

**COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE  
234 FORD HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
(202) 225-1901**

# **1995 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN CROATIA**



**Prepared by the Staff of the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe  
Washington, DC**

**February 1996**

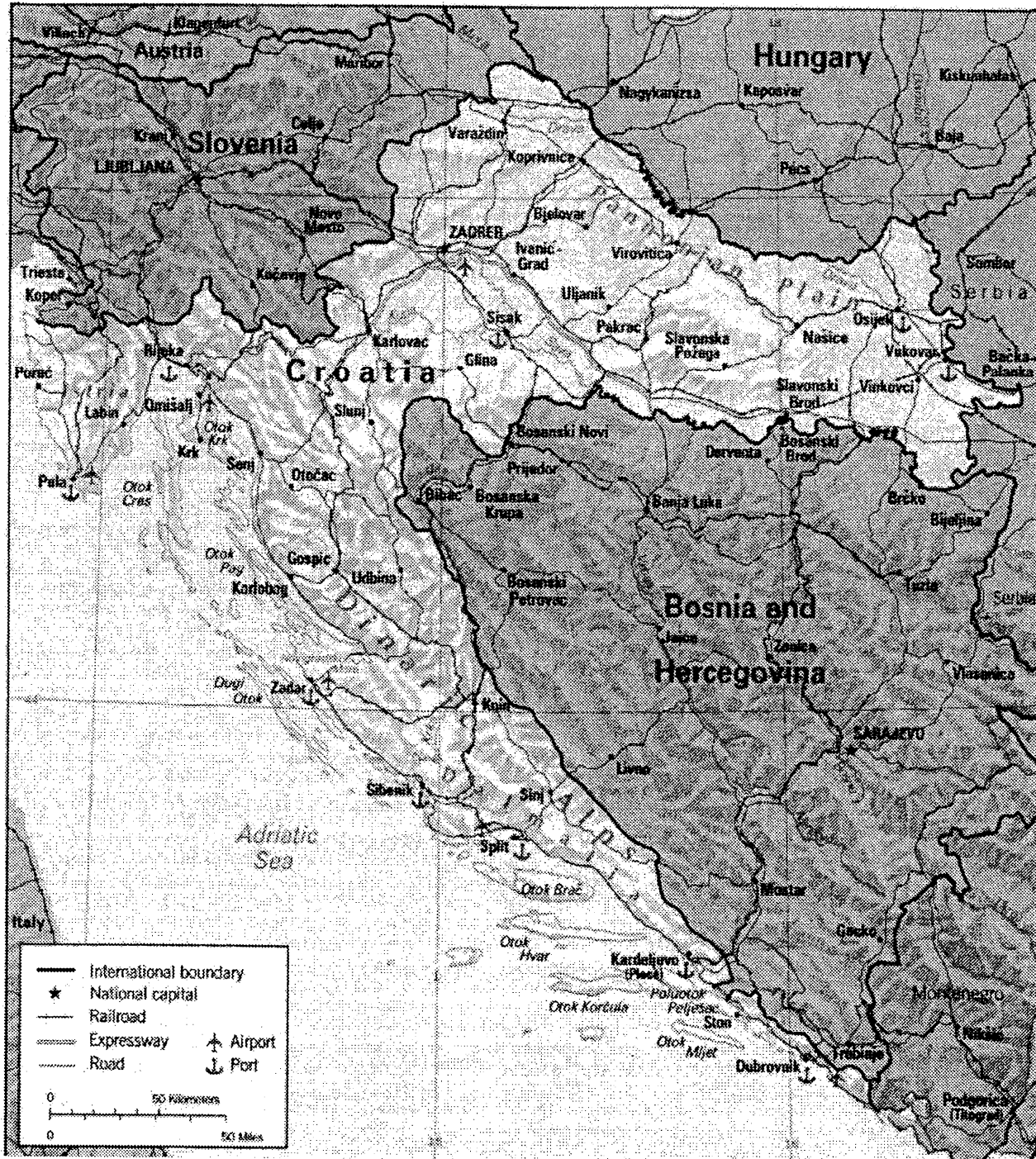
*This report is based on the findings of members of the staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission) who observed Croatia's parliamentary elections of October 29, 1995. The Commission had observed elections in Croatia in April 1990, the first multiparty elections in Croatia since World War II, and in August 1992, the first elections since Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991.*

