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Local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Change or more of the same?

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The stakes were high. The local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), held on 7 October 2012, came at one of the most critical moments for the country in recent times. The government has practically not been functioning since the last general elections of 2010: after it took more than 16 months for BiH politicians to reach an agreement and allocate the seats in the Council of Ministers, the coalition effectively broke down shortly afterwards. Disagreements over the state budget served as a trigger for the final clash between the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Party of Democratic Action (SDA). The latter's ministers were later forced out and SDA found itself in the opposition, while SDP formed a new coalition with the party 'Alliance for a Better Future' (SBB).

The ongoing institutional deadlock and political instability have been seriously hampering policy-making and slowing down necessary reforms, pushing the entire country to the limits of its sustainability. During the two years of inter-party bickering and strife over distribution of power, the Bosnian society has been struggling with a worsened economic situation and with unemployment and poverty rates that remain among the highest in the region. The October 2012 elections came as a long awaited opportunity for the neglected BiH citizenry to send a concrete message to the country's leadership expressing their dissatisfaction with the current order of things. Although giving mandates only to local authorities, the vote carried more weight, as it could serve as a political message for changing the course of action before the general elections of 2014. For that reason, the voters anything but snubbed the local elections: the turnout was 54.79% in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), 59.18% in Republika Srpska (RS), 51.57% in Brčko District, and 56.36% in BiH as a whole.

The electoral results

The electoral picture was pretty complex: citizens of BiH voted for the composition of 78 municipal assemblies in the Bosniak- and Croat-dominated entity FBiH, 58 municipal and five city assemblies in the Serb-dominated entity RS, the assembly of the autonomous Brčko District, and voted to elect mayors among 550 candidates. 87 political parties, 59 coalitions and 224 independent candidates participated in the elections. A total of 3,144,296 registered voters had the opportunity to choose from among 30,351 candidates.

The outcome of the elections in both entities is, however, much simpler:

- Defeat of the two centre-left parties that won the 2010 general elections (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats-SNSD and Social Democratic Party-SDP),
- Victory of the traditional ethnic parties of the three Bosnian nations (Party of Democratic Action-SDA, the Serb Democratic Party-SDS and the Croat Democratic Community-HDZ).

In Republika Srpska, SNSD, the party of the entity President Milorad Dodik, lost a considerable number of mayoral positions compared to the previous local elections. SNSD had 41 mayoral seats, it expected to win 45, but ended up with only 18; importantly, it lost the race in four out of the five biggest urban centres in RS – Bijeljina, Doboj, Prijedor and Trebinje. The number of the representatives the party will have in municipal and city assemblies has noticeably decreased. Even in Dodik's hometown and SNSD stronghold Laktaši, support for the party fell from 70.48% in 2008 to only 46.80%. In contrast, SDS came out of the elections victorious, winning alone or in a coalition with other opposition parties in 36 out of 63 municipalities in RS, and appointing mayors in 27 of them, up from 13 in 2008.

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In the FBiH the main loser is SDP, the party of the Bosnian Minister of Foreign Affairs Zlatko Lagumdžija. Even though the party won more mayoral positions compared to 2008 (11 up from eight), it lost about 100,000 votes. It also lost some of its important urban strongholds, such as Bihać and Sarajevo Novi Grad. In contrast, SDA attracted a significant number of votes, winning some 300,000 in total. It won 34 mayoral seats - three times more than SDP – and will hold the mayoral posts in the aforementioned former urban strongholds of the SDP. SDP's new coalition partner, and third-biggest Bosniak party, 'Alliance for a Better Future' (SBB), competed in 50 municipalities but managed to win the mayoral position only in Goražde and Sarajevo Stari Grad; the latter, however, is a symbolically important political prize since it is the Old Town of Sarajevo and a former traditional stronghold of SDA. Croat-majority municipalities in FBiH remained largely loyal to either HDZ or its more nationalist splinter party HDZ 1990. HDZ alone won 13 mayoral seats, HDZ 1990 three, while in joint coalition the two parties managed to win two more. The two HDZs once more prevailed easily over smaller parties, such as the nationalist Croat Party of Rights (HSP) and the moderate and civic-oriented 'People's Party Progress through Work' (NSRzB).

Back to 1991? Interpreting the popular vote

Since the ethnic parties traditionally associated with nationalism in BiH were significantly strengthened, many were tempted to view these elections as a return to the dark 1991. That year, after the fateful elections of November 1990, saw the country quickly sliding to political deadlock, state collapse and eventually war, a process in which the main protagonists were the very SDS, SDA and HDZ.

