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Electoral geography of Croatia on the example of the 2024 parliamentary election results

Abstract

In April 2024 Croatians elected a new parliament. At this election a political geographical divide existed between the “red” (leaned to the left) and “blue” (leaned to the right) Croatia. This article aims to diagnose the spatial differentiation of voting behaviour in this country, as well as to identify factors that regionally differentiate the voting preferences of residents, using the example of the 2024 parliamentary elections results. The basic method of the study is a regional analysis of official results.

Keywords: electoral geography, election, Croatia, politics

Introduction. Political situation in Croatia before the election

On April 17, 2024, parliamentary elections were held in the Republic of Croatia. Citizens elected 151 members of the unicameral parliament, the Sabor. The election held in early spring of 2024 was part of the Croatian electoral marathon – two months later, Croats went to the polls in the European Parliament elections, while presidential elections took place at the turn of 2024 and 2025.

The Croatian political scene is traditionally divided into left-wing and right-wing parties, as is the case in many modern democracies¹. The party system is, however, an exception among party systems of Central and Eastern Europe. It features strongly organized mainstream parties with wide membership that can maintain their electoral strength despite the underlying polarization among voters². The largest party on the left is the Social Demo-

¹ M.S. Čagalj, B. Vukosav, D. Radoš, *Friends-and-neighbours efekt na parlamentarnim izborima 2020. u Hrvatskoj*, “Društvena istraživanja” 2023, R. 32, no. 4, p. 658.

² V. Raos, *Ideology, Partisanship, and Change: Voter Profiles of Main Political Parties in Croatia*, “Politička misao” 2019, R. 56, no. 3–4, p. 18.



cratic Party of Croatia (cr. *Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, **SDP**), and on the right the Croatian Democratic Union (cr. *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*, **HDZ**). This situation has been maintained since the 2000 parliamentary elections – both of these parties (sometimes running in coalition with junior partners) have taken the first two places in all subsequent parliamentary elections. Croatia is therefore an exceptional example of the preservation of a duopoly, characteristic of the early years of the development of democracy in post-socialist countries: on the one hand is the social democracy originating from the communist party that ruled during the Cold War times and on the other the anti-communist liberal-right party.

Although the situation of the two largest parties and the size of their electorates is relatively stable, it is worth noting that the 2024 parliamentary elections continued a trend of dynamic competition among smaller political parties, contributing to increased instability within the political landscape. Once again, relatively nascent parties primarily vied for the crucial third position and the decisive influence in government formation. The fragmentation of the Croatian electorate's votes almost consistently necessitates the winning party to secure a junior coalition partner to form a parliamentary majority. In recent years, "kingmaker" roles have been played by parties such as the Croatian Peasant Party (cr. *Hrvatska seljačka stranka*), which, after the 2000 elections, achieved its strongest third-place result in the history of parliamentary elections in independent Croatia (14.9%) and subsequently co-formed a government led by the SDP. Following the 2007 elections, the Croatian Peasant Party enabled a parliamentary majority for the coalition led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Similarly, the anti-establishment group The Bridge (cr. *Most*), upon its electoral debut in 2015, secured 13.2% of the vote and entered a – ultimately short-lived – coalition with HDZ (which was briefly reactivated after the snap elections held a year later).

In the four-year term preceding the described 2024 elections, Croatia was governed by the HDZ with the support of small conservative parties and national minority MPs. On May 4, 2022, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who had held this position since 2016, the leader of the largest party achieved the title of the head of government with the longest service in the country's history. Shortly thereafter, on January 1, 2023, after long efforts, the country was integrated into the Schengen area and the Kuna was replaced by the euro as the official currency. Plenković presented this as a success, hoping to take the prime minister's mandate for a third consecutive time. He may have been hindered by the decision to appoint Ivan Turudić, criticized for his long-standing friendships with high-ranking HDZ politicians and frequent contacts with prominent figures from a criminal background, as the State Attorney General. In light of these activities, in February 2024, the opposition parties organized the biggest protests for many years.

On the other hand, important things were happening on the left, mainly due to the president Zoran Milanović, who announced that he would run in the election as a candidate for parliament and as an SDP candidate for prime minister³. This would mean that Milanović would resign from presidential mandate to become the head of government. The Constitutional Court ruled that such an outcome was unlawful, stating that the president should remain neutral and could not run for any party in the parliamentary election. Milanović

³ O. Kannenberg, *Croatia Moves to the (Far)-Right – The Parliamentary Election 2024*, "Southeast Europe in Focus" 2024, no. 2, p. 4.

described the decision as a constitutional coup and stated that if the SDP won, he would take the title of prime minister anyway. His decision resulted in the resignation from joining the broad left-wing coalition of some parties, which were reluctant to his actions.

During the election campaign, the SDP and other smaller opposition parties harshly criticized the HDZ. However, it was not certain that the elections would result in forming a broad “national salvation” coalition government of all parties except the HDZ, as Milanović had called for. It was hard to imagine, for example, the far right and the very progressive left co-governing. Opinion polls showed that coalition talks after the elections would be complicated. Eventually, as expected in a pre-election polls, HDZ won. However, the distribution of seats left open the question of the shape of the government coalition.

Methodology

Electoral geography is primarily concerned with describing and explaining the spatial distribution of votes cast in elections and referenda, as well as related issues⁴. This subfield emphasizes how the environment conditions affect individual’s political attitudes⁵ and examines the relationship between space, place, and elections. It serves as a connection between human geography and political science⁶. As shown in this work, electoral geography may be also influenced by issues related to sociology or even linguistics (according to the statement of the Croatian novelist K.Š. Gjalski: the most important reference for collective identity is language, it determines the demarcation of the boundaries between one’s own and foreign ones⁷).

This article analyses the 2024 Croatian parliamentary elections in an analytical manner. The following work allows to trace the geographical dimension of the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections and attempt to interpret them in the broader context of Croatian electoral geography. Its aim is to diagnose the spatial differentiation of voting behaviour in this country, as well as to identify factors that regionally differentiate the voting preferences of residents, using the example of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In order to achieve this purpose, the research aims to respond to various sub-questions, including:

- What issues account for regional variation in results?
- Can long-term factors explain the geographic distribution of local political identities?
- What economic, political, and social factors explain why parties enjoy greater support in some geographic areas but not others?

⁴ M. Wojtaszczyk, *Mniejszości narodowe i etniczne w badaniach z zakresu geografii wyborczej – nieistotny czynnik czy ważna determinanta przestrzennego zróżnicowania zachowań wyborczych w Polsce?*, „Prace i Studia Geograficzne” 2014, R. 54, p. 189.

⁵ M.S. Čagalj, *Prostorna analiza populističke radikalne desnice na parlamentarnim izborima 2020. u Hrvatskoj – primjer Domovinskog pokreta*, “Politička misao” 2024, R. 61, no. 1, p. 42.

⁶ C. Pattie, R.J. Johnston, *Electoral geography*, in: *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, R. Kitchin, N. Thrift (eds.), Elsevier 2009, pp. 405–422.

⁷ M. Falski, *Porządkowanie przestrzeni narodowej – przypadek chorwacki. Studium z historii wyobrażeń kulturowych*, Instytut Sławistyki Zachodniej i Południowej, Warsaw 2008, p. 123.

The paper is based on data at official results of the 2024 Croatian parliamentary elections in order to clarify territorial shapes of electoral behaviour in this country. All results have been rounded to decimal places for the ease of reading.

The subject of the work is generally a study of a single election (but in broader concept). The methods used in the text are: descriptive analysis, map analysis and identification of electoral support areas. An analysis was conducted on the relationship between the electoral support of a party and the socio-economic base in individual regions. The article deals with e.g. long-term factors that could explain the geographical distribution of local political identities. Due to the short format of the work, a broader analysis of the historical conditions was not undertaken. The focus was primarily on contemporary stimuli catalyzing voting decisions and explaining the observed regularities.

So far, by the month when the work was sent (October 2024), there has been no publication concerning the 2024 parliamentary elections in the context of electoral geography. In previous years, scientific publications on single election held in Croatia appeared sporadically, mainly in the Croatian language.

