

IMF and EU call the tune in Bosnia elections

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On Sunday, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) is holding general elections. In total, some 7,748 candidates, 735 electoral lists, 65 parties and 24 coalitions will stand for over 500 well-paid posts in a country of some 3.5 million citizens—a population equivalent to the city of Los Angeles. However, whichever parties or individuals populate the state apparatus after the election, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Union (EU) will continue to dictate economic and social policy.

Last month, the IMF declared that it was suspending the next portion of the country's €380 million (US\$488 million) loan programme until after the election and the new government had implemented "agreed economic policies". The IMF's Ron van Rooden, who headed a 10-day mission to the country, stated, "We have a number of outstanding issues, commitments on the standby agreement, where things still need to be done....We see a hole emerging in the budgets so we would like to see still an effort from the governments to compress non-priority spending, not related to addressing the impact of the floods."

The devastating floods earlier this year caused an estimated €2 billion worth of damage and displaced about 90,000 people. US embassy officials, a Japanese government spokesman, and various BiH politicians have traded insults over who is to blame for the slow disbursement of flood relief aid.

The floods also worsened Bosnia's already terrible economy, which is expected to contract by 0.7 percent in 2014. The fiscal deficit is expected to rise from 2 percent of GDP to 4.5 percent. The unemployment rate stands at 44 percent with some 550,000 workers without a job, compared with 700,000 in work. Only recently, Bosnia's aluminium smelter Aluminij Mostar, the country's top exporter, escaped the threat of bankruptcy yet again and the loss of 850 jobs and thousands more indirectly.

The huge BiH state apparatus is a legacy of the 1995 Dayton Accords, which ended the Bosnian War and enshrined ethnic divisions in the constitution.

On Sunday, voters will elect representatives for three levels of government. At the national level elections take place for the presidency and House of Representatives. Each officially recognised ethnic group (Serb, Croat or Bosniak) elects a president, who then serves for two periods of eight months as chairperson of the Presidential Council.

Then there are elections taking place for the two autonomous "entities" into which BiH is split—the Serb dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Croat-Bosniak Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). RS will vote for its president, vice-president and National Assembly members, while the FBiH will elect the members of its House of Representatives.

In addition, voting will also take place in the 10 cantons into which FBiH is divided, each of which has its own cantonal assembly, ministers and police force.

The current internationally appointed pro-consular "High Representative", Valentin Inzko, who has the last say on the country's laws and public appointments, declared, "Voters have the right to choose and it is important that they choose a better future for themselves....If you do not go to the polls, then your fate will be decided by others."

Inzko's plea is likely to fall flat. Polls suggest voter turnout may be less than half of those eligible. In 1998 the turnout was about 70 percent. In 2010 it had slumped to around 55 percent.

Political analyst and vice dean of Sarajevo University, Asim Mujkic, told reporters, "Lots of citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina have lost trust not only in those individuals in power but also in the institutional framework and system in this country."

According to the Slovenian-based International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies, the

elections are the “most unpredictable” since Dayton with all the major parties facing “great uncertainty”. Countless possible coalition arrangements are being touted in the press.

BiH has also become embroiled in the Western attempts to roll back Russian influence in the Balkans. Four days after the Bosnia vote, Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit neighbouring Serbia to take part in World War II commemorations. Current RS President Milorad Dodik, of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats of BiH (SNSD), will be the only Bosnian leader in attendance. Last month Putin told Dodik in a meeting in the Kremlin that relations between Russia and RS “are developing successfully” and represent a bright spot amid “difficult times in international relations and in Europe”—a reference to the Ukraine crisis.

There are reports that, during the crisis, Dodik had considered declaring RS independent with Russian support. Dodik has denied the reports, but last week declared, “The idea of the RS as a state has never been lost, it was pushed to the background a little, and now we have completely rehabilitated it and put it on the agenda.”

For its part, the EU signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with BiH in 2011 that was supposed to act as BiH’s “roadmap to the EU”. However, Johannes Hahn, the new Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, acting on the orders of the new European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, has indicated that EU enlargement and Bosnia’s accession will not happen in the foreseeable future.

The disastrous unemployment levels and abysmal economic conditions caused by years of EU- and IMF-dictated austerity measures led to the eruption of protests in heavily working class areas earlier this year. Many government offices were set on fire and several local governments resigned.

Following the protests, assemblies, or plenums, appeared, dominated politically by a number of pseudo-left groups and individuals who claimed that the plenums represented the voice of the working class, a “Bosnian Spring” and constituted organs of self-government, even soviets.

Chief among these was a group called Lijevi (the Lefts), established in 2012 by former Social

Democratic Party members, various protest and student leaders, and individuals influenced by Pabloite organizations internationally. They promoted a vague reformist program, structured around “basic principles” of democracy, socialism, secularism, feminism, anti-fascism and sustainable development.

Since then, the plenums have disintegrated, vindicating the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which wrote, “With the entire Dayton project breaking down, they step forward to micro-manage the situation in the interests of European and US imperialism. The plenums are not instruments for galvanising working class opposition, but a means to control and subordinate it to a reform agenda dictated by Washington.”



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