

# LOCAL GOVERNANCE, INTEGRATION AND PARTICIPATION OF CROATIAN SERBS: IN SEARCH OF PROSPEROUS MODEL

Ivana Djuric<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

During the last decade, as Osamu Ieda emphasizes in *“The Emerging Local Governments in Eastern Europe and Russia”* (2000), an overestimation of macro aspects of post-communist democratic transitions became a general tendency among social scientists while the micro level transitional effects received less attention<sup>2</sup>. Very few scholars have dealt with actual functioning of local governments and its relation to minority representation and participation within local political institutions in post-socialist East European countries and Croatia in particular.

Concentrated to the bare state survival during early 1990's, less attention has been paid to the problems of implementation and practical functioning of provisions related to the performance of legally guaranteed minority rights within Croatian local self-government framework. This negligence toward minorities was often justified by the harsh ethnic conflict and devastations, as a result of Serb rebellion that country went through during the war period 1991-1995.

After a decade of authoritarian rule when everything was administered from the central government, Croatia has embarked process of administrative and financial decentralization just recently. As foreseen under this model, the central government derogates its powers to the lower levels of governance – the county that is an intermediate unit of local self-government and municipality or city that are basic units of local self-government in Croatia. Although in its' initial phase, this process has already caused some turbulence in both normative and implementing spheres.

This article seeks to examine existing models of governance in multiethnic units of local self-government that emerged in Croatia since its independence in 1991. Meeting this objective, I will explore cases of two municipalities - Plaški (Croats holding power) and Donji Lapac (Serbs holding power) where exclusion of one of the groups took place during the term 1997-2001, rather than uneasy ethnic cooperation as in Vukovar city. Finally, the most successful case is Kneževi Vinogradi municipality where it could be found some of the elements of Arend Lijphart's model of consociational democracy. This model is characterized by the grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and autonomy<sup>3</sup>. In Kneževi Vinogradi, a grand coalition in 1997-2001 term as well as recent cooperation of all local parties and proportional ethnic representation within local governmental structures and other local institutions are found to be crucial elements for stable and democratic governance. Seemingly this case offers a role model that one should seek establishing in other multiethnic local communities in Croatia.

Although there was a six months time distance in between evaluations of all four local units, these examples are valid and comparable representing typical models in governing multiethnic communities in Croatia. Three local units; Plaški, Donji Lapac and Vukovar were examined in April 2001, before the local elections held on 20 May 2001, while the case of Kneževi Vinogradi was examined in October 2001. In Donji Lapac and Vukovar, local power relations remained basically the same while in Plaški municipality the Serb majority won the elections and formed local government. Research was carried through non-standardized either one-on-one or group interviews with local prefects, political party representatives, members of other interest groups and local population. Interviews approximately lasted in between one and two hours in average.

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<sup>1</sup> Ivana Djuric is a Ph.D. student at Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia.

<sup>2</sup> Osamu Ieda, (ed.) *The Emerging Local Government in Eastern Europe and Russia: Historical and Post-communist Developments*, (Hiroshima: Keisuisha, 2000): 3

<sup>3</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, (Yale University Press: 1977): 25

### *1.1. Minority rights and local government in Croatia: legal framework*

Croatian officials often advertise a high degree of minority rights protection in a form of cultural autonomy and guaranteed minorities' political representation, pointing to the distinguished provisions of the Constitution, the "Constitutional Law on Human Freedoms and Rights and Rights of Ethnic and National Minorities" (Constitutional Law), laws on education and use of language etc. Similar accent is put onto parliamentary ratifications of major minority and human rights related international conventions and treaties. However, many of these advanced normative provisions were actually postponed as in the case of Constitutional Law provisions (1995) or severely abrupt during the last decade.

Although a significant improvement in situation was expected after the pro-democratic Coalition Government<sup>4</sup> overtook the power in January 2000, progressing has been slow. For the two years already, expectance of final 2001 population census results remains the main excuse for a non-application of certain portions of Constitutional Law, as well as the "Law on the Use of Language and Script of National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia", which was adopted in May 2001.

