

Croatia's local elections: Key takeaways and the duels to watch in the second round

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Croatia held a first round of voting in local elections on 21 May, with the second round scheduled for 4 June. [Tena Prelec](#) assesses the results of the first round and previews some of the key mayoral races to watch as voters go back to the polls. The elections will be particularly noteworthy as they will give an indication of the trends ahead of expected early parliamentary elections later in the year.



Aerial view of Pula, the largest city in the Istria region, where the regional party IDS imposed itself already in the first round. [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Economic woes

The local elections come at a moment of political and economic upheaval in Croatia. The country is living through the biggest economic turmoil in its short history, as the [over-indebtedness of the food giant Agrokor](#) – the biggest company in the Balkans – has erupted into a full-blown crisis. Disagreements over the way the crisis is being handled, and over the persona of Zdravko Marić – Minister of Finance and former Agrokor Finance chief – have meant the end of the ruling HDZ-Most coalition, after the latter party (the junior coalition member) unsuccessfully tried to expel Marić from the government, and ended up being ousted themselves.

Agrokor's troubles had been simmering just below the surface for a while, but were largely [ignored by the media](#). A recent [documentary film](#) traced the story of this economic giant through Croatia's economic transition – a fascinating tale of business achievement and privilege that has been boycotted by [mainstream cinemas](#), but has nevertheless been highly successful with the public. If anything, the acute economic troubles, transposed quite scenically onto the stage of the [Sabor](#), have thus contributed to a harshening of Croats' views toward the country's political and economic elites, while fostering the sense that they are 'all in it together' – the allegation being that many politicians are to lose from Agrokor's downfall. No wonder the popularity of the mainstream parties is in steep

decline.

The local ballot therefore takes place at a time in which the national political scene is anything but stable. Notwithstanding the HDZ's attempt to pretend all is well and running as it should be, early general elections are looming: a possible date is September, though media speculation about an even earlier date has started to appear. It is thus interesting to take stock of what the local elections are currently indicating.

'Fringe' politics is on the rise, but the HDZ has cemented its lead in the mainstream

At local elections, voters are asked to indicate preferences for the composition of the municipal and regional councils (decided in the first round) and for mayors and regional governors (usually decided in two rounds). The two largest parties – the right-wing HDZ and the left-wing SDP – performed slightly better in the former category than in the latter, where the rise of independent candidates was very visible. This is partially due to the character of the local elections, where personalities matter more than parties, but it is still indicative of a wider trend of disenchantment with mainstream politics.

Even so, it is undeniable that the nationalist HDZ – that has crafted a much more centrist image for itself under the current PM Andrej Plenković – is at present the dominant party on the scene. Their current success is helped by a debacle on the left: the SDP was left reeling after party divisions grew under former Prime Minister Zoran Milanović's leadership, and the new party leader Davor Bernardić seems to inspire little confidence among voters. But the HDZ's Achilles' heel is internal, rather than external: the party is a wide tent gathering together a number of factions, some of which are unhappy with Plenković's policies, which are considered to be too moderate.

A new Croatian left?

Soul-searching for a significant 'third option' (non-HDZ and non-SDP) has been going on for a while in Croatian politics. While the Liberal Democrats (HNS) have been around since the inception of Croatia as an independent state, new options have start to emerge more recently. The centre-right MOST and the anti-establishment party Živi Zid have garnered good support in recent times, though so far failing to establish themselves as genuine nationwide players (even MOST, until recently the junior coalition partner, has struggled in this respect). Furthermore, neither of them captures the political views of a progressive centre-left electorate, and the current downfall of the SDP has made space for new actors.

The election results of the first round confirm this trend: new or growing options on the 'margins' include extremist spin-offs (such as Bruna Esih's far-right offering in Zagreb) but also moderate options in the centre (Pametno) as well as on the left (e.g. Zagreb je Naš, Nova Ljevica, and the green party Orah). There is therefore talk of a '[new left](#)' being formed. The warrior cry of this new political battalion has been thus [summarised](#) by Danijela Dolenc, an academic and one of the main figures in Zagreb je Naš: "The SDP has given up on values such as social equality, the widening of democracy, environmental sustainability and gender equality and can no longer speak about the challenges of the modern left. We are this new political power".

Second round – The mayoral races to watch

While the composition of the regional and municipal councils has already been determined in the first round, a number of run-offs will decide the final winners for the posts of regional governors and mayors. Here are some of the most interesting duels that will determine who will hold the keys to Croatia's cities.

