



Croatia's Parliamentary Elections

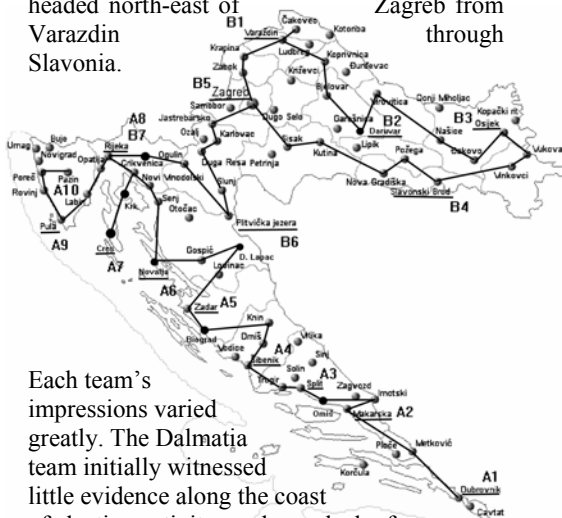
Friday, November 14, 2003

This is the second in a series of weekly campaign reports produced by NDI's Zagreb-based staff on the November 23 parliamentary elections. With two NDI teams traveling through all of Croatia's electoral districts, the reports will relate staff observations on campaign activities and party campaign material at the district level. NDI is working in Croatia on political party development, parliamentary development, and citizen political participation. This second report offers NDI's impressions of the campaign, provides a review of important events in the past week, and presents an overview of the public presentation of the campaign in the media and on the streets.

Key Political Parties: Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), Croatian Peasant's Party (HSS), Croatian People's Party (HNS), Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSL), Democratic Center (DC), Istrian Democratic Congress (IDS), Liberal Party (LS), Party of Liberal Democrats (Libra), and the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

On the Road with NDI

Both teams left Zagreb late last week. While the first team (A) went to Dubrovnik to travel along the coast to Rijeka; the other (B) headed north-east of Zagreb from Varazdin through Slavonia.



Each team's impressions varied greatly. The Dalmatija team initially witnessed little evidence along the coast of election activity, such as a lack of campaign material and limited signs of voter contact by political parties. As it moved northwards, however, particularly towards Rijeka, it observed the full swing of the campaign taking place.

The Slavonia team came upon daily activities in small communities, with candidates on the ground trying to create an approachable and social atmosphere to the events, and party representatives in public places to disseminate party information.



SDP kiosk on flower square in Zagreb

The Week in Review

The weekend campaign was dominated by the egg pelting of the Deputy Prime Minister and head of the SDP list, Slavko Linic, in Imotski (Dalmatia) and the assault of Lovre Pejkoivic, Assistant Minister of Public Works and Reconstruction, on the highway between Kalovac and Zagreb. Both events are said to have been politically motivated. In Mr. Pejkoivic's case, the assault may concern his investigation of possible fraud by the state agency responsible for purchasing housing from exiles for Croat immigrants.

The daily newspaper, *Jutarnji List*, reported that parties are spending more money than anticipated. For instance, the HSS budget quadrupled in the past 10 months. Many voters are wondering what differentiates the parties and why parties are spending such large sums

on the campaign when many issues remain unattended? This is contributing to public indifference and disconnectedness with the parties.

Moving away from its perception as a tool of the HDZ, the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) has indicated that it is not opposed to joining SDP in a coalition government.

SDP president and Prime Minister Ivica Racan and HDZ president Ivo Sanader presented their party economic platforms, respectively, at an economic conference in Opatija. In a positive exchange with the audience, Racan defended the achievements of his government, such as maintaining a stable economy, increasing competitiveness, and supporting infrastructure projects. Sanader promised to cut taxes and restore welfare benefits for veterans.

A Campaign Long on Spectacle but Short on Substance

The campaign has burst open with a plethora of jingles, billboards, and TV spots. Perhaps a little too much so. Parties are more given to spectacle than to direct contact with voters. Although there are bright spots, political rallies are usually combined with rock concerts that offer no meaningful discussion of political choices facing the voter. For instance, the hugely popular pop star, Severina (who in the past sung for the HDZ), has been touring the country with the SDP's President and Prime Minister Ivica Racan, in a series of big events for a an undisclosed fee. Election campaigns are about political rallies coupled with entertainment, to be sure, but other venues are needed to engage voters on issues and platforms to help them make their choices on an informed basis.

Interestingly, many parties have placed well-known sport and entertainment figures high on their candidate lists to lure voters. Yet, in a poll conducted by Zagreb-based Globus, a majority of voters think that these personalities will not affect their decision on Election Day.

Meanwhile important issues go unexplored, even by the parties themselves. HNS' slogan, for example, that there cannot be democracy without women, is undercut by the party's own candidate list which has a mere four women in winnable positions.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of critical reporting on the political campaign by the media. The media has adopted the role of conveyor of party messages rather than challenger of ideas. Legislation requires equal media time to all political parties and independent lists. Every night each party has two minutes of public airtime. This overexposure diminishes real debate and fails to help voters already confused by the barrage of messages devoid of substantive content. The only defense remaining is the remote control.

HRT, the state-owned network, has interpreted the law to mean that it cannot cover the election campaign in its regular news broadcast.

The Election in Numbers

Nacional*		Jutarnji List**
November 11, 2003		November 8, 2003
HDZ	51	34
SDP-LIBRA-LS	41	27
HSS	10	14
HSLS-DC	4	14
HNS	10	13
HSP	13	8
Undecided	N/A	16

This is an example of the conflicting daily polling found in the media. Notwithstanding different methodologies, the consistent message is that the HDZ remains the strongest party (as it was in 2000 when it won 30% of the vote and 46 seats in parliament) with the SDP in second place. This posits the important question as to whether or not HDZ, if the top vote-getter, would have partners to create a governing coalition.

Campaign Spotlight

While the national campaign is long on spectacle, there were signs of a more grounded campaign taking place in the field.

NDI found noteworthy examples of a well-organized campaign including: the HSS and SDP offices put up contact lists, a daily activity calendar, district maps and event photos; the HSS telephoned people and targeted its voters in Istria; the SDP in Zadar developed a campaign calendar; and in Rijeka, the SDP used door-knob hangers to target voters and HSS used canvassing scripts to help volunteers approach voters in that same city.