
Surprising Election Results in South East Europe

Standing outside the election center at Republic Square in Ljubljana on December 4, I observed a small group of protesters. They were from the 15 October (#15o) and Occupy movements and were running their usual daily assembly. Their presence at the election center was a reminder that the **elections** here and in Croatia, were largely about economics. Both countries face serious economic challenges; with the global economic crisis persisting, and for Croatia the looming entry into the European Union mean there is much focus on how to address the economic situation. The protesters were not speaking against one candidate or another. Rather, their presence can be understood as a reminder to the candidates that the crisis has produced a lot of **discontent** and searches for alternatives.

The election surprising results in Slovenia and Croatia can thus be read as reflections on this economic situation. The recent political scandals in Croatia involved high level politicians of the **Croatian Democratic Union** (HDZ) party and were economic crimes. With former prime minister Ivo Sanader on trial with corruption charges involving payments for facilitating a loan with the Austrian Hypo Bank. This facilitated the banks entry into the Croatian market in 1995, when Mr. Sanader was deputy foreign minister. In addition to the corruption charges, the Croatian economy is also not in good shape, with unemployment close to 20 percent and a rising level of debt. As the HDZ party has been in power for almost the whole period since independence, apart from three years from 2000 to 2003, it is perhaps less surprising that voters saw HDZ as the problem.

But the comprehensive defeat, which saw HDZ lose 21 seats in Parliament, was unexpected. Polls prior to the election had been predicting a victory of the center-left coalition Kukuriku, however the size of the defeat was historic: HDZ received the lowest vote percentage, and occupies the lowest number of seats in its history. In turn the **Social Democratic Party** (SDP), center of the Kukuriku coalition, became the biggest party within the Parliament. The other significant factor in this election was of course Croatia's 2013 European Union entry. The vote sealed which party would bring the country into the EU. The clear vote for the Kukuriku is an expression of the frustration people are feeling in Croatia; indeed, they handed a clear majority to a relatively untested coalition of parties at such a historic moment.

If the election in Croatia was surprising in some aspects, it was at least clear cut. The same cannot be said for Slovenia. In the build up to the election a clear victory was predicted for Janez Janša and the **Democrats party** (SDS), even if the entry of Ljubljana mayor **Zoran Janković** and Positive Slovenia into the race was seen as a challenge. Formerly the head of Mercator supermarkets in Slovenia, Janković is viewed as a reformer and someone able to make tough and potentially unpopular, decisions. He thus stood in stark contrast to the outgoing prime minister, the Social Democrat Borut Pahor. Janković appeared to be risking some political capital shortly before the election when he raised the price of public transportation in Ljubljana. However, this decision cemented his reputation instead.

The insecurity of a declining economic situation in Europe has raised the profile of more authoritarian political figures, though most often this results in victory for the political right. Janković seems to have offered the voters the strong **decision maker character**, and this propelled him into victory. In the days after the election, much was made by SDS of Janković's mixed family background. While Janez Janša's nationalistic credentials cannot be argued with, as he is viewed by some as a mythic figure in the independence of Slovenia from Yugoslavia, the same cannot be said of Janković. Born in Serbia, he remained there until the fourth grade of primary school. This provoked an unfortunate response from SDS in the wake of defeat, where they claimed he was supported overwhelmingly by the naturalized citizen vote of 'southerners', a derogatory reference to people of other Yugoslav republics now citizens of Slovenia. One need

only recall the referendum on citizenship in 2003 to see it is no secret that Janša has always opposed the naturalization of former Yugoslav citizens. But this rather prejudice analysis of the SDS shows also the surprise of the defeat.

For Janković, however, this challenge is very much secondary to what he faces in building the **coalition**. The diverse number of minority parties in the political landscape, the relatively small margin of victory of Positive Slovenia and the subsequent need for multiple coalition partners effectively means there is a real chance Janković will not be able to assemble a government. While all the parties of center-left orientation have been open to coalition, a month into the negotiations, no partnerships have been formed. Minority parties, such as Variant List and the Pensioners Party have been in coalition talks with both Positive Slovenia and SDS, and have proposed a National Unity government, but which didn't receive any support from the larger parties.

At the time of writing, **Positive Slovenia**, which "won" the elections, seems unable to build the coalition. This means there is again a growing likelihood that there will be a center-right government, effectively installing Mr. Janša as prime minister, but assembling a parliamentary majority still seems far off. Of course, such a minority government would likely suffer from significant political instability. This outcome would likely also bolster the challenge coming from the Occupy and #150, and possibly its popularity in the general population. People will likely not be happy with a government lead by a party that came in second and will be unstable from the start.

So while both the Croatian and Slovenian elections produced surprising results, they will fare differently in the months ahead. In Croatia, people will be looking closely at how this inexperienced coalition handles the entry in the EU. While next door in Slovenia, all bets are still off on who will even form the government.

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