

Croatia. A presidential candidate with a new perspective

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Ivana Kekin, presidential candidate for the Možemo! (We Can!) party, shares her views on the rehabilitation of Croatian war criminals, militarisation, and the need for a new kind of politics.



You've repeatedly said that you want to be a president of the new generation. What does that mean?

When I say I want to be a president of the new generation, I'm talking about needing someone at the head of this institution who will actively speak about public interest and topics that interest the majority in this country. Someone who will approach deep-rooted problems from a new perspective, but also open up new topics. We cannot keep choosing the same people and expect new solutions.

My opposing candidates who come from Croatia's two largest parties have been present on the political scene for more than twenty years. Both have been or are part of the executive government, one as minister, the other as prime minister and president. I believe we've all seen the peak of their potential and capacity. At the same time, I believe that former presidents haven't used this institution to speak about topics that I consider important to citizens. Public institutions are no longer managed in the public interest. For example, citizens had to mobilise themselves regarding the [state failure to remove from his position the] Osijek gynaecologist rapist, or and preserve the Una River. Croatia needs someone who will, along with dealing with security issues and foreign policy, devote a serious part of their mandate to raising important issues to the highest level. That's why I believe it needs a person at the head of the presidential institution who will tirelessly speak about burning issues for citizens.

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Prime Minister Andrej Plenković doesn't take you seriously in Parliament. Do you think this trend will continue if you win the presidential election?

Plenković takes what I say very seriously, which is why he often has inappropriate and irritated reactions. But aside from that, he must respect the institutions in this country. It doesn't matter

whether he likes me or not, he is the Prime Minister, and I am a parliamentary representative, and this should presume mutual respect. But we know from numerous examples that Andrej Plenković doesn't respect institutions. For the past five years, he hasn't even respected the Constitution, ignoring the constitutional obligation to coordinate with the President of the Republic on various issues, due to personal conflicts and animosity. If I become president, I will insist that personal animosities cannot and must not be the subject of conversation, let alone a reason to break dialogue. If Plenković continued with unconstitutional behaviour, I would also speak about that, but I wouldn't call him derogatory names; instead, I would continuously demand that public interest be put before personal conflict.

When did you personally or your party start seriously thinking about your candidacy in the presidential election?? In a recent interview, you mentioned that as a child you wanted to become a doctor, which you achieved. When did you decide to take the political path?

Možemo! is the third-largest party in the country. Citizens have recognised us as their choice, so it was logical that we would also offer citizens our candidate for the Presidency. We made this decision more than a year ago. My motivation for the presidential position came during previous election campaigns. After two electoral cycles passed, I noticed that citizens recognise me and respond positively to my work, and that I manage to effectively communicate even complex topics. I have high internal motivation and great support from the party.

One of the president's powers is awarding decorations and recognitions in Croatia, but also their removal. You know that President Milanović returned decorations to [war criminal] Glavaš. What would you do? Are you ready to remove problematic decorations? For instance, Prlić, Kordić, they still have state decorations. How would you act as president?

Events in Ukraine and the Middle East often increase fear among citizens. There are actors who benefit from encouraging this fear; instead of calming it, they bring the idea of militarisation into public space

I would never have returned the decoration to Branimir Glavaš. I was deeply disappointed by that act and truly don't see how returning the decoration to Glavaš contributes anything positive to our society. This was one of the first moves by the current president that I experienced, although I didn't have idealistic expectations from him, as a blow, not just as a leftist, but as a citizen of this country who doesn't want Croatia giving decorations to people who committed crimes against civilians.

So, if you come to the position of President of Croatia, we can expect...

...that such things won't be repeated, that war criminals won't have decorations.

Are you ready to form a team that will deal with revoking decorations?

I need to check the exact procedures, but my stance is clear: persons accused of war crimes against civilians, especially those with confirmed convictions, shouldn't receive recognition or decorations.

You said on RTL that because of [the reintroduction of mandatory military service, the Croatian state will, I quote, "waste huge resources on unmotivated young men for the army". What is your value judgment regarding the reintroduction of mandatory military service?

Možemo! is not for the general militarisation of society. Personally, I don't see any purpose in

mandatory military service. I don't believe that boys who complete this proposed eight-week military service, in today's warfare conditions, with today's technological achievements, can do much for this country's security. Moreover, I believe that instead of concentrating on potential external enemies, we should deal with real threats to our citizens. A week ago, a double-digit number of people died in Bosnia and Herzegovina from a natural disaster that only accidentally missed us this time. And, our coast was burning all summer. If there is a need to strengthen population resilience, the civil protection system needs to be reformed. Citizens could then, on a voluntary basis, learn how to prevent potential dangers and also be included in the early warning system, intervene when necessary, and actively participate in providing civil defence assistance. The idea of external threats or enemies is a PR trick that the right regularly uses to rally their voters. Meanwhile, they don't talk about the dangers that are already here.

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Switzerland reintroduced mandatory military service in 2023, while in Germany and Great Britain this topic was discussed during this year's elections. Also, Serbia and Montenegro are considering the possibility of returning mandatory military service...

We are not for introducing mandatory military service here in Croatia. We believe the question of conscripts and reserves should be resolved within the existing model of voluntary military service, for which appropriate conditions should be ensured so that those who are motivated can undergo military training in adequate conditions, not like the ones we saw towards the end of mandatory military service when we had it before.

We live in challenging times, and events in Ukraine and the Middle East often increase fear among citizens. There are actors who benefit from encouraging this fear; instead of calming it, they bring the idea of militarisation into public space. I believe Switzerland has done much more for its security through its special position in international relations than it has done by introducing mandatory military service. What will happen in Great Britain, which got a Labour government, what will happen in Germany where some trends are much more worrying, I would say, than talks about military service, we shall see.

