



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Mission to Croatia

Headquarters

20 May 2005

Spot Report: 15 May Local Elections in Croatia

Nation-wide elections for local and regional self-governments were conducted in 20 counties, the City of Zagreb and approximately 550 municipalities and cities on 15 May.

The local elections have not brought about an unqualified success for the SDP – led centre-left coalitions nor a major defeat for the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Nonetheless, HDZ lost ground, with some of its former support going to the far-right HSP. The vote still must be officially certified, and it may take several weeks to build workable coalitions out of the relatively large number of parties represented in city, county and municipal assemblies.

In a preliminary report released on 16 May, the leading election monitoring and support NGO “GONG” assessed that the local elections were held in a tolerant and democratic atmosphere, with fewer irregularities than in the previous 2001 local elections. The NGO added that polling station committees were better trained and performed well, but also noted that party observers were not sufficiently informed about their role. Most irregularities were promptly resolved on the spot, following the intervention of some of the 1,000 GONG observers who were deployed on the field to monitor the electoral process.

The media widely reported that around 3,000 Croatian Serb voters (mostly currently living in Serbia and Montenegro) came by bus to Croatia to cast their ballot in the local elections. There was only one incident at border crossing points, and voting by this group of voters took place in an orderly manner and no significant incidents were recorded, although there were some negative comments at the local level.

Election results

Most media and political commentators reported that the voter turnout fell slightly below the 46 per cent who participated in the last local elections in 2001.

Unofficial preliminary results indicate that the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)¹ came first in seven counties out of 20 (half the counties HDZ ranked first in the 2001 local elections). In war-affected areas, HDZ lost votes and seats in eight out of 13 counties. Its worst results occurred in the Osijek - Baranja County (Eastern Slavonia) where the party lost more than half of its representatives in the County Assembly, and the independent list of Branimir Glavas, a former HDZ regional leader², took away most of the HDZ vote and won a relative majority of seats.

The centre-left coalitions, led mostly by the Social Democratic Party (SDP)³, won majorities of votes in nine counties and matched the HDZ in number of seats in two counties. The center-left coalitions scored particularly well in the urban areas such as Zagreb, where it

almost achieved an absolute majority, and in Rijeka. The Istrian Democratic Union, a regional party, won an almost absolute majority in the Istria County.

The far-right Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) more than tripled the number of seats in County Assemblies from 22 to 77. It was particularly successful across war-affected areas, reaching peaks of around 16% of votes in Vukovar-Sirmium County (Eastern Slavonia) and Sisak-Moslavina County (Central Croatia). In addition, the party performed well in urban areas such as Rijeka and Zagreb.

The Serb Independent Democratic Party (SDSS) performed well in Southern Croatia while voter support for the party fell in its stronghold in Eastern. The party increased its number of seats in county assemblies in Southern Croatia⁴, and won relative majorities of votes in return areas such as the City of Knin, and the municipalities of Gracac, Krnjak, Plaski, etc. In addition, its major rival for the political representation of Croatian Serbs, the Serb National Party (SNS), has almost disappeared following the local elections.

The Croatian Pensioner Party (HSU) achieved a somewhat stronger bargaining position for post-election negotiations by increasing its support from 9 to 39 seats in county assemblies.

Independent Lists won a significant number of seats across the country, especially in Zagreb, Osijek, and Dalmatian cities and counties, indicating an important degree of popular disenchantment with mainstream political parties.

Post-election situation and reactions

The local elections have not brought about an unqualified success for the SDP-led centre-left coalitions nor a major defeat for the ruling Croatian Democratic Union⁵. Political commentators have assessed the decline of popular support for the HDZ as being directly related to worsening economic conditions as well as the failure of the ruling HDZ Government to initiate European Union entry talks in March.

The results indicate that only in a few places parties or pre-election coalitions have the necessary absolute majority to form government alone: the centre-left coalitions gained enough votes to form government in four counties⁶, whereas HDZ would be able to rule alone in Lika-Senj County (Southern Croatia).

Therefore, the formation of county and local governments will mainly depend on post-election negotiations between the HDZ on one side, and the SDP-led centre-left coalitions on the other, with smaller parties such as HSP, the SDSS and the HSU. The far-right HSP has become a decisive political force in at least four counties, while SDSS has become a stronger political force in some return areas.

The opposition Social Democratic Party sees the election results as a major defeat of the HDZ, whereas the President of the opposition Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) joined the HSP in calling for early parliamentary elections.

HDZ President Dr. Ivo Sanader showed his satisfaction with the elections results, and indicated on 17 May that he would follow a policy of “political subsidiarity,” allowing the local HDZ branches to form coalitions with any other party acceptable to them. HDZ

President Sanader's statement may open the possibility for HDZ party branches to coalesce with far-right HSP in at least four counties where HDZ needs a coalition partner.

In the city of Knin, the incumbent HDZ mayor has already announced a coalition government with HSP and two other right wing parties instead of seeking the support of SDSS, which won just short of an absolute majority of seats in the council. This is a different approach to the one Dr. Ivo Sanader took following the 2003 parliamentary elections, when he chose to lead a minority coalition government with parliamentary support from parties representing minorities (SDSS, SDAH⁷), in a context of international objections to the formation of a majority coalition government with far-right HSP.

It is unclear at this stage what effect the HDZ coalition policy on the local level might have on the attitudes of minority parties supporting the Government in the Parliament. Reacting to the announcement of a HDZ coalition with HSP in the city of Knin, Vice-president of SDSS Milorad Pupovac called it "a return to old HDZ policies," which could compromise the recent changes in HDZ's image. He stopped short, however, of indicating whether he would continue support for the present Government.

Some media observers have speculated that the statement of HDZ President could also bring a prospect for coalitions between HDZ and SDP on the local level, although the opposition to this idea seems to be fierce in both parties.

The Mission will report when constitutive sessions of the county and municipal/city assemblies are convened within 30 days from the announcement of the election results.

¹ The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) run in coalition with marginal parties in half of the counties such as Vukovar-Sirmium County - with the Social Liberal Party (HSLs)-, Sisak - Moslavina County - with the HSLs and with the Democratic Centre (DC) -, Zadar County (with HSLs), Lika Senj County (DC), Zagreb (with HDZ and HSLs).

² On 21 April 2005, the National Council of the HDZ unanimously decided to expel Branimir Glavas, a very influential regional party leader, and two other party members from Eastern Croatia. The three of them are MPs. The decision followed Mr. Glavas's announcement of his proposals to establish a citizens' association called "The Croatian Democratic Parliament of Slavonia and Baranja," and to divide Croatia into five regions to better administer the country. Mr. Glavas came under the spotlight in early spring when he proclaimed fugitive General Gotovina a hero, and later on, when he walked out of the Parliament in refusal to support the declaration on anti-Nazi struggle, which had HDZ support [see Fortnightly Report No 9/2005 for more information].

³The SDP, the leading opposition party at the national level, articulated the electoral contestation through the formation of centre-left coalitions in most counties. The coalitions were made of medium - size parties such as the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), and the People Party (HNS), and other smaller parties such as the Liberal Party (LS), and the Pensioner Party (HSU). In some counties, the HNS or the HSS led the centre - left coalitions.

⁴ Karlovac (0 to 2 seats), Sibernik-Knin (4 to 6 seats), and Lika-Senj (0 to 3 seats)

⁵ See endnote 1.

⁶ Primorsko - Goranka, Varazdin, Medjmurje, and Bjelovar-Bilogora.

⁷ The Party of Democratic Action of Croatia represents the interest of the Bosniak minority in Croatia.