



Key Lessons of the 2017 Local Elections in Croatia

Election Analysis

Marijana Grbeša

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science Zagreb
grbesa@fpzg.hr

Berto Šalaj

Associate Professor, Faculty of Political Science Zagreb
bsalaj@fpzg.hr

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Marijana Grbeša and Berto Šalaj*

The context

The local elections in Croatia were held on 21. May 2017,¹ in very turbulent political circumstances caused by the collapse of an unstable governing coalition between the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the populist party The Bridge (*Most*). The troubled marriage between these two parties dates back to the 2015 parliamentary elections, when the newly established *Most*, led by Božo Petrov, the mayor of the small southern town of Metković, unexpectedly won 19 parliamentary seats.² The media hailed them for achieving “what the third parties have been failing to do for the past 15 years,” calling them “a sensation” and “the real winners” of the 2015 parliamentary elections.³ Since neither of the two major parties (the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)) won the necessary majority to form a government, *Most* used its newly acquired blackmail potential to side with the conservative HDZ and decide the winner of the election. *Most* seemingly conditioned its support on the implementation of “reforms,”⁴ and pursued its populist agenda by insisting on the appointment of

* Marijana Grbeša is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. She teaches courses in Political Marketing, Methods of Mass Media Research, Media and the Public and Pop Politics. She holds an MSc in Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK and a PhD in Communication Sciences from the Faculty for Social Sciences, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her areas of expertise are political communication and mass media research. She was the Head of School of Journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb and the Vice Dean for Science and International Relations at the same Faculty. Berto Šalaj is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Zagreb University. He has a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D in Political Science. He is currently lecturing the following classes: Political Socialisation and Political Education, Democracy and Civil Society and Social Capital and Civil Society in Southeastern Europe. He has published numerous articles on political culture, social capital, democracy and populism.

¹ Croatia has a two-round electoral system. The first round took place on 21. May, and the second on 4. June 2017. Mayors and county governors are directly elected. The voters also cast votes for legislative bodies (city councils and county assemblies).

² In the last couple of years, Croatia’s solid two-party system has been challenged by a number of populist options, with *Most* and the *Human Wall* (*Živi zid*) being the most prominent. The Bridge of Independent Lists was established in 2012 in the small town of Metković, where the leader of *Most*, Božo Petrov, overthrew the long-time mayor and “local sheriff” Stipe Gabrić Jambo. By 2015, it had developed into a network of independent lists from all parts of Croatia, transforming itself into a strong populist option, attractive to voters from both the left and right. *Živi zid* started as a non-governmental organisation whose main objective was to obstruct evictions. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, *Most* won 19 seats and *Živi zid* 1.

³ N.N. 2015. *Most je najveće iznenađenje izbora: Najviše glasova je zapravo oteo HDZ-u. Jutarnji list*, 17. November 2015 (accessed: 05. July 2017).

⁴ Recent analysis has confirmed that the word “reform” was used primarily as an “empty signifier” in Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso. It may be a word, an idea, or a phrase that is elusive, emptied of any real content, to which people with different ideologies may assign different meanings. For more about the populism of *Most*, see Šalaj, Berto and Marijana Grbeša. 2017. *Dobar, loš ili zao? Lica populizma u Hrvatskoj*. TiM Press: Zagreb (*forthcoming*).

a non-party Prime Minister. In the end, this leader materialized in the figure of Tihomir Orešković, a successful manager from the Israeli multinational pharmaceutical cooperation Teva, and a member of the Croatian diaspora. Tomislav Karamarko, the leader of HDZ at the time, had to satisfy himself with the position of First Deputy Prime Minister.

