

Balkan FOCUS



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October 2022: general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina 25 years after the Dayton Accords

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In recent times, the already precarious situation in the Western Balkans has worsened in many respects, even verging on new armed conflicts. These have ranged from the institutional and political-economic-social paralysis pervading Bosnia and Herzegovina (more than twenty-five years after the signing of the Dayton Accords that put an end to the war) to Serbia's hesitations in embarking on a definitive European direction, passing through the unresolved "Kosovo question", the extremely tense political situation in Montenegro, and the frustrations of North Macedonia and Albania's expectations connected to the EU accession process.

In this context, on 2 October 2022, the floor will return to the voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They will have to choose, within the framework of one of the most complex and cumbersome institutional systems at the international level, both the three members of the collegial presidency and their representatives in the central parliament as well as in that of the country's two constituent entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the eve of the elections, the country lives in total uncertainty as to the outcome of the vote. As things stand, it is unclear whether there will be a (radical) change, aimed at overcoming the decades-long formula of the ethnic approach to political representation, or whether there will once again be a triumph of the nationalist political line, thanks to the retention in power of the forces that have de facto governed the country (apart from partial parentheses) for the past thirty-two years.

To better understand the picture, we must turn back the clock many years, to November 1990, the date of the first "free" elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the fact that the former Yugoslavia did not "technically" belong to the so-called "Eastern bloc", those elections were the first following the fall of the Berlin Wall, which had also caused so many effects in the former Yugoslav republics. In these elections, a coalition of nationalist parties consisting of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) and the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) won by a wide margin. In order to prevail over the opposing front - represented mainly by the former communists, who had merged into the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the so-called Union of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia (SRSJ), representing political and social forces with a "civic" orientation - the three nationalist parties, which did not "compete" with each other with regard to a potential electorate, proposed themselves in a formal coalition that promised not only "a rapid path to Europe" but, in essence, a "land of plenty".

Thanks to their miraculous promises, these parties took power and installed a tripartite system of government at all levels. Unfortunately, as was to be expected, the enchantment lasted very little: the winning coalition failed to reach agreement on any single issue and within a few months Bosnia-Herzegovina plunged back into political and institutional chaos and, later, in April 1992, into bloody conflict.

But the damage of the war was followed by the mockery of the post-war phase. The parties that won the elections in 1990 - which clashed bitterly, not only politically - during the war, continued to govern the country even after the Dayton Accords, cyclically reintroducing

nationalist themes and artfully creating ethnic problems in order to reawaken old fears and extremist claims.

So, what is the result, more than twenty-five years after the signing of the Dayton Accords?

The country is still divided into ethnically homogeneous territories, without efficient common institutions and with a predominantly assisted economy. The only significant political change that has taken place in over thirty years of decline is represented by the steady rise to power in the Republika Srpska - in place of the SDS, whose leader Radovan Karadžić was tried and convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia - of Milorad Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), who have long since abandoned social democratic positions in favour of nationalist ones and who have become, from darlings of the Western social democracies, the main stakeholders of the Russian Federation in the region.

In spite of this change, the three parties (the SDA, the HDZ and the SNSD instead of the SDS), despite many years of failed policies, continued to monopolise the country's fortunes, hindering its development and European perspective. Ranging from the constitution of a tri(ethno)party system of power, to moments of confrontation - fortunately, not armed for the moment - to parentheses of collaboration as well as formal and informal coalitions, succeeding in their intent to marginalise any form of opposition. Even in next October's elections, the same parties are still on the scene, in a de facto coalition. Neither the miraculous prospects that have not been realised, nor the resounding failures in all fields have deprived them entirely of popular consensus.

Trying to change the country's fortunes is the bloc of moderate parties, whose moderation consists mainly of not simply seeking the non-ethnic vote: from the aforementioned Social Democratic Party (SDP) to some new parties (Naša stranka/Our Party, Narod i Pravda/People and Justice, among others), which in last year's local consultations achieved a good result, especially in the large urban centres.

The elections on 2 October therefore represent both a "moment of truth" and one of the last opportunities to "archive" the nationalists. In this context, it seems positive that as many as 11 opposition parties support a presidential candidate, Professor Denis Bećirović, giving the country a perspective.

Failing this, we can only hope that the fighting will not resume.