Furthermore, pending population census results serve as an obstacle for implementation of proscribed minority proportional representation at national and local levels. Already mentioned, the Constitutional Law foresees two types of minority participation. The first is a proportional representation in the Croatian National Parliament, Government of Republic of Croatia and judicial authority bodies, that is guaranteed to minorities whose number exceeds 8% of total Croatian population<sup>5</sup>.

The second type of minority representation is reserved for: "Members of ethnic and national communities or minorities whose share in the population of the Republic of Croatia is below 8% shall be entitled to elect at least five and maximum seven representatives to the House of Representatives of the Croatian National Parliament, under the Law on the Election of Representatives to the Croatian National Parliament"<sup>6</sup>.

Although the first provision on proportional ethnic representation relates initially to the largest Croatian minority - Serbs, its application is highly unlikely, as the estimated community size is in between 5-6 percents of total population of Croatia. Finally, as a clear contradiction to above ordinance, serves the fact of only one reserved seat for Serb minority in the Croatian National Parliament in its 2000-2004 mandate<sup>7</sup>.

Since this paper mostly deals with the local self-government and Serb minority representation within, it should be stressed that the Constitutional Law prescribes minority participation under the Article 18: "Members of ethnic and national communities and minorities shall be entitled to representation within local self-government bodies in accordance to their share within the total population of relevant local self-government unit"<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the Constitutional Law derogates additional regulation of the realization of aforementioned minority rights to the "Law on Local and Regional Self-government" (2001) and Statutes of local self-government units.

So far, Serb minority was systematically denied a legally guaranteed right to political representation in local governmental structures. This was a common practice even in those local units where Serb minority composes local majority. One may draw on several reasons that induced this situation. In the first place, the "Law on Local and Regional Self-government" does not say a word on mechanisms of minority participation within the local structures. Apparently, this issue is left to the regulation by sole local units and within their Statutes. It takes a great deal of time for local units to incorporate these provisions and pass Statutes. As an illustration, even in apparently successful case of local ethnic cooperation in Kneževi

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<sup>4</sup> Partners in the coalition are: Social Democrat Party (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske - SDP), Croatian Social Liberal Party (Hrvatska socijalno liberalna stranka - HSLS), Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska seljačka stranka - HSS), Croatian National Party (Hrvatska narodna stranka - HNS) and Liberal Party (Liberalna stranka - LS), while the Istrian Democratic Assembly (Istarski demokratski sabor - IDS) withdraw in 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Constitutional Law on Human Freedoms and Rights and Rights of Ethnic and National Minorities (2000), Article 17

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Article 17

<sup>7</sup> This regulation was adopted in the "Law on the Election of Representatives to the Croatian National Parliament" enacted in 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Constitutional Law on Human Freedoms and Rights and Rights of Ethnic and National Minorities (2000), Article 18

Vinogradi the municipal Statute (allowing official use of Hungarian language) was adopted in February 2002, which is 9 months after the local elections. In yet another case, the Central Government put under close review and banned certain regulations on Italian minority language use in the Statute of County of Istria in 2001.

As stated in one of the reports of Urban Institute Croatia, the most important explanation for failures in adoption of existing laws is also "...insufficient equipment and readiness of authorized institutions of the system to occupy themselves with the realization of ethnic rights of members of national minorities"<sup>9</sup> as well as "...lack of interest of the part of bodies of local administration and self-government to engage themselves in the process of realization of ethnic rights of national minorities on their respective territories"<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to an ambiguous Coalition Government's stance, part of troubles and delays should be ascribed to turbulences in both minority and local self-government legal frameworks that were changed many times therefore provoking instability. Among these is certainly the Coalition Government's long announced decentralization process.

## ***1.2. Decentralization***

Decentralization is a political phenomenon that could be in the simplest way defined as a delegation of power to lower levels. The key-element is a hierarchical designation of different competencies and responsibilities (administrative and financial) to the different institutions as well as functions. According to B. C. Smith, the decentralization includes "subdivision of the state's territory into smaller areas and the creation of political and administrative institutions in those areas"<sup>11</sup>.