However, the ongoing conflict between HDZ and *Most* inevitably led to the rapid collapse of a cabinet that, according to Raos “was built upon a structurally unstable quasi-coalition arrangement.”⁵ The parties involved “showed an utter lack of mutual trust and agreement on key policies.”⁶ Tomislav Karamarko consequently stepped down as party leader, and soon afterwards he was replaced by Andrej Plenković, a promising career diplomat who had been a member of the European Parliament since 2013. An early election, held in September 2016, resulted in a narrow victory by HDZ which, again, was unable to establish a government on its own and had to come to an agreement with its disobedient populist partner, *Most*. HDZ won 61 seats in this election, leaving it in a somewhat better position than in 2015 (when it won 59 seats). *Most* lost some of its support and returned 13 seats.⁷ The second deal between these two parties was closed by appointing Božo Petrov as President of the Parliament (*Sabor*) and granting ministerial positions to four other prominent members of *Most*.⁸ The partnership between *Most* and HDZ remained tense, mostly due to *Most*'s schizophrenic attempts to act as the opposition while in Government. MPs and officials from *Most* tried to maintain their populist discourse, insisting they were fighting for the people against established elites (who, *nota bene*, they themselves had come to embody) and challenging the integrity and legitimacy of the institutions.

Typical of their discourse is an interview by *Most*'s Minister of Internal Affairs (colloquially, Minister of Police), Vlaho Orepić, in which he contested the credibility of the Constitutional Court, the highest judicial institution in the country: “The Constitutional Court represents the biggest national threat for Croatia. They should all collectively resign!”⁹ In April 2017, only three weeks before the local elections, the so called “Agrokor affair” finally brought this troubled partnership to an end. Agrokor is a concern that employs around 60,000 people across Southeastern Europe. It was established by Ivica Todorić, a Croatian tycoon known as “Gazda” (The Boss), who owned 95 percent of the company. Under the weight of debts and dubious business philosophy, the company came to the verge of collapse. The Government swiftly passed a law, known as “Lex Agrokor,” which enabled the state to intervene and save the company representing one of the backbones of Croatian economy. “We are concerned that issues related to Agrokor do not have repercussions on the

⁵ Raos, V. 2016. Croatia's Fallen Orešković Government Was a Messy but Healthy Experiment in Democracy. *LSE*, 29. June 2015 (accessed: 13. July 2017).

⁶ Raos, *Croatia's Fallen Orešković Government*.

⁷ In contrast, the second populist option, *Živi zid*, rose to 8 seats.

⁸ Croatia has a unicameral parliament whose 151 representatives are elected through a proportional electoral system. A parliamentary majority requires the support of at least 76 MPs. In 2016, HDZ's parliamentary majority included 61 representatives from HDZ, 13 representatives from *Most*, 8 representatives of national minorities, 2 representatives from Milan Bandić 365 – Party of Labour and Solidarity, 1 representative from the Croatian Democratic Assembly of Slavonija and Baranja (HDSSB), and 1 representative from Željko Glasnović's independent list.

⁹ Globus, 6. December 2016.

economy and financial system, and we will do everything to preserve stability,” explained Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.¹⁰ At that point, the opposition SDP demanded the resignation of the Minister of Finance, Zdravko Marić, who used to be a highly positioned manager in Agrokor before joining the Government in 2015. They claimed Marić was familiar with the company’s problems, but still said and did nothing about it. Although Marić denied any knowledge of the company’s troubles, the SDP called a no-confidence vote in the parliament. *Most* supported their request, leading Plenković to fire three of *Most*’s ministers from the Government, while the fourth voluntarily resigned. A no-confidence vote held on 4 May ended in a tie (75 MPs in favour and 75 against), keeping Marić in office but leading Božo Petrov to resign from the post of the President of the *Sabor*. “In this moment, I feel moral in front of God and the people, because I was protecting their interests to the last minute,” said Petrov as he resigned. The newly appointed President of the Parliament, HDZ’s Gordan Jandroković, announced a break in parliamentary sessions until after local elections, leaving the media and the public to wonder if and how Plenković would secure a new parliamentary majority.

