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CROATIA

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European Parliament elections have been mired with low turnouts and protest votes for the last couple of decades. This was especially pronounced in the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe and was linked to gender and age variables. The elections of 2019 bucked that trend, showing the rise in turnout across EU, including Croatia. What is not known is why this upswing in vote happened and how it influenced (or was influenced by) the focus of political parties on specific policies. By analysing the results of 2019 EP elections in Croatia, comparing them to previous national and EP elections, and linking them to the perceptions of citizens towards the European integration, we will answer the following research question: how and why did political parties incorporate gender and youth policies in their electoral programs and activities, and in what way did that influence the higher turnout in Croatia. We used mixed-methods approach, focusing dominantly on interpretative method in order to gain insights from both qualitative and quantitative data on public perception of the EU, voting results in EP and national elections, campaign materials of relevant political parties, and their ideological positions and policy preferences. We concluded that both gender and youth policies influenced how political parties approached 2019 EP elections, especially by putting female and younger candidates on electoral lists, organizing campaigns symbolically depicting these two groups, and promising policies focused on them. Despite 2019 EP elections maintaining their role described by the Second-order Elections Theory, with important influence of protest votes, in Croatia this gender- and youth-based focus allowed for political parties to depict the EU as an important place to contest public policies as well, strengthening the Europe Salience Theory.

Keywords: Croatia; Europe Salience Theory; second-order elections; gender policies; youth policies

1. Introduction

The 2019 European Parliament elections in Croatia were the third opportunity for Croatian citizens to vote for that supranational representative and legislative institution. These elections, hence, allowed us to analyse comparatively any developments that might have occurred in the last six years of Croatia's membership in the European Union. They also allowed us to test the strength of two major, competing, theories of European elections - the Second-Order Election and Europe Salience theories.

We tested the two theories on European elections – the Second-Order Elections and Europe Salience – by focusing on a single case of Croatia. In order to understand which of these two theories has more relevance after 2019 EP elections, however, we need to understand the current political, economic, and overall social situation in Croatia. We also need to understand the stance of the public and of the major political actors - political parties - towards the European Union, the European integration, and the idea of united Europe as whole.

We also analysed electoral legislation, similarities and differences between electoral rules for national, parliamentary, and EP elections, as well as actual results of 2019 EP elections in Croatia. Major focus was put on the variables of gender and age, with regards to their influence on activities of political actors before and during the electoral campaign, with the idea that gender policy, as well as youth policy influenced the behaviour of political parties and, hence, influenced the election results.

This paper proceeds as follows. After the introduction, we present the chapter on current national political landscape, focusing on constitutionally based institutional framework, as well as major issues, societal cleavage points, and contentious policies framing the political system of Croatia before 2014 EP elections. We follow it by giving a brief description of the party system, introducing major political parties and their attitudes toward the question of Europe. Afterward, a focus is set on the public opinion and the European integration policy, with focus on women and youth, as specific societal groups with idiosyncratic stance toward the European Union. The second part of this paper starts with short introduction of the electoral system of Croatia and the introduction of laws defining both national and EP elections. This is needed in order to present the analysis of the 2019 EP elections as they occurred in Croatia, as well as the comparison between those elections and earlier EP and national elections. The questions of electoral volatility and the role youth and gender played in these elections will also be tackled. In the last part of the paper I will discuss the empirical evidence our case presents us with, in order to understand the relevance of two theoretical bases of this paper - the Second-Order Election Theory and Europe Salience Theory. From this, we will draw conclusions, which will end this paper.

2. Overview of the Political Landscape

Constitutionally, Croatia is a republic with a parliamentary system of government. The power resides in the unicameral parliament, *Hrvatski sabor*. It has 151 members, 140 of which are elected in ten multi-member electoral districts (with 14 members each), while three are elected in a global at-large district, by citizens holding Croatian citizenship living abroad. Eight seats are reserved for the representatives of various national minorities recognized by the constitution (three of those for the largest, Serbian minority, which comes to around four percent of total population). The mandate of the parliament is four years. The right to elect or stand for election is universal, direct, and free for all Croatian citizens, residing in Croatia or abroad, if they are 18 years or older.

Executive branch is split between the government and a directly elected president of the republic. The president is elected for a five-year term, after a candidate secures the absolute majority of votes cast. The constitution allows for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The president maintains a rather symbolic role in the everyday politics, albeit slightly more significant than presidents in many parliamentary democracies. The president is the head of the armed forces, and has a co-equal (with the prime minister) say in foreign and national security policies. The president also gives a mandate for the government formation to the individual who has the majority support in the parliament.

The government is responsible to the parliament for its work. It has a prime minister, one or several deputies, and a variable number of ministers, usually with assigned portfolios. The prime minister is elected by the parliament, on the proposal of the president. The deputy prime ministers and the ministers are elected by the parliament on the proposal of the prime minister. The government deals with day-to-day work, with the parliament legislating new laws, most of which are presented by the government.

When interpreting the current development of the political landscape of Croatia, besides focusing on constitutional effects of the institutional framework, one needs to focus on societal, economic, and political forces active in shaping it as well. Taking into account the societal developments in recent years, the focus needs to be put on two separate yet very influential factors. The first is linked to demographic changes in Croatia post-2013, linked to migration both into and out of the country, while the second is linked with the rise in conservative (and religious political) civil society organisations and social movement.

Considering the first, demographic pressure stems from increased and sustained migration of Croatian citizens from the country toward some EU member states, mostly Germany, Austria, Italy, and Ireland

(Župarić-Iljić 2016). This migration is linked not only to economic but also to political reasons, and it is structural. Whole families are moving from Croatia not only in search for better economic opportunities but in order to find more tolerant, vibrant, and less polarized political climate. This is linked to the second factor – the influential rise of conservative, ultranationalist religious political civil society organizations and social movements (Petričušić, Čehulić, & Čepo 2017). Their focus on identity politics and attacks on LGBT and women's rights, rights of national minorities, reforms in health and sex education, give pause to expectations that the accession to the EU will bring growing progress for all societal groups, especially those marginalized and discriminated against.

When considering economic forces working on shaping national political landscape, one needs to focus on ever growing dependence on tourism as the dominant economic sector both for employment and for the infuse of liquid funds. Besides that, Croatian economy is dependent on remittances from a growing number of both new and old Croatian diaspora, as well as on EU funds and grants. Greenfield investments in manufacturing are sparse, while new industries are developing slowly, albeit burdened by cumbersome tax and legal regimes, as well as high levels of corruption and graft.

