

Croatia Awaits the Handover

Author: [Drago Hedl](#)

The transfer of power following the recent election in Croatia is oddly slow, impeded by the absence of a law regulating a change in government and the hesitation of the out-going administration to let go.

Speculation is rife in Croatia that the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), soundly defeated in the recent parliamentary elections, is not prepared to hand over power to the new administration.

The out-going administration is preoccupied with its own destiny, and a new one has not been established yet. Croatia, it turns out, does not have a clear law regulating when the new government should assume control.

As a result, concern is rising that the HDZ may be waiting for the outcome of the January 24 presidential elections. One theory suggests that should Mate Granic, foreign minister in the out-going HDZ government, win the presidency, he could repeat tactics used by late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman.

When the opposition won local elections in Zagreb, Tudjman decided that his HDZ, as the single strongest party, should nevertheless receive a mandate to form the city government. By blackmailing and bribing certain opposition delegates, he secured a majority and thereby continued to rule Zagreb despite the opposition victory.

If Granic were to win the presidential elections, some analysts in Croatia speculate that hawks within the HDZ will insist he grant a mandate to the HDZ to form the national government, ignoring their drubbing at the ballot box.

The dilemma appeared to have been put to rest on January 12, when the interim president, Vlatko Pavletic, announced that, pending complaints about the election results, he would grant the mandate to form a new government to Social Democratic Party leader Ivica Racan, on January 22.

Racan, the future prime minister, has repeatedly warned against delays. Croatia's economy is in crisis and labour unrest is on the increase. Workers' grievances have been made worse by the lack of a government they can talk to.

But Racan faces some problems in forming a new government. Two coalitions - his own Social Democrats (SDP) and the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSL) coalition - and "the four" - the Croatian Peasants' Party, the Croatian Peoples' Party, the Liberal Party and the regional Istrian Democratic Assembly - pledged before the election to form a government together and not to enter a coalition with the HDZ.

Even though the SDP/HSL secured enough votes to form a government on their own, Racan will honour the agreement for the sake of parliamentary co-operation, and will offer some ministerial posts to the other opposition block. The government also needs "the four" and their 24 members of parliament to guarantee the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution.

The new government will thus comprise a six-member coalition, leaning towards left of centre. Racan promises a stable government which will put an end to monopolistic, one-party government.

The HDZ, in office for ten years, is still struggling to reconcile itself to the role of opposition party. HDZ leaders issue constant warnings about the dangers of reprisals against their members and others in public office and the media.

Across state television, public companies - such as the railways, the oil industry, and the post office - the police, the judiciary and especially the military, the HDZ appointed its own members. These people are now feeling threatened by the prospect of a non-HDZ administration to which they should now pledge their loyalty as public servants.

The SDP/HLSL have announced that they have no intention of removing HDZ appointees. But the majority of the electorate believes HDZ loyalists in the media, the secret service and the military must be removed from office if the new government is to bring lasting change to Croatia.

Drago Hedl is a regular contributor to IWPR from Zagreb.

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