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European Elections in Croatia

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EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN CROATIA

Abstract:

This text discusses the results of European elections in Croatia. It reaches the conclusion that voters, unhappy with the economic situation, punished the ruling social democratic coalition which suffered a heavy defeat. On the other hand, election results prove the recovery of HDZ, the opposition, centre-right party. It is also obvious that most Croatian citizens do not believe that European elections are important enough to warrant voting. Euroscepticism in Croatia is on the rise because citizens see no obvious benefits from joining the European Union. On the contrary, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in its first year as a member, Croatia will pay more funds into EU budget than it will receive from it. It is evident that direct elections of European Parliament members did not succeed in strengthening EU's legitimacy in the eyes of Croatian voters, and that European elections are actually of secondary importance.

Key words:

European elections, Croatia, European Union, Euroscepticism

In Croatia, like in most other European Union member states, elections for the European Parliament attracted little public interest. One gets the impression that even major political parties did not put enough energy into informing voters about the importance of their participation in the European elections. The key question of why would someone even bother to vote in the European elections was not answered, neither by Croatian political parties nor non-governmental institutions. The answer they gave to this and other similar questions was only a general phrase that European elections were "very important". Those who put a little more effort into it pointed out that around 50% of legislation that has a direct bearing on Croatian citizens is adopted in the European Parliament. Which legislation are we talking about? Why is it important? What

is the procedure for their adoption? How can citizens change them through their representative in the European Parliament? How can citizens benefit from European institution? None of these questions were subject of public debate in the Republic of Croatia. That is why I think that the real question which should be asked is this: what is the point of participating in the European elections?

Although it was generally claimed that EU citizens will be able to directly choose the President of the European Commission for the first time, the question of why this was even good was never answered. Anyway, it turned out that this position did not account for the Treaty of Lisbon, which clearly states that the President of the European Commission is chosen by heads of government of EU member states in consultation with the European Parliament. First reactions to the triumph of the Christian democratic European People's Party and, consequently, its candidate Jean-Claude Juncker, have shown that heads of governments are not willing to stand on the sidelines and that their opinion in this matter is the most important, while European Parliament plays a secondary role. This demonstrated once again that the European Union is not a union of European citizens (the big questions is can and should it be one), but of nation states. Furthermore, we should take into account the fact that the European elections were held in the time of crisis of the European project, but also of the traditional model of representative democracy which is one of fundamental values of the European Union. First analyses of the European elections began with a media mantra which blamed the choice of bad politics and bad politicians on the good citizens who stayed at home and did not vote. The worst criticism was aimed at citizens of Eastern Europe who, allegedly, do not have a sufficiently developed democratic political culture, which prevents them from voting in larger numbers. It is interesting that nobody even considers the possibility that citizens of those countries are familiar with the situation in European politics, and are aware of the fact that representatives of political parties from their countries cannot really change anything in the European Parliament. That is because policies are not decided upon in the Parliament, but between heads of governments, representatives of big business, and lobbyists for other interest groups. So, maybe people are perfectly aware of European Parliament's impotence? Maybe that is why they do not vote? Maybe most people, meaning the passive ones who do not vote, simply do not understand the European Union project, and political elites cannot be bothered to explain it to them? Maybe this passivity of the silent majority points to a deeper problem in the relationship between political elites and citizens? Isn't it true that this divide is exploited by radical right parties? Isn't that the reason for their relatively good results? The question which should be clearly articulated is why should people go to the polling stations and vote if they do not see

