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LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA 2025 – CONTINUATION OF THE DOMINANCE OF THE RULING CROATIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the regular local elections in the Republic of Croatia that were held on May 18, in the first round, and June 1, 2025, in the second round. In the local elections, convocations of regional, county, and local, city, and municipal assemblies were elected, along with the election of the city assembly and mayor of the capital city Zagreb, which has the status of both regional and local self-government. Along with the convocations of assemblies, mayors and presidents of municipalities (mayors), as well as their deputies from among national minorities, were also elected. These elections, like most previous local election cycles, also demonstrated the rivalry between the two leading national parties – HDZ and SDP, often in appearances with their coalition partners, and in them, HDZ won a significant advantage and achieved almost complete unity of national and local Government. Attempts by “third options” to make inroads were unsuccessful or were achieved in coalition with the aforementioned leading parties,

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with the exception of certain circles, while all parliamentary parties, whether those in the coalition in power or in the opposition (Homeland Movement, MOST, etc.), experienced electoral decline. In the elections, a certain importance was traditionally given to regional, minority parties, but also to independent candidates.

Keywords: Republic of Croatia, local elections, local democracy, political parties, local political actors

INTRODUCTION

Local self-governments and local authorities in contemporary democratic systems represent a space where participation, representation, and political autonomy of local communities are realized according to their specific characteristics and needs. Theoretical and comparative insights into local democracy (Sharpe 1970; Smith [1985] 2025; Dentersand Rose 2005; Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom 2012) indicate that pluralism and diversity of political actors at the local level represent important indicators of the democratic capacity of a system.

However, in some countries, including Croatia, a pattern prevails in which local elections are strongly determined by the influence of national-level parties, specifically HDZ and SDP. Regional and local political actors in Croatia win around one tenth of the vote, which is somewhat similar to the result of local political actors in Serbia of 14.41% of the vote in the 2023/24 local elections (Republički zavod za statistiku 2024, 21). On the other hand, this is far less than the success of local movements and local groups of citizens who in neighboring Slovenia won a convincing majority in local elections compared to the leading national parties (in the 2022 local elections in Slovenia, independent candidates won the election races for mayors and municipal presidents in as many as 138 out of 232 local governments (59% of elected mayors and municipal presidents), and independent lists of councilors for local assemblies were the relative winners of the elections with 26.05% of the votes (Mijatović 2023, 46).

Based on available election data and empirical insights, a trend of further strengthening of the HDZ and, to a lesser extent, the SDP (both parties along with a circle of partner parties) and a renewed revitalization of the two-party system in the country, which in certain

periods since the restoration of the multi-party system have been interrupted by more pronounced successes of “third options” enabled primarily by the implementation of the proportional electoral system in Croatia (Homeland Movement, MOST, and previously HSLs, HSS, etc.), is observed, while alternative actors such as regional parties and independent candidates are being pushed to the political margins even at the local level.

Such a situation opens several theoretical and normative questions. First, does the concentration of political power in the hands of one or two large parties contribute to the stability of local Government, or does it discourage democratic pluralism and participation? In other words, the question is whether a centralized party structure at the local level is suitable for the development of participatory democracy. Does such a model enable local autonomy and representation of local interests or, on the contrary, does it lead to political uniformity and suppression of local pluralism? Theories of local self-government and decentralization, such as those developed by Sharpe, Smith, Denters, and Rose, as well as Heinelt, point to the importance of political pluralism and differentiation of local actors as conditions for functional democracy (Sharpe 1979; Smith [1985] 2025; Denters and Rose 2005; Heinelt 2012; Heinelt *et al.* 2018).

Based on these theoretical positions, the focus of the work is on analyzing the political configuration of Croatian local elections, not only for the purpose of presenting results, but also as a diagnostic framework for thinking about the state of local democracy in today's Croatia. This paper is based on a case study approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis of electoral data, as well as content analysis of relevant legal documents, media reports, and secondary sources. In addition, elements of comparative analysis are used in order to contextualize the Croatian case within broader regional trends, particularly in relation to Slovenia and Serbia.

In the continuation of the work, the current context and structure of the electoral system at the local level will first be presented. This will be followed by an analysis of political results and power relations, with special attention to the marginalization of local political actors. In conclusion, it is stated that such a configuration of power, although it can be efficient and stable, can also represent a challenge for the democratic potential of local Government.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – ELECTORAL RULES

The legislative basis for local elections is the Law on Local Elections. It provides that adult citizens of Croatia in the territory of a particular municipality or city, or citizens of another European Union member state, have the right to vote in elections, which is regulated by a special law. Elections for county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and their deputies are called by the Government of the Republic of Croatia. The Law clearly states that elections for county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and local assemblies are held in the third week of May every fourth year, so the Government must call them within 30 to 60 days before they are held (Zakon o lokalnim izborima Republike Hrvatske 2021).