These two set of forces influence the third, political, force shaping the national landscape. Croatia's political system is based on the dominance of one political party, but is, as of recently, opened to party fragmentation and the influx of new anti-establishment, anti-elite, and even anti-system political options. Mainstream parties are fragile, and in turmoil, while the overall climate is turning to the right. The strongest rise in popularity, voter support, and public sympathy show ultranationalist, anti-establishment, and populist political parties, groups, and individuals. All this leads to democratic stagnation and even backsliding (Čepo 2020), with mild authoritarian tendencies depicted both by the elite and the public.

2.1. Brief Account of the Political Parties

Croatian party system, and hence, the political system as a whole, is dominated by Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica - HDZ). Officially, it is a centre-right party based on the ideas of Christian democracy (Statut HDZ-a 2018). However, it is more of a patchwork of centre right, conservative, and nationalist groups vying for intraparty dominance. It was established at the tail end of the socialist regime in the former Yugoslavia, in 1989. Its founder and first president, Franjo Tuđman, became the president of the newly independent Republic of Croatia and ruled in increasingly autocratic manner until his death in 1999. The party went into opposition 2000–2003, but then won two subsequent elections, under the new president, Ivo Sanader. After his, never

explained resignation from the position of the prime minister and the president of the party, Jadranka Kosor, became HDZ's first female president, and the first female head of government since 1990. HDZ again lost elections in 2011, after which the party elected Tomislav Karamarko for the president and veered strongly to the nationalistic right. Despite winning 2015 elections, the short-lived coalition government of HDZ and Most, led by Tihomir Orešković, was plagued by distrust between two parties and led to the dissolution of the parliament and new elections not a year later. The party shed Karamarko and his nationalistic faction, electing Andrej Plenković, an MEP and moderate to lead them in winning 2016 elections. The new HDZ-Most government was formed, but was again short-lived. Plenković managed to survive by inviting HNS, a left-liberal political party, and securing the support of the representatives of the minorities. His position was strong only because of the extremely weak opposition but has become precarious in late 2019 and early 2020, after HDZ was seen as European election loser, and especially after the Presidential election loss of their candidate, the incumbent, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović.

The major opposition party is the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske – SDP). It is the centre left party based on the ideas of social democracy (Statut SDP-a 2018). As an official successor of the pre-democratic, pre-independence League of Communists of Croatia, the ruling party in the one-party system, its position has been tainted in the eyes of the significant percentage of Croatian population. However, the party did govern in two occasions (2000–2003 and 2011–2015), both times in wide coalition governments of almost all mainstream opposition parties. The party gave (Ivo Josipović and Zoran Milanović) or supported (Stjepan Mesić) three out of four presidents of the republic since 2000. Despite that, and after narrowly losing 2015 and 2016 elections, SDP found itself in both ideological and structural crisis, with public showing less and less support in public opinion polls throughout 2017 and 2018. The situation turned around with unexpected success of the party during European elections of 2019. Despite coming second behind HDZ, the party doubled the number of their MEPs (from two to four post-Brexit). This positive momentum was carried to the end of 2019 and the start of 2020 when their candidate, Zoran Milanović, beat the incumbent and won the presidency, thus breaking HDZ's grip on power.

Other parties are much weaker, with smaller support of the electorate and can be divided, roughly, in two camps. In one camp, we can find established, mainstream parties (or their offshoots), of all ideologies, that have been part of the party system for a decade or more. They include Croatian People's Party (Hrvatska narodna stranka – HNS), a liberal political party to the left of the centre, Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska seljačka stranka – HSS), nominally conservative political party to the right of the centre, that is currently in the process of leadership-led rebranding to an eco-party

with more progressive social and ideological attitudes. This camp also has Istarski demokratski sabor (Istrian Democratic Assembly – IDS), liberal regionalist party dominant in the westernmost part of the country, which gives them clout in national politics as well.

The other camp includes newer political forces of mostly right and radical right ideological persuasions, which base their popularity on populism, demagoguery, anti-elite, anti-establishment, and anti-systemic ideas and policies. Most nezavisnih lista (The Bridge of Independent Lists – Most) is an amalgamation of mostly local political forces, with conservative and ever growing nationalist ideology. It was briefly part of two HDZ-led governments, but are in opposition, with waning influence, since HDZ kicked them out in 2017. Croatian Conservative Party (Hrvatska konzervativna stranka – HKS) is a one-woman show whose strength is linked to Ruža Tomašić, a multi-term MEP. Party has conservative and nationalist ideology and is a part of a growing “sovereignist” movement opposed to further EU policy deepening and progressive reforms. Human Shield (Živi zid – ŽZ), is populist and anti-system political party with several MPs and an MEP, which had, until mid-2019, fairly growing support among the disenchanted, and especially among the youth. Helped by the social media and political stunts of their leadership the party was, at times, the third strongest political force in the country. Due to internal power struggles, the party has been imploding ever since, and is hovering around electoral threshold of five percent.

2.2. Public Opinion in politics and on the European Union

When analysing the electoral turnout for European elections in Croatia we need to consider the overlap of two levels of voters attitudes towards politics. First, turnout is usually a reflection of the dominant political culture, especially one of its aspects – formal political/electoral participation. Hence, we need to mention that electoral/political participation determinants can be recognized through existing contextual and individual resources (Buhlmann and Freitag 2006). We focus on individual aspects only. These can roughly be divided on sociodemographic factors, citizens’ competences (interest in politics, internal efficacy), attitudes (trust, satisfaction), and the evaluation of the political system as a whole (Buhlmann and Freitag 2006).

Interest in politics in Croatia is predominantly moderate (54 percent), however citizens have quite formed attitudes on the functioning of the national government, seeing it predominantly negatively – 82 percent do not trust in the government, while 84 percent lack trust in the Croatian parliament, and 92 percent do not have trust in political parties. This has Croatian institutions holding the bottom regarding the trust in national institutions, when compared to the EU28 (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018). Paradoxically, when evaluating political efficacy, Croatia does fair well, as 74 percent of

respondents feels that their vote is respected (compared to 58 percent in the EU as a whole) (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018).

Despite this, level of dissatisfaction with the democracy in Croatia is high (63 percent), while almost half of respondents show trust in the European Parliament (49 percent), and 40 percent trust the European Commission. The satisfaction with the levels of democracy in the European Union is also higher among Croatian respondents then when compared to the satisfaction with democracy in Croatia (currently on 50 percent). Same source shows that 79 percent of respondent think Croatia is going in the wrong direction, while 54 percent of them think the same thing for the European Union as a whole. However, we witness another paradox here. Although the majority of respondents sees the future of Croatia in much bleaker light then that of the EU, at the same time a significant percentage of them thinks that Croatia could have better future outside of the EU (38 percent) (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018).

