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Bosnia – voting for the devil you know

Blog Admin



*The Bosnian electorate failed to make a choice that would bring real change, in spite of signs throughout 2014 that the discontent for the current political set-up was about to reach a tipping point. “Voting for moderate parties, which would base their programmes on other than Dayton-linked demands, is simply too risky. People opt for the devil they know rather than the devil they don’t”, argues **Jessie Hronesova**.*



Streets of Banja Luka on the election night, photo: Tena Prelec/LSEE

To any external observer, the October 12 general elections in Bosnia might have seemed as a great opportunity for people to take power back into their hands and hold their corrupt political elites accountable for embezzling billions of dollars. But the electoral results, unsurprisingly, will hardly lead to a game-changer. Even if the past year’s events were truly unprecedented in the Bosnian post-Dayton history, they have not changed the general cowed approach to electoral risk-taking in Bosnia.

There are several reasons for this electoral behaviour.

Bosnians’ most-cited reason for their predictable electoral choices is the fact that there is simply no meaningful pool of parties to choose from. This is firstly because of the extreme clique-like characteristics of the party system in Bosnia. Bosnian political parties are based on strong and autocratic party leaders such as Bakir Izetbegovic from the Party of Democratic Action in the Federation, Milorad Dodik from the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats in the second entity Republika Srpska, and Dragan Covic from the Croatian Democratic Union representing Bosnian Croats. Political platforms are irrelevant. Although they publicly compete for political posts, they are eager to cooperate with each other in order to stay in their regional power units. *Divide et impera* is their main rationale.

Moreover, over the years, political parties in Bosnia have transformed into catch-all (i.e. one’s ethno-national group) parties, with no ideological programmes. It was difficult to distinguish the Bosnian Social Democratic Party’s campaign from the rest of the parties targeting mostly the Bosniak electorate (Party of Democratic Action, Part for Better Future, the Democratic Union). Only small and moderate parties such as *Nasa stranka* (Our party) have offered voters some tangible propositions. However, their moderate character with no ethno-national rhetoric disqualifies them from competing with the rest of the established parties across the country.

As Valery Perry recently [argued](#), the fear of wasting votes as well as ethnic outbidding have been deeply rooted in the behaviour of Bosnian voters. The strategy of taking the least risks manifests itself in practice in the sustained voting for parties openly representing one's ethno-national group (Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs or Bosnian Croats) AGAINST the demands of the other(s).

Voting for moderate parties, which would base their programmes on other than Dayton-linked demands, is simply too risky. People opt for the devil they know than the devil they don't. Effectively, this is a very rational behaviour for several reasons.

The Bosnian political system looks highly unstable and uncertain. The High Representative of the International Community, whose office was introduced as part of the agreement, has wide-ranging powers that allow him to interfere within Bosnian political life (such as sacking elected representatives and imposing decisions).

Rule-of-law in its narrower and broader sense remains an unattainable goal. Comparatively, Bosnian parliamentarians have some of the [highest salaries in Europe](#) but their main source of income is public procurement. Tenders are always pre-determined. In a 2012 UNDP survey, only 39.7% Bosnian citizens reported they had trust in the Bosnian judicial system.

In addition to public procurement, employment, education, and even private business are based on what one could call a "contactocracy", rather than anything remotely reminiscent of meritocracy. *Stela*, i.e. personal links to potential employers, is the best education one can attain in Bosnia. As an example can serve the case of the son of the outgoing Prime Minister of Republika Srpska Zeljka Cvijanovic, who received a post in a state firm *Elektroprijenos*, though his results were far worse than those of the rest of the twelve candidates.

In addition, Bosnia suffers from Linz and Stepan's "stateness" problem – being internally challenged as a legitimate state by the populous Bosnian Serbia minority (forming over 35% of the country) as well as torn allegiance to the state on the side of Bosnian Croats.

Bosnia also has one of the most complex governance systems in Europe with an extremely weak central state. The labyrinthine administrative and political system of the state only encourages highly corrupt behaviour as transparency is not only unwanted, but also highly difficult to exercise. With 147 ministries in a country of 3.8 million inhabitants, transfer costs are high and decision-making procedures are difficult to monitor. It comes as no surprise therefore that politicians and political parties are the least trusted Bosnian institutions. A [2014 PASOS survey](#) reported only a 14.5% trust level in political parties.

The list of problems is much longer – most analyses of Bosnia reduce themselves to call it a "deadlocked" country or a highly malfunctioning state. This is difficult to dispute. It is certainly true. However, the above-mentioned reasons aside, there is another – and often overlooked problem – which rationally explains the unwavering electoral behaviour of Bosnian voters. It is purely in the realm of economic welfare.

The Bosnian electorate is 3.28 million according to the [Central Electoral Commission's records](#). In total, 7,748 candidates put their names on the electoral lists. 98 political subjects (50 parties, 24 coalitions and 24 independent candidates) registered to compete for 518 mandates in total. This means that every 413th citizen of the country has put his or her name on the list of candidates.

A standard Bosnian family has around five members, but this does not include the extended family, which would be ten or more members. Taking into account municipal elections, which will be organized in two years, the math is simple: almost every second family in Bosnia is somehow linked to a political subject through one of its family members. [In a similar exercise](#), Bosnia was labelled as a country with the most per capita parties in the world – one party per 20,000 citizens.

Since jobs are attached to party allegiances – just like the entire civil service – it would be a highly irrational behaviour to vote for a (moderate or new) party, which could generate uncertain changes and would not have links to the current job-procurement system. Voting for a non-established, and non-national party would be too risky not only in the well-known "ethnic outbidding" logics but also for economic reasons. Entire families depend on one or two salaries of some of their members.

From this perspective, Bosnian electoral behaviour is highly rational and pragmatic. Unless the structure of the political competition is changed and the number of political subjects reduced, it is difficult to expect any major changes in Bosnia engendered through elections.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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