For many reasons this is a superficial reading of the results. Most obviously, it is highly misleading to draw parallels between the pre-war phase of nationalism and the current state of affairs in Bosnia; nowadays, despite problems and ethnic divisions, the popular mood is far from attuned to new wars. In addition, it is unfair to the small or big steps to reform and moderation that the three main ethnic parties have done in the previous years to equate their current state with their 1990s ideologies and policies. Finally, their centre-left opponents are also not what they used to be. SNSD, in stark contrast to its earlier more moderate politics, has in recent years become the champion of the Serb national cause outflanking SDS. Meanwhile, SDP long ago adjusted its discourse to fit the needs of a mainly Bosniak electorate and is now in a position to attract even conservative and nationalist voters.

Thus, rather than a return to nationalism the results rather signal the growing dissatisfaction of the electorate with the current state of political affairs and their call for change. The vote was less for the ethnic alternatives and more against the parties mostly associated with the current situation. The two parties of the centre-left, SNSD and SDP, are linked by many voters with the messy political scene that resulted from the 2010 general elections. It was, after all, these two parties that were given the 'green light' by the voters in 2010 to move the country forward. Far



FEDERATION OF BIH

SARAJEVO

In the four central municipalities of the capital SDA elected mayors in Novo Sarajevo (Koldžo) and Novi Grad (Efendić), SDP in Centar (Bečirević), and SBB in Stari Grad (Hadžibajrić). In 2008, SDA and SDP had two mayoral seats each. With regard to the municipal assemblies, SDA kept the leading position in two, SDP in one and SBB in one; in 2008 SDA won in three municipal assemblies and SDP in one.

TUZLA

The SDP was weakened but maintained its biggest stronghold in the country, the industrial city of Tuzla in the northeast. Popular mayor Jasmin Imamović was elected with 56.36% of the vote, down from 76.62% in 2008. In the new Tuzla assembly SDP will have 10 seats, down from 16 in 2008, followed by SDA with six seats, down from seven in 2008.

BIHAĆ

SDP lost its mayoral position and a leading number of the mandates in the assembly, which now both belong to SDA.

ZENICA

Just like in 2008, the city remained loyal to SDA. However, the party was weakened (64.96% for mayor, down from 79.85% in 2008; 14 mandates in the assembly, down from 15 in 2008). SDP slightly improved its 2008 result.

MOSTAR

The elections were not conducted due to disputes between the Croat and Bosniak parties over the electoral rules and procedures.

Source: Central Election Commission, www.izbori.ba

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from it, both centre-left forces focused on their narrow party interests, failing to advance any serious reform.



BRČKO DISTRICT

SDP was the strongest party in the assembly winning 15.41% of the vote, down from 22.43% in 2008. SNSD came second with 12.87%, followed by SDS with 11.53%, SBB with 11.09% and SDA with 9.83%.

The mayor will be elected indirectly, by the Assembly.

Source: Central Election Commission, www.izbori.ba

SNSD, after being seen for several years as a positive force in RS due to its moderate agenda, has in recent years demonstrated the worst qualities of a status quo power. Economic failure, unemployment, lack of prospects for the population, corruption and cronyism are the standard grievances against the SNSD rule in RS. At the same time, Milorad Dodik has already, since 2006, adopted a nationalist discourse of separatism which has once again estranged the RS political class from the international community. His constant attack on state-level institutions and his provocative use of ethnic rhetoric has antagonized the Bosniak parties making it virtually impossible to reach a consensus on key policies that will help the country move closer to Europe. His posturing as the main protector of Serbian national interests has hardly helped the socio-economic situation of RS citizens.

While nationalist rhetoric helped SNSD attract additional sympathizers among the Serbian population in the past, today, with rising poverty and unemployment, the voters became tired of it all.