This takes us to the second level of relationship of the citizens towards politics, linked to the turnout for European elections and dependent on the attitudes of Croatian citizens toward the EU as a project. Despite perceiving the EU superior to Croatia in institutional, political, and economic sense, a relative majority of respondents have a neutral attitude toward the EU (47 percent), while only third sees it in a positive light (34 percent) (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018). A study researching low turnout in new member states (Fislage 2015), concluded that the reason is linked to various latent reasons. For Croatia, these latent reasons include socio-cultural, socio-political, and economic determinants, which could be seen working in 2019 European elections as well. The relation of citizens to the EU is linked to the disappointment in the lacklustre effects of accession, especially in the lack of positive effects on the economic situation in the country. This is then compounded by the feeling of insignificance and marginal position of Croatia in the economic and political system of the EU (Fislage 2015). For examples, only 36 percent of respondents in Croatia think that the interest of their country are „well taken into account in the EU“, significantly lower that the EU average of 47 percent. Also, the attitude toward the EU depends on the fear of cultural and political integration, which could lead to assimilation which would endanger Croatian national identity (Fislage 2015). Nonetheless, according to recent surveys (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018), such attitudes do not hold sway, as only 14 percent of respondents associates the EU with the loss of cultural identity.

What seems to be the larger problem is the lack of information on EU topics, despite the years of membership. It seems that the information on the EU are either marginalized or presented in sensationalistic light in Croatian media, which can then lead to overall disinterest of citizens in European elections (Fislage 2015). This is confirmed by the lack of information on major EU institutions, like the Court of Justice of the EU (only 64 percent heard of it), or the European Central

Bank (78 percent heard of it, despite Croatian government starting the process of Euro adoption in 2019). These are well below average when compared to the EU as a whole (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018). Lack of identification with the EU is another reason for lacklustre electoral turnout. Only 63 percent of Croatian citizens feel that they are citizens of the European Union as well, again below EU average of 70 percent, only 45 percent of them perceives that they are knowledgeable with their rights as EU citizens, again well below EU average of 65 percent (Standard Eurobarometer 89, 2018; Key Indicators 2018).

2.3. Party Attitude towards the European Union

All mainstream political parties in Croatia are pro-European. Since 2000, all major political actors supported Croatia's accession to the European Union, with political parties differing symbolically as to the depth of the support and the timing of deeper integration once Croatia became a member state. As of late, with the rise of nationalist, radical right, anti-establishment, and anti-system political parties, the rise of Euroscepticism is more visible. There are political parties and individuals, garnering growing support, who openly question either the speed or the need for further integration, the values the European Union is based on, or the need for the integration as a whole.

The mainstream, long-established political parties, like HDZ, SDP, HSS, HNS, IDS, and others, are staunchly pro-European. Parties of the centre left and liberal provenance are pro-European to the core, although some of them can from time to time criticize some EU policies, like the adoption of the Euro. Only in HDZ does the question of the EU comes close to becoming a stumbling block in intraparty politics. Although the party belongs to the mainstream EPP party block, some party factions have issues with certain EU policies, like the migration policy or the activities linked to LGBTQ* and women's rights, as threatening to traditional Croatian values.

Newly established political parties, like ŽZ, Most, radical right and conservative parties that are a part of a loose "sovereignist" coalition, are either against the integration as such, against the current trajectory of the European integration, or against what they see is EU's encroachment on Croatian sovereignty. However, their influence is not as strong, and is hovering around quarter of the total number of voters, depending on how successfully HDZ is siphoning off some of their supporters by turning to the right on domestic issues without ramping up the criticism of the European integration project.

This reflects Croatian public's (dis)interest in the EU, which is mostly instrumental (i.e. the EU is viewed through the lens of funds and the freedom of movement). Hence, there are no major issues Eurosceptics can present as a wedge question that could turn the public strongly against the EU.

However, in the future questions of sharing burden of immigrant policies, cultural issues linked to family, gender, and LGBT* rights, could be used by Eurosceptics in the same way questions of the war crimes and the cooperation with the Hague tribunal, were used in late 1990s and early 2000s.

2.4. The Development of Eurosceptic-Populist Movements and Parties

Despite the strength of the nationalist ideology, mostly due to the war for independence, majority of citizens were showing preference for European integration throughout 1990s and early 2000s. This was reflected in mainstream political parties' attitudes as well. They were showing almost exclusively pro-EU stance, even when criticizing EU institutions for unfair treatment of Croatia due to insistence on conditioning the accession to the cooperation with the Hague tribunal. Lack of Eurosceptic forces was helped by the lack of viable radical left political parties, as well as by the success of the dominant HDZ in siphoning majority of votes from radical right parties, thus marginalizing Eurosceptic forces to their right.

The situation started to change after the 2013 accession and was linked both to the emergence of parties critical of the establishment's response to the global financial crisis as well as to the overall lack of trust Croatian citizens started showing toward government and other state institutions. The most important populist and Eurosceptic party that rose to importance post-2013 was the Human Shield (ŽZ), which rode the wave of citizens' disaffection with austerity measures, political corruption, and cronyism. ŽZ, linked this anti-establishment narrative with Croatia's EU membership, accusing the governing parties for sacrificing citizens' interests for the sake of Brussels. They also insisted on stronger cooperation with Russia and for the government to stop kowtowing to EU institutions who are focused on sanctioning Russia.

Another important Eurosceptic actor is Ruža Tomašić, an MEP, whose Croatian Conservative Party is a part of growing sovereigntist movement, focused on maintaining powers in member states and stripping the EU of many instruments and policies accumulated over decades of its development. The party's importance was helped by the coalition with HDZ and subsequent HDZ weakness due to internal struggles, with R. Tomašić becoming a voice of Euroscepticism in Croatia. Main criticism is linked to the need of returning sovereignty into the hands of the people of member states, and stopping the usurping of powers by the unelected Brussels bureaucracy. In mid-2021 Tomašić retired and was succeeded by reactionary proponent of religious right ideology, Ladislav Ilčić.

In the end, Mislav Kolakušić, a judge and an MEP since 2019, succeeded in articulating rage felt in part of Croatian populace, by criticizing corrupt elites, ineffective judiciary, and lack of justice in the society. His main proposals were a smorgasbord of populist staples, strong-man rhetoric, and authoritarian anti-establishment narrative. Although clearly populist and demagogue, he was not

Eurosceptic per se, however, as a one-man show it is hard to tell if the movement he might represent would develop Eurosceptic tendencies.

