

Croatia: Breaking Fragile Trust

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Introduction

Croatia's handling of the pandemic has been uneven. A forceful response in the early months of the pandemic (spring 2020) allowed the country to keep infection numbers very low. In this period, trust of citizens in the government, and in the special Covid-19 Taskforce the government assembled to tackle the pandemic, the *Stožer Civilne Zaštite Republike Hrvatske za Sprečavanje Širenja Zaraze Koronavirusom* (as it is commonly referred to in Croatia, a shorthand *Stožer*), increased. But the situation with this Civil Protection Committee reversed in the second half of the year. Having declared a victory over the first wave of the virus, in June 2020 prime minister Plenković announced early parliamentary elections and the reopening for the summer months. In 2020, the use of Covid-19 handling for political ends was a gamble that paid off for the ruling party—the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ): the slogan 'safe Croatia' resonated with large part of the citizenry, who felt in secure hands, and rewarded the HDZ with a more sizeable majority in parliament. Increasingly, however, the sense that political calculations and Covid-19 handling were connected, and that the *Stožer* was less an expert taskforce and more an extension of the ruling party, pushed citizens towards distrusting the government and flouting measures. In mid-December 2020, Croatia recorded the highest rise in Covid-19 cases in the EU.

Overall, the Croatian government's response up to May 2021(*) can be divided into six main periods: three pandemics' 'waves' with lockdowns of decreasing severity (spring 2020; autumn-winter 2020/21; and spring 2021) were followed, each time, by reopenings. The huge importance of the summer season for Croatia's economy (approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of GDP) underpinned the government's decision to implement very lax measures in the summer months. Crisis response was exacerbated by exogenous issues of both geophysical (two earthquakes in Zagreb and central-northern Croatia in March and December) and cultural (anti-mask and anti-vax protests) nature. According to *Our World in Data COVID-19 dataset*, edging towards 2,000 deaths per million inhabitants, Croatia's death tally by spring 2021 was the sixth highest in the European Union

(COVID-19 Data Repository 2022). High scepticism towards vaccination meant that a fourth wave in autumn 2021 seemed (and indeed was) inevitable.

Arrays and Disarrays of Croatian Governance

Croatia is a young democracy with the first constitution promulgated in 1990, amended in 2000 reducing the importance of the president and in 2001 abolishing the upper house, thereby rendering the Parliament (*Sabor*) a unicameral body. The President of the Republic is elected by general, direct election for five years, while the Prime minister, typically the head of the leading party in the *Sabor*, with his government, runs the country that is divided administratively into 20 counties, plus the City of Zagreb as an autonomous county.

Starting with a more centralised approach, with the executive branch and the office of the Prime Minister, in particular, taking an active role in sounding the alarm and in organising emergency response at the beginning of the pandemic (Croatian Government March 19, 2020), Croatia's handling of the pandemic included also regional and local elements. From mid-March 2020, guidance for citizens ('Coronavirus—the latest guidance', n.d.) was regularly issued by the pre-existing national public health body—the Croatian Institute of Public Health, which operates under the budget of the Ministry of Health. Furthermore, emergency Covid-19 task forces were organised at four levels. At the national level, emergency management has been carried out by a special body, a blend of experts and politicians, called the National Headquarters of Civil Protection (*Stožer*) and headed by the Minister of the Interior. Headquarters of civil protection were also active at regional, city and municipal levels. On certain occasions, the municipal-level task forces were merged with the city headquarters following a mutual agreement: upon request from the Istria region's Headquarters, the provision of the possibility of such an agreement among local-level Headquarters of Civil Protection was allowed by the National Headquarters and approved into law in April 2020 (See: The Law on the System of Civil Protection. Art. 18). As a general rule, the lower-level task forces could implement harsher decisions than the rules issued at a higher level, but could not implement any less strict decisions. For example, the Primorsko-Goranska region implemented a firmer lockdown in April 2021, keeping bars and restaurants closed while the national-level rules allowed for their opening (Jutarnji List 2021, April 9).

