

CROATIA

MAKING ELECTION CAMPAIGN FINANCES PUBLIC

Since 2009, Croatian citizens have witnessed a series of corruption scandals involving the financing of political parties and election campaigns. It has fuelled the public's mistrust of the political system, so much so that Transparency International's [Global Corruption Barometer 2013](#) reveals that Croatian citizens view political parties as the most corrupt of 12 public institutions. The Balkan country is battling to shake off this stain in its democratic development. Egged on by the demanding process of joining the European Union (EU), the Croatian government implemented an anti-corruption strategy, among which was the Political Activity and Election Campaign Financing Act adopted in 2011.

FEATURES OF THE INITIATIVE

Transparency in the flow of money in politics means a more informed voting public, which consequently strengthens the democratic process. Croatia's legislative framework is deemed to be one of the best among the Balkan countries. Political parties are required to disclose detailed financial reports on political campaigns during the campaign period, and also open a separate bank account for all financial transactions related to election campaigns to facilitate monitoring. State oversight agencies are elected by Parliament and are relatively independent with far-reaching powers. Both political parties

and donors can be punished in case of Act violations.

But it is common wisdom that the existence of a stellar law does not guarantee its implementation. Croatia's membership to the OGP gave civil society organizations a further window of opportunity to push for improvements in the law that would see it materialize in practice. One of the new provisions included in the OGP Action Plan is to make all the information on election campaign financing available to the public through a searchable database.

The process of filling the database with information has already begun. Every electoral candidate is required to fill out a form with certain details and submit it to the national or local Electoral Commission. Each donation and expenditure is identified and itemized. This includes the name and official registration number of each donor, discounts from the media, the amount of each donation and expenditures and

a general financial report. The Electoral Commission then forwards this to The Digital Information Documentation Office. Although data on the funding of parliamentary election campaigns is available through official accounting records, these are disorganized and not easy to access. The Digital Information Documentation Office of the government is currently collating and standardizing this data, along with data from local government elections, into the database.

FACING CHALLENGES

The financial reports from the last EU parliament elections in April were some of the first additions to the database. But collecting data from the local government elections has proved to be a challenge. For starters, there are 577 constituencies for local elections, with a mayor elected for each county and municipality. These generate about 6000 reports. As of now the database has

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collected around 500 reports out of 577 constituencies.

Second, while some candidates send the forms in PDF format to the local Electoral commission, others send the reports in paper or fax. The lack of a unified way of transferring the data means putting in extra effort in standardizing the data in digital format to ensure searchability of raw data in the database. The solution to this problem, naturally, is to require all candidates to fill out an application online to meet the reporting requirements. But according to GONG, one of the civil society organizations (CSOs) that introduced the idea of the database, this would require another amendment to the law, posing a third challenge. As of now, the database is searchable by name of constituency, candidates or political parties, the year and the type of election.

MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Given the relative newness of the Political Activity and Election Campaign Financing Act, the information in the database only covers the recent EU parliamentary elections and local elections of 2013. The Digital Office and CSO collaborators are attempting to collect information on past elections

to ensure an archival record as well. “The database will be a powerhouse of information for interested citizens, journalists, academia and civil society at large”, says Vanja Skoric from GONG. It is scheduled to be published in September 2013.

Despite the range of progressive anti-corruption measures enacted in recent years, CSO’s are wary of celebrating too early. With the country experiencing an economic recession in the past five years, financial and human resources flowing to public administration have been constrained. Consequently the implementation of laws is not moving at the accelerated pace that many would hope for.

However, the government is eager to showcase its commitment to transparency and accountability, and its membership to the EU and OGP should provide the incentive to put principles into practice. “We need to ensure that these memberships are not simply employed as a public relations tool by the government. We acknowledge that the government is currently facing a set of constraints but it is also important that they are honest about them and set achievable goals”, says Katarina Ott, Director of the Institute of Public

Finance, an academic think-tank in Croatia. Vanja Skoric from GONG notes that the government has made incremental progress in the OGP Action Plan but that CSO’s must continue their lobbying and advocacy efforts so as not to lose momentum. Initiatives like the searchable database on election campaign financing will go a long way in rebuilding public confidence in Croatia’s political parties.

“We are all enthusiasts in the Digital Office. We believe in publishing official documentation and information in all conceivable ways to ensure that it will find its way to the interested public. Given our experience in dealing with official information from 1994, we know that things in this sector are changing although there is room for more improvement.”

- Tamara Horvat,
The Digital Information Documentation Office
of the Republic of Croatia