3. National and European Electoral Systems

Croatia does not have a single electoral law, describing and detailing how elections should be held. Every level of government is elected by different sets of rules, normatively set in separate laws. Taking into account European-level elections, they are organized according to the *Law on the Elections of the Members of the European Parliament from Croatia*, adopted in 2010 and amended in 2013. When national elections are considered, several laws define their rules and procedures depending on the level (local, national), or the institution (mayor, council, parliament, president). As we are focusing on parliamentary elections, as the main, or first-order election in Croatia, we will take into account the *Law on the Election of Representatives to the Croatian Parliament*, first adopted in 1999, and amended multiple times afterward.

3.1. Electoral Law for National Elections (Parliamentary and Presidential)

During the 1990s, as a semi-presidential, transitional democracy with a bicameral parliament and the complete dominance of the president's political party, the presidential elections were first-order elections. As a parliamentary democracy since 2001 constitutional changes, the elections to the parliament have become the first-order national elections. Vestiges of that powerful presidential role in the Croatian political system can be seen even today, not only through direct elections of the president of the republic, but through powers – mostly in security and foreign affairs policies – left in the hands of the president despite their almost symbolic position within the system. Hence, a short overview of the rules for both parliamentary and presidential elections is in order.

Electoral rules for presidential elections are straightforward. The president is elected among the candidates who won the absolute majority of votes cast. If no candidate wins said majority in the first round, a second round is organized two weeks later with top two candidates.

Election for the national parliament are done according to proportional representation. Croatia is divided into ten electoral district. In each, citizens elect 14 members of parliament. There is an electoral district where national minorities elect their representatives (eight in total, with Serbian minority electing three of those). The last electoral district is at-large one where Croatian citizens who live overseas (including those from the neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina) get to elect three “diaspora” representatives. D'Hondt method is used to transform votes into mandates of those lists that cleared the five percent threshold. The voters have one preferential vote that they can cast for a

candidate on the list they selected. However the results of the preferential voting are applied only once the candidate gets at least ten percent of the votes cast for the list they are on.

Gender quotas have become an important benchmark in assessing the level of progressiveness and fairness of the electoral system and its intent in fighting the structural obstacles to full active and passive suffrage of all. There are electoral rules setting the minimum number of underrepresented gender. However, as there are no sanctions for flaunting it, the parties oftentimes ignore it. Even if they respect it, they do it in a mechanical manner, without supporting the spirit of it. For example, parties oftentimes have prescribed number or percentage of female candidates, but they are put in the bottom part of the list, where a chance for them to be elected are miniscule. More and more, however, parties are obligating themselves to support the inclusion of women on party lists, buy, e.g., using the interlocking, or zip method, with every other position on the list going to a woman candidate. This could help, bring overall numbers of women in the Croatian political system to a much higher level compared to the abysmal situation we are witnessing now.

3.2. Electoral Law for European Parliament Elections

As the newest member state, Croatia did not have much choice in picking electoral rules dictating the elections for the European Parliament. The rules adopted and proposals recommended at the supranational level were transposed and adapted to the Croatian situation once Croatia acceded to the European Union. Hence, many rules and regulations already seen in other member states are also visible in the Croatian case.

Members of the European Parliament elected in Croatia – 11 in total, pre-Brexit, and 12 after January 31, 2020, when Brexit occurred and UK lost its seats – are elected through proportional representation. Entire Croatia is one, at-large, electoral district. Prescribed electoral threshold is five per cent, although sometimes the natural threshold is higher and dependent on the turnout. Voters have one preferential vote that they can cast for a candidate of the list they chose. The candidate, however, can jump the queue only after obtaining at least ten percent of votes cast for their electoral list. Votes are translated into mandates according to d'Hondt method. Voting takes place on Sunday and lasts, between 7:00 and 19:00. There is no postal or early voting.

4. A Glance at National and European Elections

4.1. Parliamentary Elections in Croatia: 1990-2019

Multiparty system started in Croatia in 1989, with first non-Communist parties (social-liberals Christian democrats, liberals, and conservative-nationalists) forming. First multiparty elections after

independence and international recognition of the country occurred in 1992 with general election for tricameral parliament. The elections were overwhelmingly won by HDZ. Due to segmented electoral system, HDZ managed to secure majority, but governed for a while in the Government of National Unity, due to war.

In 1995 general elections for the first, more powerful, chamber of the parliament, the House of Representatives (which will be our focus only), HDZ again won majority, on the heels of military actions, which saw liberation of majority of occupied territory. This gave absolute majority of both votes and members of parliament for HDZ, which allowed them to rule unobstructed, until 2000. This was the period of increasing rise in authoritarian rule of both Tuđman and HDZ, with corresponding increase in citizens' demonstrations, protests, and the start of mistrust in the political elite.

The death of Tuđman in late 1999, the economic crisis, and subsequent internal power struggle in HDZ, saw the first transfer of power in democratic Croatia in 2000. The overwhelming, two thirds, victory of six opposition parties united into two coalitions of predominantly liberal and left political forces, allowed the constitutional changes from semi-presidential to parliamentary system, weakening of the position of the president of the republic, abolishment of the unrepresentative second chamber, the House of Counties, and the reset in relations with the EU.

Due to internal conflicts within the ruling coalition, and the consolidation of power within HDZ in the hands of the pro-European Ivo Sanader, the elections of 2003 saw HDZ return to power. This peaceful transition,

HDZ continued to rule after 2007 elections, partially based on good economic performance of the country, mostly built on state assets sale, which boosted public sector salaries and pensions, while partially linked to slow but continued negotiations process with the EU. The main opposition party, SDP, was also, weak due to internal struggles after the leadership change, which allowed the ruling HDZ to proclaim that continuation is the best for the country, famously depicted in their slogan "Let's continue" (Idemo dalje). However, soon, the global financial crisis would hit Croatia particularly hard, a widespread corruption of the ruling party would start to come to the fore. Sanader suddenly left the position of the party chief and the prime minister for unknown reasons that almost certainly had something to do with the discovery that the party tapped public businesses to siphon money to party coffers. At the same time, new SDP leadership consolidated power within party and focused on building anti-HDZ coalition.

