

BSFocus 2

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EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN CROATIA

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE 2021 AND 2025 ELECTIONS

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IDEFE

Introduction

Local elections represent one of the key pillars of the democratic order, as they ensure the direct participation of citizens in decisions concerning the governance of the communities in which they live. In the Republic of Croatia, from the country's independence in 1991 to the present day, local elections have undergone a profound transformation, from a mechanism of state consolidation and the dominance of a single political option to a system increasingly characterized by pluralism, personalization, and experimentation with new political models. From the first local elections in 1993 to those held in 2025, a clear dynamic has emerged between traditional party structures and increasingly influential independent actors, reflecting a broader process of democratic maturity and social change.

This analysis offers a concise overview of the evolution of local elections in Croatia over the past three decades, emphasizing key political turning points, transformations in electoral practices, and shifts in candidate profiles. It further examines the influence of European integration processes and the emergence of grassroots initiatives on local political dynamics. Particular emphasis is placed on the 2021 and 2025 election cycles, with a comparative perspective that highlights the rise of progressive platforms in urban areas, the gradual erosion of traditional party structures, and the increasing divergence in political behavior between urban centers and rural communities.

Local Elections in Croatia: From the 1990s to 2025

Local elections in the Republic of Croatia, as a key instrument of decentralized democracy, have undergone a significant evolution from the introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s to the present day. The first local elections in independent Croatia were held in 1993, in the context of post-war institutional reconstruction, marked by the pronounced dominance of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which at the time represented the leading political force in most local government units. The elections were conducted under a majoritarian electoral system, with proportional elements introduced only later through reforms, thereby opening space for greater political pluralism at the local level.

During the 2000s, as democratic institutions strengthened and membership in the EU became a strategic goal, local elections grew increasingly competitive. The introduction of direct elections for county prefects, mayors, and municipal heads in 2009 significantly altered the political dynamic. Rather than party dominance, local personalities—often running on independent lists—began to come to the fore, leading to the personalization of local politics and a weakening of traditional party discipline.

Following Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, local elections increasingly reflected broader EU-wide trends—declining voter turnout, a rise in independent candidates and locally focused lists, and the

fragmentation of the electorate. The 2017 and 2021 elections saw a rise in local initiatives and so-called citizen platforms, such as *Možemo!* in Zagreb, which succeeded in articulating dissatisfaction with the prevailing power structures through ecological and participatory discourse.

The 2021 local elections marked a particular turning point: the resurgence of the left in Zagreb with the victory of the *Možemo!* platform, and the decline of HDZ in several urban centers, underscored a growing political diversification. At the same time, HDZ retained strong positions in most counties and smaller municipalities, confirming its deeply rooted network and organizational structure.

By the time of the 2025 local elections—held amid global economic challenges, the green transition, and the digitalization of local governance—Croatia had also witnessed greater professionalization of local administration, alongside persistent issues of clientelism and local oligarchies. A continued trend of decentralized votes was observed, with a growing number of independent candidates, increased engagement by youth and civil society, and the ongoing weakening of traditional party monopolies in cities.

Local elections in Croatia reflect a gradual democratization and pluralization of society, while also pointing to persistent challenges related to the quality of local governance, political accountability, and citizen participation. The evolution of centralized authority toward strong local actors remains a defining characteristic of Croatia's local political landscape from 1990 to 2025.

Local Elections in Croatia 2021: Political Upheaval and the Redefinition of the Urban Electorate

The local elections held in Croatia on May 16 and 30, 2021, represented one of the most significant political turning points in the post-war history of local self-government. These were the first local elections conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also the first without the long-serving mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, who passed away earlier that year. The political landscape was highly fragmented, and the electorate was particularly sensitive to issues such as corruption, clientelism, environmental concerns, and the quality of public services.

The most notable surprise occurred in Zagreb, where the platform *Možemo!*—centered around a left-green political agenda—achieved a convincing victory. Its candidate, Tomislav Tomašević, was elected mayor with over 65% of the vote in the second round, defeating Miroslav Škoro of the Homeland Movement (Domovinski pokret). This victory marked a sharp shift in Zagreb's political direction following two decades of Bandić's rule and signaled the emergence of new political forces grounded in participatory governance, transparency, and sustainable urban development.

In Split, Ivica Puljak, candidate of the Centar party, delivered an unexpected result by defeating the HDZ candidate Vice Mihanović

in the second round. Puljak advocated a modern, technocratic approach to city administration, and his victory anticipated the erosion of traditional party influence in the urban centers of Dalmatia. Due to subsequent political crises, elections in Split were repeated in 2022, where Puljak once again secured victory, affirming a stable base of citizen support.

In Rijeka, Marko Filipović (SDP) succeeded the long-time mayor Vojko Obersnel, thereby maintaining SDP control in the city. Although the SDP retained power, a significantly weaker electoral result compared to previous elections indicated declining trust in party structures, with independent lists and local initiatives securing a substantial number of seats in the city council.

