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Croatian Political Agendas

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7.1 Introduction

The Croatian Agendas Project is the newest member of the Comparative Agendas network. It was initiated in 2015 by a group of researchers from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb and lead by Daniela Širinić. The project was financed by the Operational Program 2014–16 of the European Social Fund. The initial goals of the project were twofold. First, as is the case with the other projects in the group, we aimed to collect data on the activities of political institutions and second, to contribute to the agendas literature by expanding the universe of cases to new democracies.

7.2 The Croatian Political System

Croatian transition to democracy started in 1990 when the first multiparty elections were held under the provision of a two-round electoral system. Those elections marked the end of a long period of communist rule and a start of the transformation of political and economic systems towards democracy and free market economy. The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), as the new ruling party, soon began to shape democratic institutions in accordance with the preferences of its leader Franjo Tuđman, whose charismatic appeal was institutionalized within the framework of a semi-presidential system. Institutional features that facilitated the concentration of powers in the hands of a strong president, backed by absolute parliamentary majorities, very soon started to display authoritarian tendencies, making the HDZ's regime one of a defective and illiberal democracy (Dolenec, 2013). During the first half of the 1990s the new leadership was also faced with the threat of the

Croatian War of Independence, which had prevented full-scale progress of economic, social, and political transition to democracy and market economy. However, the HDZ made the most of the ongoing war and military operations. The party aimed at maximizing its electoral performance by introducing a mixed-member electoral system before the 1992 parliamentary elections, and creating strong ties with numerous war veteran and refugee groups that became its steady electoral base.

By the end of the 1990s, when the state-building program was successfully completed, the HDZ's legitimacy started to deteriorate under the pressure of a social and economic crisis. Facing a growing disaffection by voters and imminent decline of electoral support, the ruling party once again changed the electoral rules by means of institutionalizing proportional representation. Nonetheless, the HDZ's predominant party rule ended soon after Tuđman's death, when the party lost power in the parliamentary and presidential elections in early 2000. The new center-left government led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) pursued an agenda of comprehensive constitutional reforms in order to prevent any future concentration of powers in the hands of one person. Governing coalition established functional checks and balances between the different branches of government. By way of the new constitutional rules, the president of the Republic had been stripped of most previous powers in an attempt to establish a parliamentary system with a balance of power between the executive and the parliament. The electoral reform and the subsequent constitutional changes also set the pattern for future cabinet formation since coalition-building became the norm for all successive governments. Moreover, the center-left government initiated a comprehensive reform of foreign and internal policies, insisting on a broad all-party consensus over Croatia's NATO and EU membership.

Over the last fifteen years, the parliamentary system of government proved to be quite stable. Although presidents are still elected directly, they have been subdued to a symbolic and ceremonial role and left with only limited prerogative powers in defense and foreign affairs. The government took over the leading executive role with the prime minister acting as the effective head of the executive branch. The government dominates over the parliament in the legislative process due to the strong discipline which party leaders and prime ministers enforce upon their parliamentary party groups. As a result, and similar to other parliamentary democracies, Croatia has a comparatively weak parliament, which is best exemplified by the fact that more than 90 percent of all laws originate from the government.

Up until parliamentary elections in 2015, most coalition governments were stable and internally cohesive, and managed to end their terms without any serious ideological or organizational disruptions. The stability of coalition governments had mostly emanated from rather stable and predictable patterns

of party competition characterized by significant centripetal tendencies that induced a gradual reduction in the party system polarization (Henjak, Zakošek, and Čular, 2013). In contrast to the predominant party system developed in the 1990s, following the 2000 elections, the party system may best described as moderate pluralism. Both the HDZ and the SDP advanced their vote-seeking strategies in an attempt to approach the median voter, whereas smaller parties employed office-seeking strategies and were inclined to change coalition camps between election cycles, thus participating in both center-left and center-right governments. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the two main parties have started to build large pre-electoral coalition blocs. Thereby they reduce the potential for smaller parties to cross the floor and change coalition ranks. This pattern of coalition building was especially evident in the parliamentary, presidential, and European elections over the course of the last five years. Parliamentary elections in 2015 and 2016 have shaped a new political landscape in Croatia. Since the elections did not produce a clear-cut winner, neither the left nor the right coalition block could form the government by themselves. The keys to government formation were in the hands of the MOST, a newly created anti-establishment party that managed to secure significant parliamentary representation and thus became the first genuinely pivotal party in Croatian politics.

7.3 Datasets

The Croatian Agendas Project was set up to investigate agenda-setting of the main political institutions and organizations—political parties, the parliament, the government, and the president—in the last twenty-five years (see Table 7.1). Since the agenda-setting process is best understood as a "bottleneck of attention," we sought to study which and how many issues make it through all of the echelons and reach decision-level agenda (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014: 6). To accomplish this, we have decided to collect data on systemic, institutional, and decision-based levels of agenda (Birkland, 2001). The systemic agenda includes a dataset on all election platforms and a sample of front pages of the daily newspaper *Večernji list*, representing the media agenda. The institutional agenda includes a dataset covering all agenda items from parliamentary sessions (bills and other types of motions), a dataset on parliamentary questions and all items from the agendas of weekly government meetings. The decision-level agenda includes laws and other decisions adopted by the parliament and all decisions of the executive bodies (the government and the president) published in the *Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia*. All datasets were prepared according to the latest version of the CAP Master Codebook (Bevan, 2014) and coded at the level of subtopics.