*In observing the 1995 elections, Commission staff joined a delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). As part of that delegation and on their own, they met with members of the Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia, other government officials, representatives of several political parties fielding candidates, members of non-governmental organizations and journalists. They were also briefed on the situation in the country by representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.N. Peace Forces (UNPF) in Croatia. On election day, the voting and counting of ballots were observed at polling stations in Split, Sinj and Imotski in the Dalmatian region of Croatia. The staff also traveled to Livno, Tomislavgrad, Posusje and Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina to observe the "diaspora" voting. Other Commission staff observed the "diaspora" voting and the counting of ballots in the United States, specifically in Washington, DC, and Pittsburgh, PA.*

*Other sources for this report include American and Croatian press articles and materials provided by the Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.*

*The Commission staff thanks the American Embassy in Zagreb, the U.S. Department of State and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for their assistance in helping organize the visit and providing background information on the political and economic situation in Croatia leading up to the elections.*

# MAP OF CROATIA



## SUMMARY

- On October 29, 1995, Croatia held elections for the 127 seats in the House of Representatives, the lower chamber in Croatia's "Sabor," or parliament. The elections were called earlier than required by President Franjo Tudjman in light of the new situation in Croatia created by the retaking of most of the territory occupied by Serb militants since 1991, and the mass exodus of ethnic Serbs from those regions into Serb-occupied parts of neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina and into Serbia itself.
- Representatives for 80 of the seats were chosen on the basis of a nationwide, proportional vote in which 14 political parties or coalitions of parties participated. Representatives for 28 seats were chosen on the basis of a majority vote in electoral districts established for the elections. Twelve seats were chosen on the basis of a proportional vote of Croatian citizens, the so-called "diaspora" residing outside Croatia's borders, in which seven political parties or coalitions participated. The remaining seven seats were reserved for some of Croatia's national minorities, including three seats in a nationwide vote among members of the Serb community, one seat for those of the Italian minority, one for the Hungarian minority, one for the Czech and Slovak minorities, and one for the Ruthenian, Ukrainian, German and Austrian minorities in specified regional districts.
- The elections demonstrated disappointingly little democratic progress in Croatia since 1990, when multiparty elections were first held. In fact, the apparent unwillingness of the authorities to permit a truly open electoral system in which all had confidence, or a genuinely free media to permit a more competitive campaign period, seemed almost an expression of defiance of any democratic trend that may exist in Croatia at this time. Smaller flaws in polling practices observed on election day also become less excusable in that they indicated no attempt by the authorities to correct problems observed in all past elections. Thus, while the elections generally have been considered to be free in terms of providing voters with a choice, they were not satisfactorily fair in the way that choice of candidates was presented to the voters.
- Despite these problems, it is likely that the election results—which kept the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in power—represent the general will of Croatia's voting population. The elections were scheduled a year in advance to capitalize politically on the Croatian Army's victories in retaking occupied territory. Opposition parties in Croatia, while improving their own coordination, have difficulties convincing the electorate that they present a viable alternative for which it is worth voting. The realities of more than four years of war and occupation in or near Croatia certainly have contributed to a political environment in which the country's potential for democratic development has been, at least partially, lost.
- Winning 75 seats, the HDZ can maintain sole control of the government, which was formed in early November under a new Prime Minister, Zlatko Matesa. The HDZ failed to achieve the two-third's majority it needed to enable it to amend unilaterally the country's constitution. The government may not be able to garner sufficient additional votes from other parties represented, other than perhaps those which seem close to the HDZ, in order to form such a majority.

- Croatia's future course remains uncertain. On one hand, the way in which the elections were held indicates that Croatia's current leaders have openly engaged in manipulating the system in ways not conducive to democratic development in order to maximize their own political power. Combined with some major human rights violations which took place with the retaking of territory occupied by Serb militants, there are reasons for concern about the course in which Croatia may be heading. On the other hand, the HDZ did not do quite as well as its leaders may have hoped, including in the city elections held in Zagreb in conjunction with the parliamentary elections, signaling that Croatia's voting population may limit the extent to which the government can pursue certain paths at its expense.
- Certainly, as Croatia recovers from the war and matures as an independent state, the diversity of its people and their general Western orientation will become more pronounced, making it more difficult for those who govern using pseudo-communist methods reminiscent of the Yugoslav period to remain in power. Thus, Croatia's long-term prospects for democratic development look bright. Major challenges still lie ahead, however, not the least of which is whether the departed Serb population will ever be genuinely encouraged to return. For all their faults, the 1995 parliamentary elections in Croatia may have moved the country slightly forward by revealing many of the shortcomings that still exist.

