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Bosnia and Herzegovina – elections with surprising results

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The year 2020 was supposed to be a positive year for Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Pre-election promises made to the electorate included progress regarding the path to EU integration and NATO membership. Reforms were supposed to finally happen after the whole 2019 had been spent on the formation of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There were also positive changes: the GDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina had a steady and slightly increasing trend since 2017 and the employment rate was growing, too. However, the situation has changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the politics and economy.

The local elections that were held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on November 15, 2020 were therefore a particular challenge for the country. As a result of a highly decentralised political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, local politics has strong and powerful impact. At the same time, the elections give a hint at the upcoming general elections at the national level and the two entities in 2022.

A stable turnout

A high turnout is not a characteristic of local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The turnout during the 2016 local elections amounted to 53.88%. In 2020, it decreased to around 50%. Various factors may have impacted the turnout. The most important factor is probably the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a sharp increase in the number of infected persons over the last weeks of October and November. A number of infection prevention measures are being taken in this regard.

When it comes to politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a small number of parties that play a key role for the three constituent peoples. The local elections have brought changes, especially in larger cities. The Bosniak party SDA and the Serb party SNSD have lost the largest cities: Sarajevo and Banja Luka. Results show that the opposition parties, such as the Serb party PDP in Banja Luka and the coalition of four opposition parties, the so-called "Četvorka" in Sarajevo, currently enjoy a much higher level of voter trust. Elections in Mostar, scheduled to take place on December 20, are an important aspect of the local elections. Over the past 12 years, there had been no local elections in Mostar, which is an absurd situation for a European city.

Results achieved by political parties that are members of the European People's Party (EPP)

"We lost in Sarajevo, but we won the elections in the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina", said *Bakir Izetbegović* when he was asked about the election results of his party during a post-election press conference. SDA won in 30 municipalities, but that was certainly not a successful election night for SDA. This political party lost the trust of voters in large cities. Poor election results and the fact that the party will no longer be part of the government in the most important canton in the country, the Canton of Sarajevo, can be described as a defeat with consequences.

The four-party coalition "Četvorka", which includes SDP, Naša stranka, NBL and NiP won in three out of four municipalities. SDA is still the strongest party in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the election results have weakened the role of the party.

The Croatian party HDZ BiH, on the other hand, is satisfied with good election results. HDZ BiH won in 20 municipalities and lost the elections in Tomislavgrad and Prozor-Rama. HDZ BiH also won in Vareš, Novi Travnik and Stolac. The president of the party, *Dragan Čović*, expressed his satisfaction with the achieved results.

One of the opposition parties from the entity Republika Srpska was the greatest surprise of these elections. A PDP member, *Dražko Stanivuković*, was elected mayor of Banja Luka. 51,620 voters voted for this 27-year old man in the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He thus won 54.52% of votes. His opponent, a SNSD member, who had been holding this position until now, won 45.48% of votes.

"Banja Luka will be a city without divisions, a city that lives in accordance with human values", said *Stanivuković* after the elections. The opposition in Banja Luka considers this achievement a great success and a new chapter in the politics of the political and economic centre of Republika Srpska with good reason.

On the other hand, PDP lost to SNSD in East Sarajevo. SNSD also won in Doboij, a city in which SDS used to win. The new mayor of Bijeljina is a SDS member, in spite of great efforts of SNSD to win.

Women in politics

The Law on Gender Equality and the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina provide that 40% candidates on the list must belong to the less represented gender. In practice, these are only women. 12.832 women and 17.977 men ran for the 2020 local elections. 29 women ran for mayor, and there was a total of 142 public offices. The local elections have shown that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still far from being equal. No female mayors were elected in any of the larger cities.

In the entity Republika Srpska, only three women were elected mayor, mostly in small municipalities. The number of female mayors therefore halved – from six to three. In the entity Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, no female mayors were elected.

New parties

Although the political and organisational strength and experience of traditional parties largely limit political competition, there are successful new candidates. Platforma za progres, a party that ran for the first time during the local elections, won mandates in municipal councils, especially in urban areas. The results achieved by this new party are in part even better than the results of some of the well-established parties such as DF or SBB.

Local elections in Mostar after 12 years

Local elections had been held in Mostar four times, and the last local elections were held in 2008. Voters will finally be able to vote again in Mostar on December 20. The new City Council should then appoint a mayor.

After the results in larger cities, such as Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Tuzla, Bihać, Bijeljina and Zenica, it will be interesting to see what results will be achieved in the fifth largest city in the country.

The fact that elections are held at all is the result of the pressure exerted by the EU, OECD, US Embassy and UK Embassy. SDA and HDZ BiH agreed on this matter under pressure from the international community.

The elections in Mostar will not be the end of the separate administration of the city. This issue will require additional efforts.

After the elections is before the elections

The elected parties will now, of course, take their offices. Parties are looking for alliances and discussing their programme contents. In only two years, general elections will be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which refer to the state level, the two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its 10 cantons, and Republika Srpska, as well as Brčko District.

In addition to dealing with the severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians must achieve additional progress regarding EU membership. In comparison to other countries of the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently in the rear of the train to Brussels. It is questionable whether the current political system is strong enough to achieve this goal.

Local elections have shown that progressive forces advocating the European path have become stronger. Their success is also a result, among other things, of the present day communication among people. The successful election campaign of the new mayor of Banja Luka, *Draško Stanivuković*, has set the standards in this respect.

Most people in both Sarajevo and Banja Luka voted for changes. During the first hours after the publication of election results, the cooperation with the newly elected politicians was rejected. It is certain that the beginning of the work of authorities will not be without any conflicts. The way how politics will be conducted in the years to come – by both winners and losers – will be another sign for the voters whether a democratic change is good for their city.

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