The answer came right after the local elections, when it was revealed that Plenković had made a deal with the liberal Croatian People’s Party (HNS), whose nine MPs entered Parliament as part of the opposition People’s Coalition (Narodna koalicija), led by the SDP. Four of HNS’s MPs regarded the deal with HDZ as political treason, refusing to support the Government. They were consequently expelled from the party, but the five obedient MPs were enough for Plenković to secure his parliamentary majority.

The aftermath and the key lessons

The local elections were held in an atmosphere of remarkable political suspense, which probably, at least to a certain extent, affected the results of the elections. In this section, we shall first present the general results of the elections, and then point to some of the key aspects of this electoral race.

Table 1 summarises the aggregate electoral results, indicating the rounded total number of votes that each of the four major political parties received in the county assemblies and the Zagreb City Assembly.¹¹ The results, however, should be interpreted with caution, because the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and The Human Wall (*Živi zid*) stood independently in some counties, while in others they contested the elections in coalition with a number of different parties. In contrast, *Most* competed independently everywhere. Although the table includes both independent votes and the votes that the parties received within coalitions, it nevertheless clearly indicates the overall balance of political power.

¹⁰ N.N. 2017. Croatia Wants to Shield Economy from Agrokor's Problems. *Reuters*, 15. March 2017 (accessed: 13. July 2017).

¹¹ All data in the tables are based on calculations conducted by the authors and based on the official election results, available on the web [site](#) of the State Electoral Commission (DIP).

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Table 1: The results of the 2017 local elections across parties (for the county assemblies and the Zagreb City Assembly)

Party	Number of votes (% of total number of votes)
HDZ	536000 (32%)
SDP	380000 (23%)
MOST	148000 (9%)
Živi zid	78000 (5%)

Source: the author.

If we compare the 2017 results with the previous local elections in 2013, it may be observed that support for the SDP is declining, while support for HDZ is increasing. In 2013, the SDP won 450,000 votes, or 26.5 percent of all votes, while HDZ received 502,000 votes, or 30 percent of the total. HDZ's supremacy is even more convincing if we look at Table 2, which indicates the total number of governors and mayors that each party received.

Table 2: Total number of county governors and mayors won by each party in 2017 local elections

	County governor	Mayor
Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	12	60
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	2	22
Independent candidates	2	22
Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS)	1	9
Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS)	1	4
Croatian People's Party (HNS)	1	5
People's Party – Reformers (Narodna stranka – reformisti)	1	1
Croatian Party of Right (HSP)	-	2
Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs)	-	1
Primorje and Gorski Kotar Assembly (PGS)	-	1
Croatian Democratic Assembly of Slavonija and Baranja (HDSSB)	-	1
The Bridge (Most)	-	-
The Human Wall (Živi zid)	-	-

Source: the author.

The HDZ won 60 mayors and 12 governors, thus confirming its status as the country's central political force. Interestingly, the number of independent candidates who won executive posts is equal to the number of governors and mayors won by the SDP, suggesting that independent candidates may be

becoming the second strongest force on the local level.¹² Regarding the outcome in the biggest cities, Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek were won by sturdy incumbents: Zagreb by an independent, Milan Bandić, who in the second round defeated the HNS's Anka Mrak Taritaš and secured his sixth term as mayor of Zagreb with 51.79 percent of votes; Rijeka by the SDP's Vojko Obersnel, who in the second round also secured his sixth mayoral term with 55.59 percent of votes; and Osijek by an independent, Ivan Vrkić, who in the second round won 62.74 votes and secured himself a second term. Split, the second biggest city in Croatia, was won by a newcomer, the HDZ's Andro Krstulović Opara, in an extremely tight race with a returning political maverick, Željko Kerum. The region of Istria was convincingly won by the Istrian Democratic Assembly (with 56.78 percent of the vote), a regional party that, after 25 years in power, still manages to retain unchallenged supremacy in that region, thus representing a sort of European phenomenon and confirming its label as the “most successful regional party in the EU.”¹³

