

CROATIA 2/2003



COUNTRY INFORMATION BULLETIN

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Introduction

1.1 This Bulletin has been produced by the Country Information and Policy Unit, Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Home Office, to identify information about the November 2003 elections in Croatia, obtained from a wide variety of recognised sources. It does not contain any Home Office opinion or policy.

1.2 This Bulletin has been prepared for background purposes for those involved in the asylum / human rights determination process. The information it identifies is not exhaustive. It concentrates on the issues most commonly raised in asylum / human rights claims made in the United Kingdom.

1.3 The Bulletin is sourced throughout. It is intended to be used by caseworkers as a signpost to the source material, which has been made available to them. The vast majority of the source material is readily available in the public domain.

1.4 This Bulletin and the accompanying source material are publicly disclosable. Where sources identified in the Bulletin are available in electronic form the relevant link has been included. The date that the relevant link was accessed in preparing the Bulletin is also included. Paper copies of the sources have been distributed to nominated officers in Asylum Caseworking Directorate and all Presenting Officer Units.

1.5. Bulletin 2/2003 is supplementary to Bulletin 1/2003 (June 2003) and Bulletin 2/2002 (April 2002). The three bulletins constitute the total sum of current CIPU products on Croatia on the IND Knowledge Base.

Part 1: Election November 2003

Summary

The Nationalist HDZ party won the largest number of seats in the parliamentary elections held on 23 November 2003. With their two allied parties, enough seats were won to win the election but insufficient to directly form a minority government.

Electoral turnout was lower than previous elections; the Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) stated that the elections were conducted generally in line with international standards for democratic elections.

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On 22 December 2003, a Government was formed, with a legislative majority promised to the HDZ through a series of understandings with other smaller parties, but not in terms of formal coalition.

Background

1.1. The scheduled parliamentary elections called for by Prime Minister Racan in June 2003, went ahead on Sunday 23 November 2003. Parliament was dissolved on 17 October 2003, with the elections confirmed as being on 23 November 2003 by President Mesic three days later. **[7d]**

1.2. Prior to the elections, there was a general dissatisfaction among the electorate with the performance of Racan's Social Democrat Government. One poll registered 60.9 per cent of those polled were dissatisfied. **[7d]**

1.3. The electorate is larger than the number of residents in the state of Croatia, drawing postal votes from large numbers of ethnic Croats living outside the country, mainly in the neighbouring Former Yugoslavia countries. **[7d]** In January 2000, 126,000 Croats were eligible to vote, of which 109,000 residing in Bosnia Herzegovina did so. **[7d]** As many as 400,000 people could be entitled to vote in the 2003 election. **[11k]**

Parties, Manifestos, Politics

2.1. The HDZ (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - Croatian Democratic Union) was the main opposition party before the elections, and confirmed itself as Croatia's strongest political party force by capturing 62 of the 140 seats in the elections. **[7d]**

2.2. A major issue within the elections was the nature and intentions of the reformed HDZ; how far Ivo Sanader had moved the party from its Tudjman era outlook. **[11i]** **[17a]** News commentators were divided: some reporting gave a full spectrum of opinion. **[11i]** Some reports (Reuters) have cast Sanader as a "moderate nationalist" who 'prepared the ground for a comeback by cleansing the party of radicals whose hardline nationalism isolated Croatia from mainstream Europe and now boasts of friendship with conservative party leaders in Germany, Austria and Italy.' **[11m]** One US news report (the Washington Times) has viewed Sanader as 'an economic conservative' and 'the only major Croatian politician to support the war in Iraq', 'an admirer of President Bush', who 'has an electoral mandate to bring about much-needed economic reform' and 'Zagreb can serve as a counterweight to both Serbian revancism and Bosnian Muslim extremism': **[17a]** No other news reports take this line.

2.3. Other reports have tended to treat some of Sanader's claims of reform as rhetoric **[11n]** and one commentator has registered concern with the party's membership rather than leaders: 'HDZ has indeed undergone changes, but that they are more evident among the party leadership than rank-and-file.' **[11i]** However, the same commentator continued: 'Mr Sanader's ambition is without any doubt to transform his party into a modern European Conservative

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party. He succeeded until now to a certain degree and I am sure that his election victory will enable him to continue with this project. But as a whole I would like to say his party has not changed yet in a way that we could say it is already a modern European Conservative party.' [11i] One further concern of one commentator is that Sanader was held to be a hard-liner within the Foreign Ministry 'when the Foreign Ministry was an oasis of moderates during Tudjman's rule'. [11i]

2.4. Many commentators point to external pressures on the HDZ to show their reformist credentials. [11i] NATO is held to be keen to see the HDZ sticking to their reformist principles. [11i] The European Union is the main moderating influence, with Sanader openly conscious of the EU's interest. [11i]