Political parties and voters have the right to nominate county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and members of local assemblies. Given the large number of local self-governments in the Republic of Croatia, the number of signatures required for submitting lists of citizen groups (most often called “independent list” followed by the name of the list bearer) is determined according to the following scale – in units up to 350 inhabitants, 25 signatures are required, in units with 350 to 500, 35 signatures are required, in units with 500 to 1000 inhabitants, 50 signatures, up to 2,500 signatures for units with over 500,000 inhabitants (which is actually only the city of Zagreb). For submitting party lists, linearly one-third to twice as many signatures are required as for citizen groups, so for a local unit with 500 to 1000 inhabitants, 80 signatures are required, and 5,000 for a local unit above 500,000 inhabitants.

Electoral lists must respect the gender quota (as stated, representation of at least 40% of each gender), and candidacy is not allowed for active military personnel and employed police officers, as well as those convicted of prison sentences longer than six months. All candidate lists must be submitted within 14 days of calling the elections, while any deficiencies can be corrected within an additional 48 hours. The electoral law provides for equality of all political actors regarding promotion in local media, and electronic media have the obligation of objective, impartial, and balanced reporting on pre-election presentation. The bodies for conducting elections are the State Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission of the City of Zagreb, and county, city, and municipal electoral commissions.

Elections for county prefects, mayors, and municipal presidents are conducted using a majority, two-round electoral system, where the winner needs to receive over 50% of votes in the first round or a majority of votes in the second round.

Local representative bodies (county, city, and municipal assemblies) are elected using a proportional electoral model with a threshold of 5% of votes cast and the application of the D'Hondt method for calculating the number of mandates (Petak, Kasapović i Lalić 2004, 84).

According to the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, and taking into account the results of the last population census, all national minorities have the right to proportional representation in local representative bodies (the specific share is obtained when their percentage in a particular local self-government is multiplied by the number of local councilors). Participation of a national minority in local self-government of 5% guarantees at least one representative, and at the county level, the position of deputy county prefect. Candidate lists of parties/citizen groups of national minorities are provided with facilitated conditions for candidacy. If, after the elections, it turns out that the representation of minorities is inadequate (lower) in local representative bodies, the possibility of subsequent elections is provided within 90 days from the day of holding local elections.

Regarding the positions of deputy county prefects, mayors, or municipal presidents, representatives of national minorities have rights to these positions, regardless of percentage representation, which is defined by the statutes of local self-governments. The method of their election is identical to the election of county prefects, mayors, and municipal presidents.

Representatives of political parties, citizen groups, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations accredited in the Republic of Croatia have the right to observe elections.

The costs of conducting local elections are borne by the organs of local self-governments where the elections are conducted.

Incidentally, regarding the current electoral legislation in Croatia at the local level, the biggest change occurred in 2009 when a decision was made that mayors and municipal presidents would be elected directly, and not as before in assembly convocations. This reform was carried out to introduce a dual system of power at the local level in which the executive branch of Government became somewhat independent

both in powers and in the method of election in relation to representative power (Žižić 2013, 76).

Additional legal basis for holding local elections in the Republic of Croatia for areas that are not precisely defined by this Law include the Law on the Right of Citizens of Other European Union Member States in Elections for Representative Bodies of Local and Regional Self-Government Units (Zakon o pravu državljana drugih država članica Europske unije u izborima za predstavnička tijela lokalne i područne (regionalne) samouprave 2010), the Law on Local and Regional Self-Government (Zakon o lokalnoj i područnoj (regionalnoj) samoupravi 2020), the Law on the Election of Councils and Representatives of National Minorities (Zakon o izboru vijeća i predstavnika nacionalnih manjina 2019), the Law on Financing Political Activities, Electoral Promotion and Referendums (Zakon o financiranju političkih aktivnosti, izborne promidžbe i referenduma 2019) and others.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – ACTORS, SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT AND CAMPAIGN

The Government of the Republic of Croatia under the dominant role of Andrej Plenković (HDZ) on April 12, 2025, made a decision to call local elections – assemblies of 20 counties, 127 cities and 428 municipalities, along with the city of Zagreb, and direct election of mayors (county prefects) and municipal presidents (mayors), which started the legally prescribed deadlines for conducting elections. 31,082 candidates ran for positions (7,800 fewer than in the previous local elections held in 2021). Men comprised 57%, and women 42%. The average age of candidates was 47 years (men 48, and women 43). The youngest candidate was 18, and the oldest was 96 years old (HRT 2025a).

