and rising poverty to broaden her appeal and woo centrists.

Finally, there was a strong turnout. Both the HDZ and the governing SDP seem to have done their best to mobilise their respective voters. More than 59 per cent made their way to the ballot boxes – the highest share in 15 years, as shown in the Chart below.

Chart: Turnout in the second round of Croatian presidential elections (2000 – 2015)



Note: This chart was generated using information from the **Political Data Yearbook: Interactive** (part of the *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*) available online at <http://www.politicaldatayearbook.com/Chart.aspx/110/Croatia>

In comparison, just over 47.1 per cent voted in the first round on 28 December, and just over 50.1 per cent in the second round in 2010. There were reports about huge queues in Herzegovina's main city of Mostar – and the deployment of special police to contain unrest. Both parties' HQs were painfully aware of the narrow race and scrambled for each and every vote.

What are the implications of the result?

The outcome will give HDZ a badly needed boost ahead of the more important parliamentary polls at the end of this year. Grabar-Kitarović's success contrasts with the party's lacklustre performance in 2009-10, when its candidate Andrija Hebrang, a scion of a prominent political family, failed to make it past the first round. It is also a breath of fresh air given that Tomislav Karamarko, HDZ leader, has been consistently earning, according to surveys, the unenviable distinction of being the country's most unpopular politician (Josipović has regularly been identified as the most popular politician).

As of 11 January, the centre-right opposition now has wind in its sails. Grabar-Kitarović could well use the presidency to score points on behalf of HDZ, especially with regard to the struggling economy. Looking at some of the trends, Croatia, a member of the EU since July 2013, more closely resembles crisis-ridden Southern Europe, not the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Its economy contracted for a sixth consecutive year in 2014. Kick-starting growth and tackling unemployment (which sits at 17.7 per cent nationally but is close to 50 per cent among the youth) is very much the task of the cabinet as Croatia is a parliamentary republic. The President may have lots of air time to sway votes while carrying no direct responsibility.

There is also the prospect of in-fighting within the SDP as Josipović challenges Prime Minister Zoran Milanović for the leadership. Yet, HDZ's ride to power won't be smooth. A year is a long time in politics and one thing to watch will be how smaller parties progress, including [Sustainable Development for Croatia](#) (ORaH – meaning 'walnut'), an environmentalist party which did very strongly in the European Parliament elections in May last year. Sinčić's success suggests there is scope for newcomers, in the mould of [Syriza](#) or [Podemos](#), challenging the party-political status quo.

In foreign affairs, where the President's influence is more pronounced, there is concern that Grabar-Kitarović could turn back the clock on rapprochement with Serbia and start playing hardball with Brussels to please the nationalist grassroots. Such prospects cannot be overruled. It is not inconceivable that Zagreb makes Serbia's accession talks to the EU more difficult, or even vetoes certain chapters. Just as Slovenia did in the past towards Croatia.

However, it is not likely that Grabar-Kitarović's win will lead to Croatia mimicking its neighbour Hungary in picking fights with the EU. Her victory speech struck pro-Western notes, stressing relations with Germany as key. A former ambassador to Washington and until recently Assistant Secretary-General of NATO, she has good links with the US, too. All that is certainly reassuring as far as Croatia's policy towards the countries of former Yugoslavia is concerned. Rather than going back to Tudjman's days, Zagreb will continue to be a constructive player in the Balkans.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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