To understand an electoral geography of the country, it is necessary to know the political profiles and basic characteristics of the electorates of the parties considered in order to be able to identify important political issues that may be important in a specific configuration of factor values. Due to the format of the work, the views of the parties are presented in a brief manner.

2024 parliamentary elections and their results

2024 election were 10th parliamentary election in the history of Croatia after declaring the independence in 1991 and under the new constitution. Polling stations were open on Wednesday, 17th April between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. local time for 3,733,283 registered voters and 222,197 voters living abroad⁸.

Croatians voted on Wednesday for the first time ever⁹. According to the Act on Elections of Representatives to the Croatian Parliament, the day of the election was a non-working day. Why in the middle of the week? Many argue that Milanović wanted to prevent Croatian voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina (about 25,000 registered voters), where there will be no holiday due to the election, from voting for HDZ (by far the most popular choice for them) by holding the elections on Wednesday instead of Sunday¹⁰. It can also be assumed that the president's decision was dictated by the desire to increase the mobilization of voters from large cities (and therefore primarily opposition supporters). They could spend a warm April weekend away and return on Sunday after 7 p.m., when it would be too late to show up at the ballot box.

⁸ T. Ozturk, *Croatia to hold general elections Wednesday*, "Anadolu Ajansi", 16.04.2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/croatia-to-hold-general-elections-wednesday/3193353> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁹ However, this is not the first time that Croatians went to vote on the parliamentary elections not during the weekend. The same thing happened in the elections on January 3, 2000, when the election day fell on a Monday.

¹⁰ T. Ozturk, op. cit.

The unicameral parliament, Sabor is composed of 151 members. 140 of the 151 MPs are elected from ten electoral districts within the country (each providing fourteen members of Croatian Parliament). Three seats are reserved for the diaspora and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina (district XI), elected by the proportional representation method. Additional eight members come from parties of national minorities (district XII), elected by the majority system¹¹.

The Croatian law provides that the number of voters in districts from I to X should not be above or below 5% of the country average. However, the average number of voters in some constituencies grew exponentially in recent years due to mass emigration and low birth rates, even reaching an 18% discrepancy compared to the average in some cases¹². The reason was that in all elections in the 21st century until 2024, the unchanged Law on Electoral Districts from 1999 was still in force. In recent years, there have been attempts to change the law, initiated by various groups. One of them was the creation of the referendum initiative “People Decide” (cr. *Narod odlučuje*) in 2018 (ultimately, the Ministry of Administration found that the initiative did not collect enough signatures, which is why the referendum campaign ended in failure). The issue was raised by constitutionalists (such as Robert Podolnjak¹³), political scientists (eg. Goran Čular¹⁴) and geographers (eg. Matteo Žugaj and Stjepan Šterc¹⁵).

Ultimately, the change in the law was led to by the decision of the Constitutional Court of 7 February 2023. In its decision, the Court stated that the applicable electoral system significantly deviates from the principle of equal suffrage, primarily in the aspect of guaranteeing the equal weight of each vote. The justification of the decision stated that the right to vote had different value and e.g. in the IX. electoral district (comprising Lika-Senj County, Zadar County, Šibenik-Knin County and the northern part of Split-Dalmatia County), the vote carried 33.5% less weight than the same right in IV. district (comprising Virovitica-Podravina County and Osijek-Baranja County)¹⁶. In light of this, the Constitutional Court ruled that the applicable law is inconsistent with Article 45 of the Constitution, guaranteeing equal electoral rights, and therefore repealed the Law on Electoral Districts, which expired on October 1, 2023. Taking into account the above, it was necessary to adopt a new Law on Electoral Districts. Ultimately the new law on constituencies which changed the unit for 22% of voters finally came into effect on

¹¹ Eight seats for the national minorities are distributed as follows: three are assigned to Serbian minority, one to Hungarian, one to Italian, one to Czech and Slovak, one to Austrian, Bulgarian, German, Polish, Romani, Rumanian, Russian, Turkish, Ukrainian, Wlach and Jewish as well as one to Albanian, Bosnian, Montenegrin, Macedonian and Slovenian.

¹² D. Spaic-Kovacic, *Plenkovic discusses controversial redrawing of electoral districts with experts*, “EURACTIV.hr”, 6.06.2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/plenkovic-discusses-controversial-redrawing-of-electoral-districts-with-experts/> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

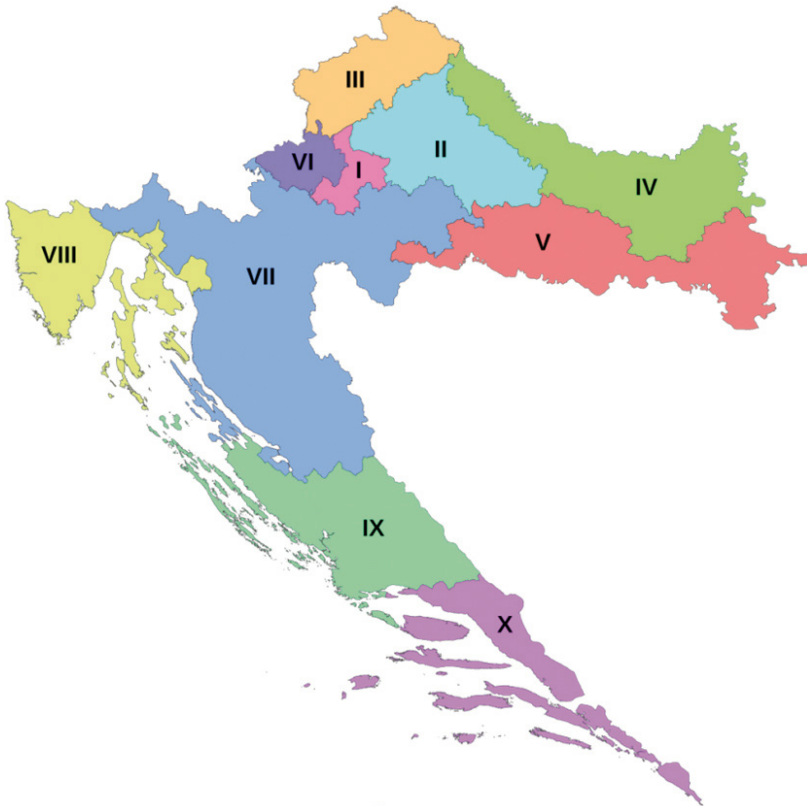
¹³ R. Podolnjak, *Constitutional Reforms of Citizen-Initiated Referendum. Causes of Different Outcomes in Slovenia and Croatia*, „Revus” 2015, R. 26, pp. 129–149.

¹⁴ G. Čular, *Methodological Challenges of Constitutional Judgement: Effects of Apportionment on Electoral Results in Croatia, 2000–2016*, „Annals of the Croatian Political Science Association: political science journal” 2018, R. 15, no. 1, pp. 7–28.

¹⁵ M. Žugaj, S. Šterc, *Hrvatske izborne jedinice – postojeći nesklad i buduće promjene*, „Pilar: časopis za društvene i humanističke studije” 2016, R. 11, no. 2, pp. 9–33.

¹⁶ Odluka Ustavnog Suda Republike Hrvatske broj: U-I-4089/2020 i dr. od 7. veljače 2023. (*Zakon o izbornim jedinicama za izbor zastupnika u Zastupnički dom Hrvatskoga državnog sabora*), p. 5.

November 3, 2023. So the 2024 election were the first within the new electoral map, which is presented below:



Source: Picture by Gust Justice shapes derived from File:2020 Croatian parliamentary election – Vote Strength by Municipality.svg – Own work, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=147470070> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

The statutory electoral threshold is 5% at the level of each electoral unit with an additional clause for electoral coalitions of 8%. Votes for mandates at the level of each electoral unit are calculated with the D'Hondt method.