SDP on the other hand, as the largest party after the 2010 general elections, was authorized to create a coalition government for reform and socio-economic progress. But the party, and especially its president, Zlatko Lagumdžija, with a series of failed political moves, spent the political capital won in 2010. Observers were initially perplexed with the party's coalition negotiations which saw the centre-left option partnering with SDA and smaller Croat parties, including an ultra-nationalist one, only to make sure that HDZ is kept out of the government in the FBiH. When the tables were turned, SDP dropped SDA and started courting SBB. Supporters, especially those of civic orientation, felt betrayed since SBB is widely seen not only as a Bosniak nationalist party, but also as a political vehicle to advance the business interests of media mogul Fahrudin Radončić. SDP's political bickering was responsible for the wasting of crucial time after the 2010 general elections. In addition, many voters were disappointed with Zlatko Lagumdžija's almost autocratic behavior. The loss of Željko Komšić, a very popular SDP politician and Croat member of the BiH Presidency, came as a result of the arrogance demonstrated by Lagumdžija and his close circle of associates. This rift demonstrated that the SDP party oligarchy does not hesitate to sever its relations with a key party official and staunch Bosnian patriot to advance its own power calculations. The overall outcome was a widespread feeling that SDP failed to keep campaign promises for socio-economic recovery. Instead, both citizens and the international community increasingly see the party as co-responsible for the political instability.

The post-election developments: Business as usual?

Despite a weak showing, SDP and SNSD do not seem willing to reconsider their policies nor are there serious intra-party shuffles to be expected. Both Zlatko Lagumdžija and Milorad Dodik maintain a strong hold on their parties and the electoral results will hardly endanger their position. In fact, only cosmetic, intra-party changes occurred after the elections. For example, SNSD dissolved ten municipal boards, thus passing to local party chiefs the blame for the electoral defeat.

In contrast, the policies at the political centre-stage continued unabated. SDP continued its initiative for the restructuring of the state-level government at the expense of SDA; on 22 October it dismissed two SDA ministers and one deputy minister. Zlatko Lagumdžija also reached an understanding with Milorad Dodik that ended RS calls for changes in the BiH Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Soon after, the two leaders signed an agreement of mutual support in the introduction of a series of changes in the current state legislation on a wide range of questions, including the electoral process, the judiciary and economic matters. If adopted, these changes are going to shift the balance of power and decision-making process in favour of the entities and thus continue the overall decentralization process and the weakening of state-level governance. At the same time, many see these changes as aiming to strengthen the positions of the two politicians. It was, therefore, not surprising that the agreement encountered the criticism of the civic-oriented civil society and several media.

Overall, the local elections of October 2012 did not invite a radical reformulation of the political landscape, but

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make plain the citizens' dissatisfaction with the current state of politics in the country. With the economy in shambles, rampant corruption, party-controlled patronage and nepotism and the country's EU accession still a distant dream the local elections offered voters a chance to express discontent. The voters appear to have extended their strongest warning yet to the greatest winners of the 2010 general elections - SDP and SNSD. An increasing number of voters find these centre-left parties as primarily responsible for the institutional crisis and political deadlock, as well as for lack of constructive ideas for improving the daily lives of ordinary citizens. However, the post-local-elections dynamics show that the message may go unnoticed by the political forces, and especially the two centre-left parties. Yet, given that the next general elections are now less than two years away, the disgruntled voters may have still yet more surprises in store for their cynical political elites.



REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

BANJA LUKA

The SNSD held its ground, electing the mayor with 40.15%. The moderate former RS leader Dragan Čavić, running for mayor with the coalition PDP-DP, got 32.20%, failing to beat SNSD's Slobodan Gavranović. SDS's significant percentage of 23.15% worked to the advantage of SNSD by splitting the opposition vote. SNSD won also a persuasive majority in the assembly.

BIJELJINA

Just like in 2008 and despite the aggressive campaign of SNSD, SDS's Mićo Mičić maintained the mayoral seat with 56.49%. In the assembly, SDS will have eight mandates and SNSD seven.

PRIJEDOR

Marko Pavić, the leader of the Democratic People's Alliance (DNS), won a third mayoral mandate (50.28%) against SNSD's 29.69%.

DOBOJ

The city had an SDS-SNSD coalition after the 2008 elections. This time, SDS's mayoral candidate won with 60.87% of the vote (SNSD 19.79%) and the same party will lead in the assembly with 12 mandates (SNSD eight mandates).

TREBINJE

A loose coalition of eight parties (SDS-PDP-SRS RS-DP-SNS-SRS VŠ-NDS-PzT) narrowly won the mayoral seat against the candidate of SNSD, which had won in 2008. SNSD, however, leads in the assembly (SNSD nine, PDP five mandates)

SREBRENICA

Preliminary results show that SNSD leads in the assembly. An independent Bosniak candidate, Ćamil Duraković, came first in the mayoral race beating the joint candidate of the Serb parties. The Central Election Commission is to decide whether the elections will be repeated due to complaints over alleged irregularities

Source: Central Election Commission, www.izbori.ba

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