

SEPTEMBER 2022

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

On October 2nd, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are going to the polls for general elections for three ethnic-based members of its Presidency and the governing bodies at the levels of state and the political and administrative components; adding to the complexity of the system itself, these elections take place at a time when Europe is experiencing a “return to geopolitics,” given the resurgence of political tension and outright violence in certain parts of the continent. A modern Balkan hot spot, Bosnia and Herzegovina is riddled with internal conflicts and rivalries, both intra and inter-ethnic, not least due to the intricate political order established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement. Although the main features on the country’s political scene are largely similar, the three races for the Presidency look tighter than ever, and the stakes are higher than ever as well. The Serb Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) candidates, who are poised to be currently in the lead in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, make their intentions of secession clear, while the Croat and Serb minorities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniak-Croat entity of the country, are demanding much-needed electoral reforms just ahead of the elections. With some analysts saying that not only the principles, but the Dayton-based peace itself are under threat, these October elections are likely to decide the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where at stake are its European integration and perhaps its very unity as a state.

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OVERVIEW

I. *A sui generis* political system

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a federal republic displaying a complex political system, established by the terms of the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more generally known as the Dayton Agreement. BiH is composed of two political entities: the Bosniak and Croat dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Serb dominated Republika Srpska (RS), each with its different own political system, separate legislative, administrative and judicial bodies.¹ The FBiH is a polity that is split into ten relatively autonomous cantons and has a bicameral parliament whose upper house, called the House of Peoples, has an equal number of representatives for each ethnicity, even though the large majority (around 70%) are Bosniaks, and only 22.4% are Croats and 2% Serbs. It also has a Federation President and a Federation Government. RS is a unitary political parliamentary republic with 83-member unicameral National Assembly as its legislative body, and its own president; its administrative structure includes seven regions and 64 municipalities.

The two entities have joint sovereignty over the Brčko District, which was created in the northern part of the country by a 2009 constitutional amendment.

The shared, state-level institutions function according to *ethnic quotas*, ensuring that all three ethnicities in BiH are represented: 2/3 for FBiH (1/3 Bosniaks, 1/3 Croats) and 1/3 for Republika Srpska. These institutions are: a tripartite Presidency (one for each ethnic group, with the chair rotated every eight months); a bicameral Parliament with 42 seats in the lower house (28 from FBiH and 14 from RS) and 15 in the upper house (5 for each ethnic group); and a Council of Ministers, the executive body.

Moreover, there is the *ad hoc* international institution of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which was established in keeping with the Annex 10 of the Dayton Agreement. It is ‘responsible for overseeing the implementation of civilian aspects of the Peace Agreement’ and ‘is working towards the point where Bosnia and Herzegovina is able to take full responsibility for its own affairs’. The position of High Representative was created under the same Agreement and ‘is working with the people and institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the international community to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina evolves into a peaceful and viable democracy on course for integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions’². The OHR is made up of diplomats seconded by the governments of the PIC countries, international staff hired directly, and national staff from Bosnia and Herzegovina; the High Representative is nominated by the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council. The authority and work of the High Representative has been subject to increased controversies of late³.

¹ “IPU PARLINE Database: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (Predstavnicki Dom), Electoral System,” accessed September 10, 2022, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-c/reports/2039_B.htm.

² Q.v. OHR – Office of the High Representative, <http://www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information/>

³ Q.v. *inter alia* Bosnia and Herzegovina Briefing and Consultations, UN Security Council, June 29, 2021,

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/06/bosnia-and-herzegovina-briefing-and-consultations.php>; European Commission, “At a Glance: Bosnia and Herzegovina: Political Parties,” September 2015, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-analytical-report.pdf>.

II. On election-related processes

The legal aspects defining the election process are intricate, and draw on multiple documents: the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace (Dayton Agreement) and Annex III (elections) of the Dayton Agreement, the 1995 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Constitution of the Republika Srpska, the 2011 Election Law, the 2012 Law on Financing Political Parties and the 1997 Law on Citizenship and Regulations issued by the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEC).

At the state level, citizens of BiH are voting for the members of the House of Representatives (the lower house) of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Presidency. Out of the 42 seats of the House of Representatives, 28 seats are elected in the FBiH and 14 in RS. The three members of the Presidency are also directly elected by the people. The Serb member is elected by the citizens of RS, while the citizens of the FBiH can vote for either the Bosniak member or the Croat member of the Presidency; because of demographic reasons, this actually makes it possible for the Croat member to be elected without being voted by a majority of Croat voters. The Presidency is elected every four years, and the chair is rotated every eight months.⁴ Citizens elect separate political bodies at entity level. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they elect the 98 deputies of the House of Representatives of the Parliament of FBiH, the Federal President and its vice-presidents, and so do Republika Srpska's people for their National Assembly's 83 members, President, and two vice-presidents.⁵

The OSCE will also send an observation mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the occasion of the elections. This mission will be composed of a core team of 15 experts from 13 OSCE participating States, and 24 additional long-term observers, which were dispersed around the country since August 31. The mission will determine whether the elections were conducted in accordance with national law, OSCE agreements, and other international obligations and criteria for democratic elections.⁶



President Slobodan Milošević of Serbia (L), President Alija Izetbegović of Bosnia-Herzegovina (C) and President Franjo Tuđman of Croatia sign the Dayton Agreement peace accord, 21 November 1995. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dayton_Agreement#/media/File:DaytonAgreement.jpg

III. State of play

These year's elections are taking place against the background of increased tensions within the country, mainly owing to secessionist tendencies within Republika Srpska and disagreements over electoral reform implementation, which might undermine key principles established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement and bring the very future of BiH's statehood under question.