The turnout reached a level of 62,3%. It was more than 15 p.p. better result than this achieved four years earlier (the all-time worst) and the best since 2000. The highest turnout was counted in the district I, which is composed from the northwestern part of Zagreb County as well as central and western parts of the Capital City of Zagreb (69,2%). On the other side of the table appeared the district V, which consists Slavonia (including geographical region of Syrmia), so the historical region located in the eastern part of the country (literally whole: Vukovar-Srijem County, Brod-Posavina County, Požega-Slavonia County and eastern part of Sisak-Moslavina County). Only 54,5% of the registered voters cast their vote there.

The election solution was a fourth consecutive victory for the HDZ in the parliamentary elections. However the party founded by Franjo Tuđman in 1989 failed to win a sufficient number of mandates to have a majority in the Parliament. HDZ won 61 mandates (three of them in district XI for diaspora), while the second-placed Rivers of Justice coalition (cr. *Rijeke Pravde*, **RP**¹⁷; coalition of the main opposition party SDP and minor left-wing and centre parties) got 42 seats in Sabor. The Homeland Movement (cr. *Domovinski Pokret*, **DP**) won 14 seats, so consequently had the kingmaker position in process of forming the government majority. The other parties – The Bridge along with partners Croatian Sovereignists (cr. *Most – Hrvatski Suverenisti*, **Most-HS**) won 11 seats, and We Can! – Political Platform (cr. *Možemo! – politička platforma*, **Možemo**) won 10. It is worth noting here that – as the table below shows – Možemo had a better percentage result, however, due to the electoral system and the more balanced result of Most (exceeded a 5% border in more units) in individual districts, it was this party that introduced one more representative. Other parties were pretty far to achieve the 5% electoral threshold.

The exact percentage results and number of seats in parliament are as follows:

HDZ	34,4%	61
RP	25,4%	42
DP	9,6%	14
Most-HS	8%	11
Možemo!	9,1%	10

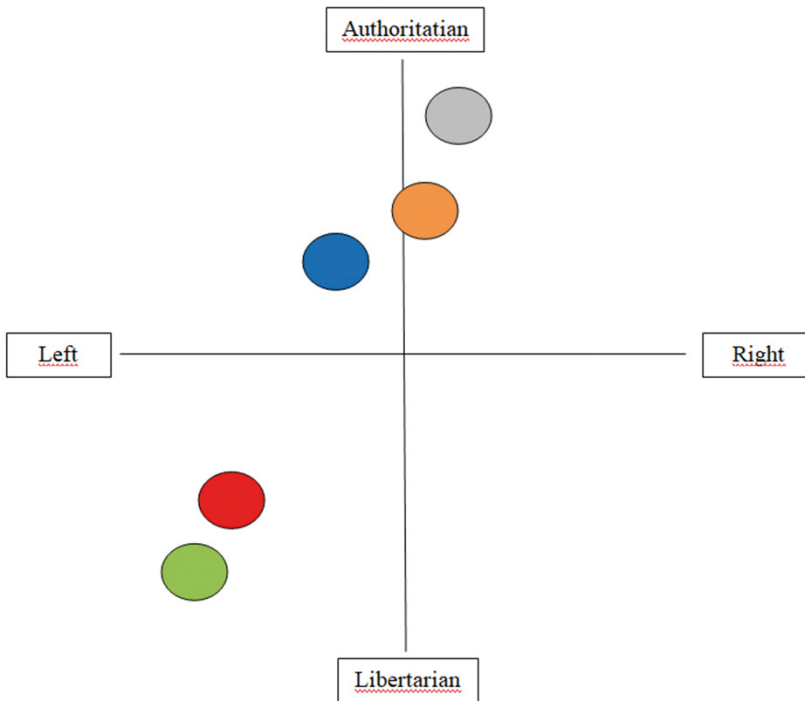
Source: Own work based on official results

It is easy to count, that the parties mentioned above won 138 seats in the Parliament. Apart of them, 2 mandates got Independent Platform of the North (cr. *Nezavisna Platforma Sjever*, **NPS**) – a regionalist, centre-orientated party, which reached a third place (12,2%) in district III; the same number of seats won social-democrat and regionalist Our Croatia coalition (cr. *Naša Hrvatska*, **NH**) which members of Istrian Democratic Assembly (cr. *Istarski demokratski sabor*, **IDS**) reached a result of 15,9% in district VIII, and 1 mandate got Fokus-Republic (cr. *Focus-Republika*) – liberal coalition with the highest support in district VI (7,8%). The other eight seats were assigned to national minorities. Three of them were given to Serbs (all of them are members of Independent Democratic Serb Party (cr. *Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*, **SDSS**)) and one mandate received a representative of following minorities: Romani, Hungarian, Italian, Bosniak and Czech¹⁸.

Below, based on the Croatian “The Political Compass” website, it is presented an approximate political ideology of the five parties that won representatives to the Sabor, in a spectrum with two axes: one about economic policy (left–right) and another about social policy (authoritarian–libertarian).

¹⁷ The name of the coalition comes from the title of a popular Croatian song from the mid-1980s by Jure Stublić.

¹⁸ See: footnote no. 11.



Instruction:

Social scale: Authoritarian/Libertarian

Economic scale: Left/Right

Parties: Možemo (green); RP (red); HDZ (blue); Most (orange); DP (grey)

Source: Own work by Izborni Kompas, *Results*, <https://izbornikompas.hr/hr/results> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

Spatial differentiation of the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections

In order to analyse the spatial differentiation of political preferences of Croatian voters, attention should be paid to the distribution of support for parties in individual districts. The southern and especially the eastern part of the country were clearly dominated by HDZ, while in the north and on the northwestern Istrian peninsula the RP coalition achieved success. The left-wing coalition also almost triumphed in districts located partly in the capital city of Zagreb. The three strongest parties in the individual districts are shown below.

The HDZ, a member of the European People's Party, usually described as a centre-right party (in 2016, 70% of HDZ supporters described themselves as Christian democrats¹⁹)²⁰, received the highest support in the unmapped district XI, created for Croatian citizens who do not reside in the country. The party list received 79,5% of the votes there (32,000 out of 40,000) and took all three seats for this district. More than 3/4 of voters in this entity

¹⁹ V. Raos, *Ideology...*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

(approx. 33,000) cast votes in Bosnia and Herzegovina (500,000 people who identify themselves as Croats live in this country, constituting approx. 15% of the country's population) – there, 88% of voters voted for HDZ²¹. It should be noted here that in this country exists a Bosnian branch of the HDZ – The Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (cr. *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine*) which represents the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and has a more conservative and nationalist program than the Croatian HDZ). That is also why Croats living in this country widely perceive the HDZ as representatives of their opinion in Zagreb.



Source: LokalPatrioti-Rijeka, *Evo kako je glasala Rijeka i naše izborne jedinice u usporedbi s ostatkom Hrvatske – PARLAMENTARNI IZBORI 2024*, <https://lokalpatrioti-rijeka.com/vijesti/evo-kako-je-glasala-rijeka-i-nase-izborne-jedinica-u-usporedbi-s-ostatkom-hrvatske-parlamentarni-izbori-2024/> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

²¹ Z. Krešić, *BiH donijela sva tri mandata HDZ-u iz 11. izborne jedinice*, "Večernji List", 19.04.2024, <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/bih-donijela-sva-tri-mandata-hdz-u-iz-11-izborne-jedinice-1762768> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

In Croatia itself, HDZ gained the highest support in electoral district V (42,8%). Similarly, the nationalist DP achieved the best result here (17,4%). On the other side, in this district, the left-liberal opposition achieved the lowest result in the whole country (Možemo – 3,6%) or almost the lowest (RP – 19,6%). As already mentioned, in this district was registered the lowest turnout in Croatia. The regions included in district V are areas of poorly urbanized Slavonia, where older people predominate. This territory was also one of the most affected regions by the Croatian War of Independence three decades ago. One of the biggest cities, Vukovar, was fully demolished during the siege in 1991 (which has been called at that moment the worst in Europe since the World War II)²². HDZ won also in the northern Slavonian district IV, which includes also Croatian's fourth largest city Osijek, with 41,8%.

