



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

A Year After the Zagreb Earthquake: When Shall the Reconstruction Begin?

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Summary

This paper analyzes the consequences of the Zagreb earthquake that shocked Croatia in March 2020. More than a year later, nothing concrete has been done, with many political actors and persons involved in reconstruction are shifting the responsibility from one another. Moreover, after the death of Zagreb's mayor Milan Bandić, everyone is expecting the outcome of the May local elections when a new mayor will finally be elected. After that, hopefully, we will have more findings on the fate of the Croatian capital.

Introduction

A year has gone since the earthquake that shocked the whole Croatia struck the country's capital and surrounding areas causing a large infrastructural and financial damage, as well as widespread panic amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That day, 22nd March, everyone in the entire country showed the two characteristics that we, as a society, often lack: solidarity and empathy for one another. Unfortunately, since that day, and many others that have followed, during which there were a series of additional ground-shakings, nothing much has been done. The reconstruction is still heavily debated, but the tangible results are still missing.

The Aftermath of the Earthquake

As perhaps everybody knows, the earthquake coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, just as the virus reached the European borders, and the decision-makers from all around the world with the assistance from the experts in epidemiology advised the worldwide population to stay home and to limit any possibility of the unnecessary physical contact with other people. Needless to say, such prescriptions were not warmly greeted by the ever-present skeptics, but at the same time, many people were concerned and decided to stay in their respective households, keeping the much-needed distance. However, the earthquake caused contradictory guidelines whereas the Croatian Government, doctors, experts, and the Civil Protection Directorate that was put in front to navigate the people during the pandemic,

reasonably, did not know what advice they should give to people: whether to stay at home to keep at bay from the pandemic or to go outside since many buildings were damaged and unsafe to inhabit. The heads of Croatian politics, President Zoran Milanović, and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, immediately patrolled through the streets of Zagreb in order to see the damage, but most of all, to reassure the population of the capital that they were not alone in this catastrophe.

The center of the city suffered the most, with many significant buildings related to the culture and history of Zagreb were destroyed, while many of them becoming a danger even if the people would just walk close to them. As one of the victims of the earthquake wrote: "The building which turned into a symbol is not the one you'd expect, it's not the cathedral. It's just an ordinary downtown building, located on the corner of Petrinjska and Đorđićeva streets. The only thing worth noticing about that building was the street art it had on its side"¹. When giving press releases and statements during the very day of the earthquake and in the following weeks and months, government officials were trying to convince everybody that, regardless of the financial cost, their homes will be rebuild. The representatives of the European Union gave statements of support to the Croatian people as well, emphasizing the need to stay together, and that the Union will once again showcase solidarity in form of various donations and financial help. Overall, it is estimated that 26 197 buildings sustained damage, while 1900 of them could not be used anymore. The Croatian Parliament building was also damaged, with part of the building's roof collapsing. Furthermore, one spire of the Zagreb Cathedral broke off and the second had to be removed due to the danger of collapsing. Many other buildings in the historic center were heavily damaged, including several museums.

The Psychological Effects a Year Later

Except for material and financial loss caused by the earthquake, it generated a series of issues primarily related to the people's psychological health. What is even more concerning, this negative effect did not occur only with the older population, but the younger people as well. Ever since the earthquake struck the capital, in addition to another one that hit Sisak-Moslavina County in late December 2020, many people, regardless of their age, have reported numerous troubles with sleeping, panic attacks, physical and psychological symptoms that originated from the fear that the natural catastrophe, such as this one, could reoccur once again. In this case,

¹ Tatić, Iva. 2021. A Year After the Zagreb Earthquake and a Building in Petrinjska. *Total Croatia News* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/51577-zagreb-earthquake-petrinjska>

unfortunately, the fear has eventually come true, as nine months after the Zagreb earthquake, there was another one in the region of Banovina. Many psychologists and social workers have disclosed that the number of people who are willing to call them and ask for help is on the rise. Furthermore, it is reported that more and more people are sleeping in their living rooms almost a year after the earthquake, with their suitcases packed, ready to leave their homes if they would witness another ground-shaking². The experts have called the Government to react and employ more psychologists that should be available to concerned citizens on an everyday basis. The silver lining is that people are, after all, willing to share their negative emotions and not trying to suppress them and hide from society.

The Factors Included in the Reconstruction

As for the reconstruction process that is about to take place as soon as possible, the citizens of the capital are getting angry with the decision-makers, while the opposition parties in the Croatian Parliament are heavily criticizing the Government for not doing enough. A valuable opinion was recently given by Ivica Roviš from the Institute for Physical Planning of the City of Zagreb. He “warned of the complex bureaucracy around reconstruction procedures that confuse people and as such residents often don’t know what they have to hand over, to whom, whether they have submitted the complete or incomplete documentation and the like”³. Roviš’s claim is having even more weight taking into account the fact that many people and organizations who were willing to start the procedure of getting funds for reconstruction were saying that they did not have a clear image of the procedure and formal requirements they should have followed when applying for help. The truth is that institutional arrangements have made this whole process overly slow, while the time to use the money available from the EU Solidarity Fund is expiring. Croatia already got €88.9 million in advance payment back in August 2020, but the rest of €683.7 million has to be used in 18 months, which implies that the deadline is set for June 2022. Unfortunately, there are still not rebuilding projects that are supposed to apply for using this money.

Roviš further commented on “the problem that Zagreb itself isn’t deciding on its reconstruction because everything has been transferred to the state, and the city itself can act

² N.N. 2021. Psihologinja s linije za pomoć: ‘Zovu nas Zagrepčani koje je drugi potres potpuno izbezumio...’. *jutarnji.hr* <https://www.jutarnji.hr/life/zdravlje/psihologinja-s-linije-za-pomoc-zovu-nas-zagrepčani-koje-je-drugi-potres-potpuno-izbezumio-15043389>

³ Simmonds, Lauren. 2021. Post-Earthquake Zagreb Reconstruction Moving at Snail's Pace. *Total News Croatia* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/51019-post-earthquake-zagreb>

only in the sense of humanitarian or professional assistance to its citizens”⁴. Another challenge emphasized by him was the regulation of traffic when the reconstruction begins. As most of the damaged areas and buildings are located in the very center, the reconstruction would require many streets to be closed and the traffic would need to be redirected which would, perhaps, cause lots of confusion among the citizens and would last for months⁵. Looking back at everything that was done or, better to say, what has not been done in the months after the earthquake and today, more than a year after, it appears as if the reconstruction of the capital has fallen out of the main priority list of the Croatian decision-makers. They would probably argue that they were too busy last year with mitigating the COVID-19 consequences and with the parliamentary election race during the summer, while this year there are local elections to be conducted in May. In addition, a long-serving mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, has died, and now everyone is expecting a new person in the office who will supervise the reconstruction process.

Conclusion

A month prior to the local elections, several candidates are considered strong contenders for the position of the second most powerful person in Croatian politics, as this office is colloquially represented. The reconstruction will, therefore, be heavily dictated by the outcome of the elections as well as the party representation in the City Assembly. The opinion polls are suggesting that Tomislav Tomašević, the leader of the left-green platform We Can! (Možemo!), is closest to being elected. That being said, there are at least a couple of months before some concrete actions will be finally delivered.

⁴ Simmonds, Lauren. 2021. Post-Earthquake Zagreb Reconstruction Moving at Snail's Pace. *Total News Croatia* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/51019-post-earthquake-zagreb>

⁵ Simmonds, Lauren. 2021. Post-Earthquake Zagreb Reconstruction Moving at Snail's Pace. *Total News Croatia* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/51019-post-earthquake-zagreb>