

**Sergej Županić**

## **Green Parties in Croatia – How to Succeed in Staying out of Parliament**

A poll by market research agency Gfk three years ago found that a well-organised Green political option could count on the support of at least 14 % of voters in Croatian parliamentary elections. That was a surprising result because it would mean that in this country where the Greens have not, barring visitors' status, entered Parliament since 1992, a potentially well-organised party would have a wide open path to become at least the third-strongest political force in the country. Yet, from one election to another, the Green parties in Croatia just confirm their status of eternal political outsiders.

Relations in the political spectrum of the Croatian parliament are quite similar to the situation in Germany, where the Forsa agency at some point last year measured the popularity of Bündnis90/Die Grünen at 24 percent. Thus, nobody should be surprised about the 'Green mood' of Croatian citizens, especially if it is known that this has quietly developed over a rather long period of time. Since the Croatian Green political alternative has been non-parliamentary for two decades now, the Gfk poll has made embarrassingly clear that Croatian Greens traditionally make mistakes in some basic matters as well as that something is seriously wrong with Croatian democracy in general. Both facts together have serious consequences for the social, technological and energy development and environmental protection in the soon-to-be 28th EU Member State.

### **The transition is no excuse**

In the meantime, in late 2011, Croatia had another round of parliamentary elections, in which the usual exclusive battle was waged between Social Democrats (SDP) and Christian Democrats (HDZ), supported by political satellites from the nominal left or right. At the same time, various Croatian Green parties, currently numbering nine with the most 'successful' winning no more than half percent of the votes, once more confirmed their irrelevancy and the fact that the Republic of Croatia will for many years be stuck at the bottom of the list of a decreasing number of European democracies where Green parties are non-parliamentary.

Hence, the political scene in Croatia is still locked in political dualism, although public opinion polls have noted for a long time that the absence of a true alternative for the heavily compromised left-centre and right-centre, nominally coloured red and black, has caused a bitter mood among citizens. It also has to be noted that in Croatia today there are some 120 environmental NGOs and that citizens are more and more and in increasing numbers following their call to action against environmental and energy industry incidents. Croatia today is obviously ripe for a political party that could channel this enormous political potential into a parliamentary struggle. Unfortunately, this is not happening.

To conclude that this is exclusively a consequence of the fact that Croatia is a transitional country would be equally wrong as comparing the situation in Yugoslavia with that in former Warsaw Pact member states in the 1980s. Croatia got its first and so far sole Green member of parliament at the first multiparty elections in 1990, while it still had the 'socialist' prefix in its official name. It was Prof. Dr Nikola Visković, who won a seat among the 80 members of the upper house of the parliament (which today numbers 151) as the candidate of Zelena akcija Split (Green Action), a party in a short-lived Green coalition that already had an exceptionally advanced pro-European programme, a rarity at the time.

Meanwhile 22 years have passed and Zelena akcija has continued as a successful NGO, strictly in the activism domain. But, just like the non-governmental Green citizens' scene had shown itself strong enough to enter the parliament when political pluralism was still in the

bud, the Croatian environmental activists proved to be the sole true obstacle to many projects of the political and/or corporate elites which could only be characterised as attempts to some of the worst ecological and urbanistic crimes in the country.

The Croatian political mainstream has – since the very beginnings of the multiparty system – a very anti-environmental and ‘urbanocidal’ approach, which often borders on the bizarre. The ‘environmental’ policy of the major Croatian political parties, the resistance of environmental activists and the absence of influence by the Green parties will be illustrated in this article through several projects and scandals that today threaten to grow into problems with unforeseeable consequences for nature, citizens’ health and even serious damage for Croatia’s economy.