2.5. The HSP (Hrvatska Stranka Prava – Croatian Party of Rights) is a party of nationalists who have taken a harder nationalist line than the HDZ. It has been held at a distance by Sanader, who has dismissed it as a party "with a very bad image" and not his favourite for a coalition partner. [7d] [16a] Sanader has avoided the HSP as a coalition partner. [16a] The HSP however have been keen to improve their image themselves, wishing to present themselves as a pro-European party. [7d] With a new-found credibility they have increased their seats in the *Sabor* to eight. [7d]

2.6. The HSS (Hrvatska Seljacka Stranka – Croatian Peasants' Party) are a party dedicated to representing the rights of the rural community, and the stated preferred coalition partners of the HDZ. [7d] With a twelve seat win in the 2003 elections, they are politically attractive and significant. [7d] However, the membership of the HSS has instructed its leaders not to enter into a formal alliance with the HDZ. [16a]

2.7. The SDSS (Samostalne Demokratska Srpska Stranka - Autonomous Democratic Serbian Party) has three seats and has agreed (report dated 20 December 2003) to back the HDZ party in return for concessions on minority rights. [11o]

2.8. A key election issue was whether a Government will fully co-operate with a International Criminal Tribunal Yugoslavia (ICTY) warrant for Gen. Ante Gotovina to stand trial for war crimes in The Hague. Sanader has promised "full cooperation with The Hague tribunal even in the case of General Gotovina." [11p] Some sources indicate however that it is still an issue that Sanader is disinclined to make hard promises on. [15b]

2.9. Other important issues are the state of the economy. Croatia has a 19 Billion Euro foreign debt, of which 20 per cent is required to be repaid in 2004. [16a] It has an unemployment rate of 18.3 per cent of the working population and is unlikely to come to future prosperity in the short term. [7d] [16a] [17a] [17b]

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Observation of Elections' Conduct

3.1. OSCE observations were that the election had been run 'according to international democratic standards'. [7d]

Election Results

4.1. 140 seats to the *Sabor* (the Croatian legislative body, comprising only one chamber the Chamber of Comitats) were contested; another 11 seats (minimum – may be higher depending on external vote) being reserved automatically for ethnic minority group representation. [7d]

4.2. The main party gain, that of the HDZ who won 62 seats, was insufficient proportionately to form a government outright, and not a majority in parliament. [7d] [Full results in Annex A, below]

New Government

5.1. The HDZ were, throughout December 2003, in negotiation with other parties to consolidate a majority as a coalition government, but talks with the leading contenders of the HSS (the Peasant's Party) and the HSP (a far right party) have fallen through. [16a] The situation initially looked unlikely to be resolved [13b] (and a Government formed) until the middle of January 2004: but on 9 December 2003, the President (Mesic) asked the HDZ to form a Government bolstered by external support from other parties but not in formal coalition with the HDZ. 22 December 2003 was set as a date for an inaugural session.

5.2. On 22 December 2003, Sanader announced his cabinet, stripped down from 18 ministerial posts to 14, including some ministers who had served in the Tudjman administration, [11p] most notably Miomir Zuzul, Croatia's ambassador to the United States in the 1990s, who will be Foreign Affairs Minister. [15c]

5.3. Commentators are doubtful as to the ability of the HDZ to ensure the party's legislative programme can succeed, particularly in relation to constitutional amendments that require a two-thirds majority. [16a]

Part 2: Documents on ethnic Serb Returns to Croatia

6.1. News reports of December 2003 indicate that the parliamentary party representing Croatian Serbs, the Independent Serb Democratic Party (SDSS), has stated that the Croatian Serb minority is willing to accept a democratically-elected HDZ Government. [15a]

6.2. Previously, during the election campaign, HDZ leader Ivo Sanader, 'vowed to improve relations with Serbia and urged Serb refugees to return.' [15a]

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6.3. The Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) report of September 2003, *Minorities in Croatia*, has full, general information on all ethnic minorities in Croatia. **[14a]** It covers the recent political history since 1990; the demography of the minorities; the state institutions that interact with the ethnic minorities; the political and other rights of the minorities; general tolerance; and the issues of returning refugees and other displaced persons. **[14a]**

6.4. Specifically on refugee return, the Human Rights Watch report, also of September 2003, *Broken Promises: Impediments to Refugee Return to Croatia*, deals with issues in greater detail. **[6b]** The article by Brad Blitz, *Refugee Returns in Croatia: Contradictions and Reform*, draws conclusions on a history of reluctance by previous (Tudjman) Croatian Governments to permit refugee return, reforms and remaining obstacles under the present (Mesic) Government; the use of war crimes issues and the judiciary as specific obstacles to return; and the muted international response to assist with returns. **[7c]**

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Annex A: Major party websites