In 2011 general elections, another coalition of opposition parties, led by SDP, managed to come to power, mostly due to public's frustration with how HDZ's government of Jadranka Kosor, Sanader's successor both in government and the party, managed the repercussions of global financial crisis in Croatia. The end of the negotiation process, which was finished during Kosor's term, did not help as

Croatian citizen showed increased disinterest, and even apathy, regarding the accession process. The SDP-led government struggled to contain the spillover effect of the crisis, the rising number of unemployed, bankruptcies, and the overall lack of optimism in both political and economic system of Croatia. Not even the 2013 accession of Croatia, saw boost in optimism among Croatian citizens, proved by the low turnout for the accession referendum, which hovered around 50 percent. SDP-led government was also weakened due to year-long protests of war veterans, supported by the HDZ, as well as by the resurgence of conservative civil society organizations and their attacks on minority (LGBTQ* and Serb) rights, through citizens initiatives and referenda, again supported by HDZ.

Despite this weak position of SDP, the 2015 elections saw a virtual tie between HDZ-led right-conservative coalition and SDP-led left-liberal coalition. This made Most, a new, populist party, into a pivot party. After a few weeks of inter-party negotiations, with the then president of the republic strongly pushing for the change of government, albeit behind the scene, Most decided to form a coalition with HDZ, with a caveat that HDZ leader, Tomislav Karamarko, cannot be prime minister. Hence, Tihomir Orešković, a Canada-born pharmaceutical manager, strongly favoured by radical elements in the Croatian diaspora, became prime minister. His government, although short-lived, managed to undo a lot of reforms favoured by the EU during the negotiations process, including outright attack on the media freedom, undermining of independent institutions and agencies, as well as stopping the reforms in education due to their deviation from the conservative norms.

The 2016 snap general elections produced a clear winner in HDZ, this time under the leadership of Andrej Plenković, an MEP, who was hailed as the pro-European face that will safeguard Croatia's democratic development. HDZ once again formed coalition government with Most, but on a much stronger positions than the previous year, which allowed Plenković to insist on the post of prime minister, while the leader of Most became the president of the parliament. This coalition was short-lived nonetheless. Plenković kicked Most out of the government after they supported opposition's vote of confidence in economy minister Z. Marić, a long-time manager in Agrokor, Croatia's largest holding company, held by Croatia's richest oligarch, which was nationalized by the state to prevent, according to government's claims, its imminent bankruptcy. HDZ then formed new governing coalition with HNS, bringing that party to implode, as some of the most prominent members were opposed to such coalition. The governing majority was supported by MPs representing national minorities, as well as rejects, dissidents, and lone-shooters who left different, mostly left and liberal parties, and coalesced around Milan Bandić, the powerful Zagreb mayor, plagued by corruption charges.

4.2. European Parliament Elections in Croatia: 2013–2019

Croatian citizens, as well as voters from other member states who were residing in Croatia at the moment of elections, first got to cast their votes in European elections in 2013, after Croatia became a member of the European Union. Those 12 MEPs elected in Croatia, got to serve the rest of the 2009–2014 EP term. Turnout was extremely low, even for European elections. Only 20.83 percent eligible voters turned out to vote. The winner was a coalition of conservative parties, led by HDZ, with 32.86 percent of the votes, which once translated into mandates, gave them six MEPs. Ruling SDP, in coalition with liberal HNS, and the Croatian Party of Pensioners (HSU), got 32.07 percent, narrowly losing to HDZ-led coalition. This got them five MEPs. The last, twelfth MEP came from the left, from Croatian Labour – the Party of Work (Hrvatski laburisti – Stranka rada – HL-SR), a splinter party founded by dissenters from HNS, which is now all but defunct.

For 2014 EP elections, Croatia lost an MEP. The turnout was higher than in the previous year, with 25.25 percent of voters coming out to vote. Those elections were once again won by HDZ-led coalition of nationalist-conservative parties, with 41.42 percent of the votes. Hence, they managed to keep their six MEPs. The ruling SDP, leading the same coalition as in 2013 with the addition of liberal regionalist IDS, managed to garner the support of 29.93 percent of electorate. This gave them four MEPs total. Electoral threshold of five percent was also cleared by Sustainable Development of Croatia (Održivi razvoj Hrvatske, ORaH), an eco-left party, started by dissenters from SDP, which got 9.42 percent of the votes. ORaH, hence, got the remaining MEP from Croatia. A coalition of radical right and nationalist parties led by HDSSB, a splinter party of HDZ, cleared the threshold as well, with 6.88 percent of votes. However, they got zero MEPs because the natural threshold during the 2014 EP election hovered around 7.5 percent.

The 2014 EP elections were seen by parties, experts, and media alike, as publics' rebuke of the ruling SDP-led coalition of left-liberal parties. They were a harbinger of what was coming in the 2015 presidential elections, where the incumbent, an SDP-supported candidate, Ivo Josipović, lost to HDZ candidate Kolinda Grabar Kitarović. The 2015 and 2016 general elections supported those claims, as voters chose to change the government, sending SDP into opposition and bringing back HDZ (this time leading coalition governments), for the first time since 2011.

After six years of membership, the EP electoral campaign in 2019 had greater visibility and engagement and electorate demonstrated increased familiarity with the EP's role and greater interest in EU topics (Henjak, 2019). It also resulted in a small improvement of the turnout in comparison to election in 2014. In 2019 the turnout was 29.85% with 2.68% of spoilt votes while 2014 the turnout was 25.24% with 3.06% of spoilt votes (Šimunjak, Nenadić and Žuvela, 2019).

SDP's candidates were well-known and popular MEPs as well as those of Croatian Sovereignists who were led by MEP Ruža Tomašić. Conversely, HDZ decided to omit right-wing candidates that

were publicly well-recognized and to give the opportunity to relatively unknown candidates (Henjak, 2019; Šimunjak, Nenadić and Žuvela, 2019). The prominent messages of HDZ's campaign were appealing to European mainstream and underpinned by the presence of Manfred Weber and Angela Merkel in the last days of campaign (Henjak, 2019). The position of SDP's leader was somewhat weakened by declining poll ratings and overall discontent within the party which led SDP to focus its campaign on its visible and publicly well-known EP candidates (Henjak, 2019). MOST and Independent for Croatia mostly based their campaign on critique of HDZ and their messages lacked in EU-related topics. Although Živi zid lacked a prominent EP candidate, it stood out with Eurosceptic and anti-system messages (Henjak, 2019). Generally, the analysis of electoral campaign showed that key topics promoted by candidates were heavily rooted in national issues and development with two thirds of all campaign materials focused on national level problems (Šimunjak et al., 2019). In a third of analysed campaign materials, Europe was not even mentioned (Šimunjak et al., 2019). When mentioned in campaign materials, Europe was placed in positive context particularly by ruling HDZ that emphasized country's development based on EU funds (Šimunjak et al., 2019). Negative campaign on the other side was mostly led by MOST and Živi zid whose criticism was predominately aimed towards national level policies, politicians and institutions (Šimunjak et al., 2019).