### **The Ombla hydro electrical plant – digging under Dubrovnik's foundations**

In January 2011 the news exploded like a bomb – the decision of former PM Jadranka Kosor (HDZ) that in two months' time a beginning of several major investment projects was to be expected, among them the construction of the hydro-electrical plant Ombla (HE Ombla). It is a plant of mere 68 MW of power, planned on the Ombla rivulet near Dubrovnik. The Ombla is, from its source to the sea, just 30 meters long (100 feet) because it is the influent stream Trebišnjica that vanishes into the ground several kilometres further upland in the Dubrovnik countryside. But the experts and the activists were severely shaken because that project was worked out in the mid-1980s to be finally dropped in 1994 ‘because it wasn't economically feasible’ as was, at the time, stated by the manager of the state electrical power company (HEP). The Kosor government claimed otherwise, claiming that the project would solve Dubrovnik’s problems with the water supply and power supply, and it even asked for a 123 million euro credit line from the EBRD, which is definitely too much for a plant that would supply just 1.5 % of Croatian electrical power demands.

The reason for such a high price is that the project includes an underground reservoir in the cave from which the Ombla flows, a technology that was applied just a couple of times worldwide, always with a very low benefit. But that is just the beginning of the problem. It is an environmentally highly sensitive underground area with an abundance of endangered or even endemic species of animals, and the project would also undertake raising the level of the underground water for 130 meters, inside a karst terrain whose water permeability makes it impossible to foresee the consequences in the Ombla and Trebišnjica flow. There is also the ‘small’ matter that relevant experts have expressed fears the construction of the HE Ombla would imbalance the seismic stability of Dubrovnik and surroundings, which were heavily damaged in a quake in 1667.

Strangely enough the project was accompanied by a 12-year-old study of environmental impact although Croatian laws stipulate a study no older than three years. It was soon discovered that one of the greatest hydrological authorities in the region, Ognjen Bonacci, was in 1999 expelled from the committee deciding on the study, because he disagreed with the economic and safety aspects of the project. A working document of the EBRD was soon leaked to the public; it stated that expert analysis concluded that HE Ombla would be economically feasible only if the price of power was increased with 200 %, but that same EBRD had in November 2011 approved the ample credit line for this dodgy Balkan project. But, probably because the project was fiercely attacked in the media, through political and legal channels by tens of environmental associations, which were supported by WWF and Friends of the Earth, and the European Commission also red-lighted the project, the EBRD just a few days after the approval, froze the credit line "until the biodiversity study is thoroughly discussed".

But since the conservative government was in dire straits after two decades of mostly misses in economic policy and wrestled with the political mortgage of the just-resigned former PM

Ivo Sanader (HDZ), it desperately needed large investments to show its competence to citizens at the last minute, in an election year.

In the November 2011 election the HDZ was severely defeated so the project was considered dead in the water, especially since the SDP had it among their campaign promises, in the Plan 21 document, to nix the project as economically unfeasible and environmentally damaging. However, just a few days later the minister of economy and the government's second-in-command Radimir Čačić (Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats, HNS, the smaller coalition partner of the Socialists), because of that project, entered into a heavy quarrel with environmental minister Mirela Holy (SDP); who had a noted past as an activist. Soon afterwards she was removed from the post, with her complete administration, under murky circumstances. Immediately after her departure and despite three out of four opinions being negative in the revision of the environmental study, the project was once more in the works. So far there were no credible denials of the environmental activists' accusations that the HE Ombla is again promoted because its real purpose is supplying the planned gated community near the also environmentally and legally murky golf courses on the Srđ hill above Dubrovnik with electricity and water.

### **TE Plomin C – what price bankruptcy?**

That was not the sole infamous energy project that the new centre-left government took over from its conservative predecessors. While the environmental associations were waging a political and legal battle with the government regarding the HE Ombla, another battle took place against the project of the thermo electrical plant Plomin 3 (TE Plomin 3). This is also located by the sea, on the Istra peninsula, right by a tiny town that was an urban unit from ancient Roman times onward. The first thermo electrical coal plant in the Plomin Bay, TE Plomin 1 with 125 MW of power, was built in 1969, and in 2000 a new block Plomin 2 was finished, adding another 210 MW of power. Since Plomin 1 usability lifetime expires in 2015, and the new government is looking for new investments with the same desperation as the old one, minister Čačić has in his mandate from day one very aggressively, sometimes on the verge of physical blows, gone to war with minister Holy about the project of replacing the Plomin 1 with the new, so-called Plomin 3.