⁴ "Central Election Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina," accessed September 10, 2022, <https://www.izbori.ba/Default.aspx?CategoryID=170&Lang=6&Mod=0;> "IPU PARLINE Database: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (Predstavnički Dom), Electoral System"; "PACE Website," accessed September 10, 2022, <http://assembly.osce.int/nw/xml/Xref/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=25200&lang=en>.

⁵ European Commission, "At a Glance: Bosnia and Herzegovina: Political Parties"; "Central Election Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina," op. cit.

⁶ OSCE, "General Elections, 2 October 2022," accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/bih/521536>.

Republika Srpska seems bent to become independent following intentions like leaving BiH's armed forces, judiciary, and tax system as per the separatist rhetoric of Serbian member of the Presidency, Milorad Dodik⁷, that his party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), support. However, according to a December 2021 study of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the population of RS is divided on the topic: 48% of RS respondents are against the withdrawal of the RS from state institutions, and 45% of RS respondents are against independence. Tensions peaked with a celebration on the Day of Republika Srpska, a banned holiday in BiH, that attended by several controversial figures, including the Russian Ambassador to BiH⁸. Moreover, after attempting to block a trade deal with the UK in June⁹, Milorad Dodik has sparked a diplomatic conflict with Germany as he stated his intention to veto the appointment of the new German ambassador to BiH, Thomas Fitchen; this decision is seen as becoming yet another stumbling in Bosnia and Herzegovina course to obtain its candidate status to the EU.¹⁰

The Euro-Atlantic integration of BiH is another important topic, with the vast majority of population being in favor of EU accession: 85% of BiH citizens want to join the EU, with the Serb support rising 9% to 64%, in just one year

⁷ Deutsche Welle, "Bosnia: Serbs Vote to Leave Key Institutions in Secession Move | DW | 11.12.2021," DW.COM, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnia-serbs-vote-to-leave-key-institutions-in-secession-move/a-60088061>.

⁸ "Secession Threats and Nationalist Strife Shock Bosnia as EU Offers Limited Response," POLITICO, January 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/>.

⁹ "Dodik Loses Argument in Bosnian Serb Assembly Over UK Deal," *Balkan Insight* (blog), June 20, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/dodik-loses-argument-in-bosnian-serb-assembly-over-uk-deal/>.

¹⁰ "Diplomatic Rift with Germany to Dash Bosnia's Hopes of Securing EU Candidate Status | Bne IntelliNews," September 5, 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/diplomatic-rift-with-germany-to-dash-bosnia-s-hopes-of-securing-eu-candidate-status-255587/>.

¹¹ Hope Robert, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Poll," Text, May 13, 2022, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/bosnia-and-herzegovina-poll>

¹² "Britain Appoints Balkan Envoy, Citing Threats To Stability, Security," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12:53:19Z, sec. Bosnia-Herzegovina, <https://www.rferl.org/a/britain-names-envoy-bosnia/31590567.html>.

¹³ Julian Borger, "US Hopes to Walk Bosnia 'Back from the Cliff' as Serbs Step up Secession Threat," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/us-hopes-to-walk-bosnia-back-from-the-cliff-as-serbs-step-up-secession-threat>; "Germany Renews Call to Sanction Bosnian Serb Leader Milorad Dodik | News | DW | 13.12.2021," accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-renews-call-to-sanction-bosnian-serb-leader-milorad-dodik/a-6010636>.

– the highest level of their support ever recorded. NATO accession, however, is a more divisive topic, with strong support from Bosniaks (90%) and Croats (92%), but heavily opposed by ethnic Serbs, out of which 82% are against joining NATO. The same poll suggests strong voter turnout this October: 56% of Bosniaks, 63% of Bosnian Croats, and 60% of Bosnian Serbs said that they will certainly vote in the next elections.¹¹

These developments alarmed the West: the UK appointed a special envoy for the Western Balkans¹², while the US and Germany expressed their concern about the situation¹³. However, since Dodik enjoys the support of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the EU could not materialize any unitary response, besides public criticism¹⁴, so that, if Dodik's party remains in power, secessionist threats may come into effect.

At the same time, Bosnian Croats and Serbs in the FBiH have made it clear that they will not participate in the implementation of electoral results, if an electoral reform is not enacted. Such a reform is necessary in order to prevent Bosnian parties from seizing control of the political apparatus of FBiH (more on this reform, below). Failure to uphold the principles of the 1995 Dayton Agreement may result in the failure of the state of BiH, and ensuing violence in the aftermath of the October elections.¹⁵ Considering the rhetoric of the ruling parties in BiH, the future of the country's Euro-Atlantic integration is also under question, despite the overwhelming support of the population, especially for EU integration and the the members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite presidency deciding to strengthen Bosnia's orientation toward the EU in a meeting hosted by European Council President Charles Michel and EU Foreign Affairs and Security chief Josep Borrell in Brussels in June¹⁶.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR PRESIDENCY CANDIDATES

There is a multitude of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As many as 25 political parties have seats at entity level, and 17 of them are also represented at state level. Most of these parties target a specific ethnicity, although some of them are multi-ethnic. Larger parties target population from both political entities for obtaining parliamentary seats, thanks to population distribution.

