

Serb Party Suffers Blow in Bosnian Elections

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Republika Srpska voters shift preference to ruling party's opponent because it talks about economic problems rather than nationalist vision.

Results from last weekend's local elections indicate that the ruling party in Republika Srpska, RS, failed to convince voters that splitting off from the rest of Bosnia was more important than the dire state of the economy.

Ahead of the October 7 ballot for mayoral and council seats across Bosnia and Hercegovina, BiH, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD, led by RS president Milorad Dodik, ran a vigorous campaign to retain its dominant position in the Serb-dominated entity. But it won only 18 mayoral seats in RS, compared with the 41 it won in the last local elections held in 2008.

Zeljko Raljic, editor of the RS news portal Istinito, says that the SNSD's spectacular defeat at local level is an indicator of what could happen in presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2014.

"People's dissatisfaction with the current economic, social and political situation has reached its peak," Raljic said. "Voters in RS gave the SNSD massive support in 2008, but when the party came to power, it paid them back in the worst possible way by openly supporting crime and corruption in almost all RS institutions, from municipal to entity levels."

With Dodik playing a prominent role in campaigning, the SNSD focused on calling for RS to separate from the rest of Bosnia. Many commentators believe the party was hoping to divert public attention away from the lack of economic progress during its period in power in the entity. (See **Nationalist Talk Ahead of Bosnian Local Polls**.)

The local polls produced a surprise winner in the shape of the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, which took 27 mayoral seats compared with the 13 it won in 2008.

This party, now the SNSD's main opponent in RS, was a hard-line Serb nationalist force both during and after the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, and its leaders were indicted for war crimes by the Hague tribunal.

More recently, the SDS has toned down its rhetoric so that ahead of this election, it presented a more moderate face than the SNSD. Politics-watchers say the two parties have effectively switched roles – the SNSD played the Serb nationalist card, while the SDS campaigned on economic and social issues. It is clear which agenda the voters preferred.

Florian Bieber, professor of Southeast European studies at the University of Graz in Austria, says talk of nationalism and secession proved to be less potent messages than SNSD was hoping.

"Poverty and unemployment were citizens' main concerns, and the opposition addressed that in their campaign, yet the only clear policy SNSD had to offer was its nationalism," he said.

Analysts put the SNSD's electoral reverses down to two causes – the economic collapse of RS and the failure of the SNSD administration to do anything to reverse it, on the one hand; and rising crime and corruption, which people blame on all levels of government in the entity. The two factors come together in the huge gap between the very rich political elite and the impoverished citizens.

"Widespread corruption, false promises and lack of concrete results are the main reasons why the SNSD has been spectacularly defeated at these elections," Svetlana Cenic, a Banja Luka-based analyst who used to be treasury minister in RS, said.

Cenic said the current administration clearly believed that its nationalistic campaign rhetoric would distract the electorate from thinking about the economy.

"Our political leaders thought ordinary people wouldn't mind starving as long as they have Republika Srpska, while they [leaders] simultaneously enjoy expensive cars, huge villas, and real estate abroad," she said. "That was a mistaken assumption."

Bieber says the election results should not come as a surprise to anyone, since the blame for so many of RS's woes falls squarely on the ruling party.

"There is dissatisfaction with SNSD due to its strong control over every aspect of life in this entity, yet at the same time its failure to significantly improve people's lives," he said.

Cenic says SDS's election success should not be seen as a sign that Serb nationalism is on the right.

“When the left party [SNSD] openly shifted to the right, and amassed personal wealth at the same time, a dissatisfied public voted for the party which had been on the right from the outset. At least they know what to expect from SDS,” she said.

Despite losing control of so many municipalities, the SNSD managed to retain the post of mayor in Banja Luka, the economic and administrative centre of RS. But even here the result was very close – the SNSD’s man Slobodan Gavranovic won only ten per cent more of the vote than Dragan Cavic, the leader of the Democratic Party, DP.

Observers say that if the SDS and DP had agreed a joint candidate for Banja Luka, they would have defeated the ruling party by a large margin.

Cavic himself says opposition parties can learn a great deal from these elections. If they really want to defeat the SNSD in two years’ time, they will have to join forces.

“It would be wrong to overestimate the individual capacities of a few oppositional party, the SDS above all. No single party will have the capacity to beat SNSD on its own in the general election,” Cavic said. “If opposition parties can truly unite for a common purpose – to bring down Dodik’s autocratic regime – then the SNSD will lose the 2014 election just as it lost these local elections.”

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