

**The results of the parliamentary elections held in Croatia on 3<sup>rd</sup> January mean that there is likely to be a major shift in future government policy. BHHRG monitored the poll and while its observers found it to be conducted properly, concerns remain about certain aspects of the election**

### **Parliamentary Elections in Croatia, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2000**

The Republic of Croatia held parliamentary elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2000, the third since independence was declared in 1991 and the fourth multiparty elections since 1990. The elections were awaited with anticipation by the United States and European Union, in particular, which had long criticized the outgoing government, especially for its alleged "democratic deficit." The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) had ruled the country since 1990. Its members had been elected to all key posts from the Presidency to a majority in local government. Following the death of President Franjo Tudjman on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1999, the 3<sup>rd</sup> January elections were widely seen as the first serious opportunity for a democratically-based change of power, especially as presidential elections were scheduled to take place soon afterwards on 24<sup>th</sup> January. (Full results of the Parliamentary elections were released on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2000.)

### **Background**

Croatian independence had been hard won. The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) fought bitterly against the country until the end of 1991. The city of Vukovar was devastated and large areas of the country remained outside central government control until 1995. After the cease-fire in Croatia itself, the county became involved in the Bosnian war, which degenerated in 1993 into a three-way struggle between Serb, Muslim and Croat-led factions. Although Croatia was never as responsible as the Serbs for atrocities and human rights abuse in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there was still much criticism over its conduct during the war, particularly in support of the Croat enclave of Herzegovina.

Despite its help in bringing the Bosnian war to an end by military operations in the Krajina region and in support of Bosnian forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina itself in autumn, 1995, there were those who persisted in accusing the Croats of human rights abuses at this time. There were recurrent rumours that those in charge (including even President Tudjman) would be brought before the International Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in the Hague. To some extent these rumours were a hangover from the days when it suited Western governments to justify their collusive involvement with the Bosnian Serb forces under the guise of protecting international aid convoys (UNPROFOR) by tarring all sides as equally guilty. It was also a way of pressuring the Croatian government to follow the Western line or face charges. To a degree there were specific cases in the period 1991-95 when individual Croatian units or soldiers may well have committed atrocities, but the fact that key figures frequently accused like Agim Ceku (an Albanian ex-JNA officer who later led the Kosovo Liberation Army) had close training and logistic links with US officers, may explain why the allegations were pressed in a generalised and haphazard manner.

Independent Croatia became synonymous in most people's minds with its first president, Franjo Tudjman. Like the country itself, Tudjman was constantly attacked for being a nationalist and crypto-facist. Although he had fought with the Partisans in the Second World War and risen to the rank of general under Tito these accusations never subsided. Many thought that this was because Tudjman had betrayed many on the Left by abandoning Communism to become a prominent dissident who was imprisoned in the 1970s over his support for Croat independence.

The parliamentary election of 2000 became entangled with Tudjman's fate as the President's illness and death on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1999 prevented the poll being held on 22<sup>nd</sup> December as planned. It was also the case that the ruling HDZ party was bound to be affected by his absence from the scene. While Tudjman had never been the dictator portrayed by Western policy-makers who disliked his insubordinate attitude towards Washington and Brussels, he still held a dominant role in the country's political life and

perceptions. The contempt with which leading Western countries treated his death – apart from Turkey and Hungary no one sent a high level representative to the funeral, shocked even some of his critics. However, it should come as no surprise that countries like the United States, France and Great Britain behaved this way. It contrasted sharply with the homage paid by Western leaders to the never -elected Tito in 1980, or more recently to the absolute monarch, Hassan II of Morocco in 1999.

However, the HDZ had been unpopular for some time inside Croatia. It is important to understand why. It was the economy rather than the human rights issues blown up by the Western-sponsored sections of the media which was the key question. After 1995, Croatia's recovery from the heavy-burden of the war of independence was slower than many had hoped. It was high levels of unemployment and declining real wages which undermined support for the HDZ. Also, as in all other transition-economies, social inequalities had grown as the communist system was dismantled.

Ironically though much of the nagging criticism of the HDZ as a high-handed, dictatorial, corrupt and incompetent regime came from the Western-sponsored media, it was the pursuit of Euro-conformist policies that caused the ruling HDZ to forfeit much of its popularity. The currency, the Kuna, had been over-valued for several years as part of a counter-inflationary policy modelled on the Maastricht criteria for entry into the Euro. This policy plus high taxes both at personal level as well as VAT had led to unemployment at c.20% and a bleak investment climate. Of course, outside conditions had not helped. Tourism, which was picking up after the Dayton accords slumped again with the war in Kosovo, and because of the relative expense of the Kuna vis-à-vis other cheaper Mediterranean destinations.

