

Croatia

Period of democratic transition: 1999–2000

Pro-democracy civic movement: not present

After independence was proclaimed in 1991, Croatia drifted gradually toward authoritarian rule under President Franjo Tudjman and his ruling Croatian Democratic Union Party (HDZ). At the same time, Tudjman manipulated the presidency, the state, economic patronage, state media, political intimidation, and ethnic nationalism to mobilize his base and consolidate his hold on power. Nonetheless, some independent media and a number of civic groups and political parties continued to function throughout the 1990s.

When the Serb-Croat civil war ended in 1995, small pockets of opposition began gaining strength, while the HDZ found that its capacity to use ethnic nationalism and scare tactics was weakening. The death in December 1999 of President Tudjman enabled him to be perceived as the hero of Croatia's march to independence. As a result, the authoritarian system was shaken, and the ruling authorities agreed to ensure a civic and political environment conducive to a free and fair electoral process. In the subsequent presidential elections in January 2000, Stjepan Mesic, running as a joint candidate of the Croatian Peasant Party, the Croatian People's Party, the Liberal Party, and the Istrian Democratic Assembly, was elected president. In legislative elections that also took place in January 2000, a center-left coalition wrested control of Parliament from the HDZ. Ivica Racan, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDPC)—formerly the League of Communists of Croatia—was named prime minister. The parliamentary majority in the government formed by liberals and the SDPC advocated Croatia's rapid integration into the European mainstream.

Presidential and legislative elections have been held regularly in Croatia since 2000, and transitions are generally peaceful. Concerns continue to exist over minority rights and war crimes, but Croatia has striven to apply itself to democratic procedures in line with European Union membership rules.