

# The Croats will be electing their MEPs on 14th April next

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Analysis

The Croats are being called to ballot to elect 12 MEPs on 14th April next. At present the country is represented in the European Parliament by 12 observers who were elected on 11th March 2011 by the members of the Hrvatski Sabor, the only Chamber in the Croatian Parliament.

The MEPs elected on 14th April will only sit for one year since the next European elections - in which Croatia will be taking part after it becomes a member of the European Union on 1st July next - will take place on 22nd-25th May 2014. The Croatian political parties had to hand in their candidate lists before 18th March. The election will take place according to a proportional vote with open lists on which the electorate will be able to indicate their 1st, 2nd preferences, etc. The Croatian president recalled that the electoral lists had to respect sexual equality. The Croatian electoral law obliges political parties to put forward at least 40% of women on each list for both the European and local elections.

At present the European Parliament comprises 754 MEPs. With the 12 Croatian MEPs elected on 14th April there will be 766. Since the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the Strasbourg Assembly should only comprise 751 members, the European institutions are now working towards a reduction in the number of representatives. Several countries will lose seats in the near future. According to the texts no Member State should have less than 6 MEPs or more than 96. The seats granted to each country are distributed according to the degressive proportionality principle. On 14th March last the European Parliament adopted a new distribution format of the seats for the European elections in May 2014. This means that Germany will have three MEPs less, so that it has under the maximum of 96, and 12 other countries will lose one seat (Romania, Greece, Belgium, Portugal, Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia).

On 22nd January 2011 the Croats said "yes" to be members of the European Union, with 66.67% of them voting in support by referendum. The President of the Republic, Ivo Josipovic, qualified Zagreb's accession to the Union as a "major opportunity". "*Croatia is investing intelligently a share of its sovereignty in the most prosperous political and economic community in the world,*" declared Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic (Social Democratic Party, SDP).

Most Croatian political parties supported membership, likewise the 132,000 Serbs (4.5% of the population) who live in the country, deeming that the European institutions will guarantee the respect of their rights. Croatian enthusiasm about Brussels peaked in 2003 at 80% of positive opinions, however this figure has plummeted, notably because of the economic and debt crisis in the euro zone.

The opposition forces, notably the Democratic Union (HDZ) have criticised President Josipovic for having chosen not to organise the European election on the same day as the local elections planned for 19th May next. The head of State indicated that he wanted the first European election in the country to retain its unique nature so that voters recognised how important it was. Foreign and European Affairs Minister Vesna Pusic (SDP), stressed that the two elections - European and local - were not taking place according to the same voting methods.

According to the HDZ's leader Tomislav Kararmarko, this choice of dates reveals "*a lack of commitment on the part of those in office.*" He said that the government "*was afraid of the result of the European elections*", and highlighted the fact that the organisation of the local and European election on the same day would have enabled major savings and would have guaranteed greater turnout. President Josipovic ans-

were that it was up to the political parties to mobilise the electorate.

The HDZ is undertaking a national campaign against the government in office. According to Tomislav Kararmarko the Social Democratic Party is incapable of running the State. He stresses that 70,000 people have lost their jobs since Zoran Milanovic's government entered office and that VAT as well as gas and electricity tariffs have all increased. He said that his party is the most apt to improve the institutions, to support the citizens and the economy and to reduce taxes. Tomislav Kararmarko has asked for general elections to be organised in Croatia after July 1st when Croatia joins the EU.

The HDZ leader maintained that he *"was sorry that certain individuals from our party have been involved in corruption that has shaken society and betrayed those who gave their lives to the Democratic Union. They have let down citizens who deserve an honest government."* The main opposition party suffered greatly because of various corruption scandals in which several of its members were involved. In November 2012 the former leader and former Prime Minister (2003-2009) Ivo Sanader was sentenced to 10 years in prison for abuse of power and corruption. He was found guilty of having received illegal funding (to a total of 480,000€) from an Austrian bank (Hypo Alp Adria) when he was deputy Foreign Minister (1991-1995) and of having received a bribe of 10 million € from the Hungarian oil company MOL which was trying to gain control of the Croatian oil company INA. Last February the former party leader and former Prime Minister (2009-2011) Jadranka Kosor was excluded from the HDZ for the damage she had caused the party. Tomislav Kararmarko did however say that these events were part of the past and that he would not allow the HDZ to be criminalised and that there was no "collective responsibility".

The Social Democratic Party of Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic is facing this election in an uncomfortable situation. Before he took office on 4th December 2011 the Head of Government had announced that a rescue plan would be implemented rapidly – an "investment

tsunami", jobs would be created, that there would be growth and finally that there would be a reduction in business taxes. These promises have not been kept however and real results have not been produced.

The Independent Farmers (NSH) led by Mato Milinaric will also be running. They will be campaigning with the slogan *"You can trust us."* *"We are the first farmers' party to run for the European Parliament, we are represented across Croatia and we are the country's second most important party,"* declared Mato Milinaric.