But the constant criticism from abroad eventually infected morale in the ruling party. Factional disagreements and disputes grew; some wanted to do the West's bidding while others viewed the endless carping as an attempt to damage Croat independence by forcing the country into some kind of new Yugoslav-type formation such as the South-East European Community supported by key figures promoting the Stability Pact. Whatever the reason, the HDZ presented a sorry spectacle – all too familiar to the British – of a deeply divided party.

Its members had also been constantly targeted by the opposition press for corruption, particularly in the privatization process. Although it is impossible to find one case where privatization of former state assets has been done in a transparent manner in the former Communist bloc – even Croatia's neighbour and darling of the West, Slovenia's President Kucan, has been under investigation for bribe-taking – people in any given country tend to think that their politicians are uniquely bad. This does not excuse misdeeds but it should put them in some kind of perspective.

Croatia also followed World Bank and other modish transitological advice which insisted that too much regulation was inappropriate in the burgeoning free market and required countries like theirs to permit banks, for instance, to operate with much laxer supervision than they would in the developed West.

### **The Election**

4006 candidates registered on 284 lists. These included 55 parties, 15 coalitions, 20 independent lists and 30 candidates representing ethnic minorities.

The main parties contesting the election, apart from the governing HDZ were the coalition of Social Liberals and Social Democrats (led by their respective leaders, Drazen Budisa and Ivica Racan) a coalition of six centre-left parties and a coalition of far right parties. The opposition's ability to finally 'get its act together' and form proper coalitions is one reason for its success on this occasion. Foreign sponsors, like the US-based International Republican Institute (IRI) and Romano Prodi's think-tank, had urged the Croat opposition to follow the so-called "Slovak Model." Foreign-backers provided a lot of the organisational and spin-doctor

expertise to make a success of the united opposition front tactic (as they did in Slovakia's 1998 parliamentary election).

The British Helsinki Group monitored the conduct of the poll and concluded that:

**The Campaign:** There were no serious criticisms of the conduct of the campaign itself. All parties and candidates had the opportunity to present their cases to the public. There is a lively opposition press in Croatia which reflected all points of view. However, much criticism was directed towards state television for its allegedly unfair bias towards the ruling HDZ party. On examination, the main complaint seems to have been about an edition of the evening news (*Dnevnik*) which suggested that certain foreign powers were supporting the opposition. Perhaps this was not as paranoid as made out. German *Deutsche Welle* TV broadcast the following reminder to the Croats on election day, 3<sup>rd</sup> January: "Are the people of Croatia aware that they will continue to be left out in the cold until they get a government which conducts itself in a more civilized and cooperative manner?"

Apart from this, it was accepted that the parties were accorded their legally allotted times for election broadcasts. Florid accusations were made beforehand that the ruling party would somehow falsify the results by interfering with the central election commission's computer system – however, since the opposition won the poll with a healthy majority no more was heard about this allegation.

The OSCE, among others, also criticized the timing of the election – the Christmas and New Year period. This was nothing new: in 1992 they had complained when the poll was held in August, deemed to be holiday time. Many countries have held elections at the Christmas/New Year period (e.g. Russia in 1993 or Turkey in 1995).

**The Election Law:** It was generally agreed that the main body of the election law met internally accepted norms. However, there has been regular criticism of that part of the law which allows Croats who live abroad but have Croat citizenship to vote in the country's election. The main burden of the criticism is directed towards allowing Croats who reside in Bosnia, particularly in the Herzegovina region, to vote. It is alleged that such a policy prevents the proper integration of society in Bosnia itself.

BHHRG would agree that, in principle, people have no business to be voting in a country which is not their principal place of residence. However, other countries in the Former Soviet Union, including Russia itself, allow such a practice without such a burden of criticism falling on their heads. It could be said that allowing ethnic Russians in Latvia and Estonia to vote in Russian elections does not contribute to ethnic harmony in those small Baltic states. It is also difficult to see what connection Latvians who have resided in countries Australia since the 1940s have with their former homeland. Nevertheless, they are allowed to vote in Latvian elections.