4.3. Turnout and Results in 2019 Elections

The elections of 2019 saw another rise in electoral turnout among Croatian voters, with 29.85% of eligible voters voting, a rise of around five percent when compared to 2014, and almost ten percent when compared to the first elections in 2013. The right to stand in the elections took 33 individual political parties, party coalitions or independent groups of voters. In the end six political parties, coalitions, or groups of voters, secured eleven (12 after 2020 and Brexit) MEP positions. Only one candidate managed to secure their mandate through the preferential vote (Ivan Vilibor Sinčić from ŽZ).

The 2019 European Parliament elections in Croatia expected to produce another easy victory for HDZ, especially because Plenković, as former MEP, put much emphasis on his European expertise, status within EPP, and willingness to push Croatia to the core groups of member states in any recalibration of European integration process where multi-tier European Union would become a possibility. At the same time SDP was weak, mainly due to internal struggles because some party members saw the new president D. Bernardić as weak and ineffective. There were, as well, some major defections from the party within parliament, where former SDP members, joined other parliamentary groups and then lend support to ever precarious majority of HDZ-HNS coalition. The

rest of the opposition was fractured, no matter if we look at the parties on the left, the liberal centre, or the right.

This confluence of events and opportunities gave Plenković optimism that he can both win these elections, thus strengthening his position within the party, as well as get rid of some, more conservative and nationalistic party members. Unlike 2013 and 2014 elections, any coalition with radical right parties and individuals was out of the question as well. Instead, he populated the list with younger and mostly unknown candidates, loyal to him, interspersed with more known candidates who will be able to garner support in specific demographics (e.g. among Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as those who he could not avoid but who would not question his position within HDZ. This calculation backfired.

Despite, winning the election, it was an accepted conclusion that Plenković was the main loser in May 2019. HDZ won 22.72% of votes but had shed more than 140 000 votes, compared to 2014 elections, and got only 1000 votes more than in 2013 elections, when ten percent less voters turned out to vote. Another evidence for HDZ's failure was visible in the number of MEPs the win secured. Despite HDZ-led coalition having six MEPs after 2014 elections, only four of those were from HDZ (including Plenković himself), while two came from then coalition partners. In 2019, Plenković refused to put on the list either R. Tomašić from the Croatian Conservative Party, or Marijana Petir, formerly from Croatian Peasants Party, but now non-affiliated. The elections again secured position for only four HDZ members, while both Tomašić and Petir taking a respectful slice of votes (Tomašić securing her return to EP, while Petir failed to clear a five-percent threshold by only 0.6 percent).

The explanation for this disappointing result of HDZ were multifold. Some blamed lacklustre campaign performance of, widely unknown HDZ candidates, especially number one on the list, Plenković's protegee, a 29-year old Karlo Ressler. Some linked it to the willingness of Croatian voters to use EP elections as a punishment for how the government was working on national level. Others found that strong performance by many radical right, nationalist, conservative, and populist parties, coalitions, and actors, bit heavily into electorate, which was usually solidly voting for HDZ.

At the same time, weak SDP, fraught with internal squabbles, was seen as one of the winners of these elections. Despite winning only 18.71 percent of the votes cast, and 75 000 votes less than in 2014, the party managed to up the number of its MEPs, from two in 2014-2019 EP term, to three (four after Brexit) in the new term. They managed this because they went to these elections alone, unlike 2014 when they were in coalition and gave two MEP spots to ALDE-affiliated political parties. They also had less successful challengers to their left, who did not manage to jeopardize SDP's position as a

main recipient of left-liberal votes. Also, as the main opposition party, they benefited from voters willingness to punish the governing coalition.

Unlike 2014 elections, when HDZ- and SDP-led coalition managed to secure all but one MEP spot for themselves, 2019 elections saw a much greater dissipation of votes and mandates. Between themselves, HDZ and SDP secured only seven (eight, post-Brexit) MEP positions. Three went to the candidates of radical right, anti-establishment, anti-system, and populist parties, coalitions, and candidates, while the fourth was secured by a liberal regional party.

Third strongest result, with 8.52 percent of votes, was secured by the four party coalition of radical right and nationalist parties, whose main candidate was Ruža Tomašić, a veteran MEP from the Croatian Conservative Party. She won more than 69 000 out of almost 92 000 votes this list secured, thus becoming the most preferred candidate during these elections. Although she won 40 000 less votes in this cycle than in 2014 elections, when she was part of the HDZ-led coalition, it was more than enough to carry her to another term as an MEP. Her success also gave boost to parties the right of HDZ in hoping they can wrest hard right voters from the dominant party, which they tried to do, and almost succeeded in 2019 presidential elections, and will probably continue to do in 2020 general elections.

One of the clear success stories of 2019 elections was Mislav Kolakušić, a former judge and a vocal critique of the government, the political elite, and the political system as whole. He rose to prominence by criticizing bankruptcy policies of government and rode a wave of public dissatisfaction with corruption and graft among the political elite. He also showed anti-system stance, insisting on accumulating power, changing the constitution, and ruling with strong hand. His voters' list managed to get 7.89 percent of votes, while he alone, got more than 68 000 votes, thus becoming second most popular candidate voters gave their preferential vote to.

Human Shield (ŽZ), seemed like a perfect political party for success in 2019 EP elections according to second-order election theory. Combination of populist rhetoric, anti-establishment narrative, and anti-system stance, coupled with public distrust of mainstream political parties, and social media proficiency of ŽZ leaders, especially among the younger voters, all but assured them success. In the end, the party managed to get a single MEP, securing 5.66 percent of total votes cast. The subsequent implosion of the party due to disagreements on who should go to Brussels, serves to show the expectations were high and were not met.

The last MEP was secured by a seven-party coalition of liberal and regional parties, who hoped for a much better result due to weakness of SDP. However, they barely managed to clear the threshold,

getting 5.19% of votes. The MEP came from IDS, a liberal regional party, which had a retiring MEP in previous term as well, but the overall result was a disappointment for liberal forces in Croatia, showing once more the strength and the support of the ideologically polarized party system.