In an effort to dismantle communist legacies of high political and administrative centralization, as Osamu Ieda highlights, all of newborn East European democracies tried to introduce different models of decentralization that were characterized by trial and error as a result of "absence of models or solid consensus"<sup>12</sup>. As it seems, many countries employed practices that were opposite to the existing 'communist' ones and therefore a priori considered democratic.

Jeopardized by internal ethnic challenges that led to war, along with the state building in an atmosphere of extremely authoritarian and nationalistic politics, Croatia became highly centralized. Immediately after the proclamation of independency, it was declared as "a unitary and indivisible democratic and social state"<sup>13</sup>, while the model of unitary and centralized governance has been introduced. Ieda identified Croatian system as a 'continental type of local government' in which "...local governments are responsible for comprehensive administration including state administrations and receive budgets from the central government"<sup>14</sup>. He continues describing Croatia as "an incomplete two-tier system of local government" in terms of functioning, with a directly elected councillors (who function simultaneously as a legislative organ – representing local inhabitants - and being an administrative organ) and central government that "appointed or approved governor"<sup>15</sup>.

The first step toward reform of local government system was an adoption of the new "Law on Local and Regional Self-Government" in 2001 that set up a legal framework for decentralization. However, these regulations omit accommodating the most important issue - a specific multiethnic environment particularly within those communities situated in Croatian areas that were strongly affected by the war 1991-1995.

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<sup>9</sup> Report on Republic of Croatia, Urban Institute (2002)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> B. C. Smith, "Decentralization: The Territorial Dimension of the State", (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985): Introduction

<sup>12</sup> Osamu Ieda, (ed.) *The Emerging Local Government in Eastern Europe and Russia: Historical and Post-communist Developments*, (Hiroshima: Keisuisha, 2000): 5

<sup>13</sup> "Declaration on the establishment of the sovereign and independent Republic of Croatia" (Deklaracija o proglašenju suverene i samostalne Republike Hrvatske, 25 June 1991), Article 1

<sup>14</sup> Osamu Ieda, (ed.) *The Emerging Local Government in Eastern Europe and Russia: Historical and Post-communist Developments*, (Hiroshima: Keisuisha, 2000): 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid; 6

These communities not only suffer a difficult economic decline but are also confronted with serious internal ethnic cleavages and hostilities. In addition to the internal conflicts, there was present an external confrontation with the central government especially after Croatian general elections held in January 2001. Oppositional parties won the elections and have formed Coalition Government thus overtaking power at the national level from the late president Franjo Tudjman's party - Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - HDZ) that dominated Croatian political arena since 1990. Simultaneously, this party remained in power at large number of local units and especially at the war torn areas of Lika, north Dalmatia, Kordun, Banovina, West and East Slavonia and Baranja, that are ethnically the most diverse Croatian regions<sup>16</sup>.

### 1.3. Demographic data of four examined cases: Plaški, Donji Lapac, Vukovar and Kneževi Vinogradi

In contemporary Croatia live 22 legally recognized ethnic and national minorities who according to 1991 population census composed 22 percents of 4,7 million inhabitants. Serb community used to amount 581,663 or 12,2 percents of total Croatian population in 1991. During the last decade, this number decreased to estimated 5-6 percents.

Although other minority communities confront variety of problems on a daily basis, too, conditions of Croatian Serbs appear the most difficult. Citizenship refusal, employment discrimination, violation of property rights particularly in a form of obstacles when trying to return their pre-war assets, denial of public and social services access are among the most frequently reported violations. Undoubtedly, this situation is reality in three out of four examined units of local self-government - Plaški, Donji Lapac and Vukovar.

Geographically, Plaški municipality is located in north Lika region (Karlovac county), Donji Lapac in north Dalmatia (Lika-Senj county), while city of Vukovar is in eastern Slavonia (Vukovar-Sirmium county), and Kneževi Vinogradi in Baranja region (Osijek-Baranja county). Before examining the ethnic structure of concerned communities, it is important to underline that both, Vukovar and Kneževi Vinogradi are located in ethnically highly diverse areas with significant portions of other populations aside Croats and Serbs.