Certainly, in this electoral cycle as well, the elections in the largest cities attracted the most attention, and this will be the case in our work as well. Given that Croatia according to the last census has 3,871,833 inhabitants, we will take as significant urban agglomerations those that count over 1% of the population or about 40 thousand inhabitants, and these are Zagreb (761,131), Split (149,830), Rijeka (108,622), Osijek (75,916), Zadar (67,309), Pula (52,220), Slavonski Brod (45,005) and

Karlovac (41,869) (Republika Hrvatska: Državni zavod za statistiku 2022; Bilen i Bučar Perić 2002, 76–94).

The context of the elections fits into the trends of the previous period. As local elections in Croatia have so far been a test of strength between the two leading parties – HDZ and SDP, and their partner parties of far lesser importance at the national level, but of certain influence in certain regions, with attempts to break through by new political parties and the important role of regional and non-partisan political actors, so it was this time as well. These local elections were also a symbolic rounding off of the electoral process in Croatia, which followed each other within a few months – elections for the European Parliament, elections for the Croatian Parliament, presidential and, finally, local elections.

The polarization of public opinion in recent years has been clearly visible, due to the dominance of HDZ in the Government, but also the fact that for the last six years, the President of the state comes from the ranks close to the leading opposition SDP. HDZ has been a constituent element of executive power, under the leadership of HDZ leaders (Tomislav Karamarko and then Andrej Plenković) since 2015, whose victory was repeated in parliamentary elections in 2016, 2020, and 2024, as well as in European elections in 2019 and 2024 (additionally strengthened by the success of extreme right, Eurosceptic options in European elections). On the other hand, former prime minister and SDP president Zoran Milanović was elected President in 2019 and again at the very beginning of 2025. Thus, in Croatia, more on a symbolic (and media) than on the level of real politics, given that in Croatia's political system the prime minister has a much greater scope of power than the President, some kind of cohabitation was established, that is, a situation where the President close to the leading opposition SDP with modest powers is a vocal critic of executive power in public, which was visible in his, as it turned out unsuccessful, and at the given moment unconstitutional, candidacy for prime minister in the 2024 parliamentary elections. In these local elections, the President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, used the official campaign and his official visits to local areas to a lesser extent, although he indirectly placed them in the context of his parent party – the SDP, which was done to a far greater extent by the President of the Croatian Democratic Union and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

It should be emphasized that during the period of HDZ dominance in national politics, SDP, after the election of Zoran Milanović as

President of the state, went through turbulent periods and periods of constant weakening of influence in internal personnel policy (several party presidents were changed – Davor Bernardić, Peđa Grbin, Siniša Hajdaš Dončić). The difficult consolidation of circumstances in SDP is evidenced by the fact that even one of the former party presidents and former President of SDP Zagreb, Davor Bernardić, left the party and led one of the opposition lists to the ruling SDP and We Can! in Zagreb in these local elections.

We emphasize HDZ and SDP because, despite all internal fractures, especially in periods when they were in opposition – SDP from 1990 to 2000, then from 2003 to 2011, and from 2015 to today, and HDZ from 2000 to 2003 and from 2011 to 2016 – they managed to survive as leading national parties. In the meantime, the center-right party MOST (originally formed as a party of strong local leaders) built its positions, and in the meantime, also the ecological-liberal party We Can!, as well as the Homeland Movement, one of numerous extreme right factions that, after the 2024 elections, formed a ruling coalition with HDZ at the national level. At the same time, over a long period of years, numerous parties that had played a significant role in Croatia since the restoration of multi-party politics have fallen to the political margins – HSLS, HSS, HNS, and even HSP (HSP is the only party that, due to its extreme right-wing narrative, was not in a position to enter the executive branch, especially during the period of Croatia's European integration until 2013) and others.

Otherwise, during 2024, HDZ won the parliamentary elections, that is, the elections for the State Assembly, forming a right-wing coalition with the Homeland Movement party. However, the attempt to win the post of President of the Republic by HDZ ended unsuccessfully because the President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, won the presidential elections for the second time (held on December 29, 2024, and January 12, 2025), with a convincing 74.68% compared to 25.32% of the votes won by the second-placed HDZ candidate Dragan Primorac (Državno izborno povjerenstvo Republike Hrvatske 2025).

Let us return to the peculiarities of local elections in Croatia. They are reflected, among other things, in different electoral congruences – the coincidence of votes in national and local elections. Thus, the previous local elections in 2021 in Zagreb were highly nationalized, and, for example, in the Istrian County (due to the existence of a strong regional party – the Istrian Democratic Alliance), highly regionalized

(Raos 2021, 14). Yet, this phenomenon remains emphatically linked only to Istria, that is, the territory of Istria, to which Medjimurje County can possibly be added (In the Medjimurje region, there exists a strong regional Independent List for the North of a former senior HNS official and minister Radimir Čačić).