## BACKGROUND

*Geography and Demography of Croatia:* Croatia is located in south-central Europe, with an Adriatic coastline of more than 1,000 miles and borders with Slovenia, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. The capital of Croatia is Zagreb. While smaller than the state of West Virginia, Croatia stretches across three principal geographic and climatic regions: the relatively flat region of Slavonia occupying the northern and eastern parts of the country, which has a largely continental climate; a coastal region, stretching from the Istrian Peninsula in the north to Dalmatia in the south, which has a Mediterranean climate; and, in between, the mountainous region of central Croatia.

Croatia's pre-conflict population of 4.76 million was fairly diverse, with 78 percent ethnically Croat and 12 percent ethnically Serb. There were, and remain, sizable populations of Muslim Slavs, Hungarians, Italians, Albanians, Czechs, Slovaks and Ukrainians. Two percent of the population consisted of people considering themselves to be ethnic Yugoslavs, many the product of mixed marriages. As a result of the conflict, however, demographic trends have shifted substantially, due to over 10,000 war-related deaths, a mass outmigration of ethnic Serbs first in 1991 and then again in 1995, and a tremendous refugee flow into Croatia from Bosnia-Herzegovina, including ethnic Muslims (Bosniacs) and Croats.

*History of Croatia:* Croatia has a strong Western tradition originating from the fact that the area lay slightly to the west of the line dividing the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, leading Croats to adopt the Roman Catholic faith, the Latin script and the influences of Frankish rule. In contrast, the South Slavic groups to the east, including the Serbs and Macedonians, adopted the Eastern Orthodox faith, the Cyrillic script and the influences of Byzantium. These differing cultural traits were further accentuated by the later division of the Balkans between the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires. It was during this period that the present-day Muslim Slavs (Bosniacs) of Bosnia-Herzegovina, under Ottoman control, converted to Islam. It was also during this period that ethnic Serbs, fleeing Ottoman encroachments, settled on Croatian territory within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Most of these Serbs settled along the frontier, where they were treated well by the Habsburgs in return for their defending the border from Turkish advances.

With the demise of both the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires in World War I, Croatia's more recent experience has been as part of a Yugoslav state, beginning in 1918. Originally, such a state had enthusiastic supporters in Croatia, but Belgrade's efforts to centralize power brought disillusionment and anti-Serbian sentiment in Croatia, which gained some autonomy in 1939. During World War II, Yugoslavia was dismembered; and Croatia achieved nominal independence as a fascist state that severely persecuted its Serbian, Roma (Gypsy) and Jewish populations through mass killings, deportations, forced conversions, and internment in camps. Communist Partisans under Josip Broz Tito, fighting both occupation forces and rival liberation forces, reunified Yugoslavia. He was able to reunify the country and maintain independence from Soviet control through a combination of genuine popularity, reformed communism and economic progress on the one hand, and centralized power and repressive measures, especially against nationalist dissent, on the other. The purge of

Croatian nationalists and liberals during the failed "Croatian Spring" of 1971 led to the virtual disappearance of a visible Croatian nationalism until well after Tito's death. At the same time, the opening of Yugoslavia to the West benefitted Croatia economically, especially in the development of tourism along the Adriatic coast. It also allowed increased opportunities for residents of Croatia, as for all Yugoslavs, to establish and maintain contacts with foreigners.

After Tito's death in early 1980, political power in Yugoslavia was spread among the six constituent republics and provinces in such a way that none, in theory, could come to dominate the others within the federation. However, disputes arose among the regions over the future political course of the country, with a parallel resurgence in nationalism, ethnic strife and separatist sentiment. This was exacerbated by growing economic difficulties, including substantial unemployment, austerity measures necessitated by a large foreign debt, and hyperinflation. Slovenia and Croatia were significantly better off economically than the others and became increasingly so, adding to disagreement over the generation and distribution of the country's wealth. The two northern republics resented subsidizing the country's southern regions through large contributions to the federal budget. Meanwhile, Slobodan Milosevic, riding an increasing tide of Serbian nationalism focused on Albanian-inhabited Kosovo, rose in the ranks of Serbia's political system by promising to restore all that Tito had allegedly taken away from the largest of Yugoslavia's peoples. This nationalism played well not only among the Serb inhabitants of Serbia but also among the 25 percent of Yugoslavia's Serbs who lived outside of that republic.