Serb population comprise local majority in Plaški and Donji Lapac, while in Vukovar estimated ethnic distribution varied from 50 percents up to 80 percents in Serbs' favour. Kneževi Vinogradi municipality is exceptional as Hungarians make local majority constituting 39 percents of population, Croats make 31 percents, Serbs 21 percents and 'Others' 9 percents<sup>17</sup>.

**Figure 1. Ethnic distribution of population**

	Plaški		Donji Lapac		Vukovar		Kneževi Vinogradi	
	1991	2001*	1991	2001*	1991	2001	1991	2001*
<b>Croats</b>	83	1545	44	300	21854	n.a.	1764	1621
<b>Serbs</b>	4074	1869	7854	2000	14797	n.a.	1437	1087
<b>Hungarians</b>	-	-	-	-	n.a.	n.a.	2763	2128
<b>Others</b>	160	-	158	-	9312	n.a.	884	460
<b>Total</b>	4317	3414	8056	2300	45963	25007	6848	5278

Sources: Juraj Hrženjak, "Lokalna samouprava i uprava u Republici Hrvatskoj" (Local Self-Administration and Government in Republic of Croatia), (Zagreb: Informator, 1993): 142, 402-403, 377

\*Data provided by local units' officials.

Decrease in the population and its' structural changes are common situation to each of four considered units of local self-government. As it is well known Vukovar suffered the most horrible destruction in the

<sup>16</sup> There is one more ethnically diverse region: Istria, which is situated in the northwest Croatia with a significant portion of Italian minority. This area was not directly involved in war 1991-1995 and therefore will not be covered in this article.

<sup>17</sup> The group of 'others' embraces Bosniaks, Montenegrins, Slovenians, Roma, Albanians, Ruthenians, Germans etc.

beginning of the war with 22,000 of its inhabitants expelled. Under the Erdut treaty (1995) and interim mandate of United Nations Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES), this area was peacefully reintegrated with Croatia in January 1998. So far only 37 percents of refugees returned to the town: "...due to the large scale of destruction, the high number of houses occupied by Serb displaced persons as well as the difficult economic situation in Vukovar"<sup>18</sup>.

Kneževi Vinogradi municipality was more fortunate and preserved majority of its original population as the municipality was not involved into direct war operations nor experienced heavy ethnically inspired atrocities. Moreover, there are estimated 95 percents of refugees who returned to the wider region of Baranja<sup>19</sup>.

In August 1995, after Croatian military operation "Storm", Plaški and Donji Lapac municipalities were almost completely depopulated. Croatian Government resettled to these areas Bosnian Croats and Croats from other regions of Croatia. Indigenous Serbs could not enter their property upon return since this was given to the new settlers. This social engineering causes additional animosity and bitterness in both communities.

Despite hostile local circumstances and occasional opened violence, certain number of local Serbs returned to Plaški and Donji Lapac and especially after governmental 1998's withdrawal of "Law on Temporary Takeover and Management of Particular Property" (enacted in September 1995). Among returnees majority are elderly persons that is a constant pattern in other places too. As reported in the latest governmental document "Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration of Croatian Refugees"<sup>20</sup>, 52 percents of around 16,500 refugees who applied to ODP/UNHCR for the return are persons older than 50 years while children under age of 7 compose only 3 percents of caseload. For example, Plaški counted in between 900-1000 registered pensioners and Donji Lapac 826 what makes more than 30 percents of its total population. In comparison, Kneževi Vinogradi with 5278 inhabitants registered 932 pensioners. Finally, both municipalities Plaški and Donji Lapac used to have high schools that no longer exist due to insufficient number of pupils.