Another area that strongly supported HDZ on April 17, 2024 is the region of the historical region called Dalmatia. This area also felt the pain of the War of Independence, including the town of Knin, the medieval capital of the Kingdom of Croatia, and in 1991–1995 the capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina, captured by the Croatian military as part of a large-scale operation “Storm” (cr. *Oluja*)²³. During the conflict, this territory experienced large-scale migrations of people, first Serbs occupied Croatian homes, and in 1995, as a result of Operation Storm, almost all Serbs left. Dalmatia consists of district IX, where HDZ received 39,7% of the votes, and district X, where this centre-right party recorded a result of 37%. In the latter, the result was underestimated by the results in the regional capital and the country's second largest city – Split, where the RP narrowly won²⁴. HDZ also achieved a very good result in district VII (41,3%), located in the north of Dalmatia, covering the “Green Heart of Croatia” so the Lika and Gorski Kotor region. Here are the famous Plitvice Lakes located, where the armed incident in 1991 took place. Josip Jović, the Croatian policeman killed in action by Croatian Serbs armed police is largely viewed in Croatia as the first casualty of the Croatian War of Independence.

HDZ recorded weak results, much lower than the national average, in the Istria and surroundings (with the third-largest Croatian city of Rijeka) and in Međimurje region. The worst result in the whole Croatia was achieved in district VIII – 21.3%, and in district III where the result was slightly higher – 27.6%. In addition, Plenković's party also achieved a worse result than the national average in districts covering the central and western parts of Zagreb – especially district VI (24,8%) as well as district I (27,7%).

District III (36,8%) and district VIII (33,4%) turned out to be the districts with the highest support for the RP coalition, associating left-wing and centrist groups led by SDP and supporting pro-European and social-liberal values. These are – as also shown by the

²² See more about the siege of Vukovar: M. Glenny, *Fall Of Yugoslavia*, Penguin Books Ltd, London 1996, pp. 98–138; A. Natorski, A. Maric, *The Siege of Vukovar*, Croatian Homeland War Memorial and Documentation Centre, Zagreb 2016; M. Tanner, *Croatia: a nation forged in war*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1997, pp. 261–274; D. Marijan, *Bitka za Vukovar 1991.*, “Serinia Slavonica: Annual of the Department for the History of Slavonia, Srijem and Baranja of the Croatian Institute of History” 2002, R. 2, no. 1, pp. 367–402.

²³ See more about the Operation Storm: D. Marijan, *Storm*, Croatian Homeland War Memorial & Documentation Centre, Zagreb 2010; M. Tanner, op. cit., pp. 296–298; M. Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, *Operacja „Oluja” i spory wokół jej interpretacji*, in: *Balkany Zachodnie w systemie bezpieczeństwa euroatlantyckiego (Balkany XX/XXI, t. 7)*, A. Głowacki and S.L. Szczesio (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2015, pp. 361–397.

²⁴ Voters from this city constitute almost half of all eligible voters in this district.

high support for regional groups – areas that oppose centralism, located near the border, and having a large number of national and ethnic minorities²⁵. In six districts the RP coalition achieved result very close to each other – from 23,8% in district VI to 25,5% in district X. This last in conservative Dalmatia was possible thanks to the support obtained in Split. Mayor of the city, Ivica Puljak is the leader of the Centre party (cr. *Centar*), which was part of the coalition. RP achieved the worst result in the strongholds of the right – district V (19,6%) and district IX (19,4%).

The coalition's rival on the left side of the Croatian political scene in a scope of the 2024 parliamentary election was the Možemo party. However, it did not manage to overtake the Rivers of Justice coalition in any of the districts located in Croatia. This party, proclaiming pro-ecological, progressive, pro-LGBT+ slogans, gathers voters ranging from the radical left, through green, to social democracy, managed to win voters primarily in cities, especially in Zagreb, where it even managed to achieve the highest result among all parties in polling stations in the city centre. The capital's mayor since 2021 is Možemo's co-coordinator, Tomislav Tomašević.

Leftist party also recorded a good result in Rijeka (over 13%). In other regions, however, the party did much worse than in the largest cities. The disproportion is visible in the fact that only in three districts (I, VI, VII) Možemo achieved a better result than on a national scale. In the rural, agricultural and conservative districts of IX (Northern Dalmatia) and V (Slavonia), the party did not even reach the electoral threshold of 5% (receiving 4,4% and 3,6%, respectively). It is worth to notice that Možemo won among the youngest voters, aged 18 to 29, with a result of 21,7% in this group²⁶. This party also has the most feminized electorate – according to research, 59% of Možemo voters are women²⁷. Similarly, the percentage of voters with higher education among party supporters is record-breaking – around 54%, compared to around 39% for the second Most and 38% for RP²⁸.

As already mentioned, Možemo did not join the RP coalition due to the decision of President Zoran Milanović, who decided to run in the elections as the Rivers of Justice candidate for Prime Minister. The same reason for not joining the SDP-led coalition was given by the IDS leader²⁹. It is a regional party (defining itself as liberal-centre-left³⁰) with

²⁵ In 2021 the population was 195,237 and the main ethnic groups were as follows: Croats – 149,152 (76.40%) Regional affiliation – 10,025 (5.13%) Italians – 9,784 (5.01%) Serbs – 5,778 (2.98%) Bosniaks – 4,838 (2.48%) Albanians – 2,055 (1.05%). Italian is also recognized in the county as an official language.

²⁶ Second place in this group was taken by Most (18.2%), third by DP (14.6%), and only then by HDZ (11.9%) and RP (10.7%). Source: A. Pavić, *Anketa: Velika izlaznost ljevici nije pomogla, i mladi su birali desnije opcije*, "Narod.hr", 22.04.2024, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/anketa-velika-izlaznost-ljevici-nije-pomogla-i-mladi-su-birali-desnije-opcije> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

²⁷ Dnevnik.hr, *Kako su glasale žene, za koga nisu glasali muškarci, kome su povjerenje dali mladi?*, 18.04.2024, <https://dnevnik.hr/galerija/vijesti/hrvatska/kako-su-glasale-zene-za-koga-nisu-glasali-muskarci-kome-su-povjerenje-dali-mladi--843911.html/62800370/843911> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Hrvatska Radio i Televizija, *Paus: Koalicija je za IDS gotova priča, SDP nas je izgurao*, 19.03.2024, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/paus-koalicija-je-za-ids-gotova-prica-sdp-nas-je-izgurao-11422069> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

³⁰ B. Ban, *IDS PROSLAVIO 30. GODIŠNJICU s koalicijskim partnerima dogovaraju plan za parlamentarne izbore: 'Trebamo staviti glave skupa'*, "Jutarnji List", 15.02.2020, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ids-proslavio-30-godisnjicu-s-koalicijskim-partnerima-dogovaraju-plan-za-parlamentarne-izbore-trebamo-staviti-glave-skupa-9978937> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

the significantly support on the Istrian peninsula (in the last local elections in 2021, almost 43%)³¹. In the parliamentary elections in 2003, 2011 and 2020, IDS ran in coalition with the SDP. However, in the 2024 election, joined the Our Croatia alliance, achieving 15,9% in district VIII (which includes Istria, but also Rijeka, some islands, etc.).

In district III (which includes historical region of Međimurje and surroundings with the city of Varaždin), another regional party that was part of Our Croatia, so the NPS, achieved a good result of 12,2%. Its leader is Matija Posavec – the Međimurje County head. During the campaign, he announced that if he entered parliament, he would support the centre-left coalition³². This is not surprising, considering the fact that in the previous 2020 parliamentary elections, Posavec ran from the lists of the coalition led by the SDP.

The Bridge of Independent Lists (Most) was founded in the Dalmatian town of Metković, in 2012 as a regionalist political platform. Božo Petrov, who is the president of the party, previously served as the popular mayor of his 15,000 inhabitants hometown of Metković. The party's deputy chairman and candidate for prime minister in the 2024 elections also comes from this town. Initially, the party participated (successfully) only in the district elections to the Dubrovnik-Neretva County Assembly (the entire county is in district X). Finally, just before the 2015 parliamentary elections, the party decided to run in the national elections and joined forces with independent local politicians from other parts of the country. It is therefore not surprising that in the 2024 elections the party achieved the highest result in district IX (12,1%) and district X (11,5%; in the town of Metković itself 23%).