*Political Pluralism and Yugoslavia's Demise:* While Yugoslavia—considered at the time the most progressive communist country, politically independent and with a functioning market-oriented economy—was grappling with these difficulties, the East-Central European countries of the Warsaw Pact were the scene of revolutionary political developments in 1988 and 1989. Pressures for democratization were felt in Yugoslavia as well and were, in fact, viewed as the possible answer to the political crisis developing in the country. However, the reformist and independent character of Yugoslav Communism made the leadership less vulnerable to democratic change than their counterparts in neighboring countries who depended on Soviet support. Moreover, growing nationalism made democratic development possible only at the republic, not the federal, level, especially after the all-Yugoslav League of Communists collapsed in December 1989. As a result, the economically advanced northern republics moved in front of the wave of political reform sweeping the region, while others in the federation fell increasingly behind.

Slovenia's bold initiatives toward greater openness and political pluralism during this period stimulated a liberalization movement in Croatia, still tempered by Tito's 1971 crackdown. Neither Slovenes nor Croats considered themselves geographically, culturally or historically a part of the Balkans, but rather of Central Europe; and democracy increasingly became synonymous with sovereignty, independence and integration with Europe. Soon after Slovenia held the first multi-party elections in post-war Yugoslavia in April 1990, Croatia did the same. The League of Communists of Croatia, renamed the Party of Democratic Changes, was ousted by a nationalist bloc led by the Croatian Democratic Union ("HDZ" for Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica in Croatian) in elections that were conducted generally in a fair and open manner, albeit with problems on election day due

The fighting finally subsided in January 1992 in what could best be called a fragile—and frequently broken—peace under a ceasefire agreement mediated by United Nations envoy Cyrus Vance, which included the eventual deployment of close to 15,000 U.N. Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) in four protected areas (UNPAs) of Croatia. The Vance plan also provided for the return of the Croatian military to barracks, the withdrawal of the Yugoslav military from the republic, the disarming of Serb militants, the return of normal civilian controls in the UNPAs, and, most critical for Croatia politically, the return of displaced persons to their homes.

After 6 months of conflict, about 10,000 people were dead, 700,000 were displaced, reports of atrocities abounded, and many towns and cities throughout Croatia, especially in the Slavonian and Dalmatian regions of Croatia, were severely damaged or destroyed. Maintaining a Yugoslav federation under such conditions was clearly impossible; after much international squabbling about the merits of recognition and the criteria for doing so, Croatian independence was recognized, along with that of Slovenia, by most of the world during the first months of 1992. Unlike Slovenia, however, to obtain recognition by the European Community—which generally took the lead in recognizing or not recognizing former Yugoslav republics—Croatia was found lacking in its respect for certain human rights and had to provide assurances on the protection of rights relating to national minorities, which it did.<sup>3</sup> Both Croatia and Slovenia joined the United Nations and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

*Developments Since the Conflict and Independence:* While Croatia had finally achieved its independent statehood, significant portions of Croatian territory remained effectively out of Zagreb's control. Moreover, the fighting uprooted a large portion of the republic's civilian population, forcing them to move to safer parts of Croatia or abroad. Meanwhile, as the fighting intensified in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, hundreds of thousands of refugees from that republic strained Croatian resources to the point that by September 1992 the authorities announced that they could take no more and would therefore transfer them to other countries. Combined with a lack of genuine economic reform (made virtually impossible during the course of a war), the difficulties in de-linking the Croatian economy from that of the other Yugoslav republics, and the heavy physical destruction, the conflict caused a serious deterioration in economic well-being.

These factors, in turn, deeply affected Croatia's political development. Many Croatian citizens were critical of the overly nationalistic tendencies of the HDZ from the beginning, but it was clear that the polarization of political views normal to a democratic system was constrained by the preservation of unity during the war. Afterwards, this was perpetuated by the popular support for independence as the cause for which the war had to be fought. To proclaim views deemed “Yugoslav” was

---

*Republics: Prospects for Peace and Human Rights*, February 5, 1992, pp. 8-13.

<sup>3</sup> In December 1991, the European Community established four criteria, two with strong human rights elements, for deciding which Yugoslav republics deserved recognition as independent states. Of those considered in January 1992—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia—only Slovenia and Macedonia met those conditions. Recognition of Macedonia was nevertheless blocked by Greece, while Germany successfully lobbied for recognition of Croatia with new assurances by President Tudjman that minority rights would be respected.