The regional spatial plan includes a new plant instead of the old one only on provision that it is the same amount of power (125 MW) and a gas plant, much more energy-efficient, with a lower CO<sub>2</sub> emission and much less harm to the environment, which was the main problem of the local population with the plants 1 and 2. But since vice-PM Čačić's team insisted on the coal plant, with 500 MW of power, the top of government and the HEP have for months on end ignored many health and legal facts showing Plomin 3 to be harmful for citizens' health, harmful for Croatian economy and illegal on top of that. In the near future the EU intends to establish an obligation to build a CCS (Carbon Capture and Storage) plant for each coal plant with more than 300 MW power. This was ignored, with as consequence that Croatia would have to pay heavy fines for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions above the allotted quota.

The government still claims that Plomin 3 would solve the energy dependency of Croatia. This is ridiculous, since there are no rock coal deposits in Croatia, which means that after building the Plomin 3, fuel for it would have to be imported and the dependency on import for energy would remain the same. The weekly *Forum* has published a study by Prof. Enco Tireli (the expert who for many years was the manager of Plomin 1 and has led the construction of Plomin 2), which shows that Plomin 3 would in 20 years of operation cause a billion and 147 million euros loss for Croatia. Finally, the whole story acquired tragicomic dimensions when minister Čačić stubbornly claimed that the German power company RWE is not withdrawing from the project even after the Zelena akcija activists had acquired a video clip with the statement of RWE executive manager that his company is not in the least interested in Plomin 3.

### **Membership in the 'Climate Killers' Club'**

Today, half a year before the official acceptance of the Republic of Croatia as a full-fledged member of the European Union, it is increasingly visible that Croatia is a country with a nominally democratic procedure, but which has in some respects the characteristics of a chronically non-functioning state. Thus each and every government in the two decades of independence was in a comfortable situation of being able to 'wash their hands', not unlike Pontius Pilate, of any responsibility for a catastrophic environmental policy, presenting it as the result of the ecological and administrative chaos inherited from the mandate of the previous administration, going back all the way to socialist times. In late 2009 such a policy, however, turned out to be disastrous for the conservative (HDZ) government of Jadranka Kosor -- at least on the international stage. This happened on the climate conference in Copenhagen, where the Croatian government asked for an increase of more than three percent of the registered emission of the greenhouse gasses from 1990 that served as the base year for the accounting of the emission quotas from part one of the Kyoto Protocol.

In an atmosphere where the greatest economic and military powers of the world in some cases resorted to barefaced bullying to protect their right to greenhouse gas emission, such an attitude by Croatia was, of course, not taken seriously. The Copenhagen climate episode was the final yard sale of the reputation previously saved at the last moment in April of 2007 when Croatia finally ratified the Kyoto Protocol – as the 170th state to sign that historical civilising document. On top of that, the Croatian government had sent to Copenhagen a delegation led by the President of the Republic who with just five weeks of his mandate left was a sitting duck, which could be considered politically symbolic, and his deputy was a mere secretary from the environmental protection ministry. No real political heavyweights from Croatia were sent there, where the U.S.A. was represented by Barack Obama, Germany by Angela Merkel, China by Hu Jintao and India by Manmohan Singh.

The definite seal on the Croatian debacle was stamped by the Climate Action Network (CAN) which on December 10th awarded Croatia the mocking 'Fossil of the Day' trophy for asking for a revision on greenhouse gas emission from 1990, thus giving the country a membership in the 'Climate Killers' Club'. This anti-award was previously reserved for countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the U.S.A – countries that had been obstructing the climate negotiation for years. The 'Fossil of the Day' prize was very painful for the official Zagreb circles, which responded in a press release to the domestic media by pointing out as the sole guilty party for alleged misinformation about Croatian politics the Zelena akcija NGO – an organisation that is a member of the Friends of the Earth network and whose activist Jagoda Munić was recently even made president of Friends of the Earth.

