

Conflict Psephology Amidst the 2022 Bosnian General Election

Written by Martin Duffy

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/10/24/conflict-psephology-amidst-the-2022-bosnian-general-election/>

MARTIN DUFFY, OCT 24 2022

There are many scholarly avenues where the essential epistemologies of International Relations (IR) and conflict psephology coincide. The work of IR oftentimes dances in tune to the calendar of international elections. In politically, ethnically or indeed racially divided societies, the result is invariably a nomenclature of conflict psephology. Unique methodologies come into play when we look at the monitoring of elections in such contested political environments. Bosnia features strongly for a number of reasons, not least its legacy of violent politico-ethnic conflict; culminating in the Dayton Peace Accords which re-drew a political geography hitherto moulded by the adventurism of Ottoman Sultans and European Kings.

Amid conflicting views of the results, claims of rigged ballots and Western intervention, Bosnia's election will take time to configure. The defeat of Bakir Izetbegovic, leader of the main Bosnian political party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in the state presidencies was the only immediate result of note. Soon after, Zeljka Cvijanovic, candidate of the Bosnian Serb party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) defeated Bosnian Serb opposition leader Mirko Sarov to be president of Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska. Zeljko Komsic from the Democratic Front also easily beat Borjana Kristo, from the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) for the Croat presidential seat. Jelena Trivic, candidate for president of Republika Srpska, asked the Central Election Commission for a recount of the election for the Srpska Presidency.

Considering damaging comments from the Bosnian election commission chief about the High Representative's late changes in the run up to the elections, the OSCE's Peter Tejler described his experience as offering "never a dull moment". It is sometimes said that in Bosnia angering a side probably means (at least) you are making decisions – angering all and you are likely doing a good job. Incumbent OHR Christian Schmidt has shown a willingness to "take incoming" from any side to ensure international standards. The OSCE Official Statement noted, "concerns remained over failed reforms and divisive rhetoric...a widespread mistrust in public institutions, and ethnically divisive rhetoric continued to mark the election environment...".

The backdrop of political deadlock, widespread disillusionment with the political establishment and key institutions shackled was malodorous. The process on election day was largely peaceful, although there were some disruptive incidents around polling stations. Voter secrecy was often compromised, and there were also cases of unauthorized people tracking voters. Observers assessed the counting procedures negatively in numerous places, mainly due to procedural irregularities. Pascal Allizard, OSCE Special Co-ordinator, stated

Serious efforts to manage this electoral process...need to be accompanied by similar efforts to solve the continued political deadlock... disillusionment towards the political establishment is evident. Restrictions on the right to become a candidate based on ethnicity and residency go against...international standards for democratic elections...

Stefan Schennach, Head of the PACE delegation commented:

It is vital to bridge the gaps between different ethnic groups. It should be sufficient for each citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina to identify themselves as such without any further specification being necessary.

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Irene Charalambides, Head of the OSCE PA delegation said, “trust in democratic processes will likely remain elusive until state structures are responsive to the people’s will rather than to entrenched political party interests,” while Mimi Kodheli, head of the NATO PA delegation observed, “very different visions of the future”. Andreas Schieder, head of the EP delegation urged: “the speedy implementation of all committed reforms, including electoral ones...” Ambassador Peter Tejler, Head of the ODIHR mission added: “Elections are not a one-day event. In the days to come we will continue our observation of post-election developments so we can make a comprehensive assessment of the entire electoral cycle.”

At Nuevo Sarajevo’s Municipal Centre, we observed the closing of the vast lurid-coloured, tamper-evident sacks. The writer is inevitably reminded that a couple of decades ago, his task in the same region was to verify the forensic body count from the cadavers arriving at Mostar. Tonight, it is zipping up polling station bags. The polling station adjudicators quarrel half-heartedly about whether “a smiley” invalidates the vote. An hour of sometimes heated but mostly good-natured wrangling resolved itself by the conclusion that as the voter’s intention was clear and his emoji not defamatory, the poll could stand. The city itself is everywhere casualty of trauma. The remnants of the rejuvenated old University Library, now restored to its Ottoman glory, offers a sanitized exhibition of the Sarajevo siege. This densely packed city, nestles bowl-like and is surrounded by hostile mountain forests from which Serb fighters once rained down fire. In such a highly contentious society, the suspicion of the deficit or surplus of one unfair vote is enough to cause momentary paralysis at the count, reducing the exhausted polling station clerks to apoplexy.

The fragility of a democracy where a disputed vote causes suspension of the counting process is palpable. This surely is in violation of the fundamental principle that minor inaccuracy in tabulations are irrelevant as long as in low percentage and the pattern is random. In Bosnia these long-honoured trusts cannot compete with the emotion generated by one contested cross on a ballot. A modern preoccupation with the hopes for majoritarianism is steeped in the dark history of previous colonial dominions. The system allows no margin for miscalculation. Even the most trivial mistake can consign one’s electoral rights to the history book of spoiled ballots. Those innocent voters are betrayed by an electoral system in which Bosnia still configures itself inescapably in the lacunae of ethnic politics. It remains a stillborn democracy, still waiting a viable power-sharing foetus from which to nurture a democratic child of the future.

Between 2013 and 2019, around half a million Bosnian citizens left and with a highly deficient mechanism for the absentee vote, a large slice of Bosnia’s overseas workers is effectively disenfranchised. This raises questions about the credibility of the entire election process. Bosnia’s multiple levels of governance is tediously complex. Parties can elect for the presidency, state-level parliament, the Republika Srpska presidency and deputies, and entity-level and cantonal assemblies. This complex system, birthed by the 1995 Dayton peace talks, actually stymies real governance. Moreover, with an electoral threshold of just three per cent, the country is held to ransom by small parties artificially boosted as coalition kingmakers – and thus open to bribery.

This writer, an OSCE observer sitting at the very spot where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914 (catapulting Europe into war), cannot help but think that the region will remain unstable for the foreseeable future. The international observer community has traditionally been benevolent to Bosnia as an emerging democracy, but it may be time to take a more critical view of its widespread electoral irregularities. While these may make little difference to the actual results, they nevertheless tarnish the principles of good electoral administration. So many international commentators (perhaps still euphoric that at least there is no mass violence), readily score “good” an exercise which is simple math and should be consistently “perfect”. There is much that could be done to streamline the Electoral Commission and speed up the process. Results “delayed” get to seem like “results denied” even when they are almost a foregone conclusion. If there is a lesson to be learned from the election it may be reflected in the impatience of the High Representative with the continued preponderance of vocal but voteless parties, and the increasingly obvious need for electoral reform. Even in such an intensely divided society like Bosnia, political opportunists cannot expect to gain seats just by “diversity criteria” alone. Conflict psephology is surely an aid to exploring and explaining division, not a tool in its perpetuation.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.