In Osijek, Ivan Radić of the HDZ emerged victorious in the second round, assuming leadership after a period dominated by independent and regional parties such as HDSSB. Through this victory, the HDZ consolidated its position in eastern Croatia, demonstrating that while the party may be weakening in major urban centers like Zagreb and Split, it continues to maintain strongholds in regions marked by pronounced demographic decline.

In Pula, following years of rule by the Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS), independent candidate Filip Zoričić-backed by civic initiatives-won the mayoral race. This outcome symbolized the end of the nearly hegemonic political dominance of the IDS in Istria and underscored the electorate's growing inclination toward change and locally rooted actors.

In Dubrovnik, Mato Franković of the HDZ secured a second term with a clear majority. His re-election signaled the party's continued stability in southern Dalmatia, where it retained voter trust largely due to development projects and the prominence of tourism.

The 2021 local elections revealed a growing urban political pluralism, a decline of traditional parties in cities, and the prominence of charismatic, often non-partisan candidates. They served as a platform for reassessing Croatia's political identity in an era of post-pandemic recovery, environmental challenges, and digital transformation.

Local Elections in Croatia 2025: Consolidation of Independent Actors and Further Fragmentation of the Political Landscape

The local elections held in May 2025 confirmed several long-term trends in Croatian local politics: the continued decline of traditional party influence in urban centers, the further strengthening of independent and locally rooted actors, and the growing divide between the political dynamics of major cities and the rest of the country. Simultaneously, these elections demonstrated that the local level remains a site of experimentation with new political models and participatory tools.

In the capital city, the *Možemo!* platform once again secured both the mayoral office and a majority in the City Assembly, confirming sustained citizen support for its reform-oriented and environmentally conscious governance model. Tomislav Tomašević won a second term in the first round with approximately 58% of the vote, widely interpreted as a confirmation of the effectiveness of his policies emphasizing transparency, digitalization of municipal services, and the fight against clientelism. Opposition lists, including HDZ and the Homeland Movement, remained marginalized, while the Social Democratic Party (SDP) continued its decline.

In Split, a political reversal occurred: after two turbulent terms, Ivica Puljak (Centar) lost the election, and power was assumed by HDZ's candidate Ante Bačić, who narrowly won in the second round. Analyses suggest that the key reasons for Puljak's defeat included unmet infrastructure promises, waning support among middle-aged voters, and the mobilization of the city's conservative electorate. As a result, Split returned to a center-right political framework.

A major political shift took place in Rijeka, where SDP's Marko Filipović was defeated by independent candidate Petra Kovačević, a former activist and university professor. Kovačević's second-round victory, supported by green-liberal and civic initiatives, marked the end of more than three decades of social democratic governance in the city. In doing so, Rijeka followed the political trajectories of Zagreb and Pula, where traditional parties were replaced by local initiatives.

In Osijek, Ivan Radić (HDZ) secured a second term with a relatively stable majority in the City Council. HDZ retained control of the city due to the continued implementation of development projects and the careful cultivation of local alliances. Radić positioned himself as a technically competent leader who avoided political confrontation, a stance that resonated with a broad segment of the electorate.

After its defeat in 2021, the Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) regained power in Pula in 2025, but with a notably weak mandate-candidate Igor Radić won the second round with less than 51% of the vote, narrowly defeating a new independent list led by former mayor Zoričić. Although IDS formally returned to office, analysts highlighted the city's deep political divisions and a broader decline in regional loyalty across Istria.

In Dubrovnik, Mato Franković (HDZ) secured another term, further consolidating the party's position in southern Dalmatia. With growing support from the tourism sector and local entrepreneurs, Franković projected an image of a stable leader, and his administration was widely perceived as effective in the reconstruction of urban infrastructure.

The 2025 local elections reaffirmed Croatia's status as a political landscape marked by stark contrasts in electoral behavior between urban and rural areas. In major cities, locally oriented and often progressive forces gained ground, while HDZ continued to dominate in most counties and smaller municipalities. This dual dynamic-between stability and change-positions the local level

as a crucial arena for political competition and a strategic testing ground for new policies in contemporary Croatia.

Comparative Analysis of the 2021 and 2025 Local Elections in Croatia: Between Urban Pluralism and Rural Stability

The local elections held in Croatia in 2021 and 2025 represent two significant stages in the evolution of local democracy, illustrating shifts in political culture, power structures, and voter preferences. While both electoral cycles were marked by declining turnout and growing distrust toward established political parties, they differ considerably in terms of social context, political outcomes, and the consolidation of specific patterns.

