

## **Bosnia's Day of Reckoning**

**Author:** [Janez Kovac](#)

International officials urge Bosnian voters to turn their backs on corrupt nationalist politicians.

Campaigning in the run-up to Bosnia's third post-war general election has been fierce, with the duel between nationalists and moderates more intense than ever.

The stakes on November 11 are especially high - the international community has made clear further assistance depends on voters rejecting the corruption, opportunism and obstructionism typical of the post-war nationalist administrations.

"Many things depend on these general elections," said Richard Holbrooke, United States ambassador to the United Nations and architect of the Dayton peace accords.

"Will Bosnia-Herzegovina be the only remaining country in Europe controlled by obsolete, racist, criminal elements? That would be a tragedy," Holbrooke added, warning a vote for nationalists would push the country into international isolation.

But Bosnia's nationalist parties are putting up a strong fight, provoking ethnic tensions and reviving nationalist paranoia to distract voters from real issues, such as the economy, employment and prosperity.

In many instances, it is Bosnia's nationalist leaders who, directly or indirectly, control the black markets, as well as fuel, tobacco, alcohol and drugs smuggling. Access to such lucrative personal fortunes depends on the corrupt, anarchic and bureaucratic political environment surviving. Normalisation of life in Bosnia is not on their agenda.

This election campaign has been the most vicious in recent history. Attacks on ethnic minorities are on the increase, independent journalists are being intimidated, inflammatory speeches by nationalist politicians have heightened tensions.

Less than a month before polling, Bosnian Serb school children in Brcko took to the streets in protest against sharing classrooms with Muslim and Croat pupils. Several people were injured, and a number of Muslim and Croat homes, shops and cars, destroyed. An investigation by international and local authorities accused local Bosnian Serb officials of organising of the protest.

Meanwhile, Bosnian Croat hard-liners announced the Muslim-Croat federation was "dead" and called for a referendum on election day on the creation of a Bosnian Croat entity. Observers believe the nationalists' are preparing the ground for such a statelet should the vote turn against them on November 11.

"I believe these are the last shakes of nationalist parties and some candidates who still believe they can swim in nationalist waters," said Bosnia's High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch. "I am certain that voters will not support this sort of rhetoric."

"Go out, vote and make responsible decisions. Vote for those politicians who are dealing with real life issues," Petritsch told Bosnians.

Around 2.5 million Bosnians are eligible to vote in the November 11 poll, which will select representatives at cantonal, entity and state level. Voters in Srebrenica will also choose their municipal government in a ballot postponed since April.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, is to deploy some 750 international supervisors in 3,700 polling stations across the country. In total, 44 political parties, six independent candidates and one coalition - around 6,000 candidates in all - are contesting the elections.

Since the end of the war, each election has seen the nationalist vote decline by between 10 and 20 per cent in favour of moderate alternatives. Prior to the general elections in 1996, 1998 and local elections in 1997 and 2000, the international community has piled pressure on Bosnian voters to accept democratic change. This time international patience may finally be running out.

Nationalists from all three ethnic communities have managed to slow down essential structural reforms, limiting vital foreign investment in the process. Bosnia now faces a profound economic and financial crisis.

The budget deficit for 2000 is expected to reach 300 million German marks, unemployment is around 50 per cent, the country functions almost entirely on the back of \$4 billion invested by the international community over the past four years.

Meanwhile, it is estimated state and entity budgets lose something in the region of 500 million German marks each year in unpaid taxes, mostly due to cigarette smuggling. As a result, pensioners are forced to make do with measly allowances, often paid six months late.

Dozens of companies, factories and banks are on the verge of bankruptcy. Strikes by disgruntled workers are increasingly common.

The international community's get tough approach has seen scores of candidates removed from office and candidates lists in recent months. The OSCE has also changed election rules in an effort to make the poll more transparent and fair.

Multi-member constituencies, preferential voting, open list systems and compensatory seats have been introduced. Politicians will also represent distinct geographical areas in future, making them more directly accountable to voters.

Opinion polls indicate moderates could make further gains on November 11. But whether this will be enough to break the nationalist stranglehold and secure long-term international engagement remains to be seen.

The nationalists are expected to fare worst in the Muslim-Croat federation, where the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party, SDP, did very well in the April local poll. The SDP, a multi-ethnic party, scored the most votes of any party in April.

Most Muslim dominated and mixed Muslim-Croat cantons in the federation are expected to go SDP, ousting the Bosniak nationalist Party of Democratic Action, SDA. In Bosnian Croat-dominated cantons, the ruling nationalist Croat Democratic Union, HDZ, is still expected to score most votes. But the race looks close, and the SDP along with other smaller opposition parties, could well deprive the HDZ of an absolute majority in these areas.

Such an outcome would in turn deprive the SDA and HDZ of their absolute majority in the federal assembly. A loose coalition centred around the SDP could take over. With the parliament due to select a replacement for retired Alija Izetbegovic on the tripartite presidency, it is not inconceivable the seat could go to an SDP candidate.

Analysts suspect it is developments like this which could prompt the HDZ to push for a separate Bosnian Croat entity - a move the international community, provided it remains in Bosnia, would never tolerate.

Meanwhile, in Republika Srpska, RS, the situation is more complex. The ruling nationalist Serb Democratic Party, SDS, founded by Hague war crimes suspect Radovan Karadzic, still enjoys most support.

Pro-western Prime Minister Milorad Dodik's Party of Independent Social Democrats and the Progressive Democratic Party of popular economy professor Mladen Ivanic are locked in a tight race for second and third place.

The hundreds of thousands of votes from Bosniak and Bosnian Croat refugees and returnees could secure strong representation for federation-based parties such as the SDA and SDP in the RS parliament.

The SDS looks unlikely to win an absolute majority. Should Dodik, Ivanic and the SDP combine, the SDS could be pushed into the minority for the first time since the war.

SDS candidate for RS president, Mirko Sarovic, certainly leads Dodik in the polls, but looks unlikely to win the necessary 50 per cent plus one needed for an outright first round victory. Preferential votes in the second round are expected to go to Dodik, promising another close finish.

The SDP is expected to win the largest number of seats in the state parliament, but not an absolute majority. The nationalist SDA, HDZ and perhaps the SDS may form a loose coalition in response, leaving smaller parties such as Haris Silajdzic's Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ivanic's PDP with a potentially pivotal role.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is expected to take another step forward on November 11, but in the short term at least, the results could generate a more confusing and tense atmosphere. With so many tight races, the real winners and losers will be sorted out in the horse-trading after the votes are counted. The West's role in Bosnia would be more crucial than ever. For the international community to walk away now would be a grave mistake.

Janez Kovac is a regular IWPR contributor.

**Location:** [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnias-day-reckoning>