Zagreb: Bandić – Mrak-Taritaš

The mayoral run-off in the capital city is set to be the tightest and also the most consequential. The populist mayor Milan Bandić, who was expelled from the SDP back in 2009, is now running for another term in office. Bandić is viewed as a hands-on mayor who has been able to get several city renovation projects under way, but his tenure has been mired by a number of [controversies](#), including a recent arrest. The current projections show Bandić and

Anka Mrak-Taritaš of the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS) neck and neck.

Mrak-Taritaš, an architect by profession, was widely praised for her results in office as Minister of Construction and Spatial Planning under Zoran Milanović's centre-left government. Neither Bandić nor Mrak-Taritaš thus hail from the mainstream (though the latter has received the SDP's backing after their decision not to field a candidate). The degree to which the two most dominant parties have lost their appeal is truly exemplified by the drastic loss in support in this race: the HDZ candidate Prgomet was able to garner only 5.6 percent of votes. The SDP's overall performance was even more disappointing, considering that the party secretary, Bernardić, invested considerable energies in cementing their support in the capital city. Voters in Zagreb appear to have turned their back on the traditional centre-left, while increasingly embracing new options such as Zagreb je Naš.

Split: Kerum – Opara

Split, Dalmatia's largest city, is the other big battleground for round two. The independent candidate and business tycoon Željko Kerum, who has already served as mayor in the past, is back with a bang. His crude ways and grandiose promises have earned him a good amount of scorn and [countless internet memes](#). All publicity is good publicity seems to ring true on this occasion, as Kerum pulled the best performance of the lot in the initial round with 30.4 percent of the vote.

Second place went to HDZ's Andro Krstulović Opara, who attracted 26.1 percent in the first round but is projected to at least narrow the gap in the second round. It is extremely important for the HDZ to win this contest to keep its hegemony over the territory and [hold on to their pre-electoral promises](#). In round one, a strong performance was also recorded by Marijana Puljak, whose centrist party Pametno ('Smart') managed to double their seats in the municipal council and the regional assembly. The SDP, in turn, has been completely wiped out in Split at these elections. This will be the first time voters from Split will not have a left-wing candidate in the run-off, so the votes from left-wingers will be [decisive](#).

Rijeka: Obersnel – Burić

The north-western coastal city of Rijeka is traditionally a stronghold of the SDP. As it seems, the centre-left will hold once again – though losing some ground here too. The SDP's Obersnel, a veteran politician and 6-time mayor, gathered 40.9 percent of the votes in the first round, while his opponent Burić (ex HDZ, but running as an

The challenger, Anka Mrak Taritaš. The [odds are not in her favour](#), but she is



putting up a fight. (HNS)



Tycoon Željko Kerum in a bizarre moment during the 2013 campaign in Split that achieved iconic status.

independent) reached 17.7 percent. According to earlier estimates, the second round will be a [much tighter](#) affair, but it is still highly unlikely that any big upheavals could tip the balance in Burić's favour.

On the occasion of the first round, Obersnel and his running mates [stated](#), only half-jokingly, that the most important victory of the night was that of Rijeka's football team, which had won the national championship for the first time in its history (it then went on to double down by winning the Croatian Cup as well). Another success story for which Obersnel is widely credited is that of Rijeka's lively theatre scene: the mayor did not give in to pressure to substitute the controversial intendant [Oliver Frlić](#). In spite of an 'SDP fatigue' being felt in Rijeka as well, this *panem et circenses* strategy of culture and football has helped sustain enthusiasm for the incumbent. An interesting fusion of the two can be seen in [an orchestra rendition](#) of an ultras hymn sang by rock band Let3 frontman Prlja, as a homage from Rijeka's theatre to Rijeka's football club.

Varaždin: Čehok – Kišić

An interesting race is also set to take place in a less renowned city – the northern town of Varaždin. The independent candidate Ivan Čehok, a charismatic former mayor who had to resign in 2011 after being indicted on accusations of corruption, imposed himself in the first round with a hefty 41.1 percent, ahead of the SDP-backed Alen Kišić. The road to Čehok's victory therefore seems to be set, and once again voters appear ready to gloss over allegations of financial irregularities for a candidate whom they perceive as having been capable of standing up for the interests of the city. Čehok, who holds a PhD in Philosophy, has been adamant in denying any wrongdoing.

Candidates with strong personalities, in many cases flirting with populism and suspected of bending financial rules, look set to make it through once again. This doesn't mean, however, that all remains the same and that the present Croatian party system is here to stay: expect some changes in the near future – though not of seismic proportions as yet.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.



Still self-assured: Vojko Obersnel in Rijeka. ([Tomislav Čuveljak](#)/CC BY 3.0)



Back and unapologetic: Ivan Čehok. ([Alchetron](#))

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