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The West Won't Strike Gold in Bosnian Election

The West should not make the Bosnian electorate responsible for its own policy confusion.

By Kurt Bassuener

Since the formal election campaign period began in Bosnia three weeks ago, USAID has mounted a get-out-the-vote campaign entitled [“Vote or Suffer.”](#)

Employing ominous music and evocative black-and-white images of the destruction wrought by the May floods, as well as references to the long-term devastation wrought by more than two decades of bad governance – such as unemployment and poverty – the campaign seems well suited to the mood of popular dissatisfaction.

Western governments, particularly the EU and US, palpably hope that the elections will deal them a better hand in terms of potential partners to champion meaningful reform.

While some change is indeed possible, the potential of the elections to generate a significantly changed dynamic and durable progress is questionable, [as my colleague Valery Perry recently wrote.](#)

Whoever is elected, their ability to effect change, even if they are so inclined, will be limited.

Western governments would therefore do better to devote their efforts towards developing their own strategy, rather than basing hopes on potential electoral outcomes.

The underlying problem is systemic – a lack of mechanisms to ensure political accountability.

This is not merely a question of personalities or parties. Within the current system, the only conceivable way to foment major structural, constitutional changes is to assemble a super-majority – 28 seats in the state parliament (including at least a third from each entity) – behind them.

But, no party or bloc of parties is even attempting to construct a broad-based common agenda during the campaign. No parties based in the Federation entity are attempting to gain votes from Serbs in the Republika Srpska, or vice versa. So, the widespread promises of change – some, incredibly, coming even from the incumbent parties – will not survive the sausage machine of government formation.

There is a real disconnect here because it has become evident that there is a vast, though atomized, potential constituency for a credible alternative among the electorate, in both entities.

Polls conducted by the EU Delegation, OHR, and others all point in this direction. It is puzzling why the EU Delegation and OHR kept their findings under wraps, as they could have shaped the political debate and increased their leverage.

Many of the findings run contrary to the prevailing narratives. For example, an overwhelming majority of respondents from Republika

Srpska said they supported the February protests. There is clearly a potential constituency for a very different sort of Bosnia and Herzegovina out there. But there is no obvious political vehicle for it.

Despite exhortations to get out and vote, a large proportion of the electorate are likely to conclude that nothing palatable is on the political menu, and either stay home or even cast spoiled ballots to show their lack of confidence in the system.

Others will grudgingly vote according to the perverse incentives that permeate the system. Who scares me most? Which party will allow me (or my family) to keep his/her job? Some surely will vote in the desperate hope that politicians who have not yet had a chance to disappoint them will generate progress.

But the incentives in the political system encourage parties to take the low road: to take the votes they can get most easily, writing-off those in constituencies that they conclude are irretrievably in the thrall of their self-proclaimed co-ethnic “protectors.” The system deters even those who claim to advocate deep change from actively seeking to develop the necessary broad constituency for it. It is much easier to go with the flow of systemic incentives than fight them.

In the post-election period, the default setting for some external actors will be to search for what is “deliverable” and engage in the labour-intensive alchemy of attempting to assemble 28 votes for a constitutional deal.

Attempting to build a composite majority means needing to serve the interests of those who arrived at their positions though this

system. Where their interests converge is on their ability to employ patronage and to operate without accountability.

The electoral cycle does not absolve the West from finally developing a reality-based strategy for BiH. The false assumptions and failed policies of the US and EU have led to a dead end from which they now hope that the voters will extricate them. Instead of this faith-based approach, the West must get its own posture and strategy in order, and decide on its mode of engagement with any government configuration.

The tools they need already exist; what is lacking is the collective political will to organize them strategically and re-animate their capabilities, restoring their credibility. New, creative leadership in the EU Delegation and OHR are essential to a new, effective strategy.

External actors cannot fix Bosnia, but they can create a much more conducive environment for those Bosnians and Herzegovinians who want to do so. Making clear that the Dayton rules will again be enforced until they are replaced, that the West will uphold the country's territorial integrity against all challenges, and ensuring that Western money no longer goes on propping up a morally and financially bankrupt governance structure, resistant to reform, would enable potential agents of change to emerge.

Rigid and clear conditionality would empower them. When these agents of change manifest themselves, they will require external policy support.

Replacing the current system is essential to Bosnia becoming a truly democratic and functioning state. Developing a formula that a

supermajority of citizens – of all self-identifications – can embrace will take time and effort. But it is the only real solution.

The best way to ensure progress toward that goal is to foster an environment that favours Bosnian advocates of alternatives who aim to develop broad constituencies – rather than vainly toiling in the hope that some combination of the base elements delivered by the electoral process will yield gold.

Kurt W. Bassuener is co-founder and Senior Associate of the [Democratization Policy Council](#), a global initiative for accountability in democracy promotion.