Despite the huge differences between municipalities in terms of their size (556 or 70% of local governments have fewer than five thousand inhabitants, and are thus undoubtedly heavily dependent on state grants), level of development, and territorial consolidation reforms have not been on the agenda of any government in the past three decades, nor have they been seriously advocated by any of the leading parties. The reasons for this were: the negative memory of large, bureaucratized municipalities and the unwillingness of political elites to significantly reduce the number of local-level offices where they could employ their party staff. At the same time, inter-municipal cooperation is underdeveloped, and there is a lack of direct support for national policies. For the most part, the powers of local governments are limited to ownership of municipal enterprises and other local organizations that provide services. As a result, the complementary, supervisory, and coordinating roles of counties towards municipalities are increasing. According to the 2018 Eurobarometer survey, a low level of public trust characterizes all territorial levels of Government and institutions in Croatia. Only 23% of Croatian citizens trust their local and regional authorities, which is significantly lower than the EU average (54%), but this level of trust is still higher than trust in national institutions (18% parliament, 19% government) (Škarica and Vukojičić Tomić 2022, 397).

The lines of political divisions at the local level have been established in previous electoral cycles in local elections, according to which HDZ achieved dominance in smaller communities primarily in Dalmatia and Slavonia, and traditionally performed poorly in larger cities, primarily Zagreb or Rijeka, and regions of Međimurje, Zagorje, Kvarner and, especially, Istria, which has roots dating back to the first multi-party elections in Croatia (Kasapović 1993, 48). Regarding Istria, the illustrative fact is that Croatian President Zoran Milanović, close to SDP, received 95% of votes in the second round of presidential elections in the municipality of Labin in the 2024 presidential elections, compared to HDZ candidate Dragan Primorac, who received about 5% of votes, as a counterpoint to HDZ's dominance at the national level. However, the pool of votes that the HDZ has in Slavonia and Dalmatia (a parallel

is often drawn with the HDZ winning in areas where conflicts persisted during the 1991–1995 civil war in the country) has often proven sufficient to win elections at either the national or local level.

An interesting fact related to these elections is that 21 out of 150 parliamentary representatives (MPs) were candidates for county prefect and deputy of one of the counties, and 71 representatives for mayor or municipal President, of which 29 entered the race for re-election – 17 from HDZ, eight from SDP, one each from MOST, IDS, NPS-Independent Platform North and one independent MP (Almost half of Parliament goes to local elections, these three HDZ members have already won 2025). This fact certainly indicated the importance of local elections to national political actors, as well as to their high officials.

Some kind of continuity to the local component of Croatia's political system was contributed by the fact that some mayors and municipal presidents have been at the head of their local self-governments for three decades, and notably mostly from HDZ – Joško Roščić (HDZ) in Baška Voda and Dinko Bošnjak (HDZ) in Hrvace, who were elected back in 1993. In the positions of municipal presidents since 1993 are also Milivoj Kurtov (Pakoštane), Davor Lončar (Poličnik), Zoran Kovačević (Koška), Ivo Zelić (Petrijevci), and Zdravko Mandić (Brestovac). In the position of municipal mayor for 29 years are also Marica Jančić from HDZ (Marija Gorica), Božidar Škrinjarić (Pokupsko), and Darijo Vasilčić from the PGS-SDP coalition (Krk) (Šobak 2025). Despite the existence of party strongholds – Zadar where HDZ has held the mayoral position since the restoration of multi-party system or Rijeka where SDP has sovereignly ruled for over three decades, so far nine electoral cycles of local elections have brought various changes, especially considering that presidents of local self-governments are elected directly, and that the compositions of local representative bodies do not necessarily have to support the political option of the mayor/municipal president. Symbolically, the electoral competition in these two cities, in addition to the elections in Zagreb, most intrigued the attention of the pre-election public (HRT 2025b). In specific cases, it was actually a fight for prestige as one of the peculiarities of local elections (Mijatović 2016, 83).

Controversies in the public came to the fore also regarding the fragmentation of municipalities and cities, in which there is a large number, believed to be often overpaid officials, whose number reaches 25,000 (Orešić 2025). On the other hand, the question was raised about the purpose of the existence of a municipality that is not able to build a

kindergarten from its budget. Among other things, the fact that presidents of small (often financially unsustainable) municipalities with 500 or a thousand inhabitants receive compensation of up to 3,400 euros for their work (about 20 municipalities, including Komiža, Obrovac, and others), while only a few work voluntarily, alongside their regular job and compensation of 500 to 700 euros (Kijevo, Zadvarje, and Saborsko) was criticized (Jurasić 2025).

