

Crisis of right-wing Croatian government deepens over coalition

By Markus Salzmann
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After just four months in office, tensions inside the Croatian government coalition are mounting. Although the conservative Democratic Union (HDZ) and the right-wing liberal Most (Bridges) party are agreed on a right-wing programme, the government of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is in deep crisis.

The conflict was triggered by a meeting of Plenković with the honorary president of the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS), Vesna Pusić. This fuelled rumours that the HDZ might quit the coalition with Most and form a government with the HNS, which currently has nine seats in the Croatian parliament.

And so the permanent crisis in this Balkan state continues. In September last year, elections were held after the government coalition—also an alliance of the HDZ and Most, under the independent pharmaceutical manager Tihomir Orešković—broke apart in June after just four months.

The HDZ emerged as the winner in the subsequent elections. With 61 parliamentary deputies, it is just ahead of the Social Democrats (SDP), with 54. In third place is Most, with 13 deputies. With the votes of some independent deputies and representatives of the smaller parties, the HDZ and Most have secured a fragile government majority.

Ever since, the HDZ, which is based on right-wing nationalists, sections of the military and the Church, has been in constant conflict with Most. Most represents better-off middle class layers and sections of big business, which are demanding aggressive reforms to satisfy the interests of the corporate elite. Many observers assume that the government could collapse following the regional elections in May.

The background of the crisis is the complete alienation of the political parties from the population. The government programme on which the HDZ and

Most have agreed is a declaration of war on the working class.

Most has insisted on the establishment of an “exclusive economic zone” (EEZ) with neighbouring countries, which is supposed to transform the region into a paradise for cheap labour and low taxes. To this end, the government is planning a tax reform that will massively benefit corporations. These would be largely exempt from regulations in the areas of environmental protection and workers' rights.

The coalition partners have also agreed a restructuring of public finances. The budget deficit is to be reduced with the aim of obtaining a much better credit rating. The two parties also consider a reform of the education system necessary, meaning the abolition of free education.

These social attacks are accompanied by a massive militarization of Croatia. Conscription, which was abolished in 2008, is to be gradually reintroduced. This would comprise several weeks of compulsory basic training. The aim is to “make the armed forces popular among young people,” Plenković said of the plan to introduce conscription in 2019. The armed forces, which currently consist of about 21,000 men, are to be made more attractive for the generations “which can no longer remember the times of the Great Patriotic War.”

Plenković stands in the tradition of the right-wing nationalists, who, with US and German support, ensured the breakup of Yugoslavia in a series of fratricidal wars. Civil rights groups are warning of the “militarisation” of society.

In January, it was announced that Croatia wants to replace its arsenal, comprising mainly Soviet-era materiel, with new NATO equipment. Defence Minister Damir Krstićević said there were also plans for the purchase of fighter jets, which was confirmed

by President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic in December.

The acquisition is to be made by the end of 2017.

In recent months, verbal confrontations with Serbia have also increased. It is significant that four months after taking office, Plenković has still not visited the neighbouring country. Croatia vehemently rejects the inclusion of Serbia in the European Union.

Journalist Norbert Mappes-Niediek remarked recently on broadcaster Deutsche Welle: “Europe is a powder keg. But the Balkans is the fuse. The conflicts are the most dangerous. They cannot be isolated. And precisely in the present situation, in which the world has become so unstable and there is no longer any predominant power, it is much easier for the conflicting parties in the Balkans to seek allies among the greater powers. This is a situation like 1914. This, most of all, should give grounds for fear.”

In this climate, right-wing and openly fascist groups are gaining impetus. Recently, several hundred neo-fascists from the A-HSP demonstrated in the Croatian capital Zagreb. Dressed in black, the participants shouted slogans from the fascist Ustashe movement. They waved a flag of the neo-Nazi German National Party (NPD) and welcomed the election of Donald Trump in the US. Attacks on refugees, members of the Serb minority in Croatia and homosexuals are becoming increasingly more frequent.

The ruling HDZ has close links with these ultra-right forces. This became clear recently, when veterans of the 1990s civil war erected a plaque near the former Jasenovac concentration camp. This was the site where the Ustasha regime, which collaborated with Nazi Germany, murdered tens of thousands of Serbs, Croats, Jews and Roma between 1941 and 1945.

The plaque commemorated the fallen fascists with the Ustasha salute “Za Dom Spretni!” (At the ready for the homeland!), which corresponds to the German “Heil Hitler.” When this resulted in fierce criticism, Plenković said the plaque had nothing to do with the world war. They were honouring the dead of the war of independence.

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