

## **MEDIA AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN CROATIA: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING**

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That Croatia has become a very civilized and functional democracy, at least with regard to elections, was confirmed in a way by the fact that in presidential elections whose first round was held on January 2 this year, there were no – foreign observers. What probably contributed to this, among other things, are the results of media surveys carried out in the previous parliamentary elections (November 2003), which showed that the most influential Croatian media which covered the election campaign, primarily Croatian Television, covered ruling and opposition political parties fairly and with balance. Along with surveys carried out at the time by the Croatian Helsinki Board, the Election Monitoring Mission of the OSCE Office of Democratic Initiative and Human Rights assessed that broadcasters and the press very fairly carried out their function to inform during the election campaign for the 2003 parliamentary elections.

There is no doubt that this assessment, formally looking, could also be given with regard to the media for covering the presidential election campaign so far. Still, at the end of the first round, an avalanche of criticism, protests, even suspicions that they might have affected the election results, tumbled down on the media.

The fourth elections for the president of the Republic of Croatia, with all public opinion surveys until the very opening of the polling stations predicting a relatively smooth victory and second mandate for incumbent President Stipe Mesic, in the end turned into a real drama. President Mesic, literally “by a handful of votes” (he received 48.92 percent of the votes and needed another 25,000 votes of the roughly 2.2 million voters who went to the polls for victory in the first round), failed to win in the first round, while the candidate of the currently ruling Croatian Democratic Union, Jadranka Kosor (20.3%), barely secured second place and the second round on January 16, when she will try her luck directly against Mesic. In third place, with 17.8% of the vote, was Boris Miksic, a successful businessman and returnee from the United States, the biggest surprise of these elections.

A politically anonymous figure initially placed according to surveys into the “one percent club,” he was shining towards the end of the campaign as a real American “Hollywood” star on the Croatian political scene, which is evidently thirsty for change and new faces, and barely missed entering the presidential run-off. Practically all analysts claim that Jadranka Kosor was saved by votes cast by Croat voters from Bosnia-Herzegovina, while some believe that perhaps these votes

decided the future president of Croatia. Namely, it is assumed that incumbent President Stjepan Mesic will beat Jadranka Kosor in the second round relatively easily, but many people wonder what would have happened if Boris Miksic, a political star on a tremendous upward line, had gone into the second round. A politician with a Janus face who on one hand is offering a hardline nationalist program, and on the other the image of a successful businessman who will revive Croatia's economy, certainly had much more power in attracting new voters and his direct duel with Stjepan Mesic would have, perhaps, been much tougher and more uncertain than the duel with Jadranka Kosor.

It is precisely the media that unintentionally turned Miksic into a heavy-weight political star. Namely, all Croatian national TV networks, Croatian Television, RTL and Nova TV, applied exit polls for the first time in these elections (polling voter preferences right after coming out of polling stations), and announced them a little bit before or right after the closure of polling stations, but in any case before election blackout was over. Namely, several hours before the State Election Commission announced the election results, Croatia's top electronic media presented exit poll results, according to which Miksic was winning second place and had a chance to become Mesic's rival. However, it turned out that exit polls conducted by some renowned Croatian public opinion survey agencies, such as PULS or GfK, did not include votes cast by Croat voters from Bosnia-Herzegovina, which ultimately decided the order of the candidates and their entry into the second round.

Thus, unfortunately, exit polls became the crucial point in assessing the role of the media in presidential elections. Top broadcasters in the country – HTV, RTL and TV Nova – violated election blackout which was supposed to last until midnight, while the biggest "winner/loser" Boris Miksic fell into shock after the State Election Commission announced at midnight the preliminary official results which sunk him into third place. After that, Miksic, proceeding from results announced by national TV stations based on exit polls, made accusations of theft of votes, conspiracy of the incumbent president and Prime Minister Ivo Sanadar to thwart Miksic at any cost, the Ukrainian scenario was mentioned, people were even called out into the streets, but in the end – nothing. Explanations and clarifications started on what exit polls are; that the Croatian public, since they are applied for the first time, is unprepared for them; they were surprised by Miksic, because at least he, with his decades-long American life and political experience, should be aware of all limitations of this method, etc. Finally, even before the elections, and especially after this media "blunder," from the most relevant places (e.g. President of the State Election Commission and President of the Supreme Court Ivica Crnic, President of the strongest opposition political party Ivica Racan) came proposals that what is called election blackout should be done away with

since it has proven to be completely non-functional, and even when it is violated, no sanctions are envisioned for the violators.

But, the hullabaloo with the exit polls and violation of election blackout threw, if not completely in the shadow, then certainly in the background, the real problems in media coverage of election campaigns. This time once again, unfortunately, it became clear that the rules prescribed by the Parliament for the main and still most influential media organization in Croatia – Croatian Television – are completely counterproductive. These rules also oblige other broadcasters with national concessions, but they, for example the private TV companies Nova TV and RTL, do not obey them.

Thirteen candidates were registered to run in these elections and they seemed to enjoy equal treatment on HTV – one individual appearance each and joint participation of all 13 candidates in just one TV duel. Certainly this approach meets the formal criteria of equal treatment of candidates, but it results in an unattractive election program and low viewer ratings. On the other hand, candidate advertisements on national television are not limited in any way and depend solely on the financial means that the individual candidates dispose of, thus creating essential inequality among them.

After the recent parliamentary elections, HRT journalists sent a public protest letter to then Parliament Speaker Zlatko Tomcic claiming that rules calling for equal treatment of the most influential and the completely marginal political parties and candidates (there are many of them) belittle the journalistic profession and make the television program of covering the election campaign absurd, but evidently nothing significant changed. Quite the contrary, one many say that the national TV company, even when not restricted by rules, showed a lack of inventiveness, bureaucratization and irrationality. Among the official and uniform questions put to the presidential candidates, there were many that are not even related to the powers of president of state, but the same questions were repeated both in the individual presentations and in the duel although, at least in the duel, the questions were supposed to be focused on several key issues on which the candidates could show their political programs and stands on the most important national issues and problems, which they could influence from their presidential position.

The leading national TV company, however, demonstrated its understanding of professionalism on a bizarre case. It suspended a journalist who was covering Stipe Mesic's election headquarters and who gave him, after the results of the first round were announced, a can of pâté. Namely, Stipe Mesic had said during the election campaign that the media and advertising space were so flooded with Jadranka Kosor that he was afraid even to open a can of pâté because she might jump out of it. Although this "journalistic" gimmick might be assessed as distasteful and below professional standards, it is clear that the leading media company in Croatia should deal with much more important professional issues. Primarily with the imposition of real professional standards and criteria for election campaigns. Of course, this is probably a hard nut to crack because the somewhat stultifying election rules were imposed by politicians, who are not eager to change them quickly or easily. In the diluted, boring and not highly watched media election campaign, it is much easier for politicians to avoid tricky questions and issues and get by without really rendering accounts to the public. But, isn't public television supposed to try to change that?

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