any point in it? Namely, it is obvious that, in spite of euphoric comments about halting the decline of voter turnout, most citizens of EU member states still do not care about European elections. European Parliament data suggests that 87% of voters in Slovakia, 80% in the Czech Republic, 79% in Slovenia, and 77.3% in Poland did not vote; in Croatia, 75.7% of people stayed at home that day, same as 70.8% in Hungary. It is obvious that citizens of former socialist countries have very little interest in participating in the European elections. My opinion is that this is not just the result of underdeveloped democratic political culture, but primarily of the fact that EU institutions are still totally abstract because political elites have not demystified them. An even stronger reason is the realization of citizens from former socialist countries that their representatives in the European Parliament do not have much influence. Most people think that the logical step would be to form alliances of representatives from smaller European countries around certain issues and pertinent legislation, but this rarely happens. On the other hand, voter turnout is significantly higher in EU founding member states, which have more decision-making power. The third group of countries consists of Nordic states which have a long democratic tradition of encouraging citizen participation, resulting in a relatively big turnout at the European elections. It means that, in deciding whether to vote in the European elections and who to vote for, people are guided by their perceived interests and affiliations with specific political identities. However, considering the lack of interest for taking part in the European elections, it seems evident that the European Union did not manage to become a true political union of its citizens. Thus the once popular idea that direct elections of European Parliament members will strengthen the legitimacy of the European Union, which will then be shaped into a democratic political community [Hix, Hageman 2008: 37], has not been fully realized.

In Croatian politics, political parties deeply rooted in certain identities effectuated a great stability of the party system and determined the results of parliamentary elections for a long time. This situation also carried over to the European elections. The second important factor which influenced the turnout and choices made by the Croatian voters at the European elections were the circumstances of Croatia's entry into the European Union.

This text will therefore aim to: a) give a short outline of the economic and political circumstances in Croatia that created scepticism towards the EU, b) show and analyse the results of the European elections in Croatia and, finally, c) point to the causes of EU's democratic deficit which, in turn, resulted in low voter turnout for the European elections in Croatia. In the end, this text will ask the question whether democracy at the level of the European Union is even possible? Isn't democratic deficit a reality that will characterise the European

Union for a long time? Isn't it caused by the fact that European institution will remain abstract to its citizens for a long time? And anyway, isn't democracy a type of political order designed for nation states!? Let us first take a look at democracy and peace as basic values of the European Union.

The European Union is commonly perceived as an economic union of European countries, partly due to its initial name - European Economic Community (1st January, 1958); however, its goal wasn't exclusively economic development of its members, but a political unification of Europe[1]. During the last fifty years, this initial form of economic integration, known as the European Union, went through various stages of development - from the Customs Union, through a Common Market to the current European Union which, basically, represents a successful economic and monetary union. Although economic interests were an especially important motive for its establishment, the European Union is not exclusively a monetary union; it is also a union of values, foremost liberal-democratic, based on the achievements of the Enlightenment which are at the core of the Western world: individual freedoms, three branches of government, system independence, and free democratic elections.

Today, the European Union is facing several crises. First is Eurozone's financial crisis, which has revealed the lack of efficient political institutions capable of dealing with the recession, and thus demonstrated that the real crisis is a political one. Furthermore, the crisis in Ukraine also showed that the European Union is having trouble dealing with geopolitical problems and forming its foreign policy. All these problems had an influence on the political mood of European citizens. But most of all, this seems to be the crisis of the traditional model of democratic decision-making itself. This crisis led to a low turnout at the European elections in nearly all member states, and a relative success of radical right and Eurosceptic political parties. The popularity of the radical right caused a big moral panic that was, naturally, restricted to the political elites and liberal non-governmental organisations. At the same time, warnings about how the politics of the radical right is endangering democracy did not impress most average European citizens. Quite the contrary: election results clearly speak to the relative success of the radical, even

[1] After the two World Wars, it became clear that something was not right with the way Europe was being managed. All those casualties and tenths of millions of dead and injured prompted the question of avoiding the next war, i.e. the question was how to prevent the emergence of fascist and nationalist totalitarianism and overcome communistic dictatorship. So, the main motive for EU establishment was lasting security and preservation of peace on the territory of Europe. Countries which didn't experience great casualties in the Second World War (such as Switzerland, Scandinavian countries and Great Britain) didn't wish to enter this supranational political organisation, but focused mainly on economic associations among themselves that resulted in the establishment of the European Free Trade Association.