#### ***1.4. Minorities' access to public and social services?***

As mentioned above, there used to be a high school in Plaški and Donji Lapac municipalities while today there are only elementary schools running. Guaranteed education in minority language and script exists neither in Plaški nor Donji Lapac. Yet, Serb and Hungarian minority in Kneževi Vinogradi and Serbs in Vukovar exercise this right. Unlike Hungarian minority who utilized this right during the socialist period already, Croatian Serbs organized education in own language and script only during the war and at the territories of their control. Due to the Erdut treaty regulations and UNTAES mediation they succeeded in preserving this privilege. However, there are many concerns arisen around the issue of ethnic segregation in schools of east Croatia. For example, in the case of Vukovar, children follow not only different school curricula but are also physically separated. This voluntary segregation starts from kindergartens up to high schools. Of course it produces a certain positive effect in terms of preserving minority's identity but unfortunately does not support much needed Serbo-Croat reconciliation and formation of healthy interethnic relations in Vukovar and similar local communities.

An overall difficult economic situation, and high unemployment rate that reaches even 80 percents certainly discourage return of more young Serbs (but Croats also) to devastated communities of Croatia. According to recent analysis, poverty rate in these areas is three times higher than in other parts of Croatia. This situation forces already returned Croats to leave this territories again.

In Plaški municipality, only 125 were employed in 2001, while Donji Lapac registered even less, 88 employed persons. Recent data on Vukovar register 3500 (10 percents of the total population) of unemployed inhabitants.

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<sup>18</sup> "Return Process to the Danube region nearing completion (2000)", OSCE Mission to Croatia 18 January 2001. <http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.vlada.hr/english/stability-pact.html>

Although an exact data are uneasy to obtain, there are many claims that minorities, and in particular Serb minority are often denied job access. As an illustration of this argument comes the Plaški case where some unqualified teachers work in school while this position was denied to qualified but ethnic Serb candidates.

Among other major barriers that Serb minority faces at level of local communities where those rights should be implemented are difficulties when applying for citizenship, pensions or social and health insurance. Failure in obtaining Croatian citizenship restricts Serbs from all set of rights and in particular the reconstruction of damaged property. But even those that hold citizenship are often denied basic social services as health care and social aid.

The most recent UNHCR's survey shows that Serb returnees receive less assistance than it was the case with Croat returnees<sup>21</sup>. As an illustration of some of the discriminatory governmental treatments appears the following: "...displaced members of the ethnic majority keep their DP status - including the benefits resulting thereof - after having returned to their pre-war area of domicile. Usually they are residing in houses of the Serb minority in relative vicinity to their own damaged/destroyed houses. They lose these benefits only 6 months after having been asked by the authorities to move into their reconstructed houses. On the other hand, minority returnees usually lose benefits having been granted to them for 6 months upon return regardless of whether or not they have managed to repossess their occupied houses or receive reconstruction assistance."<sup>22</sup>

Although the Coalition Government took some steps aiming to improve the situation, effects are not visible due to slowness.

Property return is far the greatest obstacle that Serb minority returnees confront with. This task is completely administered by local self-government units and their Municipal Housing Committees. So far, they managed to return the property in only a small number of the easiest cases. Moreover, as underlined in the U.S. Department of State report: "Local housing commissions often were purposefully dysfunctional and failed to resolve housing disputes, or when functional legally were powerless to implement their own decisions under an existing legal framework that still was unaddressed by the Government"<sup>23</sup>. Obviously mismanaging this task, local self-government units only reproduce widespread pattern of ethnic non-cooperation and conflict. Apparently different situation seems to be in Kneževi Vinogradi municipality that since 1997 handled 150 housing requests out of which only 10 remained unsolved in 2001. Part of the answer is certainly existence of political will but also the fact that not many newcomers settled within the municipality.