Most also achieved a result above the national average in right-wing Slavonia, which is a consequence of a joint start of Most (which was previously considered as moderately centre-right, free-market party, described as “a combination of a moderate centrist populist party and an anti-establishment reform party”³³) with the right-wing Croatian Sovereignists, emphasizing in their political program above all a national sovereignty and Christian values. Before the elections, there were also reports from the far-right DP party about a possible joint start of this party with Most, although this did not happen³⁴. However, it should be noted, that Most firmly distanced itself from post-election cooperation with the largest party on the Croatian right, i.e. HDZ³⁵. On the other hand, in its first election campaign in 2015, Most also made such declarations, and then in a short time it was a junior coalition partner of HDZ twice (after which the ongoing conflict between HDZ and Most inevitably led to the rapid fall of two cabinets – first led by Tihomir Orešković and then by Andrej

³¹ More about the IDS and its support in Istria in the doctoral thesis of V. Raos: V. Raos, *Istarski Demokratski Sabor i Sjeverna Liga – komparativna analiza uspješnosti uspostave de facto teritorijalnosti*, Zagreb 2014.

³² P. Maretić Žonja, *Posavec: Spreman sam za većinu u kojoj će biti SDP, Most, Možemo, IDS i Fokus. To je 68 mandata + manjine*, „Jutarnji List”, 22.04.2024, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/uskoro-uzivo-posavec-ce-otkriti-kome-ce-dati-podrsku-1763505> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

³³ M. Grbeša, B. Šalaj, *Populism in Croatia: The Curious Case of The Bridge (Most)*, “Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva” 2018, R. 14, no. 1, p. 21.

³⁴ Dnevnik.hr, *Tko će s kim na izbore? Most i Suverenisti si pružili ruke i poručili: „Mi smo druga najjača opcija u državi”*, 8.07.2023, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/predizborne-koalicije-za-nadolazece-izbore---790823.html> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

³⁵ Although one of the two representatives of the Croatian Sovereignists, Vesna Vučemilović, joined the camp supporting the HDZ-DP government after the elections, for which she was subsequently expelled from the party.

Plenković; the first one led to early elections)³⁶. Most in 2024 did worst in two districts where RP won – district VIII (5,7%) and, above all, district III (3,8%).

In these territories, the worst result (4% in district VIII and 5,1% in district III) was also achieved by the DP, considered as the most right-wing from the biggest parties. The first result should be noted due to the fact that the DP put in the first place on the list in this district Ivan Vilibor Sinčić, a politician who, as a 24-year-old anti-establishment activist, won 16,4% nationwide in the 2014 presidential elections, achieving the best result exactly in Istria County (20,1%)³⁷. His later turn to the right, and ultimately entry from the lists of a far-right and anti-EU party, effectively discouraged the inhabitants of the region. As already mentioned, the DP achieved its best result in Slavonia. The party is described as a kind of alternative to HDZ, focused on nationalism, social conservatism, economic protectionism and skepticism towards Brussels³⁸. DP puts “patriotic spirit” first (cr. *Domovinski duh*)³⁹.

Division into “two Croatias”

“Blue” and “red” Croatia

In order to show the spatial differentiation of the political behaviour of Croats in different parts of the country, below compared support for left- and right-wing blocs (only in terms of ideological issues, regardless of their attitude to the HDZ government).

Electoral district	Right (HDZ, DP, Most)	Left (RP, Možemo, NH)
I	44,4%	45,2%
II	55,5%	34,6%
III	36,5%	55,2%
IV	60,9%	31,7%
V	68,7%	23,6%
VI	43%	42,5%
VII	56,5%	33,3%
VIII	31%	59,5%
IX	62,4%	24,7%
X	59,3%	31,3%
XI (diaspora)	86,1%	3%
Whole Croatia	52%	38%

Source: Own work based on official results

³⁶ M. Grbeša, B. Šalaj, *Populism in Croatia...*, p. 11–13.

³⁷ Interestingly, the DP for the parliamentary elections also included the Green List (cr. *Zelena Lista*), a green political party whose motto is: “man water earth air” (cr. *čovjek voda zemlja zrak*).

³⁸ M.S. Čagalj, *Prostorna analiza...*, p. 45.

³⁹ Domovinski Pokret, *O nama*, <https://dp.hr/onama/> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

From the analysis of the table, it can be seen that five districts are strongholds of the right, where these parties achieved at least 25 p.p. more than the left-wing bloc. These are districts IV, V (Slavonia), IX, X (Dalmatia) and XI (diaspora). In two districts (II and VII) right-wing bloc also won clearly, but with a smaller advantage. These are two electoral districts which, in addition to rural and urban areas constituting a large base of support for the right, primarily HDZ (e.g. the Karlovac region in district VII), also include more left-wing parts of Zagreb. Districts I and VI, smaller in area and covering mainly the territory of the capital, are equal in half. Districts III and VIII are strongholds of the left – primarily district VIII (covering the Istrian peninsula, Rijeka and the surrounding area).

The analysis confirms the previously published theses and results of journalistic and scientific works that mentioned the existence of the “blue” (cr. *plava Hrvatska*) and „red” Croatia (cr. *crvena Hrvatska*)⁴⁰ – the names come from the colours of the two largest parties: blue HDZ and red SDP⁴¹ (in the literature it can also be found a division into red and black Croatia (cr. *crna Hrvatska*)⁴²). The first includes the southern Dalmatia, the traditional region of Lika, as well as Baranja, Banija and most of Slavonia. “Red” Croatia includes the northwestern part of the country (Međimurje, Zagorje, Zagreb), Rijeka and its surroundings (Kvarner) as well as Istria⁴³.

Division axis

What are the differences? In the literature on the subject, one can find a thesis that the positioning of Croatian voters on the left-right axis is determined not by economic interests or real political preferences⁴⁴, but is based on structural divisions based on cultural and value factors, which led to the creation of a clear ideological or symbolic link between voters and parties⁴⁵. This can be related to the stance of A. Roberts, according to which in countries undergoing a period of transformation from an authoritarian regime (centrally controlled economy) to democracy (market economy), the electoral preferences of citizens are more ideological than economic in nature⁴⁶. It seems, however, that in Croatia, despite the passage of time, the economic situation has not yet become the most important factor in voting behaviour. As M. Grdešić wrote, Croatian voters often vote against their own economic interests⁴⁷.

⁴⁰ Not to be confused with historical term used for the southeastern parts of Roman Dalmatia and some other territories.

⁴¹ B. Šalaj, *Analiza potvrdila: Hrvatska se podijelila na plavu (HDZ) i crvenu (SDP)*, „Večernji List”, 23.05.2014, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/analiza-potvrdila-hrvatska-se-podijelila-na-plavu-hdz-i-crvenu-sdp-940504> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁴² M. Grdešić, *Prostorna analiza “crvene” i “crne” Hrvatske: eksplorativna studija*, „Politička misao” 2013, R. 50, no. 1, pp. 183–203.

⁴³ Cf.: B. Šalaj, op. cit.; M. Grdešić, *Crvena i crna Hrvatska u dugoročnoj perspektivi*, „Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva” 2021, R. 18, no. 1, p. 21.

⁴⁴ V. Raos, *Ideology...*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ A. Henjak, *Stranačka identifikacija i granice stranačke mobilizacije u Hrvatskoj nakon 2000. godine*, „Političke perspective” 2011, R. 1, no. 1, p. 30.

⁴⁶ M. Kowalski, *Trwałość przestrzennego zróżnicowania zachowań wyborczych w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej = Durability of the spatial differentiation characterising voting behaviour in Central and Eastern European countries*, „Przegląd Geograficzny” 2023, R. 95, no. 1, p. 58.