The most important parties are the Party of Democratic Action (SDA, Bosniak), Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD, Serb), Serbian Democratic Party (SDS, Serb), Social Democratic Party of BiH (SDP BiH, Bosniak), Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH, Croat), Democratic Front (DF, multi-ethnic). Other significant parties are the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP, Serb), Alliance for a Better Future (SBB, Bosniak), Democratic People's Alliance (DNS, Serb), Naša Stranka ('Our Party' - NS, multi-ethnic), Independent Bloc (NB, Bosniak) and Movement of Democratic Action (PDA, Bosniak).



Željka Cvijanović and Milorad Dodik. Source: <https://www.predsjednikrs.rs/en/press-conference-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-srpska-and-the-serb-member-and-chairwoman-of-the-bih-presidency/>

The race for the Presidency resulted in three dyads of challengers, following the establishment of several coalitions. For the Bosnian seat, the main contenders are Denis Bećirović, the candidate of the United Opposition led by SDP BiH, and supported by the SBB, the NS, the PDA, the People and Justice (NiP) and The People's European Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (NES),¹⁷ and Bakir Izetbegović, the candidate of the SDA. Another interesting candidate is Mirsad Hadžikadić, whose party, Platform for Progress, is unrepresented, although he scored 10,09% of votes in the last election.

For the Serb seat, Željka Cvijanović is the SNSD candidate, while the main opposition candidate is Mirko Šarović, of the SDS. For the Croat seat, incumbent Željko Komšić, of the DF has to face the HDZ BiH candidate Borjana Krišto.¹⁸

¹⁴ Zeljko Trkanjec, "Hungarian Foreign Minister: We Will Veto EU Sanctions against Dodik," *www.euractiv.com*, December 20, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/hungarian-foreign-minister-we-will-veto-eu-sanctions-against-dodik/.

¹⁵ Srećko Latal, "West's Hesitation to Reform Bosnia Leaves Country on Brink," *Balkan Insight* (blog), July 28, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/28/wests-hesitation-to-reform-bosnia-leaves-country-on-brink/>.

¹⁶ "Party Leaders Pledge to Build Stable, EU-Oriented Bosnia," *Balkan Insight* (blog), June 13, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/13/party-leaders-pledge-to-build-stable-eu-oriented-bosnia/>.

¹⁷ Y.Z., "The Croatian Bloc Believes That the United Bosniak Opposition Is Weakening Zeljko Komsic," *Sarajevo Times* (blog), May 21, 2022, <https://sarajevotimes.com/the-croatian-bloc-believes-that-the-united-bosniak-opposition-is-weakening-zeljko-komsic/>.

¹⁸ "Parties and Elections in Europe," accessed September 11, 2022, <http://parties-and-elections.eu/bosnia-herzegovina.html>.

FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA & THE ELECTORAL REFORM

The main political competitions in FBiH are centered around the Bosniak and Croat seats of the Presidency. FBiH citizens also elect 28 of the 42 members of the House of Representatives of the state-level Parliament.

Based on the assessment of regional experts that New Strategy Center contacted, the presidential elections in FBiH are determined by the fact that citizens can vote for either a Bosniak or a Croat member of the Presidency, which is problematic. This essentially permits Bosniak parties to rally voters for a preferred Croat candidate, considering the demographic advantages of the Bosniaks, which usually rally around 800,000 votes, compared to 150,000 – 170,000 Croat votes. In the past, thanks to these numbers, the Bosniaks had little difficulty in electing two members of the Presidency. This might not be the case this year, as the race between Bakir Izetbegović and Denis Bećirović might be too close to call, which forces Bosniak voters to focus on the race for the Bosniak member of the Presidency. This might put incumbent Croat member of the Presidency Željko Komšić in a tight spot, as he has profited from Bosniak votes in the past.

Electoral reform is a hot topic in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially since this year, a set of crucial reforms regarding the electoral system in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina were expected to be imposed by the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

The issue is that, due to demographic changes, caused by economic migration, gerrymandering and “other ethno-political manipulations” as local experts told NSC, the Bosniak parties threaten to acquire full control over the FBiH political apparatus, undermining the representation of ethnic Croats, and implicitly, one of the core principles of the Dayton Agreement. In order to address this threat, the US and EU diplomatic efforts focused on negotiating an electoral reform. Only two and a half months before the election, a first package of technical reforms addressing electoral transparency, hate speech, and the role of the Central Election Commission was imposed. However, other crucial aspects remained unaddressed, until a document describing a second package was leaked which promised to restore a balance of power among Bosniak, Serb and Croat parties, while also preventing blocking mechanisms, like the HDZ, which opposed the appointment of new judges to the Constitutional Court and hindered therefore its works. It is unclear, however, when this package might be implemented, as it will clearly influence the outcome of the elections¹⁹; an expert familiar with the matter told the New Strategy Center team that the second package of the election reform might be implemented by the High Representative soon after the October election.