### ***1.5. Minorities' representation and participation in local government: Models found in practice***

At the beginning of his book "*Democracy in Plural Societies*" (1977), Arend Lijphart discusses impediments in realization of "stable democratic government in a plural society" highlighting that "Social homogeneity and political consensus are regarded as prerequisites for, or factors strongly conducive to stable democracy. Conversely, the deep social divisions and political differences within plural societies are held responsible for instability and breakdown in democracies."<sup>24</sup> His model of consociational democracy that consists of grand coalition, proportional representation, mutual veto and autonomy of each segment,

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<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, January 4 2001

<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/8A9D565372DD0FE9C1256A7D004E32C4>

<sup>22</sup> "Conditions for return have been more favorable to the Croat majority than for the Serb minority" (2000-2001), (Description of Problems Concerning Return, OSCE 2001)

<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/E34A8F6EA528F5A2C1256A7D004E614B>

<sup>23</sup> "*Croatia 2001 Country Report on Human Rights Practices Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor*", (U.S. Department of State, February 2001)

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/eur/716.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, (Yale University Press, 1977): 1

offers “conflict management by cooperation and agreement among the different elites rather than by competition and majority decision.”<sup>25</sup>

Certain forms of this model are found in one of the successful cases of management of multiethnic local communities, which is Kneževi Vinogradi municipality<sup>26</sup>. Local elections held on April 1997, were basically the first ballots taken simultaneously in the whole Croatian territories. Unlike other war affected local units where nationalistic Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party and extreme right Croatian Right Party (Hrvatska stranka prava – HSP) party acquired majority votes and formed local governments; therefore totally excluding one segment of local population from the power and other social benefits; Kneževi Vinogradi local politicians choose another path. With relative majority of 7 elected representatives out of total 16, the HDZ party could not form local government alone. Independent Hungarian list won 5 places and Independent Democrat Serb Party (Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka - SDSS) acquired 4. In other local units a similar situation was usually settled in a way that non-Serb political parties formed local coalitions no matter if they had dissimilar programs. Keeping Serbs out of the power was the main task gathering Croat nationalistic and right orientated parties predominantly but other moderate parties, too. Instead of analogous scenario, local branches of three winning political parties in Kneževi Vinogradi agreed to make a grand coalition which apparently functioned fairly well. The latest local elections in May 2001, introduced yet a different situation. As visible from the Figure 2, votes were even greater dispersed among large number of political parties therefore causing a great fragmentation in local political arena. Certainly, this situation was perpetuated by turbulences on national political scene as some parties split. For example Democratic Centre Party (Demokratski centar - DC) emerged after the split in HDZ party in 2000.

**Figure 2. Distribution of elected political parties’ representatives in local councils in 1997 and 2001**

Political parties	Plaški		Donji Lapac		Vukovar		Kneževi Vinogradi	
	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001
DC						2		1
HDZ	12	3			12	10	7	2
HPS <sup>1</sup>					2	3		
HSP		2	2	1				1
HSS	4 <sup>2</sup>	1						
Independent I (Hungarian)							5	2
Independent II (Hungarian)								1
Independent III								1
Independent				3				
SNS			11	8				
SDSS		8			12	8	4	2
SDP		1				2		3
SRP			3 <sup>3</sup>	1				
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>

<sup>1</sup> Independent list of HPS (Croatian People Party).

**Legend:** ■ Croats’ political parties

<sup>2</sup> One representative of HSS (Croatian Peasant Party) in Plaški was ethnic Serb.

■ Serbs’ political parties

<sup>3</sup> Representatives of SRP (Socialist Workers Party) in Donji Lapac were ethnic Serbs.

Returning back to post-electoral reality in Kneževi Vinogradi, one could notice that unlike the previous term, the HDZ, DC and HSP party stayed in opposition. The local government was formed around the

<sup>25</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, (Yale University Press, 1977): 5

<sup>26</sup> Similar model of proportional ethnic representation seems to be employed in Labin municipality (Istria) with significant number of Italians and other minorities.

strongest single winning party – Social Democrat Party (SDP). Ethnic Hungarian who later became a head of the local executive power – the Prefect headed their list.

Although the three opposition parties with 4 elected members in Municipal Council do not participate in municipal executive body – the Executive Board; their delegates were indeed invited to participate in certain local governmental bodies. For an example, a HDZ delegate is involved as a member of municipal Committee for Complaints and Problems of National Minorities. Moreover, as revealed in interview with municipal prefect mr. Deneš Šoja, the initial post-electoral division on position and opposition apparently has disappeared, as all relevant decisions are being discussed and approved by all 13 members of the Municipal Council.

