

Croatia's Presidential Candidates: Key Differences in Foreign Policy



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How Do Croatia's Presidential Candidates Differ on Foreign Policy?

On December 29, Croatia will hold the first round of its presidential election, with a second round almost certain to follow on January 12. Eight candidates from across the political spectrum are vying for the presidency:

- Zoran Milanović: The incumbent president, supported by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and nine other parties. Milanović leads in all major polls and is considered the favorite for a second term.
- Dragan Primorac: Backed by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and five other parties, Primorac is Milanović's strongest opponent and is widely expected to reach the runoff.
- Marija Selak Raspudić: Running as an independent candidate.
- Ivana Kekin: Candidate from the progressive Možemo! party.
- Miro Bulj: Representing Most, a conservative and populist party.
- Branka Lozo: Running for the nationalist Home and National Rally Party (DOMiNO).
- Tomislav Jonjić: An independent candidate who launched his campaign with support from the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP).
- Niko Tokić Kartelo: Another independent candidate.

Key Issues in Foreign Policy

Although the candidates differ on domestic matters like education, healthcare, and cultural policies, these issues fall outside the scope of presidential authority. The Constitution grants the president significant influence over foreign policy and national security, making these areas the focal points of the campaign. Some candidates, like Selak Raspudić and Jonjić, have even called for expanding the president's powers.

European Union and NATO

All candidates agree on maintaining strong and stable relations with the European Union and NATO. None of them advocate a Eurosceptic stance or oppose NATO membership, though figures like Milanović, Lozo, and Bulj have voiced criticisms of EU institutions and their leaders.

Ukraine

There is broad support for Ukraine among the candidates, but opinions diverge on military involvement. Milanović, Selak Raspudić, and Bulj have explicitly stated that they oppose sending Croatian troops to Ukraine.

Mandatory Military Service

Mandatory military service is a recurring topic in Croatian elections, often raised by right-wing candidates. This year, Lozo and Bulj have expressed support for reinstating it, aligning with their conservative platforms.

Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The status and rights of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain a significant issue, especially for right-leaning candidates. As Bosnian Croats are eligible to vote in Croatian elections, their support is crucial and often shapes campaign strategies.

Israel-Hamas War

The ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict has been a polarizing issue in Croatia and has featured in the campaign. Milanović and Bulj support recognizing Palestinian independence, with Kekin making it a top priority in her foreign policy agenda. Selak Raspudić, however, firmly opposes Palestinian statehood, setting her apart from other candidates.

Conclusion

Regardless of who wins, Croatia's foreign policy direction will remain aligned with EU and NATO commitments, ensuring that leaders like Ursula von der Leyen and Mark Rutte can expect continuity. Milanović appears likely to secure a second term, but his opponent in the second round remains uncertain. The upcoming presidential debates may provide clarity for undecided voters as the election approaches.