Besides HDZ, the biggest losers of these elections were various conservative and nationalist political forces and individuals, whose divisions helped dissipate votes on the right. Among them, Most, a two-time junior coalition partner to HDZ, got 4.67 percent, Marijana Petir's voters' list, got 4.4 percent, while the coalition of two ultranationalist parties, Independents for Croatia and the Croatian Party of Rights, garnered support of 4.37 percent of voters.

4.4. European Elections seen from Gender and Youth Lenses

In the midst of the EU elections 2019 one social and demographic group turned out to be more prominent than in the previous EU campaigns and elections - young people. This happened on a general EU level but also in Croatia. After young people gained the attention of decision-makers in Brussels with their involvement in climate change protest, Brexit, digital rights a pan-European turnout campaign "This time I'm voting" was launched. With the goal to encourage a higher voter turnout of young people at the European elections, in Croatia this campaign was solidly media covered and had an outreach to approximately 26.000 young people. This campaign was necessary because youth turnout at the European elections in Croatia in 2014 was only 13% but also due to results of youth's attitude towards the European Union in which only 13,3% of young people in Croatia in March 2019 had very positive view on European Union (Flash Eurobarometer 478, 2019). Despite there are still no official data on Croatian youth turnout for 2019, data for the combined youth turnout at the European level illustrate that it increased for 50% from 2014; 28% in 2014 and 42% in 2019 (Eurostat, 91.5). Based on that, it is justified to speculate that youth turnout in Croatia also rose, and reason for that was the fact that, the first time in Croatia, youth issues were one of central topic in election programs of political parties. For instance, the Croatian Democratic Union, a relative winner of the elections, had a slogan "Croatia for Generations" where they were addressing issues young people are facing with and how to link reconcile older and younger generations, also the frontrunner of the same party was a 30-years old Karlo Ressler, nominated by the youth branch of the aforementioned political party. Furthermore, in the program of the political party MOST youth unemployment was pointed out as one of important topics, as for political parties Pametno and START, they were focusing on youth engagement and participation often talking about them in public. In 2018 a research conducted on 1500 young people demonstrates that 68% of respondents saw themselves as Europeans. When comparing to what degree certain democratic values are upheld or

achieved in Croatia and the EU, they state that the EU respects almost all democratic values much more than Croatia thus putting their trust more in the EU than in Croatian institutions. (Gvozdanovic et al, 2019: 50). Even though these results indicate Euro-optimism among Croatian youth it is important to observe them in the context of comparison between the national and European level. As stated earlier in absolute terms in 2019, only 13.3 percent of young people saw the EU as very positive (Flash Eurobarometer 478, 2019). This discrepancy shows that Croatian youth have critical observations with regard to their country and thus it was important for the politicians to link youth issues and European elections in order to mobilize young people and get some of their voices by moving their attention from the national reality.

Taking into account the variable of gender, 2019 EP elections offered us new insights into relationship between political parties, female politicians, and women voters, as well as the influence of the European Union on the role of women in the political process. The results of 2013 EP elections in Croatia brought an overrepresentation of women MEPs compared to the European Union average, with 50 percent of all elected MEPs being women. This trend continued, with a slight decrease, in 2014 EP elections, when five out of 11 (45 percent) elected MEPs were women. Due to internal political reasons, two HDZ MEPs left the parliament in order to lead Croatian government, and one of the substitute MEPs was a woman, which pushed the number of female MEPs from Croatia, well over 50 percent. Since 2016, therefore, 55 percent of all MEPs from Croatia were women.

However, the sheer number of women, although a good indicator of the power of women in the political system of the EU, does not mean that women's interests would be better represented, as the case of Croatia in 2014-2019 parliamentary term showed. Although Croatian voters elected six women to the EP, five of them came from the right part of ideological spectrum, with two of those skewing strongly toward ultranationalist and conservative-clerical part of that spectrum. Hence, it comes to no surprise that these five MEPs voted against almost all legislation, declarations, or strategies, which were intended in advancing women's rights.

The 2019 elections again saw a decrease in the percentage of female MEPs elected in Croatia, as only four out of 11 were women. With Brexit, and Croatia's gain of an additional MEP, the number rose to five out of 12, as SDP, gained another female MEP. This saw a relative rise in the percentage of elected women, from 37 percent pre-Brexit, to 42 percent after the rise of the total number of MEPs for Croatia. This is still a decline from when compared to 2013 and 2014, made even more visible knowing that topics focused on and related to women's rights are increasingly becoming obstacles over which ideological battles are fought in Brussels, Strasbourg, and many member states' capitals. The most prominent of those was the so-called Istanbul Convention, or the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which was used by conservatives and

ultranationalists to attack the HDZ government and their introduction of “gender ideology” through the ratification of that convention.

5. The 2019 European Parliament Election: Theoretical Analysis

5.1. *Second-Order Election Theory*

Focusing first on the Second-Order Elections theory, our analysis shows that for the two out of three variables partly fit, while the third one fits completely. While gain of the smaller parties variable fits completely, our analysis showed that both the gain of opposition party and the impact of timing were only partially supported.

The 2019 election saw a rise in success of smaller parties and independent lists. In 2013 and 2014 electoral cycles only one other list managed to send an MEP to Brussels and Strasbourg (HL-SR in 2013 and ORaH in 2014), besides the two largest parties. In the 2019 electoral cycle these two parties ceded four MEP spots to either smaller political parties (ŽZ), coalitions of smaller parties on the liberal (IDS) and on the conservative (HKS) end of the spectrum, as well as to voters’ lists of to that point politically inactive actors (M. Kolakušić). Granted, some of these parties had MEPs in previous cycles as well (IDS, HKS), however they managed to secure their mandates through coalition with either SDP or HDZ. In 2019, both of the largest parties decided to contest elections on their own, thus allowing for smaller parties to eat into their voting bases. This is why the “gain of the smaller parties” variable became so important in 2019 elections, while it only partially fit in 2013 and 2014 elections. This partiality is linked to smaller parties not being able to break the duopoly of the two largest parties at the elections, which counts as a negative for them. However, they were successful in the pre-election process of coalition building to extract positions for themselves, which will all but guarantee them positions in the European Parliament, which has to be counted as positive for them.