extreme right. Marine Le Pen's National Front got 24.85% of votes in France, Austrian Freedom Party got 19.5%, Party for Freedom won 13.2% of votes in the Netherlands, and the more moderate British UKIP 27%. Parties of the extreme right also achieved good results: Greek Golden Dawn won 9.4% of votes, and Hungarian Jobbik 14.64%. Therefore, there is no doubt that radical and extreme right parties achieved relative electoral success. In Croatia, such parties were left without a mandate in the European Parliament. This was the result of the previously mentioned deep social roots of main political parties: Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ), member of the European People's party (EPP), which represents Christian democratic and popular politics, and Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija*, SDP), member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), a social-democratic party that originated from the Croatian League of Communists. The manner and circumstances of the formation of Croatian political parties, the timing of Croatia's War of Independence, and deep divisions within Croatia's electorate led to ideological rifts and the formation of distinct political identities firmly embedded in the electorate, which in turn shaped two very strong parties: HDZ, a centre-right party which presided over most of the current democratic period, and SDP, a centre-left party currently in power which won its first mandate in 2000. It has been shown that this division into HDZ and SDP stems primarily from structural social rifts caused by identity-symbolic divisions that are mostly based on the interpretation of World War II events and characteristics of the Croatian Quisling state NDH (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska* or Independent State of Croatia). Another important cause of the division is worldview issues, primarily those related to the role of the Catholic Church and religion in public life (the definition of marriage, attitude towards the family etc.). This quintessential rootedness of the two main parties in the political identities of Croatian voters makes the economic-social dimension of party rivalry less important [Čular 2013: 5]. Question which should therefore be asked is: does this also hold true for the European elections in Croatia? It seems that the 2014 European elections did not bring into question the basic division of voters nor the stability of the Croatian party system. Although some voters, disappointed by SDP's politics, voted for the newly established green party ORaH, which won some 10% of votes, it is also evident that large majority of voters still support the mainstream parties. The stability of the Croatian party system therefore stems from the structural characteristics of the Croatian society and a unique politics which, with regards to the European integration, was led by two main parties: HDZ and SDP. So, let us first look at the process of Croatia's negotiation with the European Union. Why did Croatian political and economic elites decide that Croatia would benefit from joining the EU in the first place?

The European Union is not only an economic alliance, but also a union of values. In today's globalized world, the European Union has set itself several goals: a) ensuring peace for its members, b) increasing freedom of individuals, ensuring human rights and developing democracy, c) economic development of its members based on a free market economy, d) solidarity between member states and preservation of some sort of a social state. These goals were the reason that Croatia – after it gained independence in a defensive war – decided to become a member of the European Union. Since 2000, all efforts of Croatian political elites have been oriented towards this goal. The admittance of Croatia in the European Union was considered to mean its separation from the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia, and its membership was supposed to guarantee security and economic prosperity. The country signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union in October 2001. The country applied for EU membership in 2003, and the European Commission recommended making it an official candidate at the beginning of 2004. Croatia was granted the candidate status by the European Council in mid-2004. Accession negotiations, originally set for March 2005, began in October that year together with the screening process. Croatia's accession was further complicated by the insistence of Slovenia, an EU member state, that the two countries' border issues be dealt with prior to Croatia's accession to the EU. Croatia finished accession negotiations on the 30th June 2011, and on the 9th December of the same year signed the Treaty of Accession. However, long-lasting negotiations diminished Croatian public's enthusiasm for the accession. When the negotiations finally finished after ten years, Croatia's reason for entering the EU wasn't really clear anymore, especially since the Union was also experiencing a big economic crisis. Most people were afraid that Croatia would lose its sovereignty and once again become part of a supranational entity. Euroscepticism was growing; political elites became aware of it and decided to change the constitutional provision which mandates a referendum before entering into an alliance with other countries. Previous provision stated that a referendum is valid only if it achieves the required voter turnout of more than 50%. The constitutional changes have omitted this condition, so that the referendum was valid regardless of the number of voters who had cast their ballots. The referendum on the EU accession was held on the 22th January 2012; the turnout was 43%, of which 66% voted in favour of joining the Union. The ratification process was concluded on the 21st June 2013, and Croatia's accession to the EU took place on the 1st July of the same year. Political elites claimed that this was a great day for Croatia and announced 2013 as a turning point in Croatian history.

