



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina Political briefing:
October elections
Ivica Bakota**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

October elections

Campaign for Bosnian general elections in October makes the final stretch this month. All main candidates for Presidency, House of Representatives, entity (Republic of Srpska and Federation of BIH), district (Brcko) and cantonal assemblies are set and ballots are made for 69 political parties, 34 independent candidates and 36 party coalitions. The official campaign starts exactly one month ahead of the elections (Sept 7), but informal campaign activities started immediately after the summer break. By the end of August, main candidates were busy attending cultural events or re-opening institutions in their local constituencies and ballooned fresh political paroles that will be used for electoral campaign.

The impact of these elections for the political development of Bosnia and Herzegovina is difficult to express simply and should be juxtaposed with long-term interests of Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, three main constitutional ethnicities (nations) and short-term stakes of their political parties. If one takes critical and likely justifiable approach from the Left about a “new” ethno-bourgeoisie becoming dominant political actor in Bosnian politics and raises long-term ideological questions around the sustainability of Bosnian political community and short-term political questions about anti-elite alternative approaches of civic political parties across ethnic and entity lines, these elections probably will not bring revolutionary outcome. Bosnia and Herzegovina is still state permanently captured by private, party and, seldomly, ethnic interests. It is the effects of poor and corrupt central governance that have particularly vexed most international observers in the West.

However, in the last two years there are some positive changes in central government of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In some policy circles, mainly those around European delegations and organizations sponsored by them, it is reasserted pro-European policy of the Council of Ministers (CoM) that has been

greeted as a sign that the country can step up EU integration process and negotiate compromise between antagonized ethno-political elites. This year Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted accession questionnaire from the European Commission which was regarded as a big success for the current government and increased approval rate for CoM and its Chairman Denis Zvizdic. Some of the media would like to see him as a new Bosniak member for Presidency while some think his nomination will increase Bosniak hegemony within the Federation or that the central government is about faceless bureaucrats rubberstamping decisions made between Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Mostar.

Therefore, these elections will be about long-term interests of three main constitutional ethnicities, while increased number of multi-level (state, entity, canton) and cross-segmented (inter-ethnic) actors multiplies complexity of the big picture. The stakes for political parties are difficult to overstate, yet significance of these general elections for the state, entities and ethnicities are much easier to capture.

Nomination crisscross

According to various media, the most interesting part of incoming general elections will be election for the Presidency with dozen candidates aspiring for three seats. On Bosniak ballot there are seven candidates out of which three stand real chances to get elected. Various sources claim for Amer Jerlagic, a candidate of Bosniak-nationalist SBH, to be a Trojan horse of SDA and his nomination serves to prevent large spillover of Bosniak right-wing votes that would happened if the former chairman of SBH and war-time PM Haris Silajdzic would run instead. SDA endorsed Sefik Dzaferovic, one of the most loyal party servants, yet the one with not very strong support or recognition in the public, thus additionally feeding doubts that outsider candidates M. Hadzikadic and S. Sepic are in fact installed by SDA to water down Bosniak ballot. Biggest split-deal is expected to happen between SDA Dzaferovic and center-right Bosniak SBB chairman Fahrudin Radoncic. This charismatic and

controversial businessman is direct contender for SDA votes if he proves to be able to distance from the coalition with SDA his party had made after previous elections.

On Bosnia(k) Left, three candidates will be running a for a Presidency. SDP candidate, Denis Becirovic, will probably split vote with DF`s Zeljko Komsic and NS`s Borisa Falatar and thus seal the fate of the united left coalition. As much as, Komsic, the chairman of SDP split party, has the chance for a seat in Presidency on a count of his Croat ethnicity, together with civic-left NS candidate Feletar his bets will be probably in increasing MP count in central and federal level HOR.

Polls also give chances to right-wing nationalist BPS candidate, ex-general Sefer Halilovic to stage a big surprise on Bosniak ballot. On the last elections, without financial support Halilovic won 70 000 votes, which makes his candidacy closest to anti-elite and populist position of all other Bosniak parties.

On Croat ballot there is HDZ candidate and current Croat-member of the Presidency, Dragan Covic. This long-time chairman of HDZ BIH is considered as a main person in charge for pushing the electoral reform and the failure to do so might reflect on his electoral success. DF candidate Komsic and NS candidate Falatar, both ethnically Croats, are expected to “hunt” votes in Bosniak-segmented areas but can tip the scales for Presidency. Therefore, HDZ is looking to make coalition with HDZ 1990, minor Croat center-right party on cantonal and federal levels. However, its leader Dijana Zelenika, has tried to distance from Croatocentric rhetoric and is after DFs voter base, which makes easier for HDZ to champion electoral reform as a campaign agenda, but can also decrease cohesion with other Croat political parties and make expected partnership with them on federal level little wobblier.