Taking into account the gain of the opposition party variable, our analysis showed it to only partially fit, unlike the 2013 and 2014 EP elections, when it could be used to explain the electoral results perfectly. Both 2013 and 2014 European elections occurred in the middle of a four-year term of then SDP-led coalition government. The government was weak and unpopular, partially augmented by the financial crisis, and the clear wins of HDZ were seen as voters’ rejection of the direction of the government. This was supported by the 2015 and 2016 general elections, when SDP lost power and went into opposition. The 2019 European election, occurred at the tail end of HDZ-led government’s term in office, as the general election were supposed to happen sixteen months later, the latest. The government was unpopular, but HDZ was still the party with the most support in public polls, with economic forecasts positive, and with Plenković projecting a clear support of and his importance within the EPP. Therefore, HDZ expected to win and actually won with four percentage points more

than the second placed SDP (23 to 19 percent). However, when these votes were turned into mandates – and with Croatia gaining an extra MEP post-Brexit), both parties ended up with four MEPs, each. This, coupled with the knowledge that pro-European, ex-MEP Plenković secured 140 000 votes less in 2019, than conservative, nationalist Karamarko did in 2014, allowed for criticism to start, which depicted this win as a loss. This was coupled with SDP's doubling of their MEP numbers, from two in 2014–2019 term to current four, when everybody expected them to fail due to internal squabbles and overall weakness, allows us to say that the “gain of the opposition party” variable at least partially fits.

The third variable in the Second Order Elections Theory, the impact of timing, also partially fits. General election in sixteen months' time happened both in 2014 as in 2019. However, both EP and local election that occurred a year earlier, in May 2013, as well as Presidential elections, that followed the 2014 EP elections, and occurred in December of 2014, help us understand how the timing was very influential in 2014, but only partially in 2019. In 2014 EP elections, the ruling SDP entered the race bruised by two recent losses. They came second, both in 2013 European elections, and saw HDZ gains in many local and regional council and mayorship elections. The 2019 European elections, however, occurred two years after the last election – local elections of 2017, which saw another sweep of victories for HDZ – and were temporally far enough for the positive spillover not to occur. At the same time, this made the 2019 elections, the first real opportunity for voters to judge Plenković-led HDZ government. Hence, the designation of partially fit.

5.2 Europe Salience Theory

Coming to Europe Salience theory, some early analysis of the 2019 EP elections focus on the changing tides in depicting European and domestic issues in electoral campaigns across the EU. “For the first time in the political debate at both the European and national levels, the direction and pace of the future process of European integration is at stake” (Lupo 2019, p. 105). Hence, we could expect that the Europe Salience theory became a much stronger predictor of 2019 EP elections. The analysis of Croatian elections showed it to be true. Unlike the previous two cycles, where none of the variables linked to the Europe Salience Theory were able to explain the election results (except partially the gain of green parties in 2014, due to one MEP secured by ORaH), in 2019, we can see quite a few variables becoming much more prominent.

In the 2019 European elections, the support for green parties was non-existent, with the collapse of ORaH in previous years (the party was a member of a three-party left coalition, which secured only 1.79 percent of votes in 2019). The support of voters for extreme political parties of the left was also non-existent as there was almost no parties espousing extreme left rhetoric during the campaign (the

only coalition that can be seen as radically left gained 0.24 percent or slightly more than 2500 votes in total).

The rest of the variables were, however, much more prominent in 2019 than in previous years. This is especially true when we analyse the gain of anti-establishment parties/movements/candidates, as well as the success of populist, anti-European, and extreme right-wing parties and forces. First, the anti-establishment and anti-system forces managed to secure both visibility and prominence by securing two MEP positions, one for ŽŽ and a dark horse of these elections, M. Kolakušić (who is also representing the success for populist forces). Their success came on a wave of dissatisfaction of the Croatian public with mainstream parties, the corruption surrounding the ruling HDZ, the weakness and ideological disorientation of SDP, and the lack of viable moderate options with fresh faces. This coupled with ŽŽ's and Kolakušić's focus on injustices linked to economic disparities, made them into acceptable alternatives, especially during the less important electoral cycle.

Anti-European forces and extreme right-wing parties form sort of a Venn diagram, as the same coalition of political parties – the sovereigntists – covers both of them (with ŽŽ partly also filling the anti-European column). However, if we look at other electoral lists, which did not reach the threshold, we see how the field of radical and extreme right parties was competitive, with at least 13 lists competing for radical and extreme right voters. Three of those almost reached the five percent threshold (they needed between 0.3 and 0.7 percent of votes), which shows us that the pool of extreme right is much deeper than the one on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum.

6. Conclusion

The 2019 EP elections followed two competing, yet equally influential, trends. Recent surveys in member state after member state keep showing that citizens trust EU institutions more than their domestic ones, while at the same time there is a rise in the support of populist, far right, and anti-establishment parties, focused on the criticism of the EU (among their other targets) (Fromage 2019). The Second-Order Elections theory is the oldest theoretical assumption on the role, the importance, and the actual influence of introducing direct elections for the members of the European Parliament. It states that EP elections can be distinguished from other, national-type, elections by the surge in smaller parties, opposition parties, and especially protest parties, as well as that the timing of EP elections compared to first-order national elections have influence on the final results, mostly on the turnout. The Europe Salience theory is based on later observations that the question of Europe is becoming ever more important element of European elections, both for political parties and for the voters. It states, that EP elections can be distinguished by parties' focus on "European issues", as well as relative gain of Green, populist, Eurosceptic, and extreme political parties.

Overall, our analysis of the 2019 European elections in Croatia, gives us a solid support for our claim that the Second-Order Elections Theory is still an important explanation, with waning influence. It is still a good predictor when the gain of smaller parties is taken into account. However, the support for the opposition party as well as the impact of timing proved to be less important in this electoral cycle, than in previous ones. The Europe Salience theory gained importance in explaining European elections in Croatian context in 2019, especially when taking into account the rise in anti-establishment, populist, and extreme right political parties. It is obsolete in explaining the results when focused on the gains of extreme left and green political parties, which is similar to many other member states from Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, the 2019 elections already changed the narrative around the success of Andrej Plenković's government as well as his positioning of HDZ as a moderate, right-of-centre pro-European party. This escalated further, bringing his position to a precarious tipping point, after the incumbent president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, lost re-election in 2019/2020 presidential elections. On the other hand, SDP's success in EP elections and the win of their candidate in presidential election, stopped the narrative on party weakness and brought them back to a top position in public polls in the beginning of 2020. Hence, the elections of 2019 brought instability on the right side of the ideological spectrum with many parties and politicians ready to jump into a void left by apparent HDZ intraparty instability, while the left and centre left seems to become more stable. The problem of voter dissatisfaction is still present though, which will continue to help old and new populist, anti-establishment, and anti-system forces, some of which were legitimized by having an MEP, with all financial, political, and visibility benefits that follow.

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