Table 7.1. Datasets of the Croatian Agendas Project

	Dataset name	Description	Period/Elections	N
Systematic Agenda	Election platforms	Election platforms	1990, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015	27,716 quasi-sentences; 62 platforms
	Večernji list front-pages	Structured sample of front-pages from the *Večernji list* daily	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	2,128 front pages 18,317 headlines
Institutional Agenda	Parliamentary plenary session	Agenda items from plenary sessions (bills and all other types of motions)	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	12,892
	Government weekly sessions	Agenda items from weekly government meetings	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	48,157
	Parliamentary questions	Oral parliamentary questions	14/10/1992–31/12/2015	4,989
Decision Agenda	Parliamentary Acts	Laws and other decisions	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	8,535
	Government decisions	Decisions	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	18,384
	Presidential Acts	Decisions	1/1/1990–31/12/2015	5,195

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Croatia

Election platforms dataset, coded using quasi-sentences, includes the platforms of twenty-seven parties that won parliamentary seats in the course of eight election cycles.

A decision to collect the front pages of *Večernji list* was made with regard to two individual criteria: this daily has a broad spectrum of readers at the national level (it has dominated the Croatian press scene until 1998) and it has been published continually throughout the observed period. The reasons behind using the sample rather than coding the entire collection were merely practical, as the idea was to capture the entire twenty-five-year period instead of comprehensively coding all front pages. Timing of government or parliament sessions in Croatia is not set to a specific day in the week and we did not have any prior expectations on the domination of policy topics in the newspaper regarding weekdays. To ensure that the final sample consists of twelve weeks for each year in the observed period, front pages were selected by using a quota sample. The final sample consists of 2,128 front pages and includes one non-consecutive week for each month in the period.

The parliamentary sessions dataset includes all items appearing in the minutes of the parliament plenary sessions during the 1990–2015 period. The

dataset also covers the period in which the country was at war and presents a rare opportunity to study wartime agenda-setting. This dataset is not limited to discussions on bills alone, as items also include all other parliamentary acts such as the Constitution, declarations, resolutions, recommendations, the state budget, rules of procedure, or declarations. Every discussion, such as the ratification of international treaty or a yearly report from the Central Bank is treated as a single item.

The possibility of asking parliamentary questions was first introduced in 1992. Since then MP's can ask written and oral questions directed at the government or individual cabinet members. Written questions must be submitted directly to the Speaker of the parliament and they are not publicly available, as well as answers to oral questions as they are not recorded in official session minutes. This is why the dataset on parliamentary questions includes only oral questions posed at the beginning of each session during the so-called Morning Question Time.

Until recently, government session agendas were not publicly available as many of the items pertaining to defence or privatization were classified as confidential—a classification then automatically applied to the entire meeting agenda. However, all agendas were declassified for the purposes of the project and we have been able to collect all items appearing at cabinet weekly meetings from 1990 until the end of 2015.

The parliamentary acts dataset includes all laws and other acts published by the parliament in the *Official Gazette*. Similarly, the government decisions dataset includes all government decisions published in the *Official Gazette*.

Since the year 2000, the Croatian president no longer has broad jurisdiction. Presidential powers are limited to procedural duties during the elections, referendums, and government appointment, and presidential acts are limited to decisions, regulations, orders, and decrees. This dataset was prepared mainly to analyze the break in the agenda-setting power of the president as Croatia transitioned from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary one.

7.4 Specificities

Broad coverage of agenda levels in the Croatian datasets provides an opportunity to analyze the "bottleneck of attention" process. Moreover, datasets coverage of the entire life span of a new democracy enables the comparison of an agenda-setting between different stages of regime change, but also between large institutional changes such as the change from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of government. However, these are not the only distinctive characteristics of the Croatian Project.

7.5 Automated Classification Procedure

Only two of the presented datasets were prepared exclusively by human coders—newspaper front pages and party platforms. All other datasets were compiled using an automated topic classification procedure (ATC), as we have developed a new topic classification module for the purposes of the project. Supervised topic classification requires a high-quality manually coded dataset with a sufficiently large coverage. In this respect, and aside from the mere training sessions, additional measures were taken to ensure reliability during manual coding. Firstly, a random sample of all document titles was prepared for manual coding. To ensure sufficient variation across subtopics, stratified random sampling was selected, accounting for the source of the document (the *Official Gazette*, parliamentary sessions agenda, government weekly meetings agenda, or parliamentary questions). This introduced a variance across topics and document types, which differ greatly in vocabulary and title form. Secondly, the main coding session was carried out in four phases. In the first phase, each document title was coded independently by two out of thirteen coders who were asked to take notes and tag the examples they consider problematic. In the second phase, thirteen coders were assigned to four groups and coded the titles over which coders disagreed in the first coding phases, as well as titles tagged as problematic by at least one of the coders (even if they agreed on the code). In the third coding phase, three experts coded all titles independently, whereby the codes by the two groups differed. Finally, the disagreements remaining after the third coding phase were discussed and resolved by consensus by the three experts (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2. Intercoder reliability

