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BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AFTER THE OCTOBER ELECTIONS: MORE OF THE SAME?

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The overall national elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not bring about the political turn hoped for. Although moderate and multi-ethnic parties gained more votes, national and nationalist parties won the elections once again. Under these political framework conditions a constructive restart remains questionable. A proactive policy on the part of the European Union is called for more urgently than ever before.

Regional significance

Within the framework of peace consolidation in South Eastern Europe Bosnia and Herzegovina plays a special role. Together with Kosovo, it is the only remaining entity of former Yugoslavia affected by the war in the 1990s, which is still under some type of international control and where peace-keeping forces are stationed. The West, that is the European Community/European Union and the United States of America, assumed particular responsibility for the post-war development of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Dayton Accords (signed in Paris in November and December 1995). There was a clear commitment from Brussels and Washington to substantially aid this multi-ethnic country with its constituent ethnic groups, i.e. Muslim Bosniacs, Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, to grow together again. Nationalism was to be driven back and Bosnia and Herzegovina to be prepared for EU and NATO membership.

Long-lasting obstruction and stagnation

A longer phase of progress in strengthening the overall national institutions (1999 - 2005) principally stemmed from the protectorate-like interventions of the High Representative of the international community. As of 2006, after failing a constitutional reform, political antagonisms increased again among national politicians, just as ethnic-religious nationalism rose in general. The decision of the Western representatives in what is referred to as Peace Implementation Council to de facto deprive their “guardian” over the implementation of the Dayton Accords, the High Representative, of his power, while formally maintaining his comprehensive legislative and executive commission, and to confide in the self-responsibility of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian politicians turned out to be a mistake.

In the Serb-dominated part of the state, the Republika Srpska, the political leaders of the

last government's term of office (2010 - 2014) pursued an openly separatist policy – without noteworthy Western response – and, thereby, vehemently violated the Dayton Peace Accords. Simultaneously, the second part of the state, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was paralysed by continuous political crises. They were caused primarily by partisan power struggles between the relevant political parties within the Federation and the – from the Croatian viewpoint – political dominance of the Bosniacs in that part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While in 2013 even Prishtina and Belgrade entered into an agreement to diffuse the dangerous Northern Kosovo issue within the context of Serbia's and Kosovo's rapprochement to the EU, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian politicians so far were not able to fulfil the few EU preconditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be in a position to catch up with the group of EU accession candidates.

Civil society carries the hope

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina the civil society, in the spring of this year, gave a strong sign of life by carrying out numerous demonstrations against the incompetence of its national politicians, who failed to improve the disastrous economic and social conditions of the population and to develop a common vision of the overall state. Since the demonstrations of solidarity did not go sufficiently far in the Republika Srpska entity and since the protests remained confined primarily to grass roots NGOs in the Federation, the demonstrations lost their force after a few weeks and, consequently, their political impact. The hopes of disillusioned citizens and Western politicians for a political restart in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus, focused on the overall national elections held on 12 October.

Lower voter turnout than in 2010

Already before the elections political analysts from Bosnia and Herzegovina had dampened

the hopes of a spectacular change in the political balance of power. According to their opinion, due to the massive political cronyism existing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this would have required a turnout of at least 65 percent in order to create a critical mass. Although more people were registered for those elections than for the 2010 elections, the voter turnout percentage even dropped. While in 2010 56 percent of registered voters cast their vote, the participation in this year's elections amounted to only 54 percent. Many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are disappointed with their social and economic situation. They are increasingly ready to demonstrate against grievances, like in the spring of 2014, while apparently they have lost their hope of a political turn.

In the elections of 12 October, the three-member collective state presidency, consisting of one Bosniac, one Croatian and one Serbian member, the members of the overall national parliament, the members of parliament of both parts of the state (entities), the parliamentary assembly of the ten cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity as well as the president and the vice presidents of the Republika Srpska entity were elected.

Main focus on Republika Srpska

The outcome of the elections in the Republika Srpska entity was of particular interest for political observers. The leader of that entity's government party "Alliance of Independent Social Democrats" (SNSD) and president of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, due to his nationalist rhetoric and the obstruction policy of his party officials, was considered as one of the main responsible persons for the permanent political crisis situation in the overall national institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His threat, which he frequently voiced over the past four years, to seize the first opportunity to lead the Republika Srpska into national independence, first and foremost increased the distrust on the part

of the Bosniacs. Constructive compromises, from which all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina would benefit, were impeded by such behaviour. Moreover, in Bosnia and Herzegovina Dodik is regarded as the political epitome of extreme cronyism, granting access to good jobs in the public sector only to favourites of the party.