The large number of small local self-governments often leads to a situation where only every tenth city or municipality adheres to the given financial framework or acceptable financial deviation of 5%, which speaks of inadequate planning of revenues and expenditures. Data from 2023 show that cities and municipalities in Croatia had total budgets of 5.7 billion euros, and in 2024, 6.2 billion, which speaks of their growth. At the same time, greater exposure of smaller local units to budget deviations requires technical, advisory, and financial assistance from the state, county, and regional levels. And precisely this fact opens the question of long-term sustainability of small local self-governments, whose efficiency in operation is crucial for credible budget planning and execution of public services (Gatarić 2025b).

Incidentally, according to the results of a survey by the Croelecto agency in April 2025 at the national level, HDZ is the leading party with 27.52% support. It is followed by SDP with 23.16%, then “We Can!” with 7.90%, MOST 6.13%, and Homeland Movement with 1.93%. Among other parties, the Croatian Pensioners’ Party has 1.91%, Istrian Democratic Assembly 1.63%, Domino (Home and National Rally) 1.50%, Center 1.23%, Croatian Sovereignists 1.09%, and Croatian Peasant Party and Croatian Social Liberal Party with 0.95% each. Other political options and local lists have the support of 5.44% of respondents, while 17.44% were undecided (Betl 2025).

Current topics from the national level that overlapped with the duration of the election campaign in Croatia were the death of Pope Francis and the election of the new Pope Leo XIV, marking the anniversary of the “military-police operation Flash” in western Slavonia, the increasingly current topic of introducing mandatory two-month military service that will be mandatory from the end of this or the beginning of 2026 in which about 4,000 recruits will be trained in barracks in Knin, Slunj and Požega and receiving the first calls for seventeen-year-olds to register in military records which has already caused certain dissatisfaction in the public (with the possibility of

choosing civilian service over military service). Paradoxically, at the same time in Croatian society, there was a visible (and somewhat ritualistic, pre-election) strengthening of profascist tendencies, which was also indicated by the announcement of a major concert by the controversial singer Marko Perković Thompson in Zagreb on July 5, 2025, which was attended, according to numerous estimates, by as many as half a million guests, etc.

Among local topics, the Zagreb elections and the “Hippodrome” affair certainly stood out, in which the associate of Zagreb Mayor Tomislav Tomašević (We Can!) was arrested by state authorities on suspicion of corruption in the case of fictitious engagement of one of the companies for the physical security of facilities.

Incidentally, according to data from the State Bureau of Statistics, Croatia is characterized by high inflation but also wage growth, so Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković emphasized that since he became prime minister (in 2016), the minimum personal income increased from 414 to 970 euros, the average salary from 749 to 1,416 euros, and the median from 658 to 1,175 euros (Gatarić 2025a). Inflation in 2024 compared to 2023 in Croatia was 8% (Državni zavod za statistiku n.d.).

At the same time, on the economic front, Croatia has been facing the exodus of young and qualified workers to other EU countries for many years, primarily Germany and Ireland. The above trends are linked to the strong centralization of Croatia, in which, in addition to the capital city, Zagreb, only the regions on the Adriatic coast are currently developing due to the strong tourism sector. Entry into the European Union has brought increased emigration, especially from the Slavonia region, so according to reference data, in the period from 2011 to 2020, 288,844 residents left the country, while in the previous decade, from 2001 to 2010, this number was 88,548. Considering that Croatia has since become a member of the EU, it can be concluded that the number of people who left the country has tripled (Vresnik 2025).

Naturally, the departure of the population over time opened the need for labor, so in recent years there has been an increasingly intensive influx of labor migrants from Asian countries and Western Balkan countries, which has led to a general decline in unemployment. Official data from the Croatian Employment Service show that unemployment fell by 16.8% or 18,363 in 2025 and for the first time fell below 80 thousand at the level of Croatia, while during the mandate of Andrej

Plenković's governments, employment increased by 200 thousand. In March 2025 alone, over 40,000 work permits were issued, mostly to citizens of Nepal (12,078), Bosnia and Herzegovina (9,389), Serbia (5,846), the Philippines (5,946), India (5,555), Northern Macedonia (2,949), with an increasing number of workers from Egypt (1999 work permits) (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2025b). In 2024, 206,529 residence and work permits were issued in Croatia, primarily in the fields of construction, tourism and hospitality, transport, and trade (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2025a). The Croatian Employers' Association predicted that with such trends, there will be 400 to 500 thousand foreign workers in Croatia in 2030, that is, every fourth person will be a foreigner (Jureško 2025).

At the same time, Croatia has high inflation, which has become particularly pronounced after the introduction of the euro as the country's national currency on January 1, 2023. The increasingly high inflation is clearly evidenced by the increase in food prices by 44.8% (8% more than the EU average), for which Croatian European MP Biljana Borzan from the opposition SDP blames cartels of domestic retail chains (Hina 2025a).

