

Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive but concerns remained over failed reforms and divisive rhetoric, international observers say

SARAJEVO, 3 October 2022 – The general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive and overall well organised with fundamental freedoms respected during the campaign. However, failed reform efforts, a widespread mistrust in public institutions, and ethnically divisive rhetoric continued to mark the election environment, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA), and the European Parliament (EP) found that the legal framework forms an adequate basis for holding democratic elections.

The elections took place against the backdrop of ongoing political deadlock and widespread disillusionment with the political establishment, with some key institutions blocked. The largest parties in power have frequently used ethnically divisive rhetoric as the standard form of debate. The campaign was calm overall, but observers noted incidents of pressure on public sector employees. The process on election day itself was largely peaceful, although there were some disruptive incidents in and around polling stations. While voting procedures were observed to be generally followed, the secrecy of the vote was often compromised, and there were also cases of unauthorized people keeping track of voters and assisting multiple voters. Observers assessed the counting procedures negatively in numerous places, mainly due to procedural irregularities.

“Serious efforts to manage this electoral process successfully need to be accompanied by similar efforts to solve the continued political deadlock which keeps undermining real democratic development here,” said Pascal Allizard, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers. “Overall disillusionment towards the political establishment is evident, but I have noticed efforts of a few forward-looking candidates to ignite political and socioeconomic change in the country, which is a positive trend I encourage the newly elected representatives to develop.”

Restrictions on the right to become a candidate based on ethnicity and residency go against both the principle of universal and equal suffrage and international standards for democratic elections. Rulings by both the European Court of Human Rights and the state constitutional court against the discriminatory nature of these limitations remain unimplemented.

“Now that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have voted, the politicians and political parties should see this as a mandate to work for the future of their country and the perspective of European integration,” said Stefan Schennach, Head of the PACE delegation. “It is particularly important to give the younger generation of voters the sense that their future lies within their own country. For this, 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.”

The effectiveness of the legal framework is undermined by a number of shortcomings, while failed negotiations between political parties left it without needed reforms. Still, recent legislative changes from 27 July have added important safeguards. However, the fact that the changes were made so close to the elections meant that not all enforcement mechanisms could be fully established. Further changes announced on election day were not foreseeable at the time of voting, leaving both voters and contestants uncertain about the full impact of the cantonal assembly vote.

“The capacity to manage an election process appears to have been established relatively well here in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” said Irene Charalambides, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “But real 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.”

With a few notable exceptions, women did not feature prominently in the campaign, and women candidates were often targets of insult and ridicule on social networks. Long-standing gender stereotypes remain and efforts made to increase women's active participation in the elections were insufficient.

“Yesterday, we observed an overall well organised and competitive election, despite the very different visions of the future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. We met poll workers – many of them young and many of them women – committed to administer a smooth election. And we saw the citizens make their democratic choice,” said Mimi Kodheli, head of the NATO PA delegation. “Today, the citizens of this country rightfully expect that the elected politicians will take responsibility and ownership for their country's future for the benefit of all citizens – for a safe and secure country, for reconciliation, for social and economic advances and for democratic progress.”

The upper-level election administration enjoyed election stakeholders' trust, and managed the elections efficiently and transparently. However, there was little confidence in polling station commissions due to widespread accusations that some political parties were trading positions to control polling stations on election day.

“These elections took place against a background of challenging internal and international circumstances,” said Andreas Schieder, head of the EP delegation. “We regret that last-minute changes were imposed by the High Representative. Now after the election, the European Parliament calls for a smooth government formation and for the speedy implementation of all committed reforms, including electoral ones, in line with local and international court decisions. There is no time to lose.”

The lack of public debate and the use of divisive rhetoric, which was also reflected in the limited and biased media coverage, reduced voters' opportunity to make an informed choice on election day. Recent defamation cases brought against journalists, cyber-attacks targeting prominent media outlets, and the intimidation and harassment of journalists created a working environment of political pressure or even persecution.

“The mission's media monitoring concluded that most media outlets' coverage of the campaign was significantly limited,” said Ambassador Peter Tejler, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “It further reflected division along ethnic lines and political partisanship. As a result voters didn't have complete and unbiased information when deciding whom to vote for. 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.”

The international election observation mission to the general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina totalled 471 observers, made up of 336 ODIHR-deployed experts, long-term, and short-term observers, 83 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, 23 from PACE, 17 from the NATO PA, and 12 from the European Parliament.

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