
Bosnia's European Values Must Come from Within

The general election in Bosnia and Herzegovina is long over and the votes counted. So now what?

Although a few new political parties and a few fresh faces got past the threshold for election on October 12 and are now involved in coalition talks and bargaining for ministerial positions, there is a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

Of the three branches of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), the tripartite Presidency has been formed and announced. But it is irrelevant to breaking the deadlock in this country. Its position and jurisdiction in the political dispensation mean that it is a toothless collective head of state, one which B&H could easily do without.

The Presidency was conceived in the Dayton Accords as the symbol of a country reunited after war. It was meant to show the Bosnian population and the wider world that its three members – one Croat, one Bosniak and one Serb – could sit at the same table and discuss affairs of state in a civilised manner.

Yet more often than not, instead of upholding the unity and integrity of B&H, Presidency members have displayed discord that has contributed to tensions among the ethnic communities they represent.

Leaving aside the Presidency, the country would not survive without the complex, many-tiered structure of executive power – two entities, ten cantons and so on. It certainly could not function without its Council of Ministers, the name the Dayton Accords gave to the government of B&H. It seems unlikely the Council of Ministers will be constituted any time soon. Bargaining over ministerial posts has been going on since the election results were officially confirmed in late October.

It is worth recalling that ahead of the elections, the mood among voters and in the media could be summed up as "We've had enough". It was a call for change, a demand that whichever parties were victorious, they would adopt a new approach to coalition talks. The guiding principles for forming the new government were meant to be political programmes and strategic visions for economic prosperity and political stability.

Thus far in the process, though, there is little to offer hope of a competent, responsible and reform-driven Council of Ministers.

Nor could B&H function without its legislative structures – parliaments at both state and entity level, plus the local assemblies. For almost two decades now, members of parliament have generally behaved in an arrogant and irresponsible manner, alienating themselves from their constituency. All they cared about was being on their mobiles seeking instructions from their leaders for every word they said. From one parliament to the next, they proved incompetent or unwilling to engage in constructive debate and consistent lawmaking.

Parliamentarians also deserve blame for effectively ceding their powers to the offices of their party leaders. That is where real power lies in Bosnia. In this sense, B&H can be described as a "pre-institutional democracy". Behind a façade of institutions, true power is placed in the hands of party leaders who are not subject to democratic checks.

Such a travesty of a parliamentary process is not essential to B&H's continued existence, unless the latest incarnation of parliament displays a will for fundamental change. For now, that seems unlikely.

All participants in the political debate in B&H have one thing in common – a proclivity to spout misleading rhetoric about European Union membership. The mantra of EU accession as the ultimate cure-all is a smokescreen for politicians' reluctance to enter into a debate about the real reasons for social and political paralysis and the steady decline in most people's standard of living. If politicians were banned from soundbites about EU accession, it would soon be apparent how detached they were from reality. The reasons for paralysis would still be there, and it would become obvious that EU membership would do nothing to reform the absurd constitutional and institutional structures of this country

It may be a well-worn fact, but I would again highlight the fact that in order to stop the war at all costs, three peoples were pushed and squeezed into two ethnically-defined entities – the Federation and Republika Srpska. This construct defies any constitutional or functional logic. None of the national communities feels comfortable in a vessel with no one at the helm. Republika Srpska repeatedly states its intention to go its own way and seek independence. The Federation, created out of a huge majority of Bosniaks and a small minority of Croats, is growing more and more inefficient and stuck in its self-serving ways.

All this being the case, there is no serious reason why B&H's newly-elected politicians should not begin discussing a future built along federal lines. A federal structure is a legitimate option, and could offer the potential to create a functioning democracy. In any case, B&H is already a de facto federation, albeit an asymmetric one as a legacy of the 1992-95 war.

The Sarajevo establishment's stubborn adherence to the illusion that B&H is a unified or unitary state simply prolongs the inevitable implosion of an unsustainable political dispensation.

Republika Srpska's equally stubborn insistence on secession only heightens the sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence.

What B&H really needs is a consistently-pursued process of Europeanisation at home, not formal EU membership, which in any case would achieve nothing per se. This Europeanisation would help smooth the way towards a consensus on more accountable leadership, vertical systems of government, the rule of law, and a parliamentary system in which every voter know his or her elected member.

That would create a new climate of where public officials were accountable for what they did. And that might serve to encourage the expression of public opinion, something that does exist but is hard to articulate in the present atmosphere of political chaos.

Day by day, Europeanisation would gradually chip away at the low-level corruption that is ubiquitous in B&H, and which means even the most insignificant claim form or application requires favours and inducements if it is to be processed. It is depressing to see a whole generation that has

had to grow up thinking about who they know, not what they know. Corruption is most profoundly embedded wherever the relationship is between client and service provider. That includes schools, universities, healthcare, employment offices, recruitment agencies, public administration and more.

Last but not least, Europeanisation should help Bosnians learn the benefits of respecting otherness, including conflicting views, without the need to belittle or offend. It might even teach them that queuing patiently in the bank or post office actually benefits everyone who is waiting, and that pedestrian crossings exist for a reason.

B&H needs to go through the painful and slow process of transforming a collective mentality of victimhood, great expectations, and blaming others for every ill, into a proactive and responsible society. Embracing Europeanisation might be one way of doing that.

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