
BOSNIA RISKS HEADING TOWARDS FRAUDULENT ELECTION

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With only weeks to go until voting day in October, Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the throes of campaign fever.

As in every post-war election cycle in the small country, with possibly the worlds most complex constitutional set-up, the campaign has been bruising.

But hate speech and historical revisionism are hardly novel concepts in the annals of Bosnian electioneering.

What is more alarming is the degree to which the upcoming polls appear to be careening towards overt illegitimacy.

There have always been structural problems with Bosnias elections. The entrenched dominance of the main nationalist blocs in the country – in no small part the result of institutional advantages afforded to them by the 1995 Dayton constitution – have defined the countrys politics for nearly three decades.

But never has the evidence of possible electoral manipulation and fraud been so well documented before the polls themselves.

Nor has the international climate ever been as hostile to the countrys continued sovereignty and territorial integrity, at least not since conclusion of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war.

Bosnia may thus be headed for the worst of all worlds: one in which the elections its marked by widespread fraud – but no one in the international community cares to do much about it.

The combination of domestic illegitimacy and broad international apathy is alarming.

With the last pretenses of the rule of law dissolved, Bosnias recalcitrant elites may well feel emboldened to initiate their most catastrophic fantasies.

Funny numbers

Presently, the main independent election monitoring organization in Bosnia, Pod Lupom, has reported serious irregularities with the countrys election roll.

Some 250,000 registered voters appear to lack identity cards, the primary identity document in the country, without which it is virtually impossible to access any government service.

While it is technically possible to vote without these cards, the number is worryingly high, given that it concerns such a central piece of documentation.

The same EU and US-funded organization has found evidence of organized identity theft, leading to suspicions of widespread voter registration fraud, possibly including significant portions of the above noted 250,000 individuals.

That is on top of the 9,000 or so voters whose registrations the Central Election Commission, CIK, has already rejected on various legal grounds.

Then consider also that Bosnian investigative journalists have reported that authorities in neighboring Croatia appear to be engaged in a coordinated campaign of election fraud.

In tandem with Dragan Covic, the Croat member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, and his Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, and in possible concert with intelligence operatives from Russia, the Croatian authorities have apparently been assisting efforts to falsely register possibly thousands of fictitious absentee voters.

At the very least, there is evidence of an improbable spike in Bosnian absentee voter registrations in Croatia, which would appear to disproportionately favour the HDZ.

Depending on the municipalities, the increase in registered absentee voters range from 166 to over 400 per cent. Nearly all of these election districts are currently governed by the HDZ or their Serb nationalist coalition partners in the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD.

The Covic-Komsic duel

Unlike in previous years, Covic has grounds to worry about his prospects, which might explain the evident surge of electoral irregularities.

This is the first year he is in a head-to-head contest with Zeljko Komsic, a former two-time member of presidency who enjoys widespread support among Bosniak and moderate Croat voters.

A recent opinion poll – and the only publicly available one to date – has the two in a dead heat.

Covic and Komsic represent two opposite poles of the Bosnian political spectrum, so the outcome of their race will go a long way to shaping the country's immediate future.

Covic explicitly opposes any reforms to move Bosnia towards a broadly liberal-democratic constitutional regime, and away from its existing ethno-sectarian framework.

Earlier this month he bizarrely suggested that such reforms would turn Bosnia into a de facto Islamic state.

While such claims are part of a pattern of hate speech by Covic – wherein he accuses the entire Bosniak community of Islamic extremism – the heart of his argument is fundamentally pragmatic.

The HDZ is a party that routinely wins only 10 per cent or less of the national vote.

Thanks to the institutional privileges afforded to nationalist parties under the Dayton constitution though, Covic and the HDZ maintain a stranglehold over a third of both the state and Federation entity government apparatus.

Komsic, on the other hand, is an ethnic Croat who spent years in the multiethnic Social Democratic Party, SDP, before he formed his own, again multiethnic, splinter bloc, the Democratic Front, DF.

Although he has sometimes proven ineffectual in advancing his agenda – in particular during his most recent stint in the state parliament – Komsic has remained steadfast in his commitment to reorganizing Bosnia as a civic state.

In other words, Covic and the HDZ know their political survival depends on maintaining an uneven playing field. More bluntly, Covic cannot win a genuinely democratic election, so he insists on special rules that can artificially maintain him and his party in power.

Komsic, by contrast, would have a good chance of winning any outright popular vote in Bosnia. But not because he is the preferred candidate of a plurality of Bosniaks. Their primary choice remains the Party of Democratic Action, SDA.

It is because, like politicians across the democratic world, he has a broad coalition of supporters: namely, moderate Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, and anti-nationalist Bosnians as a whole.

Given the wider context of these elections, which, as explained elsewhere, are shaping up as a test of Bosnias very existence, and considering also Covics key role in undermining that statehood, it is little wonder that these polls are the countrys most volatile since 1996.

That the HDZ will use all means at its disposal, legal or not and both before and after the elections, to cling to power is not in question.

Similar stunts will also most certainly be employed by the SNSD and the SDA. The only question is whether anyone in Brussels, Washington, or even the Office of the High Representative, will in any substantive way respond.

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