

# Croatian unions have won backing for a pension reform referendum - now it's time to put it to the people

Thursday 11 July 2019, by [ŠOBOTA Dijana](#) (Date first published: 4 July 2019).

**On 1 January 2019, a comprehensive pension reform came into force in Croatia, but for trade unions, they went too far too quickly. As well as raising the retirement age to 67, the reform also includes a 3.6 per cent pension reduction for every year of early retirement.**

In response, between 27 April and 11 May, the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (UATUC) together with the Independent Trade Unions of Croatia (NHS) and the Association of Croatia Trade Unions (Matica) led the [67 is Too Much](#) campaign to collect enough signatures to back a referendum. As well as calling for the retirement age to be lowered from 67 to 65, we also want to see the penalisation of early retirement reduced from 0.3 to 0.2 per cent per month, amongst other demands.

With a lower life expectancy than the EU average and fewer years of good health, Croatian workers are facing increasingly difficult conditions. Most early retirement is a result of company closures, poor health and the reluctance of employers to hire and keep older workers – why should workers have to pay the price ?

Calling a referendum was the only course of action left to take after the government ignored social dialogue with trade unions on this crucial issue, and after it overlooked [the people's protests](#) against the reform. We want this government to know that it needs to listen to the concerns of its citizens.

The unions needed to gather 373,568 signatures (representative of 10 per cent of all Croatian voters) for the referendum to be held ; we secured 748,624, more than twice the number required. If this figure is verified by the authorities, it will be the second most successful trade union referendum initiative, right after the 2010 labour code change initiative, which managed to collect 813,000 signatures (717,000 of which were officially validated). Despite the media blackout and anti-referendum propaganda from the government, our campaign reached more than a million people, with support from everyone from opposition parties to civil society to shop stewards.

## Road to the referendum

But now the challenge is making sure the referendum actually takes place. The signatures were submitted to the speaker of parliament, Gordan Jandroković, from the centre-right Croatian Democratic Union party, on 13 June, in 65 symbolic boxes, together with an explanatory note on the referendum question, and with the demand that parliament calls it. Croatian trade unions are now waiting for confirmation that all the conditions to hold a referendum have been met. The constitutional court then has 30 days to decide and to submit its decision to the parliament ; parliament then has 20 to 40 days to decide on whether it will call a referendum.

If the referendum takes place, and the majority of voters are in favour of the demands of the trade

unions, then a new law will be automatically adopted (since the referendum question has been worded in the form of the bill) and will enter into force 120 days after its adoption. Right now, however, trade unions are focused on making sure the turnout of any eventual referendum is high enough and that voters are in favour of revising the recent pension reform.

The support we gained through the campaign is fragile – the disillusioned citizens of Croatia are struggling to make ends meet in a country that has recovered from its economic crisis, but not its social one.

The people's support is vital if we are going to ensure a fair and sustainable pension system. It is also needed to reinvigorate genuine social dialogue as a prerequisite to putting decent work and dignity in retirement as a cornerstone of building the society we want.

Trade unions are currently preparing for all possible outcomes. Acutely aware of the political damage that a referendum and rejection of a major part of the pension reform could cause (particularly at a time when Croatia will be preparing to go to the polls and will be at the helm of the EU presidency) the government is trying to avoid a referendum and has publicly called the unions to the negotiating table. However, the time for negotiations has passed – especially with a labour minister who showed such blatant disregard for social dialogue in the first place, and whose resignation we are demanding based on his misrepresentation of the reform [in a series of media adverts](#). It's time for parliament to restore faith in Croatia's top institutions ; it is time for the voice of the people to be heard.

*Cet article a été traduit de l'anglais.*

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**Dijana Šobota**

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