The number of voters that came to the polls showed that the majority of Croatian people didn't share the enthusiasm of its political leaders. The average number of voters for the European Parliament has decreased from 65.89%

in the 1979 elections to 47.85% in 2004. In the "old" member states, the average turnout was 52.88%, but citizens of new member states were not so enthusiastic about the elections and thus contributed to the decrease of the overall percentage. The lowest turnout was in Slovakia (16.94%), followed by Poland with 20.87%, Estonia with 26.83%, Slovenia with 28.43% etc. The average percentage was slightly increased by Malta with 82.37% and Cyprus with 71.19% [Weidenfeld, Wessels 2006: 246]. This trend of decreased citizens' interest in the European elections has continued all through the last elections, held in 2009, which attracted only 43% of voters.

The situation is paradoxical: although the power of the European Parliament is growing, its members are chosen by a decreasing number of voters. Why is that the case? I believe it is a result of people's realisation that, on the level of nation states, there is politics, but no policy. At the same time, the situation on the European level is reversed – policy, but no politics. So, most policies that affect citizens' lives are adopted on the EU level, i.e. in the European Commission and the European Council (by representatives of member states' governments), but at the same time there is no proper political competition. The European Parliament itself – although a strong political institution in national states – is in a way depoliticizing; there is no proper authority or opposition. Since democracy is a political order which understands an authority and opposition that form inside a state, it is not possible to give a precise answer to the question who is the actual authority and who the opposition in the European Parliament. The Union is not a state, but an alliance of states, and it can hardly exist in any other form. Since there are no citizens of Europe, for the time being they are impossible to form. That is why citizens still perceive their own national states as the platform for true politics, and institutions of the European Union as too abstract. This situation also affected the European elections in Croatia.

The first Croatian elections for the European Parliament were held on the 14th April 2013, when its citizens elected twelve members of the European Parliament. Those members will serve the remainder of the Parliament's 2009-2014 sessions, starting from Croatia's entry into the European Union on the 1st July 2013. The country formed a single constituency, with members elected by proportional representation using open lists. Despite the prediction of a decisive victory for the governing, centre-left SDP coalition, HDZ's centre-right coalition won by a razor-thin majority of votes. The turnout of just 20.76% was the lowest of all national elections in modern Croatian history and the third lowest EU Parliamentary election turnout (after the 2004 election in Slovakia with 16.96% and Poland with 20.87%). The low turnout was caused by two factors. The first one is the already mentioned democratic deficit of the European Union: simply put, liberal-democracy is a political order designed for nation

states, and it has difficulty functioning in a supranational system. This feeling of alienation from European institution is especially strong among citizens of new member states, in which democracy is just starting to take hold after the fall of communistic dictatorships. These nations have become fully-affirmed as independent states only after the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact, or of bigger countries they had been members of (as was the case with Croatia). It is not only that citizens of these countries don't have enough experience living in a democratic order, but they are also especially sensitive about their national identity and fear that they will lose it in the European Union. The second reason why most voters from post-communist countries don't vote in the elections is a very weak mobilisation potential of their political parties; political parties from those states are bad at mobilising voters, and even worse at recruiting new political elites. Parties are not well-connected to the society, members of the party elite are involved in many corruption scandals and are not adept at translating citizens' interests into politics. For all these reasons, only a small number of citizens can identify with a certain party, while the majority is not interested in the political process at all. Citizens find politics completely dependent on foreign factors which they cannot influence, and believe that political parties don't work in their best interest. It seems as though not voting represents a form of civil rebellion, which in itself symbolizes a weakness of European democracy and the entire European project. „At the heart of the European project, which is characterized by policy without politics on the European level and politics without policy on the nation-state level, is an act of self-subversion: an example, in other words, of the cultural contradictions not of a capitalism, but of democracy" [Krastev 2013].

We also find that political elites of member states have different approaches to European politics and the European Union itself. National Parliaments of "old" EU members feel that European questions and politics encroach upon their competencies too much, while new members' legislatures consider the relationship towards the EU to be primarily a question of foreign policy. That is why their political elites believe that European politics is not a question for member states' legislatures, but for ministries of foreign relations. The situation in Croatia is similar: the attitude that European politics is closely connected to domestic politics of every member state is only gradually becoming accepted.