The high fragmentation of local administrative units exacerbated freedom of movement problems in the early phases of the pandemic. In spring 2020, citizens' freedom of movement was restricted to their municipality of residence to prevent the spread of the virus, but due to this fragmentation, implementing travel restrictions within the country proved to be very challenging. With 576 local and regional self-government units, of which 428 are towns, and 127 are cities, Croatia has many more local municipalities than are needed—a situation driven, in part, by clientelistic hiring procedures (Koprić 2017). This situation created problems for many citizens, as some municipalities lack basic services, including grocery stores, pharmacies and ATMs (Freedom House, 2021). This restriction was lifted in later lockdowns—from summer 2020 onward, citizens were able to freely travel throughout the country.

International institutions have shaped the management of the pandemic to a significant extent, insofar as Croatia has fallen in line with EU-wide regulations throughout the crisis. The European Commission's 100 billion EUR solidarity instrument (SURE: The European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency) to help workers keep their incomes and help businesses stay afloat aided the country's state coffers with 1.02 billion EUR (See: Communication from to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on the assessment of the application of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU). Croatia took part (although only as a receiver) in the EU consular operation, which brought home over 500,000 EU citizens from abroad in the early stages of the crisis. Croatia has also participated in the EU-wide non-essential travel ban starting March 2020.

In terms of vaccination, the EU's roll-out—to which Croatia subscribed—initially suffered of delays, and some Croatian citizens took the opportunity to take the jab in neighbouring Serbia, which ensured an early supply of vaccines mainly thanks to the availability of the Chinese vaccine 'Sinopharm' (Bradarić 2021). Vaccination roll-out started during the second lockdown, initially slowly, but by summer 2021 all adult citizens could get access to vaccines without big issues. The EU COVID Pass was implemented in Croatia without big issues: fully-vaccinated citizens could get access to their pass either through the electronic platform *e-Gradani* ('e-Citizens'), or by requesting a physical copy at the branches of the Croatian Health Insurance Fund (*HZZO*). The

main problem very soon switched from supply to demand: the unwillingness or reticence of about half of Croatian citizens to be vaccinated (Večernji list, December 2020).

Another critical aspect of the pandemic was the unequal response of institutions in charge of the normative legislation. The crisis has led to several decisions that, due to the slow, hesitant executive, have left an impression of incompleteness, lack of preparation, and failure to take responsibility. A number of prescriptions also received a constitutional court epilogue concerning the specific grounding of several laws, and numerous measures of the *Stožer* in regard to pandemic prevention and protection from infections. Initiating a review of their constitutionality, the Constitutional Court started procedures to assess their conformity with the Constitution as early as of spring 2020, ruling by and large in favour of the government's decisions. According to Ivana Đuras, a legal advisor to the Constitutional Court, "with ten votes in favour and three against, the constitutionality of some legal provisions and the legality of decisions made by the *Stožer*, except for the decision on a non-working week, was not questioned." (Đuras 2020: 439). In the later stages of the pandemic, which is still under way at the time of writing (early 2022), almost every measure proclaimed by the government came under intense scrutiny, with wide swathes of the public opinion and of the media landscape dichotomising all as an attack against fundamental human rights and freedoms. The latest example was the constitutionality of the Covid Pass introduced earlier in the health and care system in accordance with the Constitution, but then questioned by anti-vax and far-right movements with a long-running debate for more than 6 months.

Impossible Swinging between Politicised and De-politicised Pandemic Waves

The Covid response was accompanied by a perceived increasing politicisation, which followed the pandemic waves. The process was driven by the executive and overseen by Prime Minister Plenković. The Prime Minister was also the most exposed person in all news updates, alongside the members of the *Stožer*. The most apparent early moment of a 'break of trust' corresponded to the end of the first wave and the beginning of the first reopening, in late spring 2020, which coincided almost perfectly with the announcement of early parliamentary elections by the Prime Minister. Anticipating the autumn ballot to the spring was a political gamble that paid off handsomely for the ruling party, which capitalised on the good early handling of the pandemic and obtained a better-than-foreseen result. However, it soon became clear that the feeling of a 'victory'

over the virus—a signal given by the leadership and widely felt among the population—was only ephemeral, timed to suit political calculations as well as to favour the economy (being Croatia heavily dependent on the tourism sector, opening up in the summer was crucial to keep the country’s economy afloat). Due to such decisions, which de facto adapted epidemiological measures to serve political purposes, the confidence of citizens in the righteousness of Croatia’s Covid response fell sharply (Despot 2021). Thus, if any attempt at de-politicization was on display, daily politics had drowned it through this ‘game’ of national and security measures by autumn 2020.