Local government of Kneževi Vinogradi in previous and the new term expresses a special concern to introduce legally proscribed proportional ethnic representation within its structures but other municipal services, too. Fair allocation of posts among political parties and simultaneous fair ethnic representation seems rather complicated to achieve. Yet, this goal was reached. Keeping in mind local ethnic structure of Kneževi Vinogradi, the next model was applied when disbursing positions: ethnic Hungarians are entitled to 5 posts, Croats to 4, Serbs to 3 and others to 1<sup>27</sup>. There were enough members of different ethnic groups among the winning parties, which created post-electoral local coalition, to fill the ethnic quota. Although in some cases delegates of oppositional parties were also appointed.

Kneževi Vinogradi is a small municipality in terms of population therefore advantaged by the fact that everyone knows each other in person. This fact enormously enabled cooperation as much as openness of local politicians in adopting above described cooperative model that was further supported by consensual decision-making. Finally, a special tribute should be made to the personality of Kneževi Vinogradi's prefect mr. Šoja, who served as a vice prefect in 1997-2001 mandate, but is also an official of "old system". As experienced in some other post-communist countries, many of so called 'apparatchiki' turned to be rather efficient and proponent local agents within the new system due their experience and knowledge of local political environment. But ability to adopt new strategies and changes served as indispensable condition of their success.

Unlike the model of ethnic cooperation established in Kneževi Vinogradi, the local government in Plaški municipality was fully dominated by nationalistic HDZ party and resettled Croats. These local structures showed lack of will to response needs of Serb returnees extensively using its dominant position. It failed handling Serbs' housing repossession requests as apparently none of 160 decisions of Municipal Housing Committee's was ever enforced. Through local government's obstruction of Serb returnees' access to variety of social benefits, HDZ led local structures proved concern for their own and one-sided interests and not the whole community. Domination and social exclusion exercised by Plaški local government only deepened ethnic cleavage and nursed segregation. This discriminatory governing model was the most commonly spread among majority of post-war Croatian local communities with a significant portion of Serb population.

Uniquely, Donji Lapac was a single local unit aside East Slavonia where Serbs held power since 2000. On a pre-time elections called after the failure of coalition of HDZ and extreme right Croatian Right Party (HSP), the Serbian People Party (Srpska narodna stranka - SNS) came in power winning 11 places out of 16 within the Municipal Council. This occurred due to high number of Serb returnees. Let aside that this change in power improved psychologically a general feeling of security among local Serbs, the new SNS local government experienced blockings in its' decisions implementation. For example, after heated general public debate in March 2001, the Central Government had to restrain realization of Municipal Council's decision to rename the streets<sup>28</sup> in Donji Lapac. Local HSP party branch accused SNS led local government for taking advantage of its newly achieved majoritarian position and maltreatment of local Croats. Under the law, the issue of street renaming is clearly within the competences of units of local self-government.

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<sup>27</sup> More on Kneževi Vinogradi municipality case see Ivana Djuric, "Local Governance in the Municipality of Kneževi Vinogradi (Croatia)", in: Nenad Dimitijevic ed. "Managing Multiethnic Communities (second part)", (Budapest: LGI/OSI, forthcoming 2002)

<sup>28</sup> Fourteen street names out of total 18 were to be replaced. Among disputed titles was the street named after the Croatian's Army 9<sup>th</sup> brigade the 'Wolves' which in opinion of local prefect and population did not liberate the town but set it in fire after the military operation 'Storm' in August 1995. The new streets titles were chosen among cultural and historical figures among Croatian Serbs.

However, in order to avoid rise of interethnic antagonism and after an enormous pressure exercised by media and the Central Government, these decisions were not applied. For the same reasons local Municipal Housing Committee<sup>29</sup> did not employ any of its decisions on property repossession that involved eviction of Croat occupants.