Tainted electoral success for Dodik

The opposition coalition “Alliance for Change” was formed in the course of the electoral campaign in the Republika Srpska with the aim to present a counter movement to Dodik’s SNSD and its allied parties. The opposition alliance comprises quite diverse parties. The leading political power within it is the originally extremely nationalist “Serb Democratic Party” (SDS), which, however, under the new party leadership makes an effort in seeking a moderate orientation as a centre-right party. Its allies in the election were, particularly, the moderate centre parties “Party for Democratic Prosperity” (PDP) and the “Democratic People’s Party” (NDP). In contrast to Dodik’s polarising election rhetoric, the opposition relied on economic topics and the fight against corruption. The parties from the Federation were offered a constructive relationship.

Although, in comparison to the 2010 elections, Dodik and his party lost numerous votes to the opposition, they remained the dominant political force from Republika Srpska on almost all political levels. According to the final results published by the Central Election Commission at the end of October, Dodik defeated his opposition candidate Ognjen Tadić in the presidential race of the Republika Srpska by a close margin with 45.2 percent to 44.2 percent. Being the strongest party (32 percent) Dodik’s SNSD together with its allied parties has good chances to again obtain a parliamentary majority in the national assembly of the Republika Srpska. Also in the overall national parliament the SNSD with its result of 38.5 percent will

provide the majority of Serb members of parliament again, followed by the SDS with 32.6 percent.

Dodik’s party has lost to the opposition the important function of the Serb member in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state presidency. In accordance with the final results the moderate party leader of the PDP, Mladen Ivanić, has prevailed by a close margin over the female candidate of the SNSD. His entry into the state presidency might create a more constructive climate in this important overall national body, which represents Bosnia and Herzegovina to the outside world.

SDA and HDZ BiH as winners of the election in the Federation

In the Federation the Bosniac “Party of Democratic Action” (SDA) superseded the social democratic SDP as the strongest party. The SDA will be the dominant political force from the Federation also in the overall national parliament, accounting to 27.9 percent of votes. SDA politician Bakir Izetbegović was elected Bosniac member in the state presidency again, obtaining 32.9 percent. The SDA, on the one hand, has positioned itself as a moderate national party of the Bosniacs at the political level in a credible manner in the past years, while, on the other, it is regarded as a symbol of hunger for power and of cronyism in the Federation. After Recep Tayyip Erdogan had been elected as Turkey’s president, Izetbegović referred to him as “our leader”, thus causing major irritation in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian public.

Many disappointed voters of the SDP, which in the last term of office did not live up to the expectations regarding constructive and multi-ethnic politics, turned away from it on this occasion. By obtaining approx. 10 percent of the votes in the elections of both the parliament of the overall state and in the Federation, it fell back to fifth place. Especially the “Alliance for a Better Future” (SBB) of the entrepreneur Fahrudin Radončić and the

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multi-ethnic oriented newly founded party “Democratic Front” (DF) profited from the SDP’s electoral defeat. With a share of approx. 15 percent of the vote each, both parties might become a relevant factor in the post-electoral processes. From among the Croatian parties the “National Croatian Democratic Union BiH” (HDZ BiH) prevailed over the comparatively more moderate “HDZ 1990”. The leader of the HDZ BiH, Dragan Čović, defeated his considerably more constructive rival candidate Martin Raguž and was elected Croatian member of the state presidency. In the cantons with a Bosniac majority the SDA prevailed, while the HDZ BiH won in the cantons with a Croatian majority.

Perspectives after the elections

From the overall national elections in both entities the national to nationalist parties SNSD, the SDA and the HDZ BiH emerged victorious. It has to be expected that these three parties will play a key role in the imminent formation of the government on the various national levels. Great reforms and substantial progress in terms of consolidation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state are not to be expected from these political players. A proactive policy on the part of the EU vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina will, therefore, be the more important. The facts that the so far opposition in the Republika Srpska entity gained in votes and that with Ivanić, a moderate opposition politician will represent the Serbs in the state presidency might have a positive influence on the further development of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also the good performance of both the Domovina (Fatherland), a coalition made up of Bosnian and multi-ethnic parties, in the Republika Srpska and the multi-ethnic “Democratic Front” in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina might give rise to new political dynamics.

All in all, it still remains to be seen whether the old and new political constellations, which were the outcome of the October elections,

will be sufficient for a constructive political new start or whether the old antagonisms will rapidly gain the upper hand again.

Recommendations

- Social and economic issues relevant for all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina should be in the foreground of the government negotiations.
- Conflict-laden political issues, such as the comprehensive constitutional reform for Bosnia and Herzegovina, would be obstructive at this stage.
- The EU should concretise its plans for a new proactive policy vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina and should let them become effective.
- Further on, the EU should seize the positive elements of the result of the elections, such as the vote of Ivanić into the state presidency, as a multiplier for such a proactive policy, from which all citizens of the country could benefit.
- Strengthening civil society remains a much-needed challenge, in particular as a corrective instrument in the event of new political manipulations on the part of the politicians in government. Any deficiencies (such as the lack of political strategies and grass roots movements partly acting in a chaotic manner), which might appear in this context, should be addressed.
- The executive mandate of the peace-keeping force EUFOR should remain as a “risk net” until a political change of paradigm towards a constructive and compromise-oriented policy is clearly discernible in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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