Considering the problem of democratic deficit, the discussion centred around three strategies: parliamentary, post-parliamentary and presidential. The parliamentary strategy emphasises the democratic function of national parliaments in the European decision-making processes; it analyses their attempts to strengthen their legitimacy through special committees for European issues. The post-parliamentary strategy supports direct coordination of interests between the European Commission and associations that represent corporative interest.

It is believed that corporative and lobby networks, although conducive to efficient decision-making, cannot replace the role of the Parliament. They do not have democratic legitimacy and are not subject to democratic control. Through their proposal of direct elections of the European Commission president, presidential legitimacy strategies are moving towards increasing democratic legitimacy of the Union on the one hand, but on the other are neglecting the imminent principle of consensus. The European Parliament remains the only institution that is attempting to establish general interests of EU citizens, which gives it a decisive role in establishing democratic legitimacy, alongside European political parties [Cipek 2007]. However, none of these strategies has proved to be especially good. Attention should also be directed to a discussion about the authority of the European Parliament which also became a subject of debate in Croatian expert public. The legitimacy of the European Parliament has been found weak because it does not have any law-making and does not reflect the multinational structure of the Union. Although the European Parliament is the only institution of the European Union whose members are directly elected by citizens, it only has the power of co-decision, while the legislative initiative is held by the European Commission. Nevertheless, the Parliament has the right to suggest that the European Commission regulate certain questions by a legislative initiative, but it cannot initiate passing of that legislation. Most of the participants in this discussion believe that the development of the European democracy depends upon the European Parliament getting the power to initiate legislation, even if only in (previously) specified and limited fields. Regarding Croatia, I find it important that the European Parliament gets the opportunity to influence the politics of regional development which is closely tied to agrarian, social and environmental policies. Those policies are of the utmost importance for the Croatian agrarian region Slavonia, which has been subsisting on the production of wheat and corn, but has been hit by a deep economic crisis. Some predictions say that, if this situation continues, only 300,000 people will remain out of the one million that currently live in this region. The decision to grant European Parliament the right to a legislative initiative regarding these policies, which are closely linked, would be welcomed in Croatia. Namely, it is obvious that agrarian policy, which is also the most expensive one in the European Union, affects social and regional policy, as well as the policy of sustainable development. All this points to a conclusion that the European Parliament could have a bigger role in this area. Furthermore, the goal of this policy is to achieve economic, social and territorial, i.e. regional, cohesion of the European Union, which should be formed on the basis of growth achieved through knowledge and innovations. It is predicted that, as part of these policies, Croatia will draw some 8.6 million euros in the period between 2014 and 2020. Since this is a large

amount for Croatian circumstances, I assume that effective policy such as this one could decrease Euroscepticism in Croatia. As it is, after its first year as a EU member, it is very difficult for a Croatian citizen to name even one advantage of this membership beside the fact they can cross borders more easily. Croatia is still in a state of "post-accession" shock which all other states that have entered the Union in 2004 have gone through. Some of them are Slovenia, Czech Republic or Slovakia which has reached 80% GDP per capita of the EU today, and Hungary and Poland which have reached 60%. Today, the Czech Republic has 20.270 euros per capita, while, for example, Germany has 28.400 euros of GDP per capita. It is evident that the differences are decreasing and that all countries that have entered the Union reaped great economic benefits. Unlike countries that have entered the Union in 2004, Croatia became a member in 2013, at the time of economic crisis. From today's perspective, it is clear that predictions of the Institute of Economy in Zagreb, which in 2007 stated that EU accession will bring economic growth and lower unemployment in Croatia, were completely wrong. The reality was completely opposite - in 2008, Croatia found itself in a strong recession. A country with 4 300 000 residents lost 217 000 jobs. Today, Croatia's GDP has dropped 12%, real wages are 18% lower, industrial production 16% and retail sale 21%. None of these negative trends were changed by the social-democratic government, which came into power in 2012 by beating Christian-democratic and people's party HDZ. Even worse, economic situation in Croatia only deteriorated after its 2013 accession to the EU. Unfortunately, Croatia had the misfortune of entering the Union at the time of the biggest Eurozone debt crisis, so the initial effects of the accession were negative. The labour market suffered a significant rise of unemployment and a decline in real wages, i.e. decrease of disposable income, all of which led to a further dive of personal consumption. At the beginning of 2014, 363 400 people were unemployed, which is 5 000 more than the previous year. Furthermore, the unemployment rate has reached 21.6%, which is 0.5% more than in December 2012. Youth unemployment is especially high, over 48%, which makes it the third highest youth unemployment in the EU, following Greece and Spain.