Finally, the last case of local governance in Vukovar introduces model of difficult political cooperation that required Central Government's mediation (at that time HDZ run) on several occasions. Initially, the power relations in Vukovar City Council were slightly in favour of Croats and HDZ party after 1997 local elections. Croat block made up of 12 representatives of HDZ and 2 representatives from independent extremely right orientated list of Croatian People's Party (Hrvatska pučka stranka – HPS). At the same time Serbs had 12 representatives within SDSS party. This slight advantage secured Croats with the post of City Mayor and one Vice-mayor. The second Vice-mayor and 6 members of city's 13 members' Executive Board were SDSS representatives. Tight result allowed Croats to dominate the local decision-making process therefore leaving Serb part regularly outvoted. On several occasions they demonstratively left City Council's sessions. In one of such cases, dispute was over the main city's soccer stadium that was given to the local Croat soccer team "Vukovar 1991". The Serb party returned into the City Council only after the HDZ run Central Government and party headquarter pressured the Croat side. Compromising solution was found in providing financial support and another playground to Serbs' local soccer team. Shortly afterwards and again without Serbs' party consent, city Executive Board granted Croat soccer team the third playground.

During the 1997-2001 mandates, some of elected representatives of all three parties (HDZ, HPS and SDSS) transferred to other parties (as HSS, HSP etc.) what complicated the overall situation even more and burdened political bargaining at local political scene. Further developments could be observed in the outcome of the last local elections held in May 2001, when two more parties find the way into Vukovar's City Council. In order to obstruct Serb participation in local power, HDZ, HSP and DC joined a Croat-block coalition and formed government. In March 2002, this coalition apparently started showing signs of breaking up over the issue of renewed kindergarten that supposed to accommodate already existing 2 separate kindergartens for Croat and Serb children<sup>30</sup>. Although under the HDZ plans the two groups of children would be physically kept apart in this new building, HSP coalition partner apparently disliked the idea.

Vukovar's specific situation as being the site of worst war destructions and ethnic atrocities committed undermines any political cooperation among local Croat and Serb political elites. Beside apparent disinterest in interethnic cooperation both sides are additionally hampered working under the microscope of largely antagonistic Croatian general public.

## Conclusion

Although all four examined communities are bounded with similar legal framework, as it is presented earlier, they developed different practices in management of local ethnic diversity and responses to their populations' needs. With initial advantage in preserving already established Serb minority institutions as schools, kindergartens, etc; which was granted under the Erdut treaty (1995) and UNTAES interim administration, East Croatian units of local self-government differ significantly from the rest of Croatian war affected areas.

Despite, when it comes to the level of accomplishment of basic social needs of their ethnically diverse populations, only Kneževi Vinogradi local government employed apparently effective mode of governing ethnic diversity.

Indeed the cooperative model developed in Kneževi Vinogradi and especially during the term 1997-2001, is very similar to one described by Lijphart's model of consociational democracy which assumes that "...it may be difficult, but it is not at all impossible to achieve and maintain stable democratic government in a

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<sup>29</sup> By April 2001, the Municipal Housing Committee received 121 applications for property repossession but solved only 66.

<sup>30</sup> "Štengl: Ni u vrijeme reintegracije nije bilo više optimizma – bilo je više obećanja" (Štengl: There was not more optimism during the reintegration process – but there were more promises), Vjesnik 11 March, 2002.

plural society.”<sup>31</sup> Such successful practice in governing multiethnic local communities seems to be very much needed in many regions of Croatia and especially after the last 2001 local elections when a number of pre-war Serb dominated municipalities’ re-established local Serb majorities and elected own representatives. It is of great importance that this reversal in local power relations will not simply reproduce earlier situation though this time excluding local Croats from power access. Hopefully, this change will be accompanied by strong organizational solutions in local governance and not just by good intentions and fruitless promises of local politicians to normalize interethnic relations in their municipalities.

As revealed, up to this moment only one successful model of local government - a model of consociational democracy and in particular the proportional ethnic representation was applied in Kneževi Vinogradi municipality. Along with recent decentralisation process that provides necessary financial and administrative tools, this model offers key answers for revitalization of Croatian war destroyed local communities and their sustainable development. Finally, local political cooperation across ethnic boundaries and varying programs seems inevitable due to registered fragmentation in both - Croatian political scene and electorate.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid; 1

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