Of course, one common reason behind opposition to this aberration is that émigrés tend to be more patriotic/nationalistic from nostalgia as much as anything else and their votes may go against the grain of the values promoted by internationalist bodies like the OSCE. However, it is not true to say that the votes of such people are decisive of an election's outcome as some critics of the Croatian system have said.

The Law included a new provision which allowed for an additional voter list for those accidentally left off the register or who were unable to vote at their local polling station. This is an unfortunate development: such lists are used all over the former Communist world and have been regularly abused by the 'party of power'.

Another unsatisfactory element in the Croatian law is the provision that allows for minority candidates to be elected to the *Sabor* even though the deputies for electoral districts are chosen by proportional representation. In practice most Serbs, for instance, chose not to vote *qua* Serb but in the general ballot open to all citizens. The observers estimated that nine out of ten Serbs offered minority ballots rejected them in favour of the general ballot. In a few cases, such Serbs seemed embarrassed or worried at being identified as such.

Whatever the admirable intentions behind offering separate, coloured minority ballots to voters, in practice the combination of PR offering minorities the chance of representation plus the occasional tensions occasioned by identifying people as such in front of strangers suggests that a reform of this aspect of Croatian elections should be considered. This is even more appropriate since the 5 minority MPs are in practice chosen by derisively small electorates numbering less than 6,000 in the case of Serbs, but the low hundreds in the case of the Germans, Austrians, Ruthenes and Jews. This distorts the balance of representation too far towards the micro-minorities.

**Conduct of the Poll:** Turnout was high (70.48%) and voting was conducted in an orderly manner. There was no police presence or campaign material displayed at polling stations visited.

However, there is much room for improvement in the facilities provided for voters. While most of the buildings visited were satisfactory in themselves there was, effectively, no proper secrecy of the ballot. Flimsy pieces of cardboard separated voters one from the other and the voter sat facing outwards. It was all too possible to see how someone had voted, or, should circumstances have been different, to interfere with the process. Ballot boxes, too, were inadequate. Made of cardboard, they were often too small making it necessary to have a 'spare' on hand. In one polling station in Novi Zagreb the glue along the edge of one of the ballot boxes had come unstuck rendering the whole thing practically useless.

Members of the OSCE observer mission regularly brought up these matters at the organization's post-election press conference. But their concerns were swept aside as it was, generally, agreed that the overall conduct of the election had been satisfactory. However, one cannot help wondering what the OSCE would have said about these inadequacies had the 'wrong' party won.

**Voting registers:** The registers seemed to be generally accurate and up-to-date. Anyone whose name was missing could appeal to the regional election authority to have their names added to an additional voter list. BHHRG visited Dugo Selo town hall during the course of the day where a couple of people turned up seeking registration. Few seemed to have availed themselves of the facility. However, other BHHRG observers saw several examples of people going to the wrong place and having to be redirected to their correct polling station.

**Electoral Commissions:** Electoral commissions were properly constituted with a mixed party composition. The chairman and deputy were non-party as accorded with the law. However, observers found that, when asked, some chairmen and deputies had been recommended to offer their services by party representatives. Ironically, it would probably be more transparent if party members were allowed to hold these posts – very few people are likely to be totally unbiased and the possibility must exist that 'fronts' are pushed forward into these positions. One chairwoman, for instance, said that she had been telephoned by a friend in the opposition HSLS and asked to take the post (though it should be added the observers saw no reason to doubt her integrity).

**Ballot papers:** There was little ballot paper security. Commission members were neither required to stamp or sign them before they were handed out nor was the voter required to sign the register. On the other hand, the ballot papers were numbered which is to be recommended while bearing in mind that this provides opportunities for discovering how people have voted – something that could affect those living in small, tightly knit communities. There was also no provision for spoilt ballot papers. Theoretically, voters could make corrections which would be "passed" if their real intentions were apparent. But at the count attended by BHHRG several ballots were disallowed due to a majority of the commission finding their meaning ambiguous. In other countries, the OSCE and Council of Europe have usually recommended signing the register and better ballot security.

**Local monitors:** In early 1999 a non-governmental election observer group was set up in Croatia known by its acronym, GONG. The group later gained permission to monitor the

parliamentary elections and, according to its own figures, GONG provided 5864 monitors in 6711 polling stations on 3<sup>rd</sup> January. BHHRG representatives saw these people in most of the polling stations they visited.