¹⁹ Srećko Latal, “West’s Hesitation to Reform Bosnia Leaves Country on Brink,” *Balkan Insight* (blog), July 28, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/28/wests-hesitation-to-reform-bosnia-leaves-country-on-brink/>. See also: Fondacija, “Biography,” *Fondacija Alija Izetbegović* (blog), accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.alijazetbegovic.org/en/biography-2/>.



Bakir Izetbegović and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/64/Erdogan_and_Izetbegovi%C4%87_in_Sarajevo.jpg

The Bosniak member of the Presidency A Status-Quo Candidate: Bakir Izetbegović

One of the main candidates for the October elections is Bakir Izetbegović, the son of late Alija Izetbegović. He fulfilled two mandates as the Bosniak member of the Presidency between 2010 and 2018, and is currently a member of the House of Peoples. His campaign is focused on a narrative of the alleged mass endangerment of Bosniaks, who face both internal threats (Croats and Serbs) and external threats, that come in the shape of Western powers who are seeking to impose a new Election Reform on Sarajevo.²⁰ His ties to Turkey are obvious from his discourse and political actions²¹. His campaign also puts an emphasis on the fight against corruption.²²

²⁰ "The Pre-Election Campaign in BiH Starts Tomorrow," *Sarajevo Times* (blog), September 1, 2022, <https://sarajevotimes.com/the-pre-election-campaign-in-bih-starts-tomorrow/>.

²¹ "Radončić: Hoće li Bošnjaci ostati na ispravnom, prozapadnom putu ili ćemo otići u begovate i kolonijalnu sredinu," *Avaz.ba*, September 10, 2022, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/771321/radoncic-hoce-li-bosnjaci-ostati-na-ispravnom-prozapadnom-putu-ili-emo-otici-u-begovate-i-kolonijalnu-sredinu>.

²² Vedran Radenović, "Izetbegović: Borićemo se protiv korupcije," *Nezavisne novine* (nezavisne.com Nezavisne novine, September 10, 2022), <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Izetbegovic-Boricemo-se-protiv-korupcije/735109>.

²³ Fondacija, "Biography," *Fondacija Alija Izetbegović* (blog), accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.alijazetbegovic.org/en/biography-2/>.

²⁴ "OHR BiH Media Round-up, 23/10/2003," Office of the High Representative, accessed September 11, 2022, http://www.ohr.int/ohr_archive/ohr-bih-media-round-up-23102003-4/.

Izetbegović is supported by the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) SDA is the strongest Bosniak party in BiH, and it is a conservative, Bosniak nationalist party, founded by Alija Izetbegović, a Bosnian politician, lawyer, Islamic philosopher and author, the first president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who served as member of the Presidency of BiH until 2000. The ideology of this party is centered around Alija Izetbegović's ideas about Islam, defined in his books, *Islam Between East and West* and the *Islamic Declaration*.²³

He was critical of the Dayton Agreement, and his tenure was described as authoritarian, with nationalist tendencies.²⁴ His party, the SDA, is inherently conservative and nationalist, and significantly Turcophile²⁵ and it was the dominant party in the aftermath of the Bosnian War, serving as an alternative to left-leaning post-communists²⁶; it is still in power, obtaining 17% of the votes in 2018 and a total of 9 parliamentary seats.²⁷ Šefik Džaferović, the current Bosniak member of the Presidency, was an SDA candidate.

United Opposition candidate: Denis Bećirović

Denis Bećirović is the quintessential pro-Western candidate. He is a Bosnian professor and politician, currently the Vice President of the Social Democratic Party.²⁸ His political discourse emphasizes the need for “an accelerated path towards EU and NATO”, without neglecting the social agenda of his party. Currently a member of the House of Peoples, he is at his second run for the Presidency. In 2018, he lost to the incumbent Šefik Džaferović who received 37.17% of the votes: Bećirović’s scored 33.49%.²⁹ The party leaders of his coalition partners are emphasizing his pro-Western agenda, in antithesis with his main opponent’s ties with Turkey.³⁰ In the words of SBB leader Fahrudin Radončić: “we want a pro-Western, secular state in which we will preserve our Bosniakness and our autochthonous Islam. We want a country that will not be governed by Belgrade, Zagreb, or Istanbul”.³¹

Denis Bećirović is supported by the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SPD BiH), rallying around himself the “United Opposition, composed of the following parties: the SBB, the NS, the PDA, NiP and NES. The Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SPD BiH) is the leading party. It is a left-leaning party whose main agenda emphasizes fostering employment, personal and societal prosperity, and meritocracy. SPD BiH has a classic social democrat agenda, naming “social justice and equality, solidarity and responsibility towards other people” as its core principles, and a clear pro-Western orientation, being open to the integration of BiH in the European Union and NATO.

This party has a vision of BiH that draws from the European regionalization concept: “a decentralized state with a high level of regional and local self-governance.”³² The partners of SPD BiH are parties with center-left ideologies, with a mainly pro-European leanings and secularist convictions. They also claim to be anti-nationalist, with the exception of PDA, which has some right-leaning, conservative, and nationalist tendencies.³³ These parties united against the ruling party, the conservative, status-quo SDA.