As President of Croatia, you would have to appear at various state anniversaries, ceremonies, etc. Croatia celebrates two major and important anniversaries in 2025 - the 1100th anniversary of the Croatian kingdom and the 30th anniversary of the end of the Homeland War [when Croatia re-emerged from Yugoslavia]. Do you have a ready plan for how to navigate 2025 so it doesn't become a parade of nationalism?

I will certainly attend all state holidays, including May 30th, November 18th, August 5th, and the often forgotten June 22nd. By the way, the Current Prime Minister doesn't regularly appear at the commemoration of Anti-Fascist Struggle Day. As for other protocols, I will decide event by event. I've already shown my approach when, as the only presidential candidate, I participated in marking the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Korčula Island from fascism. At that event, where a Montenegrin women's choir was banned from performing under pressure from veterans' associations, the President of the Republic, who had been announced, suddenly cancelled his arrival. But I was present with citizens and numerous anti-fascists who came from all over Dalmatia and Croatia. I believe this also shows how I plan to navigate anniversaries in the future.

In Croatia, August 5th is celebrated as Victory Day, while in Serbia that date is a day of

mourning. What is your stance on the celebration of Operation Storm [when Croatia regained control of a break away Serbian region, at the cost of the exodus of most of the Civilian population]. Given that the Office of the President of Croatia finances part of the organisation, how would you approach this situation if you took on that role?

That date should be appropriately marked, but without excessive triumphalism. Croatia liberated an enormous part of territory then, and we commemorate that on that day, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't remember and commemorate civilian casualties that occurred during and after Operation Storm. As for the budget, it's difficult for me to say what the exact amount is, and whether it's excessive or not, and as for the aesthetics of the event itself, every president certainly partly adapts it according to their own affinities.

Mentioning civilian casualties of Serbian nationality at the Operation Storm celebration isn't anything new; some former and current presidents have already done this, but often with a certain degree of relativisation. You would like this celebration to be held with dignity, with respect for civilian victims?

There is no bright future if there isn't an honest look at one's own past. A dignified celebration and commemoration of Operation Storm Day doesn't exclude but, on the contrary, includes remembrance of all civilian victims.

The [national minority] Serbian National Council sends an invitation to all parliamentary groups every year for the central commemoration of Operation Storm victims. Why haven't you responded since 2021 until now?

We have many events we don't attend, because there are truly many of them. I have never been to the Operation Storm celebration either because there hasn't been an opportunity.

Could your non-attendance at commemorations this and previous years influence voters of Serbian nationality in favour of your opponent Zoran Milanović?

I'm certain that the majority of citizens of Serbian nationality recognise very well who are the people who systematically advocate and work on improving living conditions generally in terms of equality and economic rights. I have regularly spoken up in all parliamentary debates where the extreme right would attack the Serbian national minority. Additionally, I remind you that Milanović called on citizens to vote for the Homeland Movement, which built its entire political platform on hatred towards minorities, primarily towards the Serbian minority. I'm convinced that our fellow citizens of Serbian nationality know how to recognise who truly advocates for their equality.

You said that Dayton must be modernised to meet the needs of citizens of modern Bosnia and Herzegovina. If Dayton is outdated, how would you modernise it? Should Croatia interfere in BiH policies?

That question should be answered by BiH citizens and their political parties. They must find consensus and generate a solution if they have a desire to advance BiH's democratic model. This should not be tailored either in Zagreb or in Belgrade. Personally, I advocate for an integral BiH, therefore any alliances with those who would divide BiH, like Milorad Dodik, would not be an option for me.

Did you sign a petition fifteen years ago for a referendum on Croatia's entry into NATO?

I think I didn't, but it's okay with me that there was an initiative for a referendum on Croatia's entry into NATO.

Do you agree with Milanović that the Croatian army should not participate in any way within NATO in the war in Ukraine?

Croatia is not a great military power, nor can it pretend to be. We don't have many resources in equipment or personnel, but that shortage can be compensated by better-equipped countries. On the other hand, we have specific knowledge that other countries don't have, primarily because of our recent war. This puts us in a unique position where we can offer something that many lack. The stance of the Možemo! parliamentary group, but also my stance regarding the conflict in Ukraine, is that Croatia should help Ukraine as a country under Russian aggression. I believe Croatia should help where it can contribute quality, for example in demining, documenting war crimes and prosecuting war crimes. Our proposal was presented in Parliament, but Prime Minister Plenković rejected it, probably because he didn't want to accept an opposition proposal. Later, Plenković made a similar agreement outside the mission, through bilateral cooperation with Ukraine.

As a parliamentary group in Parliament, we wanted help to come within the NATO mission, but in those elements in which it is really capacitated and in which it can constructively help Ukraine. .

Can we expect Možemo!'s MEP Gordan Bosanac to leave the Greens' parliamentary group given the dichotomy of views on Palestine?

It is precisely Gordan Bosanac who is one of the initiators within the Greens for reaching consensus on key issues related to Palestine, and there is a high level of agreement within the group that there should be an immediate ceasefire, that arms exports to Israel should be immediately suspended, that Israel should allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, that the EC should significantly increase funding for UNRWA, that the implementation of the International Court of Justice decision should be fully supported, that the two-state solution should be supported, that illegal settlement in the West Bank should be condemned as well as attacks by Israeli settlers on the Palestinian population.

When can we expect the integration of your New Left party with Možemo!?

That process is already underway, but I believe the integration will be completed during 2025.

Ivana Kekić was interviewed by *Dora Tomljanović*

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