In 2013, industrial production has decreased by 2% in relation to the previous year. Last year, exports have amounted to some 68 billion kuna, which is 6% less than in 2012, and import has decreased around 2%. Macroeconomic prediction is that 2013, fifth recession year in a row, will see an economic downturn of around 1%, which would be less than in 2012 when the GDP has decreased by 2%. In spite of EU membership, the year 2014 will likely bring further stagnation of the Croatian economy, as well as an estimated 1% drop in GDP. Credit agencies have lowered Croatia's credit rating under the credit level. All this considered, it is evident that there are no obvious economic

advantages of EU accession, at least as far as we can see in Croatia. Just the opposite, different tax rules have taken billions of tax income out of state hands. Customs income is now shared with the European Union, and Croatia can keep only one fourth of it. A great increase in Croatian external debt and a lack of funds in its budget led the country into a cycle of excessive deficit reduction, which is mandated by the Union and entails some loss of fiscal sovereignty. Croatian administration was proven to be slow and inefficient in producing the documentation necessary for the withdrawal of money from EU structural funds. In its first year, Croatia could very well find itself in a position of having paid more money into EU funds than it has received. European Commission data states that all 12 new member states, which joined the EU in two previous circles of expansion, have finished their first year of membership in surplus. Cyprus is the only country which has marked financial loss in its fourth year of membership, while all other states, in all years of membership, have received more from the EU budget then they have paid. This proves that the European Union is a truly successful solidarity community, but that the incompetence of Croatian government could singlehandedly make it an exception to this rule.

Of course, none of this contributes to the popularity of European integrations in the Croatian society, nor to the popularity of the centre-left government which, according to over 70% of people, is leading the country in the wrong direction. This government will most likely be replaced in the next elections, but European integrations policy will continue to bear a negative image in people's minds, at least for now.

In Croatia, the deep economic crisis prompted several, distinctly conservative referendum initiatives. The conservative right organised a successful referendum which resulted in the introduction of a constitutional provision that marriage is a union between a woman and a man (as a way of preventing the legalisation of gay marriage). Another civic initiative was a referendum on Cyrillic alphabet, used by the Serb ethnic minority, aimed at restricting its use on public buildings. Public discussion also revolves around the question of how liberal should an education program be, and what is the parents' role in choosing the education program for their children. This conservative movement, supported by the Catholic Church and conservative organisations, also has the backing of the centre-right opposition party HDZ, which used it to win the support of some conservatively-oriented voters.

The economic and political crisis had a significant impact on the European elections in Croatia, but it did not motivate voters to use their say in these elections to change something. Just the opposite, the majority of disgruntled voters "protested" by staying at home, thinking they are powerless to change anything; European elections in Croatia remained secondary. It is true

that election turnout rose from 20.84% in 2013 to 25.24% (Table 1); this represents a bigger increase than the one on the level of the European Union, where it went up by 0.9%. This increase is not significant and has primarily a symbolic value because, for the first time since the introduction of the European elections, the downward voter turnout trend has been halted. Croatia saw its voter turnout increase by some 5%, which may seem as a positive move towards an increased interest of Croatian voters for European topics, but actually represents a negligible shift. Rather than signalling a trend towards halting the deeply rooted Euroscepticism of Croatian voters, it is a matter of deep voter dissatisfaction with the situation in the country which prompted them to go to the polls in larger numbers and express their protest. Low turnout also showed that Croatian political parties do an increasingly bad job of performing their democratic functions and are having more and more trouble mobilising voters. Present-day parties mostly boil down to party apparatuses that reward their members with well-paid positions in national or European administration, which loses them credibility with the voters.