Polling

Given the lack of online accessible polls for the BiH elections, New Strategy Center reached out to regional experts, who have aided us in this study with local data. A recent poll shows that the United Opposition candidate, Denis Bećirović, is in the lead, although marginally, with 17%. Bakir Izetbegović appears to be at 16%, even though it is known from previous years that SDA voters usually refuse to say who they will vote for, meaning that Izetbegović is probably in the lead. Nonetheless, the race for the Bosniak member of the Presidency looks particularly tight. It should be emphasized that in this particular race, 34% percent of voters are undecided, according to the same poll. This means that the large number of undecided voters could easily decide the election.

²⁵ “A State of Division,” accessed September 11, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2018/11/bosnia-herzegovina-elections-nationalism>; Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, “Enver Kazaz: Turkophilia in the Bosniak mentality,” OBC TransEuropa, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Enver-Kazaz-Turkophilia-in-the-Bosniak-mentality-173610>.

²⁶ Vera Stojarová and Peter Emerson, *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Routledge, 2013), 89.

²⁷ “Parties and Elections in Europe.”

²⁸ “CIN: Imovina Političara - Denis Bećirović,” accessed September 11, 2022, <https://imovinapoliticara.cin.ba/profil.php?profil=70>.

²⁹ “CIK ponovo potvrdio: Džaferović, Dodik i Komšić novi članovi Predsjedništva BiH,” accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/cik-ponovo-potvrdio-dzaferovic-dodik-i-komsic-novi-clanovi-predsjednistva-bih/18008088>.

³⁰ “Konaković: U jednu stvar ne sumnjamo i oko nje smo se bez ikakvog interesa okupili, ona se zove dr. Denis Bećirović,” Avaz.ba, September 10, 2022, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/771316/konakovic-u-jednu-stvar-ne-sumnjamo-i-oko-nje-smo-se-bez-ikakvog-interesa-okupili-ona-se-zove-dr-denis-becirovic>.

³¹ “Radončić: Hoće li Bošnjaci ostati na ispravnom, prozapadnom putu ili ćemo otići u begovate i kolonijalnu sredinu,” Avaz.ba, September 10, 2022, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/771321/radoncic-hoce-li-bosnjaci-ostati-na-ispravnom-prozapadnom-putu-ili-cemo-otici-u-begovate-i-kolonijalnu-sredinu>.

³² “About SDP,” *SDP BiH* (blog), accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.sdp.ba/about-sdp/>.

³³ “Početna,” PDA BiH, May 18, 2018, <http://pdabih.org/>.

The Croat Member of the Presidency

The Incumbent: Željko Komšić

Željko Komšić, a Bosnian Croat politician and diplomat, is the sixth and most recent Croat member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency. From 2014 to 2018, he served as a representative in the national House of Representatives. Following Bosniak Alija Izetbegović, Komšić served as a member of the Presidency from 2006 until 2014. He was re-elected to the same position for a third time in the 2018 general election, making him the first and only Croat to hold the office for more than two terms. Komšić was an important figure of the Social Democratic Party, until he left in 2012 to establish the Democratic Front a year later.³⁴

Željko Komšić is back by his party, the Democratic Front (DF). DF is a multi-ethnic party, with center-right leaning, secularist convictions and a pro-Western stance. This party stands for laicism, secularism, anti-nationalism and meritocracy regardless of ethnicity. DF also proposes a set of liberal policies with the goal of de-bureaucratizing market operations and facilitating reinvestment. Reducing the spending on the state apparatus is another point on this party's agenda, that accounts for "clearly divided powers between the state, regions and municipalities" and higher autonomy for administrative regions.

Foreign policy proposals are focused on the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into Western structures, such as the EU and NATO, which are seen as potential guarantors of economic prosperity and security.³⁵ DF is in opposition to the current government. Being a multi-ethnic party, the Democratic Front also draws support from Bosniak voters. It is speculated that a tighter race for the Bosniak seat between Izetbegović and Bećirović might prevent Bosniaks from offering support to



Željko Komšić. Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/%C5%BDeljko_Kom%C5%Aii%C4%87_2021.jpg

The Croatian contender: Borjana Krišto

The other main competitor is the HDZ BiH candidate, Borjana Krišto. She served as the FBiH's president from 22 February 2007 until 17 March 2011, being the first woman to hold this position. She has also served as a member of both the national House of Peoples and House of Representatives.³⁶ Her political program also has a pro-Western dimension, as she claimed during a meeting in Jablanica: "European and Euro-Atlantic integrations are our foreign policy goal, which represent progress for the entire country."

³⁴ "Rođen Željko Komšić," Historija.ba, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://historija.ba/d/294-roden-zeljko-komsic>.

³⁵ "Demokratska fronta – Za građansku državu!," accessed September 11, 2022, <http://fronta.ba/>.

³⁶ "Borjana Krišto Postala Prva Predsjednica Federacije BiH – Nacional.Hr," accessed September 11, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120609121518/http://www.nacional.hr/clanak/31833/borjana-kristo-postala-prva-predsjednica-federacije-bih>.