What, then, are the most important lessons of the 2017 local elections? Firstly, the insights about populist actors who have been challenging the domination of the two major parties in Croatia are ambiguous. On the one hand, the two main populist platforms, *Most* and *Živi zid*, did not achieve significant results. *Most* seems to have been affected by the developments in the Government, and although it won a number of seats in the town halls and county assemblies, it did not win a single executive post. Besides, it suffered a severe blow by losing its stronghold of Metković, which was won by the HDZ. This time their hardcore populist slogans did not seem to have much success with the electorate.¹⁴ *Živi zid* was generally invisible throughout the campaign. These were their first local elections, and although they did not win any executive posts, they did win a certain number of seats in town halls and county assemblies. Judging by the results of the two most pertinent populist options, one could therefore argue that the effects of a populist formula in local campaigns were only moderate. However, this would be misleading. The number of independent candidates who won executive posts indicates that the 2017 local elections may hide an interesting story of populism, but establishing this would require more laborious analysis, sensitive to specific local contexts and candidates. Yet, the most curious case regarding populism is undoubtedly that of Željko Kerum, an independent mayoral candidate in Split who lost by a narrow margin to the HDZ candidate, Andro Krstulović Opara.¹⁵ Kerum is a well-known entrepreneur, a non-professional politician who was the mayor of Split from 2009 to 2013. He failed to secure a second term due to his demonstrated ineffectiveness while in office, but he came back four years later – with a vengeance. Kerum is an established populist,¹⁶ whose 2009 victory

¹² Independent candidates commonly compete either with their independent lists or with parties that were established primarily to cater to the needs of the candidate. An example is that of Milan Bandić's party: *Milan Bandić 365 – Party of Labour and Solidarity*. In this article we treat them all as “independent”.

¹³ See Raos, Višeslav. 2014. *Teritorijalnost i identitet: Istarski demokratski sabor i Sjeverna liga*. Fakultet političkih znanosti: Zagreb.

¹⁴ For example, one of *Most*'s most distinguished and eccentric MPs, Miro Bulj, campaigned on the message “From the people, for the people.”

¹⁵ 46.19 percent to 44.30 percent. Kerum asked for a recount due to an unusually high percentage of irregular ballots (9.51 percent), and insisted that the elections had been stolen.

¹⁶ See Grbeša, Marijana and Berto Šalaj. 2014. *Faces of Populism in Croatia*. Paper presented at the IPSA Conference, Montreal, July 2014.

should be largely attributed to the reasoning that generally underlies the success of entrepreneurial populists of Berlusconi's kind: "if politicians are going to behave as badly, or as inefficiently, as they do, it makes more sense to elect someone about whom you have no illusions in terms of morality or trustworthiness, but whose "street smarts" can be relied upon."¹⁷ Although voters punished him back in 2013, he regained his popularity four years later, suggesting that the voters chose his authenticity and explicit style over his failures. His discourse, which many find anecdotal, is characterised by direct and often vulgar remarks. For instance, when he spoke about his opponent Krstulović Opara, who used to be the head of a museum, Kerum said: "So he has been guarding statues all his life, and now he is supposed to run the city!?" Journalists were keen to compare Kerum with Donald Trump, which he considered a compliment: "Trump and I have a similar style and we both have beautiful wives, Slovenians."¹⁸

Secondly, one of the features of these local elections, as well as of political culture in Croatia in general, is that voters do not tend to punish politicians against whom there are legitimate indictments or even preliminary verdicts for political corruption. In Croatia, politicians can not only remain in office despite legitimate indictments, but keep being re-elected. Such were the cases of Milan Bandić in Zagreb and Ivan Čehok in Varaždin, both of whom were elected as mayor in the second round of elections, despite having indictments for political corruption allegedly committed while they were holding office. The case of Ivica Kirin in Virovitica, who was elected mayor in the first round with 61 percent of the vote, is similar. This is an interesting phenomenon that requires systematic political research, and here we can only present several theses about the reasons why citizens decide to return a mandate to politicians suspected of political corruption. According to the first theory, citizens deliberately choose such politicians because they are involved – or want to get involved – in some of the clientelistic networks that such politicians create to ensure their political survival. In other words, political corruption and clientelism are recognized by voters as a part of the normal and expected behaviour of political actors, and therefore they choose those who tend to maintain the clientelistic *status quo*. The second thesis, laid out by a group of authors in a recent study about local authorities in Croatia, claims that Croatian citizens depart from the premise that political corruption is a certain *zero point* of Croatian politics, meaning that all Croatian politicians are corrupt.¹⁹ This consequently means that political honesty is not a *differentia specifica* on which voting decisions are based, so citizens base their choices on other criteria. For example, they choose those politicians who are perceived as powerful and charismatic and who effectively address local community issues. According to the last, third thesis, such citizens' choices are the result of extremely high distrust in the institutions of the system, especially the judiciary. Specifically, if citizens are