International observers had criticized elections in Croatia in the past. However, the reasons given were nothing to do with the conduct of the poll itself but involved allegations that media coverage had not been fair [see OSCE reports from 1992, 1995 and 1997]. In other words, malpractice at polling station level in Croatia had never been alleged. Why then was it necessary to flood the country with these observers whose presence, in a way, accorded the country the status of banana republic?

Although GONG had only a few minor technical criticisms of the poll, its neutrality is open to question and had the HDZ performed better its verdict on the conduct of the poll might have been different. It should be noted that GONG's main headquarters are in the same building in Zagreb as the Social Democratic Party (and other organisations critical of the HDZ like the Croatian Helsinki Committee, the newspaper *Feral Tribune* and Radio Free Europe). It is also partly funded by a clutch of foreign countries known for their hostility to the present Croatian government. The young people working at polling station level were likely opposition supporters too. As it turned out, they found nothing much to complain about on polling day but it could have been very different: had the 'wrong' people won the election there were 5864 people who might have been ready with evidence of alleged irregularities.

BHHRG observers found that in some polling stations GONG observers seemed to have more authority than commission chairmen if a dispute arose. They could also be obstreperous: in one station in Novi Zagreb a particularly officious GONG representative had shaken the (flimsy) ballot box so hard that it had collapsed and been sellotaped together again.

**Results:** 11 polling stations had re-runs of the poll on 16<sup>th</sup> January due to reported irregularities. This meant that full results of the election were not available until 19<sup>th</sup> January. However, it was obvious that even before these and the diaspora votes were counted the HDZ had lost the election badly and, after 10 years in power, the opposition had managed to inflict a resounding defeat on the party.

#### **Distribution of Seats:**

For the 151 seats in the Croatian parliament:

Social Democratic Party/Croatian Social Liberal Party (SDP/HSLs) ....	71
Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	... 46
Coalition of Croatian Peasants Party (HSS), Liberal Party (LS), Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) and Action of Social Democrats of Croatia (IDS)	... 24
Coalition of the Croatian Party of Rights and Croatian Christian Democratic Union (HSP/HKDU)	... 5
Minorities	... 5

The turn-out in Croatia proper was 76.52%. In the diaspora (constituency 11) 35.22%. In the 12<sup>th</sup> constituency, reserved for minorities it was 22.17%

The winners nominated SDP chairman, Ivica Račan to be prime minister while HSLs leader Dragan Budisa will be the coalition's presidential candidate.

## Conclusion

The parliamentary elections in Croatia were conducted in a peaceful and proper manner which fairly reflected the will of the people. There can be no doubt that the population was tired of the ruling party and wanted change. The victors have promised to improve living conditions by cutting expenditure, lowering taxes, creating jobs and, of course, abolishing corruption. However, prime-minister designate Racan was soon hinting that many promises would be difficult to put into practice immediately.

Rumours that the HDZ would cheat or refuse, in some way, to accept the results of the election proved to be unfounded. The hand-over of power seems to be taking place smoothly. The party has only itself to blame for many of its problems having pursued an inappropriate economic policy while, at the same time, indulging in unseemly and damaging infighting.

However, Croatia has been subject to improper and unwarranted interference from the United States and certain European countries who made their preferences all too clear, hinting that failure to elect the opposition would lead to greater isolation from the international community. Such interference took many forms from funding supposedly 'independent' NGO activity to petty snubs like refusing to send proper representation to the late president's funeral. One American media commentator said on election day that should Croatia fail to elect the opposition there would be "no Christmas presents for their children next year". It is to be hoped that the Croats are not disappointed by their choice: further integration both into Europe and the proposed South East European Stability Pact could reduce their chances of changing the status quo in the future.

It was assumed that Mate Granic the country's Foreign Minister and a leading figure in the HDZ's pro-EU wing might win the presidential poll scheduled for 24<sup>th</sup> January. This would, of course, result in a French-style *cohabitation*. However, whatever popularity he had has dissipated along with the fortunes of the HDZ itself. Even Dragan Budisa's support has slipped, perhaps because of his over-confident remarks after the parliamentary elections and Stipe Mesic is now favourite to come top in the first round of voting on 24<sup>th</sup> January. If confirmed such an outcome should produce a coherent government in Croatia and afford the main opposition party, the HDZ, the opportunity to retire and put its house in order.