Krišto's party, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), was one of the dominant parties in FBiH after the Dayton Agreement. It is a right-wing, conservative, Croat-nationalist party that claims to "represent [...] all interests of the Croatian people in and out of BiH at all levels of government in BiH and other spheres of life and activity". HDZ BiH is specifically targeting Croat voters, serving as a platform for Croat political participation.³⁷ They advocate for the implementation of an electoral reform that would allow for the Croat member of the Presidency to be elected solely by Croat constituencies.³⁸

Polling

The polls describe a rather interesting race for the Croat member of the presidency, as the HDZ candidate Borjana Kristo has a considerable lead over the incumbent, boasting 16% over Zeljko Komšić's 12%. This result confirms the theory that a tight race for the Bosniak member of the presidency will draw from Komšić's Bosniak support (people who vote, in fact, against the HDZ) to SDA candidate Izetbegović. Considering that this race has the same constituency as the previous one, it is just as important to keep in mind that 38% of voters are undecided.

Finally, in the entity-level parliament, polls show that the SDA remains the dominant party, with 20% of support. The HDZ and the SDP share 17% and 11% respectively, while Konaković's NiP (3%) and Nasa Stranka (2%) are polling very low. An important detail is that as much as 39% of the voters are undecided.

Republika Srpska

Citizens of Republika Srpska go to the polls to elect their member of the tripartite Presidency and 14 seats in the House of Representatives in the state-level Parliament, as well as their entity-level President and National Assembly. The position of President of Republika Srpska is, essentially, more important than that of the Serb member of the Presidency of BiH. The RS President has extensive powers within the Serb entity: he has the power to declare laws by decree, to dismiss the National Assembly or the Prime Minister (and implicitly, the Government). He is also the one to suggest the Prime Minister, and the President and judges of the Constitutional Court, to the National Assembly. The candidates for the position of the Serb member of the Presidency are Željka Cvijanović (SNSD, incumbent President of RS) and Mirko Šarović (SDS). The candidates for the position of President of RS are Milorad Dodik (SNSD, incumbent Serb member of the Presidency) and Jelena Trivić (PDP).

³⁷ "HDZ BiH," accessed September 11, 2022, <https://hdzbih.org/en/vizija-misija>.

³⁸ "Krišto: Jedino Hrvatski Narod Mora Birati Hrvatskog Člana Predsjedništva BiH - Ni," accessed September 11, 2022, <https://ba.niinfo.com/vijesti/kristo-jedino-hrvatski-narod-mora-birati-hrvatskog-clana-predsjednistva-bih/>.

The Serb member of the Presidency

SNSD Candidate: Željka Cvijanović

The candidate proposed by the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats is Željka Cvijanović. She is currently the President of Republika Srpska, having been elected in 2018. She has formerly served as Prime Minister of RS. Back in 2014, she ran for the Serb seat of the Presidency, but was utterly defeated by Mladen Ivanić, the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) candidate.³⁹

The SNSD is a culturally right-wing⁴⁰ and economically left-wing⁴¹ political party, currently the most powerful Bosnian Serb party. Since its emergence in the 1990s, SNSD has capitalized on ethnic divisions and cleavages in society, in order to maintain a long term rule⁴²; as a result, its power has only grown, reaching a peak in the 2006 elections and remaining in power ever since. The leader and founder of SNSD, arguably the defining figure of the party, is Milorad Dodik, whose nationalist rhetoric focused on secession plays an important role in the ideological steering of the party. In the past decade, the party has shifted towards more obvious displays of nationalism⁴³ and Russophilia. For instance, leaders of SNSD have refrained from criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. SNSD has not shied away from attempting to strengthen economic ties with Moscow. Dodik also has a significant relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which showcases the foreign policy direction proposed by this party.⁴⁴

³⁹ President of the Repulika Srpska, <https://www.predsjednikrs.net/en/biography/>

⁴⁰ Gianluca Passarelli, *The Presidentialisation of Political Parties in the Western Balkans* (Springer, 2018), 83.

⁴¹ "Parties and Elections in Europe," accessed September 11, 2022, <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/bosnia-herzegovina.html>.

⁴² Gianluca Passarelli, *The Presidentialisation of Political Parties in the Western Balkans*, 93.

⁴³ "Za sve bi najbolja bila konfederacija Herceg Bosne, Republike Srpske i Bosne," accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/za-sve-bi-najbolja-bila-konfederacija-herceg-bosne-republike-srpske-i-bosne-921053>.

⁴⁴ "Bosnia's Republika Srpska Seeks Stronger Economic Ties with Russia," August 14, 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/bosnia-s-republika-srpska-seeks-stronger-economic-ties-with-russia-253395/>.

⁴⁵ "Šarović o sutrašnjoj sjednici NSRS-a: Srljamo grlom u jagode, nisu svjesni opasnosti u koju nas vode," accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/sarovic-o-sutrasnjoj-sjednici-nrsr-a-srljamo-grlom-u-jagode-nisu-svjesni-opasnosti-u-koju-nas-vode/21209148>.

⁴⁶ Gianluca Passarelli, *The Presidentialisation of Political Parties in the Western Balkans*, 83.

