

Presidential elections in Croatia go to second round

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The Croatian National Electoral Commission announced Wednesday that no candidate had secured a majority in the first round of the presidential elections. Consequently a run-off will take place on February 7 between the two highest placed candidates. Stjepan Mesic, the Croatian Peoples Party (HNS) candidate, won 41.1 percent, against 27.7 percent for Drazen Budisa of the Social Democratic Party/Croatian Social Liberal Party (SDP/HSL) coalition.

Mate Granic of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) polled 22.5 percent. The HDZ is the party of former president Franjo Tudjman, whose death from cancer prompted the elections. Fourth place was taken by an independent candidate, Slaven Letica, with 4.1 percent.

One Western diplomat said of the first round result, "With these two in the finals, it's a win-win situation. Everything is going to be a lot easier than it has been."

The result delivered a further blow to the former ruling party following the HDZ's defeat in parliamentary elections at the beginning of this month. Western governments hailed the victory of the centre-left coalition in the parliamentary vote as a move towards a "new era of democracy in the Balkans". US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright telephoned to congratulate Social Democratic leader Ivica Racan soon after his party, together with the Social Liberals, won the January 3 elections.

European Union leader Romano Prodi visited Zagreb last week to show support for the new regime. Relations between the EU and Croatia had cooled in recent years but a decision was taken Monday to form a joint EU-Croatia task force to strengthen ties between the two.

After serving as the political proxy for both the US and Germany, Tudjman lost their support following the

settlement of the Bosnian war of 1992-95. His nationalist and expansionist ambitions were increasingly seen as a destabilising factor in Balkan politics, and the pervasive corruption and nepotism of his regime were considered obstacles to the requirements of international capital. Croatia was denied access to European Union (EU) funds, barred from NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and blocked from commencing initial talks on EU membership.

What pleases the West is that both contenders in next month's presidential run-off, and the new government coalition, are pledged to direct the country into both the European Union and the NATO alliance. They have also pledged to seek new relations with Bosnia, with its large Croat minority, and to co-operate with the War Crimes tribunal at The Hague.

Presented as a "down-to-earth" politician, 65-year-old Mesic is an old hand at Yugoslav politics. He was the last president of the Yugoslav Federation before its break-up in 1991. Initially co-operating with Tudjman, Mesic gradually came into conflict with him, accusing Tudjman of collaborating with Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic in dividing Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia. Mesic is regarded as something of a war hero for his role in commanding a flotilla of small boats in the Adriatic Sea that broke the Serb siege of Dubrovnik, carrying humanitarian aid into the harbour.

Like Mesic, his opponent Drazen Budisa, 51, was jailed in 1971 for nationalist activity in the old Yugoslavia. He is a political ally of the head of the new government, former Communist Party official Ivica Racan.

Both candidates are members of a six-party coalition that won the parliamentary elections on January 3. Despite there being no noticeable political differences

between the two, the second round battle looks set to be a dirty one. Mesic, regarded as the most likely winner, began his campaign by accusing elements of the country's intelligence services and the military of trying to torpedo his chances.

"All those who joined the campaign against me will have to account for their actions, those in the intelligence services, the generals who behaved in the way that had some of the hallmarks of an imminent coup d'etat," he told reporters without giving any details. He also warned that he might sack the future government if it failed to keep its promises to bolster the economy.

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For his part, Budisa said Mesic was displaying alarming intolerance. "His words are worrying, almost threatening to those who have dared to criticise him. I do not intend to threaten anyone," Budisa declared. Prime Minister-designate Racan said he would campaign for his ally Budisa, suggesting that Mesic could stand in the way of Croatia's push for reform.

One commentator, who called Mesic "a maverick", stressed that the new president would still have all the dictatorial powers that Tudjman had enjoyed.

Behind the euphoria over the elections, some commentators are taking a more sober approach to the future of the country. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times* political analyst Nenad Popovic warned, "The current surge of optimism may be short-lived once a new government gets down to the painful job of dismantling Tudjman's legacy." Popovic cautioned that once Croatians are forced to face "government cutbacks, job losses and growing gaps in the social safety net, voters may quickly turn nostalgic for Tudjman and his party."

The US and the European Union have promised more economic aid if Croatia's new government shows co-operation, particularly in relation to war crimes and the resettlement of several hundred thousand Serb refugees. But if the new government moves too quickly to satisfy the demands of the West, it risks provoking a backlash at home. Foreign investment is likely to benefit Croatia's elite and will do little to defuse the volatile issues in Croatian society, such as widespread joblessness.

The outcome of the February run-off will likely have

little impact on political life in Croatia. With an unemployment rate of some 20 percent and an economy that declined 1.5 percent in 1999, whatever the final composition of the new government, its tasks are already set out. To attract the promised investment from the transnational corporations, the new regime will implement free market policies that further erode the living standards of working people.



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