

Zagreb, Croatia, 27 July 2018

Croatian Government obstructs the civic initiative for the change of the electoral system

In two weeks, from 13 to 27 May 2018, civic initiative The People Decide collected more than 405,000 voters' signatures to call a referendum on the change of the electoral system in Croatia.

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Art. 87.3) provides that the Croatian Parliament shall call a referendum if so requested by 10% of the total number of voters in Croatia (375,000 voters). Croatia has one of the most rigorous referendum laws in the EU, which states that 375,000 voters' signatures have to be collected in only two weeks and only in locations permitted by the local municipality or owner.

During the referendum process, the Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, Gordan Jandroković, and Minister of Public Administration, Lovro Kušćević, **attacked the civic initiative The People Decide and presented lies about the initiative¹**, while the Venice Commission in its **Code of Good Practice on Referendums emphasizes that authorities must not take a biased stance with regard to the referendum initiative, let alone attack it, and must hold a neutral position** (see I. 2.2.a., I. 3.1.a., II. 3.1.a./b.).

¹ **Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković:** “A referendum is not the way to decide on the electoral system of a country. It is clear which marginal and exclusive political options are behind the referendum”, interview for [Večernji list](#), 30 June 2018.

“This kind of questions, which reduce the rights of minorities in a referendum, are completely failed, even irresponsible. In my opinion, any meddling with the rights of minorities is not in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, and I do not see how this could be decided on a referendum, such meddling with the rights of minorities is for me, as the president of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, absolutely unacceptable. This is a step backwards with regard to the level of rights achieved in the Croatian democracy,” [media statement](#) at the ceremonial session of the City Assembly of Zagreb, on 31 May 2018.

Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, Gordan Jandroković: “Croatia relies on political stability generated by HDZ. Now we see some who wish to disintegrate the system saying that nothing is good. Let us not fall for those stories that are only aimed at affirming those who cannot get more than 1% in democratic elections,” [address](#) at the conference for county prefects, mayors and heads of municipalities from HDZ, Šibenik, 5 May 2018. “It seems to me that the main purpose is to weaken the political and partisan system that we have today. And what is actually behind them [initiative organizers] as persons, is revealed only when they become political stars or starlets who very frequently do not have any relevant substance, but are rather reduced to an attraction or cheap form”, [media statement](#) 7 May 2018.

Minister of Public Administration, Lovro Kušćević: “In due time, because the timeline is not stipulated, the signatures should be submitted, and we have been receiving information that they are still being collected [after the expiry of the two-week deadline for the collection of signatures, which is against the law]. There is no stipulated period within which the signatures must be submitted”, [TV show](#) “Otvoreno” on the Croatian Television, 30 May 2018.

The above mentioned state officials **are in conflict of interest because their positions in the government and the parliamentary majority depend on the current political system**, which this civic initiative is seeking to change by a referendum, making sure the voters have greater influence on the election of their representatives in the Croatian Parliament.

CI The People Decide **point out that the above behavior and stance of the institutions of the Croatian Government compromise their neutrality and cause citizens to lose confidence that they will act neutral in the referendum process.**

The civic initiative has therefore requested the Government to entrust the verification of the collected signatures, in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission, **to an impartial and independent body – the State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia.**

Since Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has rejected this possibility² and intends to entrust the verification of the signatures to the Ministry of Public Administration, whose minister has presented gross lies on the civic initiative, **The People Decide are appealing to international institutions** – the European Union, Council of Europe and Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, in view of the fact that the independence of the **referendum process** has been impaired!

The referendum procedure, enforcement of the Constitution and the Referendum Act in Croatia, **is no longer free and does not take place in an environment free from the influence of politics and the current government, which is in conflict of interest and opposed to the referendum, thereby violating in Croatia the fundamental rights of citizens to participate in free elections and referendums.**

Four years ago, the Government at the time obstructed the civic initiative to change the electoral system **by falsely stating that Croatia had 4.1 million voters** and with the claim which, unfortunately, was also accepted by the Constitutional Court – that 10% of that number is required to be collected in two weeks. Namely, in the parliamentary elections for the European Parliament in 2013 and in all other subsequent elections, the total number of voters was 3.7 million. The civic initiative which organized this referendum initiative and collected more than 385,000 signatures in only 2 weeks, filed a dispute before the European Court of Human Rights.

The civic initiative expects international institutions and the public to react and contribute to the **protection of the constitutional rights of Croatian citizens to a referendum, in order to allow them to decide how they want to elect their representatives.**

Organization Committee of the Civic Initiative The People Decide

² “I have confidence in the institutions of the Croatian state and those who were given the task to examine this will do so,” [media statement](#) by Prime Minister Plenković on the request of the initiative The People Decide to have the State Electoral Commission verify the signatures.