⁴⁷ Ibid 41

SDS Candidate: Mirko Šarović

Mirko Šarović is the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) candidate for the Presidency. He is currently the president of the SDS, having been elected in 2019. He held several important roles in the political structures of BiH, having served as President of Republika Srpska, between 2000 and 2002, and Serb member of the Presidency of BiH, between 2002 and 2003. Šarović is a fierce opponent of SNSD leader Milorad Dodik, criticizing his policies on several instances.⁴⁵

The Serb Democratic Party (SDS) is a right-wing party⁴⁶ that used to dominate the politics of Republika Srpska. It is a Serbian nationalist party that promotes a separatist sentiment.⁴⁷ As part of its political program, the SDS stands for the autonomy of Republika Srpska in foreign policy, and has a pragmatic approach to European integration. Unlike the SNSD, the SDS promotes the idea of European Integration of BiH. For the SDS, the it is paramount that the principle of subsidiarity is being respected in the process of European integration. It also advocates for a referendum in Republika Srpska on the topic of EU accession. In fact, being an essentially nationalist party, the SDS insists on the preservation of Serb identity.

President of Republika Srpska SNSD Candidate: Milorad Dodik

Milorad Dodik is the defining figure of the SNSD, being its founder. His political career goes back to the 1990s, and has held a multitude of important positions, both in the Republika Srpska and at the state-level: he has served as the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska (1998–2001 and 2006–2010), its President (2010–2018) and is the incumbent Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2018).⁴⁸ Dodik is known for his nationalist convictions, coupled with an obvious closeness to Belgrade and Russia. His most recent efforts of withdrawing Republika Srpska from key state-level institutions of the BiH, such as the armed forces, tax and judiciary system. It is clear that Dodik is the main candidate in favor of secession, with a preference for Belgrade and Moscow over the West.⁴⁹

On June 18th, Dodik met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to reaffirm the desire of the Republika Srpska to deepen economic cooperation and combat Western sanctions against Russia. At this meeting, Putin praised Dodik's efforts to keep Bosnia from complying with Western sanctions imposed as a result of the Ukraine war.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ "Biography for Milorad Dodik," July 14, 2014,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140714132935/http://database.cin.ba/baza/biography.php?id=59>.

⁴⁹ "Serbs Vote to Start Quitting Bosnia's Key Institutions in Secessionist Move," www.euractiv.com, December 10, 2021,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbs-vote-to-start-quitting-bosnias-key-institutions-in-secessionist-move/>; "Secession Threats and Nationalist Strife Shock Bosnia as EU Offers Limited Response," POLITICO, January 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/>; "Dodik Loses Argument in Bosnian Serb Assembly Over UK Deal," *Balkan Insight* (blog), June 20, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/dodik-loses-argument-in-bosnian-serb-assembly-over-uk-deal/>; Zeljko Trkanjec, "Hungarian Foreign Minister: We Will Veto EU Sanctions against Dodik," www.euractiv.com, December 20, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/hungarian-foreign-minister-we-will-veto-eu-sanctions-against-dodik/.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Velasquez, "Russia's Strategy to Destabilize the Balkans Is Working," *Geopolitical Monitor*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russias-strategy-to-destabilize-the-balkans-is-working/>.



Milorad Dodik with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Source: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59694>

PDP Candidate: Jelena Trivić

After the SNSD and the SDS, the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) is the third most powerful party in Republika Srpska. It is a center-right party, having a conservative agenda and a tendency towards Serb nationalism. Its candidate for the entity-level position of President of Republika Srpska is Jelena Trivić, a Serb politician that serves as professor at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Banja Luka, being a doctor of economic sciences. She serves as the president of the Economic Council of the PDP. Her political experience includes her mandate as a member of the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, as she was elected for that position during the 2018 General Elections.⁵¹

Polling

According to the polls, PDP candidate Jelena Trivic has a significant lead over Dodik in the race to become President of RS (37 to 33%). However, the majority of local and international experts concur that this outcome is unrealistic and exhibits the typical issue with such polls, which is brought on by the fact that many SNSD voters (as well as SDA voters) refuse to declare their intentions. 20% of respondents for the RS presidency, for instance, indicated that they would want their choice to remain secret.

Unsurprisingly, the race for the RS National Assembly seems to be dominated by SNSD with 25%, based on information collected for to polls. Meanwhile, the PDP has 12%, while the SDS has 11%. Most powerful Bosniak parties also have significant voters in Republika Srpska: the SDA has 5%, while the SDP has 4%. This poll is being questioned by experts, because it does not mention some other relevant parties, the kind of United Srpska or the Socialists.

THE STATE-LEVEL PARLIAMENTARY RACE

Citizens of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and those of Republika Srpska are also voting for the 42 seats (28 and 14 respectively) in the lower house of the Parliament of BiH, the House of Representatives.

For the state parliament, the polls describe the following picture: the SDA leads with 14%, followed by SNSD and HDZ with 10% each. They are followed by the SDP (7%), the PDP (5%) and the SDS (5% also). NiP and Nasa Stranka have 2% each, while any other party is at or below 1%. Nonetheless, as with other races described before, the parliamentary race is likely to be decided by a large margin of undecided voters, at 38%.

⁵¹ Hellasije, "Jelena Trivić Biografija," Biografija.org, January 4, 2019, <https://www.biografija.org/politika/jelena-trivic/>.