Decisions taken to curb the pandemic’s spread have formally come from three institutions: the Ministry of Health, the Croatian Institute of Public Health (*HZZJZ*), and the *Stožer*. The latter body, whose members were chosen ad hoc by the executive, is the institution that has received, by far, the most attention by the media in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. The way appointments to the *Stožer* were made and the increasing perception of its politicisation among the Croatian public were key elements in the discontinuity of trust between the citizenry and the political leadership in the fight against Covid-19. The initial heavy-handed response, which found a very high approval in the country in spring 2020, corresponded to the high popularity of the individual members of the *Stožer*. Some of them were hailed for their medical expertise and praised as role models in their prompt and selfless response to the crisis. Appointed directly by the government upon suggestion of the Minister of the Interior, who heads the *Stožer* (See: Law on the System of Civil Protection), the members of this body formulated opinions on the nature of the virus, on how best to cure the sick, and on what sanitary and social measures to adopt in order to curb infections. All the decisions taken by the *Stožer* were published on an ad hoc website, *koronavirus.hr*, the “Official Croatian government website for timely and accurate information about the coronavirus,” and regularly updated (*Službena stranice Vlade za pravodobne i točne informacije o koronavirusu*).

However, scientific controversies stoked mistrust among the population. Especially bitter were the disagreements raised by individual members of a further body with an advisory role, *Znanstveni Savjet Vlade* (The Scientific Committee of the Government of Croatia), whose statements sometimes flew in the face of scientific consensus. These controversies erupted in full force after the period taken into account by this chapter and book. In October 2021, five members of the

Scientific Committee published an open letter in which they took distance from the statements made by the controversial Dr. Gordan Lauc. It took a very long time for the government to eventually ‘fire’ Lauc, although he had gone rogue in his statements a long time before (tportal website, October 2021).

Being the *Stožer* so closely associated with the government leadership itself, the break of trust between citizens and government went hand in hand with the loss of trust in the objectivity of the *Stožer*. A development that cemented this impression was the active participation of the Minister of Health and *Stožer* member Vili Beroš—initially presented as an expert, non-party individual—in the parliamentary elections in summer 2020 and later in the local elections in spring 2021, for which he was initially touted as a potential ruling party (HDZ) candidate for the mayorship of the capital. This perception was further worsened in the months to follow, as conflicts of interest and cases of nepotism started to emerge in the media. During the first weeks of the vaccination roll-out, attempts to use positions of power to jump the queue surfaced daily. Politicians, business people, and other powerful actors such as the rector of Zagreb university sought to use their connections to these ends. Another prominent *Stožer* member, Dr. Alemka Markotić, also arranged the first jab for her mother before her turn was due. In the same period (February 2021), Markotić attended a mass religious demonstration in the centre of Zagreb, which was organised despite epidemiological measures. Due to such instances, journalists and commentators highlighted the “moral debacle of the fight against the coronavirus (Novosti February 19, 2021; 24 sata February 11, 2021).

Conversely, Parliament did not have a big say in Covid-19 matters, being by and a large cut out of the decision-making process. Civil society organizations (CSOs) warned that some democratic practices had suffered considerably during the pandemic. Most notably, as pointed out by the watchdog Gong, the Croatian Parliament stopped publishing individual MP voting record statistics from March 2020, being the only legislative institution in the EU to stop doing so (tportal website May 2021). The procedure of tallying votes was changed at the beginning of the crisis to allow for MPs who were not in the plenary room (due to restrictions to the freedom of movement) to vote remotely, but its continuation entailed the curtailing of transparency. Despite criticism from CSOs, and the strong need to depoliticise measures that are were supposed to benefit all Croatian citizens,

authorities rejected the idea that this development would lead to lower democratic standards and kept this practice for the whole duration of the period under exam.