The broader social context of local elections in Croatia did not significantly change the basic characteristics of local campaigns, campaign themes, or the general chances of leading political actors. The characteristics of the local campaign were identical to previous ones; the campaign for local elections was relatively short and would intensify somewhat less than a month before the elections. Promotion of candidates was carried out on national and local media, social networks, traditional street stands, where candidates talked with voters, and other forms of electoral promotion. Campaign themes, in addition to numerous local topics, could not bypass national and even global issues that occupy the European Union as a supranational community to which Croatia belongs, and this is primarily European security (Petrušić 2025).

Given that HDZ is a party that dominates at the national level, the fact that it has not been dominant in most of Croatia's largest cities for decades, so it was almost not planned to take over in Zagreb, Rijeka, Pula, and others. At the same time, HDZ maintained its strong positions in Zadar, Osijek, Karlovac, and Slavonski Brod. HDZ tried to improve its electoral score also through local coalitions with coalition partners from the national level – Homeland Movement (in Vukovar, it supported their candidate for mayor, who eventually lost the elections), but also

with other smaller parties such as HSU, HSLS, and others. Quite the opposite, SDP could count on a favored position in coalition with We Can! in Zagreb, Rijeka (where there were sharp personnel mistakes due to changing the candidate for mayor at the last moment), or Pula, although each local community brought its own special characteristics. In Zagreb, SDP supported the coalition candidate for mayor Tomislav Tomašević (We Can!), in Rijeka, which for decades has carried the aura of “SDP electoral stronghold,” there was a division within the party, where dissidents excluded from the party appeared with their own list, while in Pula SDP tried to take over the space in which the IDS, which was their partner, had dominantly ruled and which entered a series of internal divisions. At the same time, in Osijek, Karlovac, or Slavonski Brod, as larger cities, SDP expectedly had far fewer chances for electoral success.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – RESULTS AND CONSEQUENCES

The results of the local elections brought growth for HDZ, growth for SDP, and the virtual absence of so-called “third options,” which, according to expert public opinion turned into “punctual opposition” (decline of the MOST party, and almost symbolic effect of HSLS, HSS, and various extreme right factions – Homeland Movement, Domino, Croatian Conservative Party, HSP and others). The green-left party We Can! retained a certain weight as the third force in the country, from whose ranks comes Tomislav Tomašević as the new (old) mayor of Zagreb. At the same time, regional IDS of Dalibor Paus in Istria has a certain influence, although the number of their constant votes is declining – after the first round of elections, the President of IDS resigned due to internal divisions and independent appearances of yesterday’s most prominent officials, which after the first election results also brought the resignation of IDS president Dalibor Paus, as well as the Independent Platform North of former minister and HNS official Radimir Čačić, which retained influence in his native Medjimurje.

In the county assemblies, the HDZ and its coalition partners won 45% of the seats in these elections, and the SDP and its coalition won 28%, which makes up 73% of the seats in the county-regional parliaments in total. On the other hand, in the previous elections in 2021, the HDZ had 38% and the SDP 20%, so the HDZ recorded an increase

of 7% and the SDP by 8%. Nominally, the HDZ won 316 (2021, 296) seats in the county assemblies, and the SDP 182 (2021, 148) seats. In summary, in the first round of 20 counties, the HDZ and its coalitions individually achieved a majority in 15 counties, the SDP and the SDP-We Can! coalition in four (Krapina-Zagorje, Koprivnica-Križevci, Primorje-Gorski Kotar, and the city of Zagreb), and the IDS in one (Istria) and the Independent Platform North in one (Međimurje County). The HDZ also won 61 mayoral seats and 202 municipal presidents, and the SDP 25 mayoral seats and 47 municipal president seats (Turčin 2025). In short, HDZ and SDP took 67% of the mayoral seats (HDZ 48% and SDP 19%), as well as 58% of the municipal presidential seats (HDZ 44% and SDP 14%).

As part of the “fight for prestige,” the HDZ managed to retain power in Dubrovnik, Osijek, Karlovac, Zadar, and win the position of mayor of Split, while the SDP lost its “fortress” Rijeka after 32 years in power, because its candidate did not even make it to the second round of elections. However, the victory in the city of Rijeka was not recorded by the HDZ, but by the candidate of the Youth Action, the Union, the HSU, the Center, the Focus, and the Alternative non-partisan Iva Rinčić, previously an independent county deputy in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. The above situation was due to the decision of the SDP headquarters to replace the candidate for mayor at the last minute, so instead of the current mayor, Marko Filipović, his deputy, Sandra Krpan, was nominated. This led to a situation where Marko Filipović submitted his candidacy as a candidate of a group of citizens, and in the first round of elections, he was in second place, and Sandra Krpan (SDP, PGS, RI, SDSS, IDS, HSS) was in third place (Glavan i Cupać 2025).