¹⁷ Heywood, Paul M. and Catherine Fieschi. 2004. Trust, Cynicism and Populist Anti-politics. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3), 289-309, 303.

¹⁸ Večernji list, 28. May 2017.

¹⁹ Hoffman, Dražen / Miošić-Lisjak, Nives / Prkut, Duje / Zelić, Dragan / Stubbs, Paul / Šalaj, Brto and Siniša Zrinščak. 2017. *Croatia's Captured Places: Case Studies on the Quality of Local Governance in Croatia*. GONG: Zagreb.

suspicious of the work of judicial institutions and their independence and objectivity, indictments against individual politicians may seem like something politically constructed and fabricated.

Finally, it is useful to look at these elections in the context of the “nationalisation” thesis, which suggests that the national arena is the most important one and that all supra or sub-national elections (European, regional, local...) are primarily a reflection of the national power ratio.²⁰ Seminal is Reif and Schmitt’s thesis about national parliamentary elections (or presidential elections, depending on the system of government) as the “first-order elections,” and all other elections as the “second-order elections.”²¹ They argue that “second-order” elections are mainly determined by national factors, and that “many voters cast their votes in these elections not only as a result of conditions obtaining within the specific context of the second-order arena but also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation.”²² Although the 2017 local elections in Croatia provide arguments to reinforce the “nationalisation” thesis (national and local supremacy of HDZ, local defeat of *Most* due to their national performance etc.), there are arguments to claim that local elections have their own logic and that they should be assessed on their own merit. This is best visible in the results of the independent candidates who managed to secure a remarkable number of votes in local elections but score poorly in parliamentary elections. For instance, Željko Kerum, who won 25,553 votes in the 2017 local elections, won only 1,022 preferential votes in the 2015 parliamentary elections and decided not to run in the 2016 elections. Milan Bandić received 147,680 votes in Zagreb in 2017, while in the last parliamentary elections his party got only 49,811 votes in all four electoral units in Zagreb. This suggests that the national situation may have a bearing on local elections, but that voters still apply a different set of criteria when making local (regional) choices.

In summary, the aftermath of the 2017 elections may be boiled down to four points. First, the results of the local elections clearly confirm the status of the HDZ as the strongest Croatian party. Second, the results of *Most* and *Živi zid* indicate that their populism might be wearing down, while, at the same time, the exceptional success of independent lists may point to another fruitful avenue of research regarding populism. Third, Croatian voters seem to appreciate the discourse of anti-establishment and authenticity (demonstrated by Željko Kerum) while at the same time challenging the credibility of legal institutions by choosing candidates with indictments or convictions. Finally, although they do represent a reflection of the national processes, local elections at the same time represent a separate arena of political competition, prone to its own rules and logic.

²⁰ See for instance Rodden, Jonathan and Erik Wibbels. 2011. Dual Accountability and the Nationalization of Party Competition: Evidence from Four Federations. *Party Politics* 17(5), 629-53.

²¹ Reif, Karlheinz and Hermann Schmitt. 1980. Nine Second-Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results. *European Journal of Political Research* 8(1), 3-44.

²² Reif and Schmitt, *Nine Second-Order National Elections*, 9.

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