



Weekly Briefing

Croatia political briefing:

Redrawing of Electoral Districts in Croatia: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?

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Summary

This article will discuss the latest Government proposal concerning the new look of electoral districts. After the Constitutional Court ruled that the current model is not aligned with the administrative boundaries of Croatian counties and with the number of people eligible to vote, it set a deadline for the Government to come up with a solution. The new model entails the same 10 electoral districts and 14 representatives elected from each like the previous one, but it introduces changes when it comes to the geography of some districts. The proposal was heavily criticized by opposition, political science and law experts due to the lack of public debate on the matter, but it is yet to be seen what will be the outcome of the process.

Introduction

On 25 May, the Croatian Government presented a proposal that redraws electoral districts ahead of the parliamentary elections that will take place in 2024. The Government's action was stipulated by the Constitutional Court decision according to which the number of voters in each district should not be above or below 5% of the country average. Due to mass emigration and low birth rates, the discrepancy in some Croatian districts reached even 18%¹. The Government was told to introduce the new law by 1 October 2023; therefore, the plan was to push the proposal in the first parliamentary reading before the summer break, while the second reading was expected in early September. However, as soon as the news went public, representatives of opposition parties and legal scholars, here mostly referred to constitutional law experts, criticized the proposal, first, on the accounts of the enlargement of some districts that are faced with depopulation, but are considered strongholds of Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and second, due to the lack of public debate when introducing the proposal. On the other hand, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković claimed that changes are minimal and made to satisfy the deadline set by the Constitutional Court.

¹ Spaić-Kovačić, David. 2023. Plenkovic discusses controversial redrawing of electoral districts with experts. Euractiv.com <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/plenkovic-discusses-controversial-redrawing-of-electoral-districts-with-experts/>.

The History of the Croatian Electoral System

The electoral system in Croatia has long been a subject of debate among politicians, political science and law experts, and is often used during the pre-election period as a go-to topic of the majority of political parties, some of which demand its moderate, while others demand a complete reform, in order to ensure better and fair representation in the main legislative body. To present it briefly, the Croatian Parliament consists of 151 members: 140 are elected from 10 electoral districts (14 members per district), 8 are elected as representatives of national minorities, and 3 are elected to represent the Croatian diaspora. Ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections, the change has been introduced to allow the citizens to vote not only for the nominated list of candidates but could choose a single candidate from the same list, the so-called preferential vote. The nominated candidates from ten electoral districts (I-X) and the eleventh electoral district (diaspora) are elected by the proportional representation method, while the national minority candidates (twelfth electoral district) are elected by the majority system. Such an electoral system was set in motion in 2000 as a result of the joint efforts made by civil society organizations, the academic community, and the 1990s opposition, in their attempt to shed light on electoral procedures and consolidate democracy that was still in its early stages². Before the 2000 parliamentary race, the country relied on the two-round system (in 1990) and the combined parallel system – the combination of first-past-the-post and proportional representation (in 1992 and 1995).

The Changes Introduced by the Government's Proposal

The proposed model of electoral districts originated from the decision of the Constitutional Court, dated back in February 2023, according to which several aspects need to be addressed. The decision stated that “it is necessary to ensure the equal weight of the vote, electoral districts must follow the administrative borders as much as possible, deviations must not be higher than +/- 5 percent, and the new law must be adopted by 1 October 2023”³. As it appears from the outside view, but also by analyzing the words of the Prime Minister himself, the intention of the Government was to react as soon as possible, undergo the necessary process,

² Raos, Višeslav. 2023. Novim izbornim jedinicama Plenković smiruje HDZ, no rješenje je samo privremeno. Tportal.hr https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/novim-izbornim-jedinicama-plenkovic-smiruje-hdz-no-rjesenje-je-samo-privremeno-foto-20230530?meta_refresh=1.

³ Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2023. Predstavljen novi model izbornih jedinica – čak 78 posto birača ostaje u istim izbornim jedinicama <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/predstavljen-novi-model-izbornih-jedinica-cak-78-posto-biraca-ostaje-u-istim-izbornim-jedinicama/38388>.

introduce the changes, and have everything ready to send the proposal to the Parliament before the summer break. Therefore, the number of electoral districts has remained the same, as well as the number of representatives elected from each. The changes will reflect only in 22% of the electorate since some electoral districts were enlarged as a consequence of depopulation. For example, the seventh electoral district will now encompass a large area stretching from Sisak-Moslavina and Karlovac County (Central Croatia) to Primorje-Gorski Kotar, Lika-Senj, and Zadar County (Mediterranean Croatia). Likewise, the fourth electoral district which includes Osijek-Baranja County and western Slavonija parts is also enlarged since the region is faced with the loss of population due to its poor socio-economic conditions. The city of Zagreb is now divided into three electoral districts, rather than four.

The Reaction of Political Science and Law Experts

When looking at the electoral impact of these modifications, the consensus is that they did not bring any harm or advantage to any specific party. Professor at the Faculty of Political Science from Zagreb, Višeslav Raos, analyzed the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections by using the new proposed look of electoral districts and came to the conclusion that the HDZ- and SDP-led lists would get one mandate less, while the right-wing Homeland Movement (DP) would get 2 mandates more. All other party lists would get the same numbers as it was the case in 2020⁴ (although other simulation shows that the HDZ-led list would get one mandate more, the SDP-led list 2 mandates more, while DP would get 2 mandates less⁵). Of course, this does not mean that the proposed modification would not have any impact; taking into account the new boundaries of electoral districts, some parties may opt to run alone or in coalition with other parties, depending on their calculations on how to generate more votes. Nevertheless, the critics were most vocal about the manner in which the Government dealt with this issue. During the process, there was no working or expert group established to discuss the outlook of electoral districts. Apart from the lack of transparency, the criticism underlined that there was not any kind of explanation as to why some electoral districts were designed in one way or another.

⁴ Raos, Višeslav. 2023. Novim izbornim jedinicama Plenković smiruje HDZ, no rješenje je samo privremeno. Tportal.hr https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/novim-izbornim-jedinicama-plenkovic-smiruje-hdz-no-rjesenje-je-samo-privremeno-foto-20230530?meta_refresh=1.

⁵ Litvan, Goran. 2023. Politička kartografija: HDZ-ove nove izborne jedinice najviše pogoduju SDP-u, i to nauštrb Domovinskog pokreta. Lidermedia.hr <https://lidermedia.hr/biznis-i-politika/politicka-kartografija-hdz-ove-nove-izbone-jedinice-najvise-pogoduju-sdp-u-i-to-naustrb-domovinskog-pokreta-151064>.

Conclusion

Finally, what has been suggested by the Government is considered by most experts as merely a short-term solution to a wider and more profound problem that the country faces. Even though it was not mentioned in such a way, Prime Minister Plenković addressed this issue as if the changes were made only to meet the deadline set by the Constitutional Court and have everything ready for the 2024 parliamentary elections. Since the electoral system, that is, the outlook of electoral districts is something that will impact political actors in years to come, the critics of academia, law experts, and civil society organizations are in place and should have been granted by the Government. However, knowing the ambiguity of decision-making processes that unfold in Croatia, the topic of electoral districts seems not to be an exception.