The 2021 elections took place in a post-pandemic environment and in the immediate aftermath of the death of Zagreb's long-serving mayor Milan Bandić, a development that significantly reshaped the political landscape-particularly in the capital. The emergence of the *Možemo!* platform signaled a pivotal moment for the left, while numerous independent lists achieved breakthroughs in local councils. Voter sentiment was largely driven by a desire for change, anti-corruption messages, and dissatisfaction with opaque governance.

In contrast, the 2025 elections unfolded within a relatively more stable epidemiological and social context, but against the backdrop of intensifying socio-economic pressures-such as inflation, the demands of the green transition, and increasing strain on local budgets. Voters were less motivated by the euphoria of change and more by pragmatism and evaluations of local government performance. This led to political stabilization in some areas, but also to unexpected reversals in others.

In Zagreb, *Možemo!* secured victory in both election cycles. However, while Tomislav Tomašević's 2021 win reflected a surge of protest and expectation, his reelection in 2025 marked the institutionalization of an alternative model of governance and the legitimation of his first administration. His first-round victory in 2025 demonstrated a consolidation of support and the successful transformation of a movement into a functioning governing body.

In Split, the 2021 elections delivered a liberal and centrist alternative through Ivica Puljak's victory, while the 2025 results revealed political volatility: HDZ returned to power, indicating the limited reach of urban reformists under conditions of local conflict and unmet expectations.

In Rijeka, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) retained control in 2021, albeit with weakened legitimacy, only to lose the mayoral office in 2025 to an independent candidate. This outcome signaled the collapse of the traditional left in one of its longest-standing urban strongholds.

The 2021 elections witnessed increased turnout among young voters in urban areas, while the 2025 elections experienced lower participation but greater influence of structural factors such as the quality of public services, budget transparency, and citizen participation. Although the rise of independent candidates continued, the 2025 results revealed that the long-term viability of these actors depends not solely on their critique of the status quo, but on demonstrable administrative performance.

The comparison between the 2021 and 2025 elections points to a shift from a phase of political change to one of political verification. The initial momentum of progressive and locally rooted forces in 2021 generated high expectations, while in 2025 voters responded selectively: rewarding effective administrations (Zagreb) and penalizing inefficient or unstable ones (Split). At the same time, HDZ strengthened its presence across most counties and smaller municipalities, reaffirming its long-standing organizational discipline and embeddedness in traditional social structures.

Taken together, these two electoral cycles reveal that Croatian local politics is in a state of transition-between the decline of party monopolies and the emergence of new forms of participatory governance. Political accountability is increasingly measured by tangible results rather than ideological alignment, suggesting a gradual transformation in the criteria by which local political actors are evaluated.

Conclusion

The local elections in Croatia from 1993 to 2025 bear witness to profound transformations in political culture and institutional practice, as well as to the gradual maturation of the democratic order. From the dominance of a single party and limited pluralism, through the introduction of direct elections and increasing personalization of politics, to the strengthening of independent candidates and local initiatives, the Croatian local political landscape has emerged as a space marked by dynamic change but also enduring challenges.

A comparative analysis of the 2021 and 2025 elections indicates a transition from the euphoria of political change to a phase of evaluating results and concrete accountability. Voters increasingly prioritize the efficiency of local governance, transparency, and the quality of public services, while ideological frameworks recede in favor of pragmatic concerns related to everyday life. Nonetheless, pronounced differences between urban and rural areas persist, with traditional parties-particularly the HDZ-maintaining strongholds in smaller communities, whereas cities increasingly lean toward progressive or independent alternatives. The future of local democracy in Croatia will depend on the ability of political actors to sustain public trust not merely through rhetoric of change, but through measurable outcomes and enduring institutional responsibility.

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Dr. Enes Turbić was born in 1992 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After completing his secondary education at Gymnasium Rizah Odžević in 2011, he studied Turkish language at Gazi University (TÖMER) in Ankara during the 2011-2012 academic year. In 2016, he graduated from the Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy, Trakya University, with a thesis titled *The Independence of Bosnia and the Bosnian War (1992-1995)*. In 2018, he earned his master's degree from the Department of History at the Institute of Social Sciences, Trakya University, with a thesis entitled *The Bosniak Resistance to the Austro-Hungarian Occupation (1878)*. In 2023, he completed his PhD at the same institute with a dissertation titled *The Political Life of Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian Rule (1878-1914)*, under the joint supervision of Prof. Dr. Jahić from the University of Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sannav from Trakya University (Türkiye). His research focuses on the political life of BiH and the Bosniaks during the Austro-Hungarian period, as well as on the analysis of contemporary political developments in BiH. His areas of interest include: Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian rule, the history of BiH in the 20th century, the history of the Western Balkans, BiH during the First and Second World Wars, the Bosnian War, and political life in post-Dayton BiH. Turbić has written numerous articles and analytical pieces, presented papers, and participated in academic panels. He is co-author of several textbooks for primary schools. He has also translated various articles and books from South Slavic languages into Turkish and vice versa.

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