

## **Gotovina Exploited in Croatia's Election Campaign**

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As General Ante Gotovina awaits trial for war crimes in The Hague, Croatian politicians use him to score some points ahead of the parliamentary elections.

The detention of a Croatian general who evaded arrest on war crimes charges for four years has become a hot election issue, with all major parties seeking to score points by backing his request to await trial at home.

Prosecutors at the tribunal investigating alleged war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia strongly oppose Ante Gotovina's wish to serve his detention under house arrest, but that has not stopped politicians campaigning on his behalf.

Retired general Ante Kotromanovic, a member of parliament for the opposition Social Democratic Party, SDP, recently visited Gotovina in his detention centre in The Hague – a trip that was given extensive coverage by Croatian media.

The SDP's president Zoran Milanovic denied the trip was a bold play for the nationalist vote ahead of November parliamentary elections, and said Kotromanovic was just visiting a friend. However, he told Croatian media that the "prosecution arguments against Gotovina are very thin".

He warned that Croatian citizens might "take to the streets to support Gotovina".

Gotovina is indicted for war crimes committed against Serb civilians during 1995's Operation Storm, which ended the war in the country. He was arrested in December 2005 in the Canary Islands after four years on the run, and has been in the detention unit ever since.

His co-accused, generals Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac, are already awaiting trial at home, under certain restrictions.

At the beginning of August, his lawyers asked the tribunal's judges to allow him to await trial under house arrest with an electronic tag. They also provided government guarantees that he would return to The Hague to face trial and would not threaten the witnesses.

But prosecutors immediately opposed the request.

"In light of Gotovina's proven willingness to avoid justice, to obtain new identity papers and to cross international boundaries to avoid arrest, the proffered guaranties are inadequate," they argued in a submission filed on August 22.

Be that as it may, in Gotovina's home town of Pakostane everything is ready in case the judges grant his request for provisional release. His house is surrounded by a thick brick wall and Mayor Milivoj Kurtov thinks it is suitable for house arrest.

“All of us here want Gotovina to be provisionally released, not just because we would like to see him again, but because he would be able to prepare his defence here better than in the tribunal’s detention,” said Kurtov in an interview with Croatian daily Vjesnik earlier this month.

Although electronic tags, which fit around defendants’ ankles and allow police to track their movements, haven’t been used in Croatia before, the police say they will “embrace this novelty” if the tribunal grants Gotovina’s request.

The judges’ decision on Gotovina’s request will not be known until September, and politicians are trying to score as many points as possible in the meantime.

A recent opinion poll said that almost 100 per cent of people - including almost all political parties in the country - support Gotovina’s request for provisional release.

While it was in opposition in 2000-4, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, party organised frequent rallies in Gotovina’s support. But when it came to power, the HDZ, led by current Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, helped locate and extradite the general to The Hague.

By publicly supporting Gotovina’s request for provisional release, the HDZ hopes to win the votes of those who think that it betrayed the general by handing him over to the tribunal.

The Croatian People’s Party, HNS, condemned this sudden support for Gotovina from the other two parties. Zeljko Kurtov Bus from HNS, who was Gotovina’s friend during the 1991-95 war, told Vjesnik that the politicisation of Gotovina’s case was extremely cynical.

“I have always had the same attitude about Gotovina and I don’t approve when someone changes their opinion about him only because the election date is getting closer,” he said.

Zarko Puhovski, professor at Zagreb’s Faculty of Philosophy and a member of the Croatian Helsinki Committee, said that of all the indicted Croatian generals Gotovina is the most popular, but said his use in the electoral campaign would have little influence on the outcome.

“What attracts the voters is the traditional difference between SDP and HDZ programmes, not their attitude towards war crimes indictees,” he said.

And Gotovina’s lawyer Luka Mišetic told Vjesnik that the row and the increasingly charged atmosphere actually risked harming his client’s interests.

“Politics has always had a great influence on General Gotovina’s case, but we would really like to keep him out of it for now. The facts are on our side, and only the facts can help him get acquitted,” said Misetic.

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**Location:** Balkans  
Croatia

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/gotovina-exploited-croatias-election-campaign>