Table 1. Turnout in EP election in Croatia

	Elections 2013	Elections 2014
Total number of voters	3 748 815	3 767 343
Number of votes	781 216	950 980
Percentage of voters	20.84%	25.24%
Number of invalid ballots	39 572	29 076
Percentage of invalid ballots	5.07%	3.06%

Source: www.izbori.hr (7.8.2014).

A smaller percentage of invalid ballots shows that, this time, voters could choose from more *protest* parties listed on the ballot, which gave them a chance to express their disgruntlement by voting instead of spoiling ballots. Generally speaking, European elections in Croatia were marked by protest voting against the current Croatian politics led by the social democrats. This is corroborated by the results achieved by the hard right, assembled in a coalition of parties called the Alliance for Croatia (*Savez za Hrvatsku*), and even more by the entry of a new green party into the European Parliament. The Alliance for Croatia got the votes of conservative nationalists who were unhappy with government's politics, but also the politics of the centre-right opposition gathered around HDZ. Protests votes of leftist voters, disillusioned by SDP's rule, went to the green party ORaH, founded just six months before the elections by the former Minister and SDP's member of Croatian Parliament M. Holy, which succeeded in entering the European Parliament.

But most of all, it was a protest against government policies that resulted in the victory of the coalition of centre-right parties led by HDZ as the main opposition party. What is interesting is that, thanks to the possibility of preferential voting, most votes from that electoral slate went to two candidates representing extremely conservative positions – R. Tomašić and M. Petir. Ruža Tomašić is the first name of the radically right Croatian Party of Rights – Ante Starčević (*Hrvatska stranka prava – Ante Starčević*). She won 107,206 preferential votes. As a member of Parliament, R. Tomašić is active in the parliamentary group European Conservatives and Reformists, and her success has shown that Euroscepticism is definitely strong in the Croatian society. Considering that predictions of the Croatian National Bank say that Croatia is a country which will pay more money into European funds than it will receive, R. Tomašić's results are not surprising. In the second place by the number of preferential votes on HDZ's slate is M. Petir, member of the Croatian Peasants Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*, HSS) She won 42 683 votes by actively promoting conservative values like traditional marriage, but also by championing the protection of rights of Croatian farmers. Strong performance by these two candidates from HDZ's coalition slate, with their right-wing, national-conservative rhetoric, prevented an even bigger success of the Eurosceptic, hard, conservative right in Croatia. That type of right-wing organisations gathered around several parties and civil organisations, assembled into a coalition popularly known as the Alliance for Croatia, which won 6.88% of votes. Since these parties did not have a single candidate with enough prominence and popularity among the national-conservative public, they could not convincingly go up against parties in HDZ's coalition and the right-wing rhetoric of R. Tomašić and M. Petir. These two candidates thus prevented a vote drain from HDZ to a more radical right option. That is why, in spite of the difficult economic situation and high unemployment, Croatia did not experience the same phenomenon of the success of right-wing populists and the radical right as a number of European countries. Anyway, studies have shown that there is no automatic connection between the success of the extreme and radical right and the economic crisis. Such parties owe their success more to their identity politics and ability to publicly present certain topics (such as fear of strangers) as their own, rather than to their socio-economic programmes [Mudde 2007; 2014].

What is interesting is that, in Croatia, economic crisis and high unemployment did not result in an increased popularity of left-wing parties like, for example, in Greece, where SYRIZA emerged as an election winner by capturing 22% of votes. On the contrary, the left party which emphasised workers' rights and the idea of equality – Croatian Labourists - Labour Party – did not pass the electoral threshold and lost its only mandate in the European Parliament

(won in the 2013 elections). In the 2014 elections, Croatian Labourists won only 3.40% of votes, in spite of the widely-held opinion that Nikola Vuljanić, their representative in the European Parliament, was doing a good job. The elections clearly showed that, at the moment, there is no room for a traditional-left party in Croatia. They also made clear that left-oriented young people, who make up the biggest percentage of the unemployed in Croatia, do not favour traditional left-wing values like equality, but are more attracted to postmodern topics of environmental protection, gender equality, gay marriage etc., championed by the newly-established green party ORaH. So, although Croatian left-wing voters are clearly not satisfied with the politics of SDP-led government, they did not vote for the leftist party which ran on the platform of traditional social-democratic values.