⁴⁷ M. Grdešić, *Prostorna...*, p. 186.

Comparing the economic indicators for individual areas of Croatia and the election results, it can be seen that unemployment is higher and wages are lower in areas dominated by right-wing parties, primarily HDZ – Dalmatinska Zagora (part of Dalmatia separated from the Adriatic coast by mountains), Lika, or Slavonia. As J. Glaurdić and V. Vuković noted, unemployment is an issue that invariably favours the right-wing⁴⁸. It may seem strange why people living in areas with weaker economic indicators are more likely to support a more free-market party than the more pro-social left.

One reason is the continuing shadow of the War of Independence⁴⁹. The HDZ continuing politicization of the war which resonates throughout communities unevenly depending on their war pasts⁵⁰. Communities that suffered more disproportionately support them as a party that took the country into independence and led it throughout the victorious war⁵¹. The HDZ regularly presents itself as a party implementing pro-social policies and expanding benefits for veterans, thus strengthening its own electoral base in such areas⁵². The importance of war veterans for the Croatian political sphere is evident from the number of this group, which constitutes about 10% of the population⁵³.

On the other hand, the bastion of the left, Istria, with a strong regional identity⁵⁴, saw no fighting in the ensuing war, differing in attitudes towards the controversial issues of the War of Independence⁵⁵. The Istrian County differs greatly from other Croatian counties, or rather from the rest of the country, in terms of numerous characteristics of its population. These characteristics further confirm the impression of isolation and separation, which arises from the geographically weak connection of the Istrian peninsula with the mainland, and create the prerequisites for the formation of a specific political culture that is conducive to the development of regionalist sentiments and bigger aversion to nationalism⁵⁶. Generally, Istria particularly stands out from Croatia in terms of nationality, history, and culture. This is important because, as Polish Slavacist J. Rapacka wrote, regionalism has had a decisive influence on the shape of the country's culture for centuries and is a permanent element of discourse within it⁵⁷.

⁴⁸ A. Blašković, *Država s dva lica: Bogata i siromašna Hrvatska*, „Večernji List”, 13.05.2014, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/drzava-s-dva-lica-bogata-i-siromasna-hrvatska-938313> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁴⁹ See more about the history of Croatia: I. Goldstein, *Croatia: A History*, McGill-Queen's Press, London 1999; R. Harris, *Croatia – A History – From Revolution to Independence*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 2024; M. Tanner, op. cit.

⁵⁰ J. Glaurdić, V. Vuković, *Voting after war: Legacy of conflict and the economy as determinants of electoral support in Croatia*, “Electoral Studies” 2016, R. 142, pp. 135–145.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 137.

⁵² A. Blašković, op. cit.

⁵³ D. Bagić, K. Kardov, *Politička participacija i stranačke preferencije ratnih veterana u Hrvatskoj*, „Politička misao” 2019, R. 55, no. 3, pp. 82–83.

⁵⁴ T. Agarín, P. Čermák, *Descriptive representation and political participation: exploring Croatia's non-dominant groups electoral turnout*. “Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva : časopis za politologiju” 2019, R. 16, no. 1, p. 61.

⁵⁵ D. Bagić, *Društveni rascjepi i stranačke preferencije na izborima za Hrvatski sabor 2003. godine*, „Politička misao” 2007, R. 44, no. 4, p. 111.

⁵⁶ V. Raos, *Štvaranje regije Istre*, „Political Analysis: Croatian and International Politics Quarterly” 2014, R. 5, no. 17, pp. 35–39.

⁵⁷ J. Rapacka, *Uloga regionalizma u hrvatskoj kulturi* in: *Zaljubljeni u vilu. Studije o hrvatskoj književnosti i kulturi*, Književni krug, Split 1998, pp. 191–210.; B. Popiołek, *Regionalizm a kultura ogólnonarodowa* na

Croatia is a place where various axes of conflict occur within the sociopolitical divisions (social cleavages)⁵⁸. The division of the Croatian electorate along political, cultural and value lines could already be felt in the first free, multi-party parliamentary elections in 1990⁵⁹.

Voting preferences and the shape of electoral geography are influenced by, among others:

- perception of the Catholic Church as one of the key variables determining an individual's attitude towards the political identity of the left and right in Croatia⁶⁰; the probability of voting for the left decreases with the frequency of attending religious services, and increases in the case of the right⁶¹; for example, the most right-wing-friendly Slavonia is a region characterized by above-average religiosity and attachment to conservative values. It has the fewest people declaring themselves as “non-believers” (about 3% compared to about 15% in Istria or Zagreb). Support for religious education in public schools also stands out as an extremely strong positive predictor of voting for the right and negative for the left⁶²;
- the share of national minorities (SDP and the left-wing bloc obtained a higher percentage of votes from these voters⁶³)⁶⁴; on the other hand, on the basis of consolidating Croats “against aliens”, counties with the highest percentage of Serb minority are strongholds of the right, such as Vukovar-Srijem County (for example, in Vukovar itself almost 30% of the inhabitants identify as Serbs and the mayor until 2025 was Ivan Penava, leader of the far-right DP);
- attitude towards the position of women and sexual minorities in society⁶⁵ (in the 2013 nationwide referendum, almost 60% of voters in Istria opposed the adoption of the constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and in counties in Slavonia or Dalmatia only around 20% (nationwide 33,5%));
- perspective on the Yugoslav period and the role of Josip Broz Tito and historical traditions from World War II (attitude towards the Ustasha/communist partisans; a positive attitude towards Tito indicates a tendency towards a left-wing interpretation of history, while a negative towards a right-wing⁶⁶)⁶⁷.

przykładzie Istrii (zjawisko ča-valu) in: Kultury słowiańskie między postkomunizmem a postmodernizmem: 1989–2004, M. Dąbrowska-Partyka (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2009, pp. 75–76.

⁵⁸ See more: N. Zakošek, G. Čular, *Ideological Cleavages and Party Preferences: The Case of Croatia*, Paper prepared for the Panel #19: „Cleavage Development: Causes and Consequences” at the European Consortium of Political Research’s Joint Session of Workshops, Edinburgh, March 28 – April 2, 2003; G. Čular, I. Gregurić, *How Cleavage Politics Survives despite Everything: The Case of Croatia*, Paper prepared for the Panel #19: “Politicising SocioCultural Structures: Elite and Mass Perspectives on Cleavages” at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Helsinki, May 7–12, 2007.

⁵⁹ N. Zakošek, *Struktura i dinamika hrvatskoga stranačkog sustava*, „Revija za sociologiju” 1994, R. 25, no. 1–2, p. 28.

⁶⁰ A. Henjak, *Nose li parlamentarni izbori 2015. i 2016. godine promjenu političkih rascjepa u Hrvatskoj?*, „Društvena istraživanja” 2018, R. 27, no. 3, p. 391.

⁶¹ V. Raos, *Struktura rascjepa i parlamentarni izbori u Hrvatskoj 2020. u doba pandemije*, „Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva” 2020, R. 17, no. 1, p. 20.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 24.

⁶³ M. Grdešić, *Crvena...*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ A. Henjak, *Determinante ideološke samoidentifikacije hrvatskih birača na parlamentarnim izborima 2003. godine*, “Politička misao” 2005, R. 42, no. 1, p. 97.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ A. Henjak, *Nose li...*, p. 391.

⁶⁷ Cf.: A. Henjak, *Stranačka...*, p. 35; A. Henjak, *Determinante...*, p. 102; V. Raos, *Struktura rascjepa...*, p. 24.

Demographic differences. Case of Slavonia

According to the statistics, it is noticeable that the division on the right-left axis also occurs on the basis of education (people with lower education opt more for HDZ and the right, those with higher for SDP and the left) and the countryside-city axis (right-wing countryside and small towns and left-wing large cities)⁶⁸. It turns out that the phenomenon described by L. Johannsen two decades ago is still alive here – in countries with unconsolidated democracy in post-socialist countries there is a strong urban-rural conflict⁶⁹.