The Croatian Workers'-Labour Party (HL-SR) led by Dragutin Lesar and the Democratic Assembly of Istria (IDS) will also each be presenting a list. The latter party, together with Radimir Cacic's People's Party (HNS) and the Prime Minister's Social Democratic party are all government members. IDS leader Ivan Jakovic will be the party's lead candidate. He has said that he would retire from political life if he did not win the confidence of the electorate and has said that sitting in the European Parliament would enable him to *"fulfil the dream of a lifetime."*

To date 23 Member States have ratified Croatia's accession to the European Union. Denmark Germany and Slovenia should be doing so very soon. On 11th March last Zagreb signed an agreement with Ljubljana that puts an end to an old financial dispute between the two countries. Indeed in 1991, 430 000 Croatians placed their money in the Slovenian Bank Ljubljanska Banka, which then went bankrupt. Croatia compensated two-thirds of the clients to a total of 270 million € but demanded that Nova Ljubljanska Banka, which succeeded the former establishment, give back this sum.

Whilst European Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle insisted on the settlement of the bilateral conflicts between Zagreb and other capitals before Croatia could enter the Union, Croatia and Slovenia decided together to settle the differences that divide them at a later date. The Slovenian political crisis (resignation by Janez Jansa's government and the appointment of a new Prime Minister Alenka Bratusek (Positive Slovenia, PS) on 27th February made negotiations difficult.

# Right-wing opposition victorious in the first European elections organised in Croatia

## Results

The coalition headed by the Democratic Union (HDZ), the main opposition party led by Tomislav Karamarko, came top in the first European elections organised in Croatia on 14th April 2013. It collected 32.86% of the vote and won 6 of the 12 seats. The coalition led by Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic's Social Democrat Party (SDP) won 32.07% of the vote, gaining 5 seats. The last seat went to the Croatian Labourists – Labour Party (HL-SR), the opposition party led by Dragutin Lesar, which collected 5.77% of the vote.

In July the 12 new Croatian MEPs will replace the observers who were appointed by members of the Hrvatski Sabor, the Croatian Parliament's single chamber, and who have been sitting in the European Parliament since March 2011. They will sit for only one year since European elections will be held in all countries in the Union between 22nd and 25th May 2014. Only a small number of these observers were candidates in the European elections.

The opposition's victory in the first European vote was a surprise since HDZ has suffered a great deal from the various corruption cases in which several of its members have been involved. The opposition benefited from the social democrats' difficulties in facing up to the country's economic difficulties and from the low turnout, particularly amongst the electorate of the party in power.

### Results of the European elections held in Croatia on 14th April 2013

Turnout: 20.79%

Political parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes cast	Number of seats
Coalition led by the Democratic Union (HDZ)	263 654	32,86	6
Coalition led by the Social Democrat Party (SDP)	237 778	32,07	5
Croatian Labourists – Labour Party (HL-SR)	42 750	5,77	1
Other	215 226	21,32	0

Source: website of the Croatian electoral commission ([http://www.izbori.hr/2013EUParliament/rezult/r\\_00\\_0000\\_000.html?t=1365972717300](http://www.izbori.hr/2013EUParliament/rezult/r_00_0000_000.html?t=1365972717300) )

Turnout was indeed extremely low. At 20.79% it was well below the 43.54% recorded during the referendum on Croatian membership of the European Union on 22nd January 2012. According to political analyst Zarko Puhovski, the Croatians have probably not yet taken the measure of the importance of the elections.

The candidates were not very well known and the electoral campaign was almost invisible: no party convention, no televised debate. «Go out and vote. We have

*the possibility of electing our representatives for the first time. They will not be representing the government or the parliamentary majority; they will be representing the Croatian people. That's why it's essential that you go and vote so that those who will represent us in Europe see the seriousness and maturity of the Croatians»* declared Foreign and European Minister, Vesna Pusic (HNS). She was elected on 23rd March as president of the party, replacing Radimir Cacic who had to resign after being

sentenced to 2 years in prison in Hungary for his involvement in 2010 in a car accident that caused the death of 2 people.

President of the Republic Ivo Josipovic decided not to organise the European elections on the same day as the local elections, planned for 19th May. The two elections – European and town council – do not use the same voting method. The European elections were organised within a single national circumscription with open lists on which voters could rank candidates according to their preference. A list had to collect at least 5% of the votes cast to take part in the distribution of seats.

Finally, «*Croatian support for EU membership has been whittled away over the past few years due to the country's difficult economic situation and distrust of the local political class, as well as due to the economic problems with which the European Union itself is confronted,*» declared Radovan Vukadinovic, professor of international relations at Zagreb University. The people's enthusiasm for the European Union, which culminated in 2003 with 80% of

positive opinions, has indeed fallen sharply. Nevertheless the Croatian people, who suffered enormously during the war with the Serbs, still see membership of the European Union as a guarantee of peace and stability.

Zagreb is enduring a serious economic crisis and has been in recession since 2008. Last year GDP fell by 2% in one year. However, growth could reach 0.7% in 2013. GDP per Croatian represents only 60% of the European average. The average monthly salary is 5 529 kuna (€726) and the unemployment rate in February was over 21.9% of the active population (40% amongst young people aged under 24), according to the National Statistics Institute (DZS). The country should benefit from financial aid of around €13 billion from the European Union between now and 2020.

On 1st July 2013 Croatia will therefore become, after Slovenia, the second former Yugoslavian Republic to join the European Union. On 2nd April last Ljubljana unanimously ratified the treaty of Croatia's membership of the European Union.

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