In ROS, current President and strong secessionist Milorad Dodik appeased the appeal of pro-integrationist SZP coalition and is expected to have a dead heat race with standing Serb member and moderate Mladen Ivanic. Already, at the beginning of this year, Dodik announced that he will chase independence

full time and his rhetoric is most cohesive around one issue – to remove all legal obstacles for conducting independence referendum. His candidacy is facing strong opposition in the West; however, he counts on regional fragility and foreign support to push for his agenda. It is hard to predict how far he will go with secessionism, but it is almost sure it will cause a crisis and deadlocks in the Presidency.

Issues and expectations

Overall impact of the general elections is difficult to foretell. Bosnia and Herzegovina might face more fractious Presidency which will obstruct the government in carrying out necessary reforms and block country's EU and NATO integration processes. On the other hand, it could steep bargaining process for already imminent reforms or delay them indefinitely. At least, it wouldn't be the first time that country's long-term interests are hijacked by short-term plans of the politicians.

Mainstream Sarajevo-based and more broadly Bosnia-minded analysts point out that incoming elections are expected to determine the future of SDA, leading ethnic Bosniak and Bosnia-centric political party, give scarce chance to leftist parties to make united coalition, bring about personalities instead of party apparatchiks and increase drastically low voter turnout.

Before incoming general elections, it is perhaps useful to face all these issues with reality check. As it turns out, SDA might suffer downturn but, as polls suggest, is unlikely to be dethroned from its position as leading Bosniak political party. It is probable that Bosnian Muslims would fail to give SDA yet another majority in HOR, but proportionate representation and the number of alleged 'SDA proxy parties' will likely see SDA in ruling coalition. Due to highly ethnic segmentation of votes for Presidency, SDA candidate stands good chances to become the next Bosniak member of Presidency. Second, small chances for united left coalition are already dispersed with SDP, traditional center-left party, and DF, its split party, announcing separate ballots and several

local center-left parties running against each other. Third, the quest for clean and trustful personality rather produced the very opposite: higher number of celebrities endorsed by various parties as a substitute for lack of real leadership figure. As a matter of fact, given the level of political alienation and abundance of various federal, cantonal, state assembly and cabinet posts to be traded for support, there is certain symbiosis between political parties and public figures in practicing so called ‘uhljebljivanje’ (benefiting from stable salary and “increasing coefficient for a pension”) instead of financial remuneration. The upshot of this practice is unusually higher number of non-political public figures being endorsed by different parties on their lists. Lastly, according to instant polls conducted by various media, there will probably be same or higher number (around 50%) of abstainers and passive voters who don’t believe that elections could bring any significant change and are not convinced by either party that her vote will make a difference.

On the other hand, for Croats the main state and federal level issue is electoral reform. From March 2018, Croat politicians tried to again mobilize support around electoral reform which would prevent Muslim constituent majority to vote on Croat ballot and thus determine the Croat member for Presidency. Current electoral law stipulates that tripartite Presidency is elected from three constituent ethnicities, one Bosniak and one Croat from the Federation and one Serb from Republic of Srpska. Without specific provision that allows separate ballot for Croat candidate for Presidency, Croat political parties fear that large numbers of Bosniaks will vote for Croat candidate and repeat the scenario from 2006 and 2010 elections when Croat member was elected solely on Bosniak votes. Croat political parties engaged in long constitutional and political battle to pass amendment on current electoral law in central parliament, however, the proposal was rejected by House of Peoples. As a result, Croat political parties are in paradoxical situation where they have to fight for its own constitutional representation by relying on non-ethnic vote in

single federal constituency or risk losing support segmented in Croat-dominant areas if they break with vicious circle of ethnopolitical agenda.

From 2010 general elections, this stumbling stone for participation of Croat representatives in central government has been dealt with either pan-Croat pre-election coalitions and post-election “gentlemen agreements”. Depending on HDZ BIH, major Croat political party’s current stand, other Croat parties will tend to vacillate in broad range between extra-constitutionalism with anti-centralist and secessionist aspirations accusing Bosniak-based parties of vote kidnapping and creating “Great Bosnia” (HSP AS), up to mild regionalism with “BH rhetoric” and more parochial agenda (HDZ 1990, HSS).

The cross-segmented impact of these general elections will be least felt in the Republic of Srpska (ROS), because this autonomous entity has luxury to have separate ballot (as well as agenda and rhetoric) on republic and central elections. From ROS thus will arrive the cohort of candidates without “shared vision of common destiny” with Sarajevo and no particular devotion to the norms of the Bosnian political system. They are exclusively focused with single-issue of ROS autonomism that can amount to overt secessionism.