In Croatia exists so-called “friends-and-neighbours effect”, a concept introduced to the electoral geography literature by V.O. Key⁷⁰. This term refers to the phenomenon whereby candidates perform better in their home areas compared to all others⁷¹. When analyzing the results of HDZ, it should be borne in mind that it is a people’s party, in which over 200,000 Croats were registered in 2020 (the entire country has a population of less than 4 million citizens, 2,18 million voted in the 2024 elections)⁷². The text also mentions the case of increased regional support for Božo Petrov from Most in his native Metković County, similarly, in Slavonia, which is favourable to DP, the current leader of this party, Ivan Penava – between 2014 and 2025 the mayor of Vukovar was gaining the popularity.

Looking at the election results in the largest cities, one can see that HDZ lost even in Split, although it clearly triumphed in Dalmatia. The exception in the 2024 parliamentary elections was Osijek (and to a lesser extent Zadar in northern Dalmatia), the capital of Slavonia and the fourth most populous Croatian city, whose residents, like their compatriots in the entire region, voted decisively for HDZ. The electoral choice made by residents of the most populous cities in the country is shown in the figure below.

City	Population in 2021 (municipal)	1 st place	Result	2 nd place	Result	3 rd place	Result
Zagreb	761,000	RP	25,2%	HDZ	24,9%	Možemo	22,3%
Split	161,000	RP	30,4%	HDZ	30,2%	Most	11,5%
Rijeka	108,000	RP	34%	HDZ	25,3%	Možemo	13,4%
Osijek	96,000	HDZ	42,4%	RP	23,5%	DP	11,3%
Zadar	71,000	HDZ	32,2%	RP	25,7%	DP	9,9%
Pula	52,000	RP	37,2%	IDS	17,2%	HDZ	15,2%

Source: Own work based on official results

⁶⁸ Cf.: D. Bačić, *Društveni rascjepi...*, pp. 103–104; M.S. Čagalj, B. Vukosav, D. Radoš, *Friends-and-neighbours...*, p. 661.

⁶⁹ L. Johannsen, *The foundation of the state: emerging urban-rural cleavages in transition countries*, “Communist and Post-Communist Studies” 2003, R. 36, no. 3, pp. 291–309.

⁷⁰ The occurrence of “the friends-and-neighbours effect” in Croatia, based on the example of the previous 2020 parliamentary elections, was described more by M.S. Čagalj, B. Vukosav and D. Radoš. Por. M.S. Čagalj, B. Vukosav, D. Radoš, *Friends-and-neighbours efekt...*

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, *Službeni rezultati unutarstranačkih izbora: Andrej Plenković osvojio je 78.6%, a Miro Kovač 21.4%*, 18.03.2020, <https://hdz.hr/article/1579/sluzbeni-rezultati-unutarstranackih-izbora-andrej-plenkovic-osvojio-je-786-a-miro-kovac-214> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

In the article from 2013, M. Grdešić wrote that among the Croatian “swing cities” “Šibenik, Petrinja, Virovitica, Vinkovci, Vukovar and Županja stood out”⁷³. In these cities, HDZ won in 2007, and the left-wing coalition led by SDP in 2011. In 2024, HDZ won by a large margin in each of these six cities. Comparing the structural results of the elections from 2024 to these held in 2020, it can be seen that there were no major changes on the map, the winner in all districts was the same. The above considerations allow to put forward the thesis that after more than 30 years of shaping Croatian democracy, the electoral map of the country is already solidly shaped and certain permanent regularities can be observed in the voting behaviour patterns of citizens. The stability of political competition is manifested in the tendency of voters to create long-term ties with “their” party, which would not be shaken even by changes in policies and programs⁷⁴.

At this point I would like to describe the example of Slavonia, where many former HDZ voters live, who moved – above all – during the 2019 presidential elections to the political camp of Miroslav Škoro, the founder of DP. He won in this territory by a landslide, achieving significantly more than 30% of support and attracting many former HDZ voters, who felt that under the leadership of Andrej Plenković, the party was turning too much towards the centre, rejecting true right-wing and conservative values⁷⁵. The analysis suggests that the DP attracted an above-average group of voters who were less educated, unemployed, often opposed to Covid-19 vaccinations, and who identified themselves as Catholics⁷⁶.

It should also be noted that among HDZ voters the number of people declaring themselves as “extreme right” has been increasing over the years (21,6% in 2000, 36,2% in 2016⁷⁷), which resulted in the expectation of a larger group of voters to pursue more radical policies. The retreat of a significant group of voters from HDZ was, however, surprising in that previously voters of this party were considered stable and loyal, while centrist and left-wing voters seemed more inclined to change party preferences⁷⁸.

Why is this region more susceptible to far-right slogans than, for instance, another HDZ stronghold, i.e. Dalmatia? Apart from the depopulation mentioned below, or the attachment to traditional and national values, Slavonian counties are at the end of Croatian counties by GDP per capita. For example, in Vukovar County, GDP per capita increased between 2000 and 2019 from 3,300 to 8,600 euros, while in Dubrovnik-Neretva County, for example, from 4,900 to 14,700. After 11 years since Croatia joined the EU, the residents of Slavonia do not feel the expected benefits of joining the European community (and it is worth noting that support for EU accession in the 2012 referendum was here higher than the national average). Far-right parties benefit from such bitterness of the population⁷⁹. Disappointment also results in the low turnout mentioned above – voters who go to the polls are generally better informed politically, more socially engaged, have greater trust and interest in politics and a stronger sense that they can influence political events than voters who do not go voting⁸⁰.

⁷³ M. Grdešić, *Prostorna...*, p. 193.

⁷⁴ M. Grdešić, *Crvena...*, p. 23.

⁷⁵ M.S. Čagalj, *Prostorna analiza...*, p. 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁷⁷ V. Raos, *Ideology...*, p. 18.

⁷⁸ A. Henjak, *Stranačka...*, pp. 31–34.

⁷⁹ M.S. Čagalj, *Prostorna analiza...*, p. 43.

⁸⁰ A. Henjak, *Lojalnost, glas ili izlazak: izborna participacija i potpora novim strankama u Hrvatskoj, “Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva” 2017, R. 14, no. 1, p. 85.*

Demographics also play an important role in shaping Croatian electoral geography – comparing the results of the census from 2011 and 2021, it can be seen that the regions of “red” Croatia were less affected by depopulation. The phenomenon was felt least by Istria County (approx. 208,000 in 2011, approx. 195,000 10 years later, a decrease of 5,9%), the regions north of Zagreb decreased in population by less than 10%⁸¹. In Slavonia, for example, in the regions of Brod-Posavina County (from approx. 159,000 to approx. 130,000) or, above all, Vukovar-Srijem County (from approx. 180,000 to approx. 144,000), a population decline of almost 20% was recorded in just a decade⁸². According to a 2024 study, Sisak-Moslavina County, which is part of District V and District VII and one of the strongholds of the HDZ, which has depopulated by 18,5% between 2011 and 2021 (from around 172,000 to 141,000), may experience further emigration in the coming years – as many as 47% of young people here often or constantly think about (cr. *često ili stalno*) leaving the country (so external departures, not internal immigration). The fewest number of young people thinking about leaving Croatia live in Zagreb (27%) and Istria (20%)⁸³.

In terms of the impact of demography on electoral geography, the phenomenon of emigration of young women from less affluent, mostly rural areas to the capital or large cities in order to study at a university or take up gainful employment should also be pointed out⁸⁴. This results in a decrease in the feminization rate in emigration areas, which may have an impact on the increase in support for far-right parties in these areas, as is the case in the areas with the highest support for the AfD in East Germany or the Confederation in East Poland.

Referring to gender, it is worth noting that in the 2024 elections there was a quite clear difference – in the case of left-wing parties: RP and Možemo, the share of women among voters exceeded 50%, similarly, the share of men was lower in these electorates than in the case of HDZ, DP and Most⁸⁵.

As noted in the literature, in Croatia, the share of immigrants is still relatively too small to significantly influence the party preferences of voters⁸⁶.

