

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Implications of the election results for international investors

6 October 2022

Last weekend's general elections in Bosnia & Herzegovina provided a number of surprises and controversies that will further complicate the political landscape in what is already one of the world's most complex and fragile systems of government.

Held on 2nd October, the general elections decided the make-up of the country's Presidency as well as national, entity and cantonal governments. At parliamentary level, they were divided into the country's two entities: the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, whereas for the presidential elections, each of the three national communities elected a Presidency member.

The Serb-dominated Republika Srpska held its own Presidential elections, which is still contested between rival candidates (at the time of writing), though will likely see long-time strongman Milorad Dodik return to the role he left in 2018. In the Federation (FBiH), the leader of the country's biggest party, Bakir Izetbegović, stunningly lost his seat as a Presidency member by almost 20% to social democrat outsider Denis Bećirović. The election process was mired in controversy due to last-gasp constitutional changes by the internationally appointed Office of the High Representative (OHR), which are said to favour the country's Croat community at the expense of Bosniaks.

Overall, the elections have provided two key takeaways: firstly, they represent a strong showing of civic political candidates over hardline nationalists, in light of growing inter-ethnic tensions and political instabilities exacerbated by Russia's war in Ukraine. Second, while the election provided no clear winners, there is one notable loser – Bakir Izetbegović.

This memo will cover:

-  an introduction into the complex political system of Bosnia & Herzegovina through the country's recently held general elections,
-  the implications of the results of the various nationwide and regional elections that were held on 2nd October,
-  a short-term outlook on the country's future in wake of the election results and regional politics in the Western Balkans.

A REMARKABLY COMPLICATED SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

For a population of just over 3 million, Bosnia has a remarkably complex system of 14 different governments and a total of 136 ministers. The system was devised at the Dayton Peace Agreement which ended the Bosnian civil war (1991-95) and instituted two main administrative units — the Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosniak-Croat majority Federation of BiH (FBiH). The entity of the FBiH is further divided into 10 cantons, while the northern town of Brčko was designated as an independent district.

At the state level, Bosnia has a three-way presidency, in charge of foreign, diplomatic and military affairs, with presidency members elected to a four-year term to represent one of the country's three main ethnic groups; as well as a Council of Ministers and its president who are, in essence, the country's prime minister and their cabinet. It also has a House of Representatives and House of Peoples that are effectively tasked with ensuring legislation does not contradict state-level "national interests."

The two entities have a similar two-house parliamentary body. The FBiH Parliament is also divided into House of Representatives and a House of Peoples, while in RS it is divided into the People's Assembly and the Council of Peoples. In RS, voters additionally elected the entity-level president and vice-president.

The highest political authority in the country is the internationally appointed Office of the High Representative (OHR), which has the power to remove government officials, including court justices, local government members, MPs and introduce legislation or constitutional changes as well as veto rights. All previous High Representatives have been from Western Europe.

THE END OF AN ERA IN THE COUNTRY'S PRESIDENCY

The biggest surprise in these general elections came in the race for the Bosniak representative of the Presidency. Bakir Izetbegović has led the country's biggest political party, the right-wing Party of Democratic Action (SDA), since 2014 and is a household name in Bosnian politics. His father, Alija, was a Bosniak wartime leader and is considered the father of modern Bosnia & Herzegovina. However, in his bid to maintain his seat in the Presidency, Izetbegović was dealt a decisive blow by Denis Bećirović, a joint candidate of 11 opposition – mainly Bosniak – parties. Bećirović, a social democrat, received 57.2% to Izetbegović's 37.5% and almost 100,000 more votes.

The key reasons for Izetbegović's decline are attributed to his disastrous campaign in which he toured the country with his largely unpopular wife, promising economic progress for the country. In fact, the Izetbegović family had become associated with rampant corruption and clientelism among Bosniak voters, and certainly not the bearers of fresh economic reform. However, while Bećirović's success is certainly considered a victory for moderate, civic voters, the coalition United for Free Bosnia and Herzegovina that he led comprises opposition parties and movements from right across the political spectrum.

On other levels, the SDA maintained its status as the country's most dominant party, winning 25% of votes in the country's parliament, a 10-point lead on second placed Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In FBiH entity's parliament, SDA's victory was of a similar proportion, achieving 24.4% of votes to HDZ's 14.6%.

PRESIDENCY OF BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA: ELECTION RESULTS

Bosniak Member	Popular Vote (%)
Denis Bećirović – United for Free Bosnia and Herzegovina	57.26
Bakir Izetbegović – Party of Democratic Action (SDA)	37.53
Mirsad Hadžikadić – Platform for Progress	5.22
Croat Member	Popular Vote (%)
Željko Komšić – Democratic Front	54.39
Borjana Krišto – Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	45.61
Serb Member	Popular Vote (%)
Željka Cvijanović – Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD)	52.59
Mirko Šarović – Serbian Democratic Party (SDS)	35.99
Nenad Nešić – Democratic People's Alliance	5.55
Vojin Mijatovic – United for Free Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.55

DODIK SURVIVES SCARE, HIS PARTY MAINTAINS SLIPPERY COURSE

Observers woke up on 3rd October to the news that Milorad Dodik, the strongman Serb member of the Presidency, may have lost his bid to become President of Republika Srpska for the third time, a position he has held since 2018. In the early hours of Monday morning, his unlikely challenger, Jelena Trivić from the centrist Party of Democratic Progress, gathered supporters in front of party headquarters in the capital, Banja Luka, announcing that “the criminal regime has finally fallen” to the sound of fireworks and street music.