THIRD ACTORS AND THEIR INTERESTS AND REACTIONS TO THE BOSNIAN ELECTIONS

The October elections in Bosnia are also shaped by international dynamics in an interesting way. The foreign ambitions of Moscow and Ankara have the capacity to shape the upcoming elections, through various means, including economic aid and diplomatic maneuvering. There is also the fear of possible meddling in the elections from the Russian part, by use of organized cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns.

As part of his Balkan tour, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, meeting Chairman Šefik Džaferović and Members Milorad Dodik and Željko Komšić of the BiH Presidency in Sarajevo. During his visit, which took place on September 6th, Erdoğan outlined the cultural, social, political, military, and economic ties between the two countries and their importance to Ankara. In order to underline Turkey's support for BiH, Erdoğan discussed his plans for strengthening the economic ties between the two states, which aim to "improve our bilateral trade, which reached the level of \$876 million last year with a nearly 35% increase, and to further boost our investments."⁵² Turkey's support for the unity and prosperity in BiH by maintaining strong ties with Muslim Bosniak nationalists is in line with Ankara's new foreign policy doctrine, which has been described as containing an imperial⁵³, neo-Ottoman perspective.⁵⁴

Russia's meddling in the internal affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina is far from being a novelty. In fact, the Kremlin has long supported secessionist tendencies within Republika Srpska.⁵⁵ It is not a surprise that SNSD candidate to the Presidency of RS, Milorad Dodik, has visited Moscow on September 20th, just ahead of the elections. On this occasion, President Putin has expressed his support for Dodik: "I hope that it will be so,

after the results of the vote, that the position of the patriotic forces will be strengthened, which will enable us to further develop fruitful and mutually beneficial cooperation."⁵⁶

Moreover, there is also possibility of Russian interference by other means, such as cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns, as many Western officials and experts suggested. Janis Sarts, of NATO's Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence pointed out Moscow's will "to exploit the existing vulnerabilities to create instability in a country and basically question the election legitimacy and outcomes,". Johann Sattler, head of the EU delegation in Sarajevo and European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina declared that "this election season especially, we will see most likely attempts [of cyber-attacks] in that sphere".⁵⁷

To counter such threats, the UK government mentioned this summer that it would send two cyber-attack specialists, as well as additional funding to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina in resisting Russian influence. The US promised financial assistance for numerous nations as well, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, to modernize their security forces and increase their capacity "to counter Russian influence and aggression" in early September.⁵⁸

⁵² "Presidency Of The Republic Of Turkey, 'We Will Continue to Stand with Bosnia and Herzegovina,'" accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/130433/-we-will-continue-to-stand-with-bosnia-and-herzegovina->.

⁵³ Grosioiu Gabriel-Sorin, "Neo-otomanismul și ambițiile imperiale ale Turciei în Bosnia și Herțegovina (I)," accessed September 26, 2022, <https://adevarul.ro/blogurile-adevarul/neo-otomanismul-si-ambitiile-imperiale-ale-turciei-2206092.html>.

⁵⁴ Dimitar Bechev, "Erdoğan in the Balkans: A Neo-Ottoman Quest?," accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/10/11/erdogan-in-the-balkans-a-neo-ottoman-quest/>.

⁵⁵ Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959>.

⁵⁶ RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Dodik Travels To Moscow For Meeting With Putin Ahead Of Elections," accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/dodik-moscow-putin-elections-republika-srpska/32043095.html>.

⁵⁷ Irvin Pekmez, "Fears Grow of Russian Meddling in Bosnian Election," *Detektor* (blog), September 9, 2022, <https://detektor.ba/2022/09/09/moze-li-rusija-iskoristiti-slabosti-bh-sistema-da-utice-na-rezultat-izbora/?lang=en>

⁵⁸ Ibid

CONCLUSION

The regional stability of the entire Balkan Peninsula is intimately tied to the internal situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose cultural, religious, and implicitly geopolitical cleavages have impacted the history of the Balkans. Consequentially, any spark of tension that originates from this country risks to amplify old animosities and create new conflicts in the region. One can see how internal conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina can catalyze international tensions between larger powers with interests in the region. The divergent designs of the European Union, the Russian Federation and Turkey with regards to Bosnia and Herzegovina promise to give any internal crisis a regional dimension. Given the tensions created by the Ukrainian war, Russia's recent decision to officially declare a partial mobilization in the country has raised further concerns that Moscow may attempt to intervene in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to divert Western attention away from the Ukrainian situation.

A brewing crisis in Bosnia could easily create a spillover effect into the entire Western Balkans region, which, added to other current issues Europe has to face, risks to create further instability that would be hard to manage.

There is no lack of themes for disagreement for the parties in BiH: these are ranging from internal electoral reform to defining the future of BiH as a unitary state. The implementation of the forementioned second package of electoral reforms may cause tensions within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Bosniak parties seek control over the entity, endangering the political interests of Croat parties. In fact, this entire situation threatens the core principles established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement – a political compromise that has kept the country at peace. The Serbs in Republika Srpska are not satisfied with the status quo either; leaders of SNSD have made their wishes for secession clear.

These upcoming elections are the very expression of both internal rifts and international clashes of interests; hence, the reason why their result is so gravely consequential, and could define the future of the country, as well as impact regional stability.