Longue durée

Understanding the persistence of spatial differentiation of voting behaviour in Central and Eastern Europe does not seem possible without taking into account the longer time

⁸¹ Hina, *Rasprava o depopulaciji u Slavoniji – Iseljavanje se usporilo, dio se vraća*, „Glas Istre”, 26.10.2022, <https://www.glasistre.hr/hrvatska/rasprava-o-depopulaciji-u-slavoniji-iseljavanje-se-usporilo-dio-se-vraca-826289> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁸² Croatian Bureau of Statistics publications.

⁸³ M. Lilek, *Porazno istraživanje: Čak 70 posto mladih razmišlja o odlasku iz Hrvatske, evo kojim županijama najviše prijeti egzodus*, „Jutarnji List”, 30.06.2024, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/porazno-istrazivanje-cak-70-posto-mladih-razmislja-o-odlasku-iz-hrvatske-evo-kojim-zupanijama-najvise-prijeti-egzodus-15476908> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁸⁴ P. Hristov, N. Spasova, *Labour migration of young women from the village to the capital in Bulgaria: A case study of woman servantry in Vakarel*, “Open Research Europe” 2024, R. 10; pp. 4–13.

⁸⁵ Dnevnik.hr, *Kako su glasale žene....*

⁸⁶ M.S. Čagalj, *Prostorna analiza....*, p. 43.

perspective and the related processes of long duration (fr. *longue durée*), as understood by F. Braudel⁸⁷.

Due to the format of the work, there is no space here to analyse the existence of theoretical *phantomgrenzen*, related to the Ottoman influence in the 16th and 17th century (Slavonia was occupied by Istanbul for the longest time). The focus will be more on the 19th century, when independence tendencies intensified in the territory of today's Croatia and a Croatian national identity began to be awakened. Croatian political activist and poet Ljudevit Gaj founded at that time the magazine "Novine horvazke, slavonzke y dalmat-inzke"⁸⁸. The process of cultural unification of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia began (which was one of the constant postulates of Croatian politics in the 19th century)⁸⁹. In 1868, within the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen, which were Hungarian part of Austria-Hungary, the Triune Kingdom of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia was established (which did not include Istria or the city of Rijeka⁹⁰). Nationalisation activities were focused primarily on rural areas (now mainly supporting the right-wing camp), where there were more Croats than in the cities. For example, in case of Dalmatia, the feeling of "Croatianess" in the 19th century was the strongest among the peasant population in the area north of the Neretva River, where the tradition of Croatian statehood was preserved⁹¹.

Influential and wealthier cities cooperated more with Italy, Hungary or German-speaking countries⁹². Zagreb was not considered a purely Croatian city, as the Croatian language was rejected in favour of German, which was considered the language of the "elites"⁹³ (to this day, fans of Zagreb clubs are called "Purgeri" – which is a reference to the German word *Bürger* meaning citizen⁹⁴). In Istria, on the other hand, the Croatian national movement developed slowly and the percentage of Italians gradually increased (in 1880, according to official data, 114,000 Italians and 121,000 Croats lived there, with Italians dominating in the cities)⁹⁵. The indigenous Istrian cultural regionalism developed under the auspices of the Italian bourgeois elite⁹⁶. Međimurje, on the other hand, was part of the Kingdom of Hungary and had no autonomous privileges.

Later, after the World War I, Istria was not a part of first Yugoslavia, and during the World War II was not a part of the Independent State of Croatia – just like Međimurje occupied by Hungary (and the islands and part of mainland Dalmatia occupied by Italy).

The "red" and "blue" Croatia are also distinguished by the occurrence of dialects of the Croatian language. In Istria or Međimurje, dialectal groups are widespread (Chakavian

⁸⁷ M. Kowalski, op. cit., p. 61.

⁸⁸ M. Falski, op. cit., p. 48.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, pp. 74–75.

⁹⁰ However, Dalmatia, being located in the Austrian half, still also remained de facto separate.

⁹¹ A. Cetnarowicz, *Kwestia wyznaniowa w procesie kształtowania się nowoczesnej chorwackiej i serbskiej idei narodowej w Dalmacji w XIX wieku*, in: *Portolana. Studia Mediterranea (Vol. 2. Religie świata śródziemnomorskiego)*, D. Quirini-Popławska (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 260.

⁹² M. Falski, op. cit., p. 79.

⁹³ A.G. Matoš, *Zagreb i Zagrebi*, in: *Kritike i eseji, studije i članci. Polemike, putopisi, feljetoni i impresije*, D. Tadijanović and M. Matković (eds.), Matica Hrvatska – Zora, Zagreb 1967 (PSHK 66), pp. 378–379.

⁹⁴ Hrvatska Enciklopedija, *Purger*, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/purger> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

⁹⁵ M. Falski, op. cit., p. 76.

⁹⁶ V. Raos, *Istarski...*, pp. 81–82.

and Kajkavian, respectively), which differ from the Shtokavian dialects, which are widespread in other parts of Croatia and on which literary Croatian is based. When the further development of Croatian literature was determined at the beginning of the 19th century, the Shtokavian dialect in Zagreb as a literary idiom was a novelty, because there was already a rich tradition of Shtokavian writing from Dubrovnik, Bosnia or Slavonia⁹⁷.

Conclusion

J. Bosque divided the subjectivity influencing voting behaviour into the two groups of factors: individual factors, which refer to the voter's individual preferences, and contextual factors, which refer to the geographical environmental conditions of the voter's surroundings. The voter focuses all these elements of life on expectations and own interests, which tries to visualize in the candidates' proposals⁹⁸. The sum of these factors ultimately determines the decision to vote⁹⁹.

As indicated in the work, the spatial differentiation of Croatian voting decisions is influenced by various indicators. In conclusion, it can be stated that this is what the American president G.W. Bush aptly described in his speech on September 11, 2001, as a "way of life"¹⁰⁰. In the case of "red Croatia", it is a way more oriented towards liberal values, greater secularism, less nationalism, a tendency towards regionalism and granting more rights to various minorities, also with the better demographic condition.

On the other hand, there is a "blue Croatia", which is generally more conservative, rural, often oriented towards agriculture, attached to patriotic values, with a friendly relationship to the Catholic Church, faithful to tradition, with a large number of elderly people. The issue that unites the strongholds of the right, so non-bordering eastern areas of Slavonia and southern Dalmatia is the impact of the recent war. To propose a new name for this area from the point of view of electoral geography (because denominators based on colours are very common, e.g. for Italy or the UK, not to mention the US) this area could be called "Combatant Croatia".

In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the "Combatant Croatia" won, in a sense also literally, because the HDZ-DP government coalition formed after the elections is united primarily by, among other things, attitude to the War of Independence and the perception of its actors. DP stated in its election program that current Croatian school textbooks present an erroneous image of the war and that they should be changed. The cult of the war will therefore probably develop in the near future.

The analysis that is offered in this article is only a snapshot of the big subject of Croatian electoral geography. As a result, further study on this subject may continue investigating the areas of support for far-right (which has already been the subject of some studies) or regionalist parties as well as reasons for low turnout in some areas. There should be no

⁹⁷ M. Falski, op. cit., p. 50.

⁹⁸ B. Monzón, *Norma Geografía electoral. Consideraciones teóricas para el caso argentino*, "Cuadernos de Geografía – Revista Colombiana de Geografía" 2009, R. 18, p. 120.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ The White House, *Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation*, 11.09.2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html> (date accessed: 16.10.2024).

shortage of topics related to the growth of populist sentiments – recent research from 2023 shows that only 29% of Croatians are satisfied with the way their democracy works; this figure is significantly lower than European Union average¹⁰¹.

Results of the 2024 Croatian presidential election could also be a potential subject for future research – here, the map of support for Zoran Milanović, a left-wing candidate with big-tent views, also supported by many conservatives, may be particularly interesting. It is certain that Croatian politics will provide a lot of material for research in the field of electoral geography.

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¹⁰¹ B. Vuksan-Ćusa, M. Jennewein, *Who does (not) vote in Croatia?*, 2024, p. 3.

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