Before the second round of elections, the greatest attention was attracted by the second round of elections for mayors of the largest cities – Zagreb, Rijeka, and Split, in which various and colorful political partnerships were created.

In total, in the second round, voting was held for 12 county prefects, the mayor of Zagreb, and for another 46 mayors and 62 municipal presidents. In the second round, there was a final resolution and an even more pronounced victory won by the ruling HDZ. HDZ managed to win in Split against the candidate of the Center party, who enjoyed the support of the left and liberal parties. In Rijeka, the aforementioned non-party candidate Iva Rinčić won, thus breaking the 32-year dominance of SDP in the city. HDZ also wins in Karlovac and

Slavonski Brod. In Zagreb, the candidate of the left-liberal coalition (SDP, We Can!) won, but he came from the ranks of the green-left party We Can!, not SDP. SDP only managed to win in the race for mayor of Pula (the position was won by former party president Peđa Grbin), but this victory had no ideological dimension because in the second round, he defeated a candidate who was a dissident from IDS, a natural ally of SDP (Hina 2025b).

HDZ's success was somewhat diminished by the failure in Vukovar, which has a certain symbolic value for Croatian right-wing parties, because in it the candidate of HDZ and Homeland Movement lost in the mayoral elections to a right-wing candidate of Croatian Sovereignists and the Domino party (Home and National Rally). Yet, given that the candidate came from the Homeland Movement, as a coalition partner of HDZ in the Government, this defeat was not so painful for HDZ, and on the other hand, it weakened the negotiating positions of DP in the Government, given that Vukovar and Vukovar-Srijem County are the most important stronghold of DP.

In the race for county prefects, HDZ showed absolute dominance. Thus, in Dubrovnik-Neretva, the candidate defeats the candidate of the MOST and HSP coalition. Similarly, the HDZ candidate in Vukovar-Srijem County also defeats the MOST party candidate. In Split-Dalmatia, the HDZ candidate defeats the Center party candidate, in Šibenik-Knin, Zadar, Zagreb, Požega-Slavonia, and Varaždin, HDZ candidates defeat candidates of SDP and its coalitions, and in Karlovac, the candidate of the coalition around the We Can! party.

SDP wins in Krapina-Zagorje and Primorje-Gorski Kotar County over candidates of coalitions around HDZ, while in Istria County, a dissident candidate from IDS defeats the SDP candidate.

In summary, out of 20 counties, 14 were won by HDZ and its coalitions, three by SDP (Primorje-Gorski Kotar, Krapina-Zagorje, and Bjelovar-Bilogora), one by the SDP-We Can! coalition (city of Zagreb), one by Independent Platform North (Međimurje County), and one by an independent candidate (Istria County).

The stated data clearly speak of the continuation of dominance of the ruling HDZ even in these local elections in Croatia.

CONCLUSION

The local elections in Croatia in 2025 were the fourth elections in time intervals of several months each (European elections, parliamentary, presidential, and local elections), and which effectively ended the electoral cycle for all levels of Government, in which complete unison of HDZ power in the country was achieved.

Naturally, parliamentary and presidential elections have more pronounced significance compared to local elections. Voter turnout data further illustrates how citizens perceive the relative importance of different elections. While turnout in the 2025 local elections ranged between 43.58% and 43.88% (depending on the level of local Government), almost identical to the 44.18% recorded in the presidential elections, participation was significantly lower than in the 2024 parliamentary elections, which reached 61.48%. This 17% gap clearly indicates that citizens still see parliamentary elections as the central arena of political power, reflecting the strong role of the prime minister in Croatia's political system. At the same time, European Parliament elections attracted only 21.08% of voters, showing that they are largely disregarded in comparison with national and even local contests, suggesting that primarily party loyalists and Eurosceptic voters mobilize in that arena (Državno izborno povjerenstvo 2024).

The parliamentary elections showed the dominance of HDZ, and the presidential elections showed more the personal popularity of Zoran Milanović than his connection with the party with which he was close, which he did not hide. The success of Zoran Milanović and his convincing victory in the presidential elections showed expectations for the growth of SDP, which could achieve a result in local elections that would lead to the overthrow of HDZ rule that has lasted a whole decade, since 2015. However, this did not happen, and the absence of greater participation by Zoran Milanović in pre-election activities was noticeable, even in the form of an official campaign.