Just hours later, though, Dodik tweeted from his party HQ that he had, in fact, won comfortably, claiming to have secured 274,326 votes to Trivic's 246,425. By midday on October 3rd, the Central Electoral Commission ruled in Dodik's favour, with official results showing Dodik achieved 48.3% to Trivic's 43.3%. However, adding to the controversy, the Commission is (at the time of writing) yet to announce the final results, with 95% of ballots counted (for the Bosnian parliament elections, this is as low as 88% currently). Claiming that voter fraud and irregularities took place overnight, Trivic is yet to renounce her claimed victory so Republika Srpska's presidential election remains contested.

No such dilemmas exist in the entity's other elections. In Republika Srpska's National Assembly, Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) won a comfortable 35.3% compared to the second placed Serbian Democratic Party's (SDS) 15.2%. In the race for the Serb member of the country's Presidency, a post Dodik held to-date, his deputy Željka Cvijanović won with a landslide 52.6%.

Both Dodik and Cvijanović were [put on sanctions by the US and UK in April 2022](#) on the grounds that they “have driven action to withdraw Republika Srpska from key State institutions, using divisive, dangerous, nationalist rhetoric, undermining domestic and regional peace and encouraging ethnic hatred and genocide denial.” As such, the Republika Srpska government will likely maintain its precarious course of growing isolation, alignment with the Kremlin and continued separatism from Bosnia & Herzegovina's institutions.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

Republika Srpska (RS)	Popular Vote (%)
Milorad Dodik – Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD)	48.30
Jelena Trivić – Party of Democratic Progress (PDP)	43.36

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION RESULTS IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

Republika Srpska (RS)	Popular Vote (%)
Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD)	42.13
Serbian Democratic Party (SDS)	18.42
Party of Democratic Progress (PDP)	11.84
For Justice and Order	5.35

OHR INTERVENTION INFURIATES SARAJEVO

One hour after polls closed on Sunday evening, the head of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), Christian Schmidt, imposed changes to Bosnia's election law and to the constitution of Bosnia's Bosniak-Croat-dominated entity, FBiH. The constitutional changes include increasing the size of the Federation's House of Peoples chamber from 58 to 80 and increasing the caucuses of each of the three main ethnic groups – Bosniak, Croat and Serb – from 17 to 23.

They also dramatically restrict officials' ability to block legislative appointments and other processes. In effect, the move favours greater rights for Croat parties and especially the HDZ – whose candidate in the race for the Croat member of the Presidency, Borjana Krišto, lost out to the moderate Željko Komšić, with the controversial support of Bosniak voters. The move by Schmidt, who has already been the subject of protests by Bosniak parties and civil society groups throughout the year, has further infuriated Sarajevo which continues to call for his dismissal.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS

Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina (FBiH)	Popular Vote (%)
Party of Democratic Action (SDA)	25.06
Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	15.54
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	13.29
Democratic Front	10.61
People and Justice	8.06
For New Generations (NES)	4.79
Our Party	4.78

LOOKING AHEAD

As the post-election dust settles, there are a number of sensitive issues to monitor in relation to the country's future stability, European course and territorial integrity.

Significantly, the discernible step towards moderation across a number of constituencies will likely accelerate the country's European aspirations, which have been desperately stagnant in recent years. Following his victory over Izetbegović for the Bosniak seat in the presidency, Denis Bećirović's key message was directed to the EU, asking that it grants Bosnia candidate status as a priority, while calling on citizens to unite around the idea of a European future.

These aspirations, however, may be further complicated as calls intensify for Schmidt's removal. As a German national, he is largely seen by the Bosniak community as an enforcer of Merkel/Scholtz's doctrine in the Western Balkans, adding to EU scepticism among Bosniak nationalists, who are calling for NATO (the US or Turkey, not the EU) to instead take a more active role in guaranteeing the country's territorial integrity.

TIES TO SERBIA AMONG KEY ISSUES TO MONITOR

Across in Republika Srpska, Dodik's government will also look to complicate any push by Sarajevo towards EU accession. These elections have helped cement Republika Srpska's isolationist course; not only because Dodik's SNSD campaigned for greater autonomy and closer ties with Serbia and Russia, but because most of the main opposition candidates – including Trivic – campaigned on a similar ticket.

However, one unexpected and potentially serious development to watch closely is the complicated relation between Banja Luka and Belgrade, or more accurately, between Dodik and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić. Despite publicly expressing a warm relationship, on election night there were widespread rumours that Vučić was throwing his support behind the opposition and that the notion of a contested outcome was being devised in Belgrade. In her premature 'victory' speech, Trivić added fuel to the fire by claiming that Republika Srpska would "now closely align its interests with Serbia, unlike before."

The following day an article appeared in a Banja Luka portal, supposedly run by Dodik's son Igor, criticising Vučić's intervention in Bosnian politics. Since this article was published, tabloid newspapers across Serbia have run daily headlines smearing Dodik's family and confirming that the pair's feud is becoming increasingly public. Speculation is rife as to the reasons behind this rift, but one plausible explanation is that Vučić is under increasing pressure to align Serbia's policies with the EU regarding Russia – and dropping Dodik, the Kremlin's key ally in the region, could be a necessary early step.

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