Obviously, the Croatian request for a rebate of three percent of the greenhouse gas emission from 1990 was not accepted. Despite that, Croatia managed by the end of 2012 to fulfil the prescribed lowering of the greenhouse gas emission with 5 % from part one of the Kyoto Protocol. What is obvious today is that this wasn't because of any new technology developments or any serious climate strategies, but just a consequence of two decades of ruining the economy, especially the industry. Global Financial Integrity (GFI) has recently published studies stating that just in the last ten years 15.2 billion dollars (78 % of the yearly budget) was sucked from Croatia by a combination of corruption, organised crime, smuggling, tax evasion and money laundering. GFI also added that this is totally a consequence of non-functioning state institutions.

### **Waiting for the sun**

Where environment protection is concerned, it is interesting to note that Croatian institutions usually fail even more than in other problem areas of the Croatian state like the judicial system, local self-governance, respecting the building codes and similar things. Based on everything said above and the unfortunate Copenhagen episode, it can be deduced that the Croatian reality would be quite different if there was a Green political option in the Croatian

parliament. That would make it less probable that on the one hand Croatia happens to fulfil the conditions from the Kyoto Protocol on the total emission of the greenhouse gasses, but is at the same time threatened with a penalty because in road traffic a 76 % increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from those agreed has been observed. And then there is still the limit 14 % of alternative automobile fuels by 2015.

If you look into the amount of energy produced from renewable sources in Croatia, the situation becomes absurd. Croatia is a Mediterranean country with a world-famous well-indented coast and a Mediterranean climate in the coastal area. Still, the state governments somehow managed to achieve that the wattage of installed photovoltaic plants per citizen is just 0.27 W of power, seven times less than in misty Finland or Sweden, which confines Croatia at the bottom of the EU solar scale. This, of course, is a consequence of an ineffective energy policy established long time ago, which strongly pushes for projects of thermo electrical plants like Plomin 3. The current government of Zoran Milanović added to the situation by lowering the purchasing prices for electricity from photovoltaic plants by a third and by even forbidding solar plants on fields.

The following example that shows something is very wrong in Croatia's political power balance is the one with exploiting the wind power, which is also abundant in the Mediterranean part of the country. Domestic wind plants cover just 2 % of the electricity production in the country, and other renewable sources of energy do not fare any better. All that in a country which is troubled by 20 % unemployment, while Germany has 800.000 workers in the photovoltaic industry, as many as in the automobile production. The cautious – to put it mildly – attitude towards renewable energy sources was repeatedly explained by government officials like Radimir Čačić in terms of fear that energy prices could increase, which is both political and logical nonsense. In 2003 the energy institute 'Hrvoje Požar' from Zagreb presented a study about research among Croatian citizens about their views on economic development regarding environmental protection. A slower development of the economy, but with more environmental protection, was favoured by 87.9 % of Croatians. Moreover, Croatian citizens although economically weakened stated in 92.3 % of the cases that they would be ready for more expensive energy, but from sources proven to be less harmful to the environment.

All this underlines the fact that the political elites in Croatia, where energy and environmental policies are concerned, for a whole decade push policies that are absolutely opposite to citizens' interests and for the good of citizens and democracy in general Croatia desperately needs a strong green political option.

### **Politics as a three-ring circus**

Just when it was thought that such anti-environmental policies of continuity between centre-right and centre-left would defeat citizens' activism, Croatia was shaken by the 22-month jail term of minister Čačić, to which a Hungarian court sentenced him for being guilty of a traffic accident with loss of life as consequence in 2010. Not even a week after Čačić's resignation, speculations that the HE Ombla will be dropped stopped. Even in a society that has experienced the transfer of its prime minister almost directly into prison, that would be an original solution to some dire problems, but such a political three-ring circus might have serious consequences.

Part of that was described by the short-lived weekly *Forum* that appeared before the last parliamentary elections. In January 2012 *Forum* has published documents unknown until then about the research of Norwegian and Croatian scientists which during the course of four years measured the level of pollution in the Sava river and found a dangerous level of antibiotics right by and downriver from Zagreb, so high that it can only be explained as a consequence of sewage from the nearby pharmaceutical factory Pliva. The weekly also wrote about the plans to build a 100-million-dollar worth addition to the factory, right by the

main spare water source for the city of Zagreb, and the story was corroborated with ample documentation about the devious ways in which the former conservative government tried to get the necessary permits for the project.

