

## **Bosnia: Nationalists Prevail in Elections**

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Low turnout and voter frustrations allow nationalists to claim victory in Bosnia poll.

Bosnia's three main nationalist parties appear to have snatched a clear victory in last weekend's general election, dashing the hopes of moderates and raising fears of instability.

Complete but uncertified results indicated a serious defeat for the moderate Social Democratic Party, SDP, which the international community hoped would take the country into a new era of economic and social reforms and future membership of the European Union.

The result bore a distinct resemblance to the outcome of the 1990 elections which were followed by a surge of nationalist extremism and, eventually, by conflict. "I just hope there will be no new war," said Sasa Cotar, a Banja Luka clerk, expressing the view of many in the country.

Bosnia's top Western mediator, High Representative Paddy Ashdown, played down these fears and insisted the result should not be seen as a resurgence of extreme nationalism or a threat to peace. He said it was simply a clear sign of voters' frustration with outgoing moderate-run governments that failed to fulfill their pre-election promises.

"This was not a vote to return to the past. It was a demand to stop messing about, to get on with it, to implement change and build a better future," Ashdown said on Wednesday, adding that both Bosnian Serb and Croat nationalist parties actually lost a certain percentage of votes when compared with previous elections.

The main election surprise was the extent of the SDP defeat and the success of the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) Party of Democratic Action, SDA.

An exceptionally poor turnout of 55 per cent, the worst in all four elections since the war, was cited as one reason for the result. The lowest polling figures were registered in the bigger cities and among younger people where votes tend to favour moderates. In this election, candidates were being elected for four- instead of the previous two-year mandates.

The next few years will be crucial for Bosnia-Herzegovina, which needs to speed up economic and social reforms if it wants to attract the foreign capital needed to compensate for declining western aid.

According to still uncertified preliminary results released on October 8, the state tripartite presidency will comprise Sulejman Tihic, SDA, Mirko Sarovic, the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, and Dragan Covic, the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ.

These three parties will also have strong representation in parliaments at state and entity levels, though exact figures could still change through recounting, verification and appeals.

The situation is most confusing at the state level, where the SDA, SDS and HDZ could form a majority as a coalition. However they will find it very hard to justify such a move to their voters.

In Republika Srpska, RS, the SDS will to get most of the seats, but probably less than they hoped for. The moderate Party of Independent Social-Democrats, SNSD, of Milorad Dodik registered surprisingly good results, giving them only marginally fewer seats than the SDS. The Party of Democratic Progress, PDP, led by RS premier Mladen Ivanic seemed to have been the biggest loser, coming third behind SDS and SNSD.

Thanks to its good result, SNSD could theoretically form a government with the PDP and a few smaller parties. A coalition between the SDS and SNSD would also need other parties for a safe majority.

In the Federation, SDA and HDZ will jointly have around or slightly over 50 per cent of seats and will require at least one other party for an overall majority. The Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina, SZBiH, of Haris Silajdzic would obviously be the SDA's first choice.

Silajdzic himself was a founder of SDA and these two parties ran in alliance for the 1998 elections. But a significant number of senior SZBiH leaders are now more inclined to cooperate with the SDP. This attitude could change due to the latter's results but it's highly unlikely that a majority of the SZBiH leadership would ever accept coalition with the HDZ.

Coalition building is not the only problem. A new law requires proportional ethnic balance in all Bosnia's parliaments and compensatory seats will be awarded to redress the balance.

The latter will especially alter things in RS, where no Bosniaks or Croats won parliamentary mandates, but are now obliged to have at least four seats each.

A similar law applies to entity governments: there must be proportional representation of the three main ethnic groups - which may represent an additional problem for nationalist parties.

This may help the SDP though there is no disguising the scale of its defeat especially bearing in mind that the SDA list of candidates was thinner than ever before. The latter had lost former president Alija Izetbegovic, who retired from active political life and several other senior officials, who were sacked by the High Representative.

At both state and Federation levels, the SDP fell behind the SDA and HDZ and in some cases even behind Silajdzic's SZBiH. The party was also badly defeated in cantonal races, losing even its long-time strongholds of Tuzla and Sarajevo.

Much of the blame for SDP's defeat has been directed at party president Zlatko Lagumdžija who was accused of mishandling his own members and threatening journalists, some of whom were already labeling Lagumdžija an egoistic despot.

Some senior SDP leaders have already asked for Lagumdžija to be held responsible for the defeat. On Tuesday night, party vice-president Sejfidin Tokic said Lagumdžija and all the other members of the SDP presidency had offered their resignations. These will be discussed at its congress in November.

Lagumdžija still has enough power to retain the SDP leadership if he wants, just as his party could probably maintain power at some level through unorthodox coalitions.

Ashdown indicated that he and his office would be ready to work in partnership with any government - as long as they are determined to undertake necessary reforms. These are essential if Bosnia-Herzegovina wants to attain long-term prosperity.

During the election weekend, Ashdown introduced a number of measures aimed at extending more balanced ethnic representation to cantonal level and changed regulations on political immunity, which will improve anti-corruption efforts.

"The elections mean that we must be quicker, not slower, to reform, if we are to convince the outside world that our course is still set for the future and we are determined to stick to it," Ashdown said on Wednesday.

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