The conclusions drawn from this election cycle are that it brought the dominance of the HDZ, nominally observed (in terms of the number of county, municipal and city councilors) a somewhat stronger position of the SDP at the local level (although in fact they no longer have a mayor in any of the largest cities, with the exception of Pula, but, of course, also in coalition with the We Can! party in Zagreb), but also the suppression from the party scene of numerous smaller parliamentary and

extra-parliamentary options – the Homeland Movement, MOST, IDS, HSP, Centar and others. The only exception is the green-left party We Can!, which, in coalition with the SDP, managed to retain the position of mayor of Zagreb, one of the most important positions in the country in terms of formation.

Given that HDZ managed to complete power from the national through county to local level with these local elections, in which it only has the President of the state as a sharp political critic, as well as the fact that voters went to polling stations four times in a period of one year, it is expected that three politically calm years will follow in which HDZ will be able to implement its political power unhindered.

For the opposition, primarily SDP and its partners (We Can!, IDS and others), the task remains to try to regroup and create a platform on which it could oppose HDZ in the next, by all accounts, regular parliamentary elections in 2028.

However, beyond party dynamics, such a political configuration opens important questions about the state of local democracy in Croatia. Although arguments can be found that institutional stability under one party enables coherent implementation of policies, the dilemma remains open whether strong vertical dominance of a national party at all levels of Government leaves sufficient space for political pluralism, alternative voices, and local interests.

The theories and insights pointed to in this work suggest that a diversified local scene, with space for various actors such as regional parties, civic platforms, independent lists, and the like, is an important condition for democratic legitimacy and accountability. If local elections function to affirm central power, there is a risk of losing the specificity of local policies, as well as reducing the capacity for civic participation outside the framework of large parties.

In this sense, although electoral results indicate stability and predictability of the political scene, they simultaneously initiate the question: is the democratic value of local elections reduced when the local level becomes merely a reflection of the central? Therefore, this electoral cycle also opens space for re-examining the quality of local representation and the democratic potential of local self-government itself.

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Appendix: Political Parties Mentioned in the Article

Original name (Croatian)	English translation	Acronym
Hrvatska demokratska zajednica	Croatian Democratic Union	HDZ
Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske	Social Democratic Party of Croatia	SDP
Možemo!	We Can! (Political Platform)	Možemo!
Nezavisna platforma Sjevera	Independent Platform North	NPS
Istarski demokratski sabor	Istrian Democratic Assembly	IDS
Most	Bridge of Independent Lists	MOST
Domovinski pokret	Homeland Movement	DP
Hrvatska stranka prava	Croatian Party of Rights	HSP
Dom i Nacionalno okupljanje	Home and National Rally	DOMINO
Hrvatska narodna stranka – liberalni demokrati	Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats	HNS
Hrvatska seljačka stranka	Croatian Peasant Party	HSS
Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka	Croatian Social Liberal Party	HSLs

Original name (Croatian)	English translation	Acronym
Hrvatska stranka umirovljenika	Croatian Party of Pensioners	HSU
Stranka umirovljenika	Pensioners' Party	SU
Hrvatski suverenisti	Croatian Sovereignists	HS
Primorsko-goranski savez	Primorje-Gorski Kotar Alliance	PGS
Lista za Rijeku	List for Rijeka	RI
Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka	Independent Democratic Serb Party	SDSS

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ЛОКАЛНИ ИЗБОРИ У РЕПУБЛИЦИ ХРВАТСКОЈ 2025. ГОДИНЕ – НАСТАВАК ДОМИНАЦИЈЕ ХРВАТСКЕ ДЕМОКРАТСКЕ ЗАЈЕДНИЦЕ

Резиме

Циљ овог рада је анализа редовних локалних избора у Републици Хрватској који су одржани 18. маја, у првом, и 1. јуна 2025. године, у другом кругу. У локалним изборима бирани су сазиви регионалних – жупанијских и локалних–градских и општинских скупштина, уз избор градске скупштине и градоначелника главног града Загреба који има статус и регионалне и локалне самоуправе. Уз сазиве скупштина бирани су и градоначелници и председници општина (начелници), те њихови заменици из реда националних мањина. И ови избори су, као и већина претходних локалних изборних циклуса, исказали ривалитет две водеће националне странке – ХДЗ и СДП, често у наступима са својим коалиционим партнерима, и на њима је ХДЗ однео значајну превагу и остварио готово потпуно јединство националне и локалне власти. Покушаји „трећих опција” за продор били су неуспешни или је он остварен у коалицији са поменутиим водећим партијама, изузимајући поједине средине, док су све парламентарне странке било оне коалиционе на власти или пак у опозицији (Домовински покрет, МОСТ и др.) доживели су изборни пад. На изборима је традиционално исказан одређени значај регионалних, мањинских странака, али и независних кандидата.

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Кључне речи: Република Хрватска, локални избори, локална демократија, политичке странке, локални политички актери

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