Despite the material proof, the state attorney's office took no action. The same silence occurred in April 2012 when it was discovered that after 2006, when Croatia banned all production, import and transport of asbestos on its territory, 11,677 tons of asbestos were imported, 87 % of that from the EU, upon whose directive the ban was introduced. Although in that case major structural problems of the system of sanitary and customs supervision were proven to exist, neither the state nor anybody in the political system had reacted, including the nine politically atomised Green parties.

In all these cases the strength, willpower, knowledge and organisation necessary to tackle the problem were exposed by environmental activists, mostly of very modest means. Meanwhile the political Greens are either busy with worldview polemics, which should take a backseat compared to environmental protection, or are crumbling because of disputes and in-fighting caused by personal leadership ambitions, no matter how bizarre that looks on the scale of their political influence. Besides, some of those parties were founded by the political mainstream due to interests that have no connection whatsoever with anything in Green ideology. All those things provide an answer why the unification of Greens is still waited for after more than 16 years.

Currently the largest among the Croatian green parties is Zelena lista. That can hardly be a consolation to the party itself since not only do their members not appear anywhere above the level of small-town councils, but also in 2010 the European Green Party has rejected their plea for membership. The election defeats are explained away by Zelena lista as the fact that Croatian media follow the political scene exclusively in a bipolar fashion, which stunts the growth of the non-parliamentary parties. That the situation of the Croatian media is very dark indeed is shown by the 68<sup>th</sup> place on the list of Reporters without borders, which several years ago as the main problem identified the major media companies in the country – Europapressholding and Styria. That is underlined by the destiny of *Forum*, a weekly that intensely covered environmental and similar issues, but was quickly suppressed despite a growing circulation and heightened relevancy in society, which was the consequence of a non-compromise editorial policy regarding political parties and corporations. Still, even with the media being in such a state, on the last elections two new parliamentary parties have appeared, one from the left and one from the right (Hrvatski laburisti – stranka rada and HDSSB), and an entrance into parliament 'through the back door' could already be witnessed in previous elections.

### **The future of Croatia on a platter**

Thus, if the Greens are practically nowhere, it seems logical that the state of their political domain is also catastrophic. In the Croatian power sector today just 1.7 % of production comes from renewable sources, wind energy gives us just 2 % of domestic production of electricity, and this very sunny Mediterranean country gets just 0.001 % of electricity from photovoltaic plants. Croatia is at the very bottom of Europe with such numbers and is far away from the situation in 1990 when just behind Slovenia it was the second most-developed country of the transitional Europe. The same is true concerning energy efficiency and the introduction of new technologies, where a lack of strategy can be considered the cause for the expected decrease of the national BDP in 2013 of 10 % compared to 2008, whereas the EU recognises that one of the possible ways to escape from the all-enveloping crisis is investing in new technologies and renewable energy sources.

Regardless of how much the acceptance of such an economically unstable new member, no matter how small it is, would present an additional burden for the EU, it is even today difficult to imagine how Croatia could reach the conditions it accepted to meet by 2020: lowering the

CO2 emissions by 20 %, increasing the energy efficiency by 20 % and the 20 % of all energy sources being renewable energy. Of course, it does not say anywhere that a modern democracy has to have a Green parliamentary option; besides, e.g. in Sweden it is unthinkable for even political mainstream parties to have a prominent Green part in their party manifestos. In Croatia, however, it was the Christian Democrats who built a system that demands 68 various permits for building a solar power plant, as if it is a chemical industry plant, and in which below-the-board machinations and financial support of town councils enables building glass-and-concrete buildings in the very downtown, in which to the horror of experts, citizens and activists radical hydrological constructions are attempted at an oasis of unspoiled nature. And it was the Social Democrats who have shown that they either do not know or are not even aware of what was done wrong so far and where to begin to repair the damage. And neither of them has shown themselves capable of building a prosperous and modern society. Thus, it is not impossible that in the following years the percentage of the electorate identified in the Gfk research mentioned at the beginning of this article will grow further. And the party that will be the first to discover how to enter that political space, this party will have a crucial part of this country's future in its hands.

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(c) Sergej Županić