<http://www.hdz.hr/> HDZ
<http://www.sdp.hr/> Social Democrats
<http://www.hss.hr/> Croatian Peasants Party
<http://www.hsp.hr/> Croatian Party of Rights

Election Results November 2003 (from *Elections in Croatia* Electionworld.org) [18a]

Political Party: Name	Political Party: Initials	Percentage of vote (61.7% turnout of electorate)	Seats (151 in total)	Seats: alliance breakdown of seats
Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - Croatian Democratic Union	HDZ	33.9	66	
SDP-IDS-Libra-Ls Alliance	SDP	22.6	41	SDP 34 IDS 4 Libra 3 LS 2
HNS-PGS Alliance	HNS	8.0	11	HNS 10 PGS 1
Hrvatska Seljacka Stranka – Croatian Peasants' Party	HSS	7.2	10	
Hrvatska Stranka Prava – Croatian Party of Rights	HSP	6.4	8	
HSLs- DC alliance	HSLs-DC	4.0	3	HSLs 2 DC 1
Hrvatska Stranka Umirovljenika – Croatian Pensioners' Party	HSU	4.0	3	
Samostalne Demokratska Srpska	SDSS	(reserved seats)	3	

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Stranka - Autonomous Democratic Serbian Party				
HDSS-HDC- DPZS Alliance	HDSS	1.0	1	HDSS 1
Non-aligned			4	

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Annex B: References to Source Material

2. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):-

2e. ODIHR Election Observation Mission to the Republic of Croatia, *Parliamentary elections in the Republic of Croatia, 23 November 2003*. (Accessed 20 November 2003)

6. Human Rights Watch Publications:-

6b. *Broken Promises: Impediments to Refugee Return to Croatia* Vol 15 No 6 (D). (accessed 15 December 2003)

7. Miscellaneous Reports:-

7c. Blitz, Brad K. 'Refugee Returns in Croatia: Contradictions and Reform' in *Politics*, 2003 Vol 23(3), pp 181-191.

7d. Foundation Robert Schuman: European Elections Monitor: *General Elections in Croatia: 23 November 2003* and *The Democratic Union (HDZ) returns to power in Croatia*. (Accessed 17 December 2003)

11. General News sources:-

11h. 24 November 2003, BBC News.com, *Croatia's new-style nationalists* (Accessed 25 November 2003)

11i. 28 November 2003, RFE/RL news via Balkan News at www.balkanpeace.org, *Is HDZ A Party of Nationalists Or 'Conservatives'?* (Accessed 2 December 2003)

11j. 24 November 2003, BBC News.com, *Croat PM admits election defeat* (Accessed 24 November 2003)

11k. 24 November 2003, BBC News.com, *Nationalists lead in Croatia poll* (Accessed 24 November 2003)

11l. 9 December 2003, BBC News.com, *Croat Nationalists to take power* (Accessed 17 December 2003)

11m. 23 November 2003, Reuters via MSNBC News at famulus.msnbc.com, *Sanader, a moderate nationalist with Western links* (Accessed 24 November 2003)

11n. 21 November 2003, ClariNews at quickstart.clari.net, *Croatia's nationalists adopt pro-West rhetoric* (Accessed 24 November 2003)

11o. 20 December 2003, BBC News.com, *Croatian Serbs win minority rights* (Accessed 22 December 2003)

11p. 22 December 2003, BBC News.com, *Croat parliament enters new era* (Accessed 22 December 2003)

13. European Union; Commission:-

13b. 28 November 2003 Enlargement website at EurActiv.com Portal, *Croatia: nationalists seeking coalition partners* (Accessed 30 December 2003)

14. Minority Rights Group International

14a. *Minorities in Croatia*, published September 2003 (Accessed 3 December 2003)

14b. 28 November 2003, Recent News and Events, *Nationalist election victory leaves Croatia's minorities concerned*. (Accessed 3 December 2003)

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15. Balkan News (www.balkantimes.com)

15a. 25 November 2003, Southeast European Times, *Croatian Serbs Willing to back HDZ-Led Government in Zagreb* (accessed 3 December 2003).

15b. 10 December 2003, Reuters Foundation AlertNet, *Croatian leader vague on war crimes, picks new govt* (accessed 30 December 2003)

15c. 22 December 2003, AFP, *Croatia's incoming PM unveils nationalist cabinet* (Accessed 22 December 2003)

16. Institute for War and Peace Reporting at www.iwpr.net

16a. 11 December 2003, *Croatia: Minority Government Survival Battle.* (accessed 30 December 2003)

17. Washington Times Online at www.washtimes.com

17a. 3 December 2003, *Croatia's right turn* (accessed 30 December 2003)

17b. 7 December 2003, *Croatia at the crossroads* (accessed 30 December 2003)

18. Electionworld.org / Elections around the world

18a. *Elections in Croatia* (Accessed 2 January 2004)