This repeated curtailing of accountability has not favoured the (traditionally low) trust of Croatian citizens in institutions. Considering that research has shown that trust in government strongly correlates with vaccine take-up in South-Eastern Europe (Prelec et al. 2021), it is likely that the marked politicisation of the response has left its mark on the high scepticism by which vaccines were greeted in the country. The whole of 2021 was characterised by mounting populism, with several political actors including the conservative party ‘Most,’ some far-right groups, and the President of the Republic Zoran Milanović, attempting to capitalise on the widespread frustration concerning the Covid response by questioning government measures and stoking anti-vax sentiments. Polarisation increased, and some protests turned violent, with the media and doctors sometimes taken as targets. In late 2021, the party Most managed to collect over 400,000 signatures for a referendum to regulate the work of the *Stožer* and to abolish the Covid Pass—in only three days (See Trkanjec December 7, 2021).

Policy Responses

Key measures implemented by the Croatian government to alleviate the impact of the Covid-19 crisis addressed four main areas: income support and job-saving provisions; social distancing and work-from-home measures; parental leave; and specific policies addressing particularly vulnerable workers (Grgurev, I. 2020). For clarity, in the discussion below we adopt the terminology outlined by Hood & Margetts (2007). Thus, government tools are distinguished among treasurer (economic incentives), authority (law), nodality (information) and organisation (capacity). As outlined in the sections above, both nodality and organisation were under solid government control at the beginning of the crisis, keeping the political situation stable until a slow but steady irruption of the anti-vax movement, closely accompanied by latent far-right tendencies. In this section we thus examine more closely economic measures (treasurer) and then pass on to dwell on the social (authority) measures, supplementing the above discussion on the legal response.

‘Treasurer’ tools: Economic Incentives

The Government presented its first support package in March 2020. Labour market-wise, several governmental bodies provided support to employers and employees. The Croatian Employment Service issued a set of measures called “Supporting the preservation of jobs for employers whose economic activity has been disrupted due to special circumstances caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the consequences of the earthquake in Sisak-Moslavina, Zagreb, and Karlovac counties.” This is because shortly after the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown, on March 22, 2020, the area of Zagreb and surrounding regions were severely hit by an earthquake of magnitude 5.3 Mw—5.5 ML that destroyed homes and businesses. Employers could apply for income support of HRK 4,000.00 per worker. This package was revised in April 2020 and essentially extended up until the end of the period under consideration.

As part of the measures to support entrepreneurs in activities affected by the coronavirus, the Croatian Development Bank (*Hrvatska Banka za Obnovu i Razvoj, HBOR*) implemented a temporary lending program under the Temporary Framework for State aid measures (TF). Named ‘Working Capital COVID-19 Measure,’ the programme offered subsidised interest rates, a repayment period of up to five years and a grace period of up to 12 months (HBOR website). The Croatian Agency supported its roll-out for Small SMEs, Innovation and Investment (HAMAG BICRO), which provided guarantees to all firms that met its conditions. The measure included new working capital loans for SMEs active in the maritime, transport, tourism, and related sectors, as well as loans for undertakings in the field of culture and in the creative industries. The Government provided loan contracts until the exhaustion of available funds, and contracts had to be signed not later than 31 December 2021.

Due to the refocusing of the funds into the preservation of jobs and onto more vulnerable sectors, the Croatian Employment Service suspended a part of the programmes of active employment policy measures (this suspension is still in place at the time of writing, end of 2021). The suspended measures included: training subventions, employment and self-employment subventions, education and training, and public works. On the other hand, it continued the implementation of the subventions for the preservation of jobs and the ‘permanent seasonal worker’ scheme (e-Građani Information and Services Official portal).

'Authority' tools: Social measures and further normative response

Exception made for the first lockdown in spring 2020, restrictions to gathering and freedom of movement in Croatia were considerably milder than in many neighbouring countries. A curfew was never imposed. After the short-lived limitations to freedom of movement from one municipality to another, which proved highly problematic (See above: Arrays and Disarrays of Croatian Governance), the Croatian government dropped that measure. The government imposed to all main businesses and social activities, including retail shops, eateries, and shopping centres, to fully close during the first lockdown in the first wave. The gradual relaxation of restrictions occurred in three stages, on 27 April, 4 May, and 11 May 2020 (Croatian Government Official Website, April 2021). Services—aside from those requiring close contact—were allowed to re-open, with rules in place for physical distancing and the wearing of masks. Athletes were then allowed to recommence training. In summer 2020, the outside spaces of restaurants and bars were allowed to open.

