

Bosnian Muslims Oust Nationalists

Author: [Janez Kovac](#)

Early results from last weekend's local elections point to the most significant breakthrough in Bosnian politics since the signing of the Dayton peace accord in 1995.

Bosnian Muslims have voted a moderate opposition party into power for the first time, according to the preliminary results of last weekend's local election poll.

The apparent breakthrough however has been overshadowed by early indications that nationalist parties have been re-elected in Bosnian Serb and Croat areas of the republic.

Only a portion of the ballot has been counted and tens of thousands of votes from refugees and displaced people may yet alter the final result.

Nevertheless, it appears the opposition Social Democratic Party, SDP, has secured a majority in Muslim-held areas, defeating the nationalist Party of Democratic Action, SDA, which has dominated in those constituencies for the past 10 years.

The apparent SDP victory has been soured, however, by the continued success enjoyed by the traditionally nationalist Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, and Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, in their respective territories.

This second post-war ballot in Bosnia has so far thrown up some important trends for local and international analysts to mull over for weeks to come.

The SDP's leading position in all four Sarajevo municipalities is the most significant development. The first results announced by the OSCE also indicate SDP wins in former SDA strongholds such as Gorazde, Kakanj, Kladanj, Breza, Ilidza and Vogosca.

The SDP also appears to be running a close second in SDA bases such as Maglaj, Gradacac, Konjic and Jablanica.

The SDP and the SDA have acknowledged SDP victories in Zenica and Tuzla, Bosnia's two largest industrial towns. The OSCE has yet to confirm the results.

Many analysts had anticipated losses for the SDA on the back of the party's poor reputation for corruption and incompetence. But the scale of the losses has surprised many. The SDP appears to have had most success in urban areas, while the SDA has been reduced a rural and small town party.

The Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina, led by former Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic, appears to have come third in most of the Muslim-dominated areas.

"It's shaping up to be quite interesting," said OSCE spokeswoman Tanya Domi.

Leader of the SDP, Zlatko Lagumdžija, said, "Citizens are tired of 10 years of no perspective, anguish, poverty and misery. In peace time, they started to realise that nationalism is a blind alley."

SDP general secretary, Karlo Filipovic, said that while his party was celebrating, moves were already under way to change local leaderships, making them democratic and transparent.

Meanwhile SDA general secretary, Sulejman Tihic, congratulated the SDP on their success and admitted results were worse than his party had anticipated.

In Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb dominated areas, however, the picture appears more familiar with clear victories for the HDZ and SDS respectively.

Although the HDZ appears to have won this time, gains by the SDP and New Croatian Initiative, NHI, in Bosnian Croat held areas have focused HDZ minds on the need to change.

The HDZ president and Croat member of the Bosnian tripartite presidency, Ante Jelavic, said on Monday, April 10, that his party would soon undergo a "radical" change in personnel and politics, emerging as a "modern party of political center."

Recent political changes in neighbouring Croatia have forced the Bosnian HDZ to face up to a new reality, where secret funds to bolster Bosnian Croat sub-state institutions will no longer be forthcoming from Zagreb.

The reforms Jelavic promised will either split the HDZ completely or result in the expulsion of the ultra hardliners. Both outcomes can only improve the political situation in the country.

Results from the Bosnian Serb held areas, however, present the biggest setback.

The international community itself must bear much of the responsibility for this outcome. By blocking the second-strongest Serb nationalist party - the Radical Party - from taking part in the elections in retaliation for the party's obstruction of the peace implementation process several months ago, the international administration united all hard-line Serb voters behind the only remaining option, the SDS.

The arrest of prominent Bosnian Serb wartime leader, Momcilo Krajsnik, for alleged war crimes only days before the election may have hardened the resolve of otherwise undecided Serb voters.

Nevertheless, the OSCE preliminary results indicate that the SDS vote this time round may in fact be lower than the combined vote for the SDS and Radical Party in 1997. The SDS share of the vote may also shrink once the votes from tens of thousands of non-Serb refugees are added to the final tally.

Absentee ballots "can dramatically swing these races," Domi warned.

Another factor to bear in mind is the changed nature of the SDS itself. This is not the same party founded by indicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic. Following Karadzic's forced withdrawal from politics, the party changed personnel and policy. Recent activity and rhetoric in the parliament has shown the party to be, sometimes, more democratic than pro-Western Bosnian Serb Prime Minister, Milorad Dodik.

The international community now has an opportunity to use the SDS win as a lever against Dodik. Ever since international backing enabled Dodik to capture the premiership in 1998, he has behaved in much the same way as the tyrant he replaced. So long as he kept the hard-line SDS at bay, the international community rarely raised a murmur of protest. Such tactics allowed nationalism to prosper under a different name.

Dodik made a crucial mistake, however, only a few days ahead of the ballot, when his bodyguards were filmed beating up several spectators at a basketball match. The incident that was aired all over the Bosnian Serb media.

Another positive outcome of the April 8 ballot was the split the defeat provoked in the Republika Srpska Socialist Party, SPRS. Only two days after the elections, a group of prominent SPRS officials announced they were leaving to form the Democratic Socialist Party.

Ever since the SPRS left the pro-Western Sloga coalition - led by Dodik - this split has been on the cards. Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is thought to exert considerable influence over some hard-line SPRS members and the party has been a destabilising force in Republika Srpska politics over the past few months.

Meanwhile the SDP and other opposition parties did increase their support in some Serb-held areas, which may force Dodik and his like to reconsider their policies.

The Party of Democratic Progress, PDP, formed by popular economics professor Mladen Ivanic six months ago, has attracted special attention. The PDP has polled a strong third behind the SDS and Dodik's party.

Bosnian Muslims and Croats initially welcomed the arrival of Ivanic on the political scene, encouraged by his outspoken democratic principles. But the PDP too soon succumbed to a nationalist and exclusively Serb rhetoric.

Nevertheless many local analysts believe Ivanic could play a very positive role in Republika Srpska, provided the international community does not repeat the Dodik mistake of offering blind and unconditional support.

The lack of violence and tension accompanying the April 8 election was another significant breakthrough for Bosnia.

For the first time, Western officials were keen to stress, all Bosnian citizens could travel across the country unimpeded to cast their votes. All previous elections have been prone to intimidation and violence, despite heavy NATO and UN surveillance.

This time only two violent incidents were reported. A hand grenade was thrown into a polling station in the Bosnian Serb town of Pale. Local police arrested some suspects the same evening. And in the Bosnian Croat town of Stolac a local politician was detained by police after he kicked over some ballot boxes.

In northwest Bosnia, a normally tense part of the country, violence was limited to a fist fight between a husband and wife at one polling station and a cow wandering into another.

"BiH voters across the country - and indeed around the world - were given the chance to express themselves freely through the ballot box, and while there were isolated incidents of intimidation and extremism, overall we see these elections as free and fair," said Robert Barry, head of OSCE mission in Bosnia.

Several political parties have filed complaints of intimidation and vote rigging against their rivals, but the OSCE believe few have any real foundation. All such complaints will, however, be investigated.

Confusion over voters' lists and polling stations presented the biggest problem. The OSCE extended voting by one hour to alleviate some of the problems. Several parties blamed the OSCE for chaos at 3,500 polling stations.

Tens of thousands of people could not find their names on voters' lists. In many cases members of the same family had to cast their ballots in several different polling stations. Despite all this the overall turnout is expected to be around 70 per cent.

Janex Kovac is a regular IWPR contributor.

Location: [Africa](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnian-muslims-oust-nationalists>