The question which should therefore be asked is how come the government's very poor economic results and the deepening economic crisis did not compel voters to be even more decisive in punishing the ruling party? My opinion is that SDP's relative high percentage of votes (29.93%) is the result of identity politics. Namely, SDP clearly positioned itself as a defender of liberal values against HDZ's national-conservative politics. The election campaign, generally weak and half-hearted, centred around topics connected to domestic, primarily identity politics, and the results achieved by the Croatian government. In this contest, the victory went to the opposition headed by HDZ, which won 41.42% votes. HDZ emerged as a well-organised party which, even in conditions of low voter turnout, managed to mobilise its members and secure a decisive victory. SDP's ruling coalition paid the price for its thoroughly unsuccessful economic policy and interparty conflicts. Many votes were also lost to corruption scandals of middle-ranked SDP members that tarnished its image as an honest party.

Table 2. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections in Croatia

Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections		
HDZ coalition	381,844 votes	41.42 %
SDP coalition	275,904 votes	29.93 %
OraH	86,806 votes	9.42 %
Alliance for Croatia (Savez za Hrvatsku)	63,437 votes	6.88 %
Croatian Labourist (Hrvatski laburisti)	31,363 votes	3.40 %

Source: www.izbori.hr (7.8.2014).

European elections have shown that both European and Croatian politics revolve around the centre, so that best results are achieved by centre-right and centre-left parties – the same ones which already govern the European Union in a big coalition. It also became clear that great expectations surrounding direct

elections for the European Parliament were not justified. The initial claim was that these elections would enable the formation of a genuine European political community and increase European Union's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. This did not happen; on the contrary, the interest for taking part in the European elections kept falling. It remains to be seen whether the 2014 elections, which stopped this tendency, will also mark its reversal or just a temporary suspension of a clear trend which shows that citizens consider European elections to be of secondary importance. Hence, the lack of interest in the European elections clearly shows that democracy is a political order designed for nation states. This is an indisputable fact which will make the gulf between the European Parliament and national parliaments of EU member states, as well as between European and national elections, difficult to overcome. Moreover, it seems that this gulf will continue to grow, at least for the time being. Namely, the Treaty of Lisbon gave the European Parliament considerable power, but it conflicts with the fact that EU is a union of states, not its citizens. That is why the tension between decisions on the European level and the consequences of those decisions for member states will continue to exist. So, there will still be some sort of tension between the politics of the member states and the EU, and that will discourage voters from taking part in the European elections. Citizens did not miss the fact that the process of globalisation led to decision-making centres becoming more and more distant, and often completely non-transparent [Dahrendorf 2002]. It has become perfectly clear that elections can serve to depose ruling politicians, but they cannot change the politics [Blühdorn 2011; Krastev 2013]. Democratic elections lose their point if they cannot bring about any significant change, which is why more and more people are giving up on the election process. That is why most political theoreticians agree that the crisis of participatory democracy is an undeniable fact. It is thought that this crisis was caused, among other things, by the rise of neoliberal ideology which followed the collapse of communist dictatorships. Neoliberalism took the slogan of the French bourgeois revolution, "Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood", which represented the ideological foundation of parliamentary democracy, and replaced it with "Costs, Profit, Efficiency". This represents a new type of fundamental liberal "political rationality", which views every democratic institution, person and politics through entrepreneurial glasses and sees no difference between political and economic activities. This process casts most people in a passive role because the actual political process takes place behind stage lights in the form of privatised interaction between political elites and representatives of economic interests [Jörke 2010]. It is not a question of businesses buying politicians, but a hard-to-unravel web of joint interests of companies and state [Bofinger, Habermas, Nida-Rümelin 2012]. This is about a tendency

of increasingly entwined power of big business and the state which ordinary people cannot easily fathom. Transnational movement of capital, goods, money and people, as well as the power of international institutions, weaken the nation state, and thereby also democracy. Namely, it is worth repeating that democracy is a political order designed for nation states, and that is why the European elections are of secondary importance.

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