

EXCERPTS  
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Elections in 2000  
Risks for the Bosnian Peace Process

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According to current plans, the coming year in Bosnia and Herzegovina will once again be a year dominated by elections. Municipal elections are to be held on 8 April 2000, organised by the OSCE, and state, entity and cantonal elections are scheduled for September, to be conducted by domestic authorities.

**ESI has serious concerns about the impact of these elections on the Bosnian peace process. Because of their timing, the elections are likely to reinforce the war-time nationalist regimes, even though many indicators suggest that their public support is beginning to decline.** They will also dominate the international agenda in a year when attention should be focused on addressing the institutional reasons for the weakness of Bosnian democracy.

This short paper is written to bring these risks to the attention of policy makers, and promote discussion of the possibility of postponing both rounds of elections until 2001.

The Weakness of the Democratic Process in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Many observers now believe that the prominence given to elections in the Bosnian peace process has been misguided. Four rounds of elections in four years have not brought about any transformation of the political environment. They have not removed the war-time leadership from power. They have not produced political processes which bind the three ethnic groups together. Most strikingly of all, they have not generated political platforms which credibly address the country's many acute problems.

The problem of Bosnian democracy is not simply a question of election results - whether the people choose to vote for 'moderates' or 'hard-liners'. In most parts of the country, Bosnia lacks the institutional base for a meaningful democratic process. Parliaments and governments at all levels are kept weak by the existence of extra-constitutional structures.

Because of these extra-constitutional structures, the nationalist regimes are not dependent on elections or parliaments for their power. The Bosnian public is aware that real questions of power are not decided through elections, and there is widespread cynicism about the capacity of the democratic system to bring about change. The lack of credible alternatives encourages the population to continue to vote in ethnic blocs for the war-time leadership. In this institutional environment, simply conducting more elections does not promote democracy.

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The decision of the High Representative and the OSCE Head of Mission in November to remove 22 officials whose actions were blocking the peace process was taken, in their own words, "to see that Bosnia and Herzegovina has the opportunity to develop political institutions consistent with the rule of law" (Joint Press Release, 29 November 1999). ESI agrees that direct action by the international community against illegal power structures is both legitimate and necessary to clear the way for the development of democratic institutions.

However, there is a clear inconsistency in using international authority to over-rule a flawed democratic process, while at the same time continuing to conduct further elections.

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#### Elections Will Freeze Political Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Over the past year, there have been many signs of a decline in public support for the nationalist regimes.** Changing relationships with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia are undermining the ability of the nationalist parties to finance parallel, unconstitutional structures. Popular frustration over public corruption and deteriorating economic conditions in Bosnia will present important opportunities for political development in the coming period.

However, municipal elections in April are too soon to reflect these trends. Their timing is likely to catch the nationalist parties, particularly the Croat HDZ and the Serb SDS, at a high-point in their political fortunes, protecting their position for the next four years.

In Croat areas, the HDZ remains a very disciplined political force, opposed to any initiatives for reform or ethnic reintegration. There is a very real prospect that the death of Croatian President Tudjman, the election victory of the opposition parties in Croatian parliamentary elections and the forthcoming Croatian presidential elections will lead to splits within the HDZ. The emergence of a moderate Croatian government willing to make alliances with opposition parties, such as Zubak's New Croatian Initiative (NHI), might offer the best chance of isolating the current HDZ leadership (as occurred with the Serb SDS in 1997). It will also, over time, undermine the financial basis for the parallel "Herceg-Bosna" institutions.

However, candidate lists for the municipal elections closed in December 1999. Whatever positive developments may follow the Croatian election, they will not be reflected in an April poll in Bosnia.

**It is tempting to assume that the defeat of the HDZ in Croatia will lead of itself to the isolation of the Bosnian Croat hard-line leadership. However, there are important differences between Croatia and Bosnian Croat areas in Bosnia.** In Croatia, opposition parties have been established for a long time, have developed a strong campaign platform focusing on economic mismanagement on the part of the government, and have promised an end to the international isolation of Croatia. In Bosnia, Croat opposition parties have not presented any alternative economic platform and have very weak local structures. While urban voters and civil society have strongly boosted the anti-HDZ forces in Croatia, Bosnian Croat cities such as Mostar or Vitez are in the hands of the HDZ.

In Republika Srpska, the decision of the Provisional Election Commission (PEC) to ban the Serb Radical Party (SRS) from the April elections will likely consolidate the opposition vote to the Dodik government behind the Serb nationalist SDS. Over the past year, the SDS has successfully capitalised on popular disaffection with the Dodik Government. It has taken the sting out of international opposition by adopting a more moderate rhetorical tone. Some observers are expecting fewer Bosniac refugees and displaced persons to vote in Republika Srpska municipalities this time. **Together, these factors suggest that the SDS will perform well in the municipal elections, and may take control of the Republika Srpska Government in September.**

**The multi-ethnic Social Democratic Party (SDP) has a good prospect of improving its position in the coming elections. The SDP is the most important opposition party, and deserves**

**international support. However, an SDP victory in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica, or even in the state institutions, will not help to control the centrifugal forces in Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, which would result from renewed mandates to the HDZ and the SDS.**

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#### Elections and International Support for the Bosnian Peace Process

**If our concerns are correct, and the April elections strengthen the positions of the SDS and the HDZ, the impact on international support for the Bosnian peace process could be severe. The result would inevitably be interpreted by the Western media as the Bosnian public once again rejecting Western peace initiatives.** If it is reported that 'Karadzic's party' has returned to power in Republika Srpska, the Dayton process may be judged a failure, and the effort to sustain international resources and attention on Bosnia may be undermined. If the HDZ is seen to triumph in the wake of Tudjman's death and despite an opposition government, the public interpretation could be similar.

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#### What are the Alternatives to Holding Elections in 2000?

Instead of holding elections, international strategy should focus on building the institutional base of Bosnian democracy. Without strong and independent executive institutions, subject to parliamentary authority through the rule of law, elections will continue to produce merely the formalities of democracy.

Capitalising on the political opportunities presented by the fragmentation of local power structures, the international community should continue with direct action aimed at reducing the nationalist regimes down to ordinary political parties. At the same time, it must build regulatory and institutional structures to limit abuse of power by the current authorities. These issues are examined in detail in the current ESI series, "Reshaping international priorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina".

Concerted international institution-building programs, together with the changing regional context, offer the prospect that elections in 2001 could produce a much more meaningful result. ESI therefore recommends that both rounds of elections be postponed until 2001. The peace process is at too delicate a moment for our energy to be spent on elections where the people of Bosnia cannot possibly be the winner.