

Democrats Look to Build on Poll Success

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Bosnia's Social Democrats must attract more Croat and Serb voters if they intend to play a major role in the country's future.

Along Tuzla's cafe-lined main streets, people are a bit smug about the landslide re-election victory of their popular mayor and the unexpected success of his opposition Social Democratic Party, SDP, in Bosnia's recent municipal poll.

"It's about time other places started to catch up with us," says Danny Mihilovic, the 26-year old owner of a local modeling agency.

Tuzla is the only Bosnian city that eschewed nationalist politics throughout the war and in its aftermath. Since 1990, when Selim Beslagic won his first term as mayor, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats have lived together in this northeastern city. Although the war sent many Tuzla Serbs to Bosnian Serb-held areas and swamped the city with thousands of Bosniak refugees, it maintained a battered multiethnic composition and boasted a defiant spirit of tolerance.

In Bosniak-populated areas of the country, the municipal elections delivered victories for the opposition Social Democrats outside Tuzla for the first time. And the opposition dealt heavy blows to the ruling Bosniak nationalist party of Alija Izetbegovic, the SDA, in a number of other areas. The SDP, which includes members of all three ethnic groups, backs market-oriented economic reform, the return of refugees and full co-operation with all elements of the Dayton peace process.

Some observers cautiously see the election results as part of a backlash against nationalist parties across the Balkans. Recent ballots in Croatia roundly defeated hardliners who'd been in power for a decade. But in Croat and Serb controlled parts of Bosnia, nationalist parties retained their overwhelming dominance, despite losing significant numbers of votes to opposition parties.

"The last 10 years showed us the nationalists can't run the country," says Beslagic, a former cement factory manager. A heavy-set, straight-talking, former communist, Beslagic is allied to the SDP's intellectual president, Zlatko Lagumdzija.

"It's very difficult to fight against nationalism here," explains Beslagic. "You have to take it slowly, step-by-step."

Beslagic admits his party was unable to make inroads in the Croat-dominated West Herzegovina or the Bosnian Serb entity. "First, we're going to have to see political change in Serbia if democracy is going to take hold everywhere in Bosnia," he says. But one day, he predicts, Bosnia's extremists will be relegated to the political margins with about five percent of the vote, "like in Western Europe."

A raft of ugly corruption scandals, involving top officials, undoubtedly hurt the ruling SDA, which had dominated not only political life but also the economy, the civil service and the media in Bosniak-populated areas. Recently, the Tuzla canton's former prime minister, as well as its top justice and health officials received prison sentences for pocketing state funds. Fraud cases are underway against dozens of other authorities.

"People wanted change, and so did the international community," explains Edib Kravic, a former high-

ranking official in Izetbegovic's party, who has long criticised the SDA's abuse of power. But like others, he claims the international community unfairly bolstered the opposition through biased use of nationwide public information campaigns.

The SDP hope to ride the momentum brought by their recent successes into the autumn general elections. Lagumdzija is expected to challenge Izetbegovic for the Bosniak post on the tripartite presidency, while Beslagic is well positioned to take the top position in the powerful Tuzla canton.

But the Social Democrats are under pressure to produce tangible results - and quickly. The timing couldn't be worse. Humanitarian and international agencies are gradually pulling out of Bosnia. The corruption scandals have dampened international interest in investment projects. And the painful process of privatising central Bosnia's heavy industry and mining operations has only just begun.

"There are going to be less jobs before there are more," says Amra Tinjic, a fifth-year economics student. "I have no idea what I'm going to do next year."

Critics point out that the Social Democrats must attract more Croat and Serb voters if they intend to play a major role in the country's future. The SDP has set up offices in several cities in the Bosnian Serb entity. But most of its prominent leaders, like Beslagic and Lagumdzija, are Bosniaks. The vision of a united, multi-ethnic Bosnia remains anathema to most of the republic's Croats and Serbs.

In Republika Srpska, the nationalist Serb Democratic Party took all but a handful of municipalities. In Croat-controlled regions, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, captured every Croat-dominated municipality, despite low voter turn out.

"The opposition has to reach out across the ethnic borders," says Klelija Balta, a local businesswoman and community activist. "We have to treat the Serbs with respect, and try to understand how they think, rather than just tell them they're wrong all the time. There are some things we won't be able to talk to one another about for a long time and we have to accept that."

Paul Hockenos is a Berlin-based journalist and author who has covered Central Europe and the Balkans for many years.

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