	Measure	Subtopic level (223[b] categories)			Topic level (21 category)		
		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Decision agenda	Percent agreement	51.2	79.7	83	72.9	88.9	89.5
Institutional agenda	Cohen's kappa	0.50	0.79	–	0.78	0.87	–
	Fleiss' kappa[a]	–	–	**0.87**	–	–	**0.92**
Večernji list front-pages	Percent agreement	66.9	–	76	79	–	91
	Cohen's kappa	0.65	–	**0.74**	0.77	–	**0.90**
Election platforms	Percent agreement	–	–	78.8	–	–	88
	Cohen's kappa	–	–	**0.78**	–	–	**0.86**

Note: [a] Fleiss' kappa is an extension of Cohen's kappa, which is applicable for tests with more than two coders. [b] Number of categories differs, media and party programs have several additional categories.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Croatia

In addition, and following the example set by Purpura and Hillard (2006), we have experimented with a number of design choices (different machine-learning algorithms, multi-class classification schemes, and methods to handle topic and subtopic hierarchy) in order to find an appropriate supervised topic classification method. We hope that lessons learned from these experiments will be useful to others working on the same or similar task for other languages; a detailed description on the ATC can be found in Karan et al. (2016). Lastly, the prepared dataset was fed into the APC module. Not all codes produced by the module were equally accurate. In some cases, mainly for subtopics, the number of manually coded items was too small to enable efficient "learning" and for some documents titles were very short and uninformative so they could not be used for common feature detection. The module provided a measure of confidence of classifier decisions for each individual title and also a second and third best topic and subtopic prediction. We have used those measures to develop several rejection threshold strategies and selected all those items where thresholds were not reached for additional manual coding. A subset of titles for which the decision confidence was low or a difference between the best and second best prediction small, was checked by experts. For instance, a code was checked by experts if a prediction had low confidence at the major topic level (under 0.95), (2) if subtopic confidence was less than 0.90, and if (3) the difference to the second-highest confidence subtopic was less than 0.05.

7.6 Example: Government Confidentiality Policies

Because the aforementioned dataset on the government session agenda was constructed of declassified original documents we had received, it also contained information on the type and level of classification for each item. We used this information to supplement the CAP topic codes with information on the levels and types of secrecy for each of the classified meeting agenda items. These additional pieces of information have enabled us to study the change in government confidentiality policies. As an example, Figure 7.1 shows the share of closed government meeting items by main CAP topics. Almost half of the government discussions in the last twenty-five years regarding international affairs and foreign aid, government operations (most notably government property management), domestic macroeconomics and—unsurprisingly—defense, were classified under the secrecy acts. This finding implies that most decisions regarding Croatia's accession to the European Union were discussed behind closed doors and without public discussion.
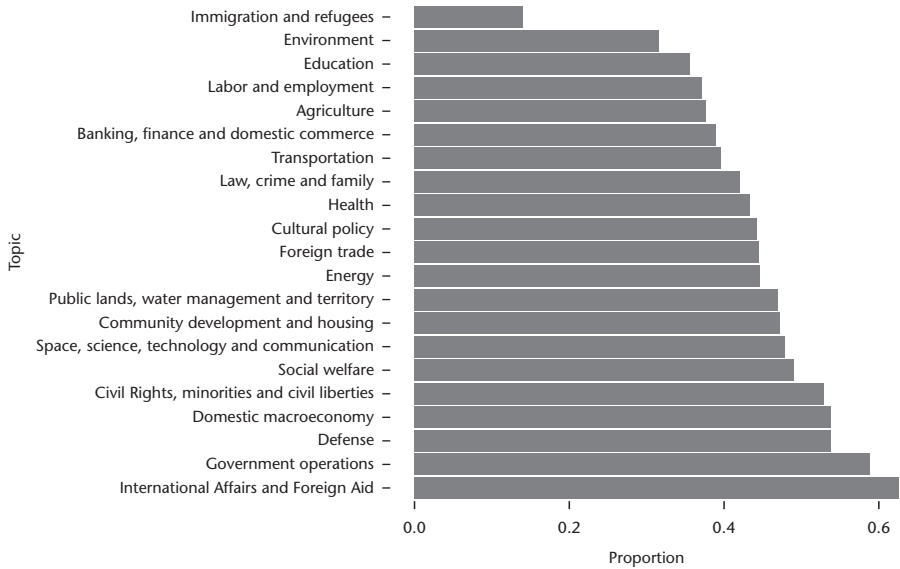
Figure 7.1. Share of closed agenda by CAP topics
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Croatia

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