

Nationalist Talk Ahead of Bosnian Local Polls

Author: [Maja Bjelajac](#)

Serb politicians focus on their hopes that Bosnian state will break up, as voters worry about mundane issues like the economy.

As Bosnia braces itself for local elections this weekend, tensions between its two entities – Republika Srpska and the Federation – are growing because of fiery campaign rhetoric suggesting that the country should split up.

On October 7, thousands of candidates will run for mayoral and council seats in 139 municipalities across Bosnia and Hercegovina, BiH.

Although nationalist rhetoric has been a feature of every Bosnian election in the period since the 1992-95 war, the level of intensity seems higher this year, particularly in statements made by politicians in the Serb-majority Republika Srpska, RS.

“Bosnia is a rotten country. It does not deserve to exist. That's clear,” Milorad Dodik, RS president and leader of the entity's ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD, said during campaigning.

In comments made separately, he said, “The question is no longer whether BiH can exist [as a unified state], but how we can ensure its peaceful break-up.”

Although the SNSD has been in power in all key municipalities in RS for the last six years, Dodik and his party colleagues are leaving nothing to chance.

Dodik has personally attended most of the pre-election meetings held in support of local candidates.

The secession of RS from the rest of Bosnia has been a recurring and central theme in his speeches. It is, as he said at a meeting with SNSD candidates in Bijeljina a few weeks ago, “the most important issue for those of us who are rational-minded”.

Describing the status quo as “torture”, he continued, “We are all victims of those who are trying to prove that it is possible to sustain BiH.”

Dodik has spoken about the need to dissolve BiH along ethnic lines on previous occasions (see **Bosnian Serb Leader Opportunistic or Committed Nationalist?**), but the language he employs has got a lot fiercer recently.

“The term Bosnia and Hercegovina triggers no emotion in me other than disgust,” local media quoted him as saying at one campaign meeting.

Some commentators believe all this talk of the end of BiH and the importance of defending Serb interests serves another purpose – deflecting the electorate's attention away from pressing issues like the poor state of the economy, corruption and unemployment in RS.

“The SNSD has been in power since 2006, but it doesn't have any real successes to show off to the RS electorate,” Damir Miljevic, a political analyst in Banja Luka, told IWPR. “So Dodik is now trying to convince voters that only he and his party can save RS. He is trying to scare voters and offer himself up as their almighty saviour.”

Not everyone in RS is buying this argument.

“If Dodik wants us to take him seriously, then he first has to feed us,” Aco Prelic, head of the Party of Social Security for Serb Soldiers, said. “People in RS and in the whole of BiH are hungry and unhappy with their political leaders.”

Prelic said the only reason the current RS government kept going on about secession was “to divert people's attention away from social and economic issues”.

“Soldiers from RS – those who fought in the war – are completely disillusioned,” he added.

Interviewed by the Novi Magazin news site last month, Dodik insisted voters had their minds on higher things than the difficulties of daily existence.

“Often when I come to a poor community and ask people how they're doing, they will not tell me they don't have jobs or enough food on the table. Instead they tell me, 'Keep our Republika Srpska safe'.”

A straw poll of voters on the streets of Banja Luka suggests Dodik might be wrong. Many of the people interviewed by IWPR suspected that political leaders in RS were saying BiH was unsustainable and needed to break up only because they did not want to address more immediate problems.

“He and his party are trying to distract people's attention from poverty and unemployment. They don't want people to see the enormous wealth they have accumulated, while we are left struggling to make ends meet,” said one interviewee, Zdravko Mihajlovic.

Another Banja Luka resident, Miroslav Radosevic, told IWPR, “I think the SNSD and Milorad Dodik are very much aware that they've lost the support of a significant number of voters since the last elections. They know their popularity has gone down.

“Dodik is not a stupid man. He knows that the easiest way to win people over is to blame somebody else for his own failings. That's why he keeps saying the Bosniak authorities in Sarajevo are to blame for everything, which is not true. Sarajevo has nothing to do with the current economic turmoil in RS, but the SNSD and the RS government do.”

Local man Miljan Kovac agreed, accusing the authorities of “trying to win votes by maintaining tensions in BiH”.

But he warned, “People in RS no longer believe this story, because they have realised that the true threat is not Sarajevo or any other external factor, but their own politicians who are in power.”

As well as suggesting that the RS should secede, Dodik also said the “best solution” for BiH would be creating a third territorial entity, to be dominated by Bosnian Croats. This is in contradiction with the Dayton Peace Agreement which ended the war in Bosnia, and which prescribed only two entities in Bosnia – the Federation, shared by Bosniaks and Croats, and the Serb-majority RS.

So far, Dodik has suffered no consequences for his inflammatory rhetoric and open calls for the dissolution of Bosnia, even from the Office of the High Representative, OHR, the international community's representative whom the Dayton accord empowers to dismiss any politician who threatens the continued existence of BiH in its present shape.

Eric Gordy, Professor of Slavic and East-European Studies at University College in London, accuses OHR of failing to respond to Dodik's statements properly.

“OHR can overrule or remove politicians, which means that [these] politicians have no genuine responsibility for the positions that they take. They are encouraged to go as far as they can, and then if they go too far they can count on being overruled or at worst removed,” he said. “But resentment against this system again means that politicians are very strongly encouraged to test the limits of OHR. Dodik has understood this game very well and positioned himself at an enormous strategic advantage. He knows that there is no limit to how far he can go in rhetoric.”

Meanwhile, Miljevic is unsurprised that Dodik is personally leading the SNSD's election campaign, even in remote villages and small communities. The RS president is taking the local elections very seriously as he is aware how important they are to his own future as well as that of his party.

“Because of the poor economic and social situation in all the municipalities in RS and the ever-increasing popular dissatisfaction with SNSD rule, Dodik's position as president of RS will be seriously shaken if his party is defeated in these local elections,” Miljevic said.

Maja Bjelajac is a reporter for RFE and IWPR in Banja Luka.

Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

Topic: [Elections](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/nationalist-talk-ahead-bosnian-local-polls>