After the second lockdown, restaurants, take-out services and bars, and outdoor areas were mainly open for the rest of the duration of the crisis. Services requiring close contacts, such as beauticians, hairdressers, and massage parlors, were only fully closed during the first lockdown and selectively closed in certain regions implementing stricter measures following lockdowns. Public events and large gatherings started to be permitted only from spring 2021 onwards, sometimes with the requirement of a Covid Pass (a measure that most often depended on the municipality's decision in question, or even on the event organisers). Travelling into Croatia was always possible for those who wished to return to their residence (with quarantine requirements, depending on the epidemiological situation).

Croatia opened the doors to visitors early on, in the late spring of 2021, upon the presentation of a negative PCR. Fully-vaccinated Croats could obtain their EU Covid Pass through the web portal *e-Građani* or by visiting the Croatian Health Insurance Fund offices. These documents started to be used routinely by customs officers from spring 2021, who would scan them at the entrance confirming that the individual is fully vaccinated and/or has recovered from Covid recently. But unlike nearby countries such as Italy, the use of the Covid Pass in Croatia was never extended

more widely: for instance, bars and restaurants continued to operate without imposing restrictions on non-vaccinated individuals.

Conclusion: From a break of trust to increasingly well-profiled authoritarian populism

Early on in the crisis (summer 2020), it became evident that the sanitary crisis in Croatia was driven by ad hoc normative apparatus that was unevenly implemented and rarely publicly articulated or debated. That self-serving political calculations outweighed public interest is clear from the meek attitude towards vaccination: the government never made vaccination mandatory nor implemented a blanket requirement for entry into closed spaces, although entering public institutions became conditional upon possessing a Covid Pass in the second half of 2021—which gave a timid spur to a very sluggish vaccine take-up compared to EU levels.

The media landscape did not help. In early 2021, almost a year after the beginning of the pandemic, traditional Croatian media generally did not provide space to discuss measures with people who lost their jobs or had to close their businesses, or who had a legitimate distrust of Croatian and international institutions (Bagić, D. Šuljok, A. 2021; Boda, Z. et al. 2014; RTL December 4, 2020). Instead, since the crisis started, most media reduced the entire vaccine-sceptical movement to its most extreme members—often, the biggest eccentrics, conspiracy theorists, and hard right wingers. In addition to muting public debate, most traditional media in the spring of 2021 in Croatia were guided by a clickbait model that exploited and intensified public panic and anxiety. Much of the news consisted of hastily written sensationalist articles about snippets of information lacking basic scientific grounding. Some traditional media outlets ran articles about vaccines whose headlines contradicted their content. While headlines suggested a high risk of vaccination, the text below would usually reject the danger. The media's 'loose' approach towards all forms of scepticism significantly threatened the fragile trust in the capacity of action of the *Stožer*, the government, and Croatian and international institutions in general.

The growing influence of right-wing populism in movements against Covid-19 measures went hand in hand with a rapidly decaying political debate (Askwall, C. et al. 2020/1; *Deutsche Welle* December 30 2021). By disabling public discussion and downplaying the existential problems of

the population, the government—alongside a large portion of the public intellectuals as well as of the mainstream media—effectively disavowed a significant amount of their fellow citizens. At the same time, right-wing populists provided them with refuge and a voice. Politically, thus, we argue that the most significant impact of the Covid-19 crisis in Croatia is the emergence of a fully-fledged populism, in the guise of that found in other Western countries in earlier years and identifying with dynamics that fit an ‘authoritarian populism’ pattern (Peters, 2017; Bugarič, 2019; Edelman, 2021). In Croatian politics, this tendency has, so far, been somewhat muted—but the Covid-19 crisis has brought it thoroughly under the limelight. A frequently incoherent mix of anti-expert, anti-elite, Eurosceptic, and even pro-Russia sentiments has been on full display. The politicians most successfully riding this discontent by potentiating such discussions have been the right-wing party *Most* (The Bridge) and the formerly Social Democrat President of the Republic, Zoran Milanović. This newly exposed cleavage – which is certainly an issue deserving of further research and attention – could be set to play a role in electoral competition in the country in the years to come.

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