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# NEWSLETTER

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**LOCAL ELECTIONS - WHAT THEN?**



# EDITORIAL

Written by:  
Professor Dr. Sead TURČALO

## How did we actually vote?

In the last month, public debate in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been marked by two events – the post-election developments in the United States, and the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Analysis and commentary on the US election result, and the expectations raised by the new administration, has created the impression that Biden's election as President is as important for Bosnia and Herzegovina as it is for the United States.

### AMERICA'S COMEBACK

In an interview for this Atlantic Initiative Newsletter, professor Adis Maksic from Burch University tries to anticipate the foreign policy of the future administration and discusses the comeback of the United States as the *indispensable nation*. A more assertive attitude by the US towards Russia and China would have an influence in shaping political and economic relations in the Western Balkans, where these

two countries have taken advantage of a distracted European Union and decreased US engagement in the region.

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The recent local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been initially characterized as indicating a decreasing level of power and influence by dominant political parties within Bosniak and Serb electorates - and as demonstrating the victory of progressive options, due to the outcomes in two large urban centres: Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

Such an analysis of the results is not entirely accurate for two reasons. Firstly, the data processed so far by the Central Election Commission shows a decreased level of support for the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), but also growing support for the Union of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), despite the

fact that this party lost the strategically important city of Banja Luka.

Secondly, the election results - viewed through an ideological lens – indicate that conservative political parties are still dominant in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thirdly, the term ‘progressive’ has been used quite indiscriminately. The new Mayor of Banja Luka has been labelled ‘progressive’ even though, in ideological terms, he carries the legacy of Draza Mihailovic’s *chetnik* movement, and represents the continuity of the Srebrenica genocide denial initiated by his political opponent Milorad Dodik.

In this issue, Srdjan Puhalo analyses these election results in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on strategically important local areas and those, such as Bihac, that were under public scrutiny because of the migration crisis.

#### **CHALLENGES OF TERRORISM**

Readers have the opportunity to get our experts’ reviews of recent terrorist attacks in Zagreb, Paris and Vienna.

Professor Vlatko Cvrtila from the University of Zagreb warns about labelling an entire culture and religion as terrorist, and points to the radicalizing effect of such a political narrative.

In his expert analysis of the terrorist attack in Vienna in November, Vlado Azinovic, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, elaborates on the processes of radicalization of young people. He insists on the importance of social context, not only in the radicalization process, but also in attempts to counter it through deradicalization.

His analysis argues that disregarding the importance of social context, and returning people to the same environment in which they were radicalized can - even after they have completed deradicalization programs - be a trigger for further strengthening radical beliefs which may have been suppressed during such a program. ■

**INTERVIEW** Vlatko Cvrtila, geopolitical analyst, professor in the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb, and rector of Vern' University, speaks to the Atlantic Initiative

# Terrorism is European reality, a threat that will keep haunting us for a long time

President Macron's speech is an example of how a terrorist act is taken advantage of for the purposes of public mobilization against Islam as religion, says Cvrtila



**CVRTILA: TERRORISM IS A MODERN THREAT THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ERADICATE**  
(PHOTO: UNIVERSITY VERN')

Written by: The Atlantic Initiative

Vlatko Cvrtila is an expert in security issues and geopolitics, a professor in the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb, and rector of Vern' University. He spoke to the Atlantic Initiative about the most recent terrorist attacks in Europe that reminded us of the spiral of horror we witnessed in 2015 and 2016 on the Old Continent.

In the interview, Cvrtila answers questions about the reactivation of the so-called Islamic State (Al-Dawla

al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham) in Europe, potential “triggers” i.e. causes of attacks and the role of political rhetoric in inspiring terrorism. He also discusses the recent terrorist attack in Croatia, radicalization within Croatian society, and Croatia's security agencies' views of neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Lastly, he looks back at the recent American elections and the increasing influence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans.



LABELLING AN ENTIRE CULTURE AS A POTENTIALLY THREATENING ACTOR IS OUT OF PLACE

## SPIRAL OF VIOLENCE

**Atlantic Initiative:** What is your view on the series of new terrorist attacks in October and November in Europe, first in France and then in Vienna? It seems that they reminded the European public of the wave of similar attacks we witnessed in 2015 and 2016, and even earlier, on European soil.

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Terrorism is a modern threat that is impossible to eradicate as long as there are reasons or excuses for this form of political violence. These “excuses” have not disappeared. On the contrary, they intensify from day to day. Reactions and counterreactions create a spiral of violence that is impossible to stop because, among other things, such a situation suits both sides.

Terrorism stimulates racism (and vice versa), which turns into radical narratives and even political platforms. Their political representatives then participate in election processes, thereby obtaining political power, which expands their area of activity, which again may provoke an individual or a group.

Terrorism is a European reality, a threat that will keep haunting us for a long time. Reactions to terrorism or racism are based on the belief in doing the right thing, which decreases the ability to reduce tensions.

**Atlantic Initiative:** The terrorist organization, the so-called Islamic State (Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham), assumed responsibility for the recent attacks. Have those, including some terrorism experts, who believed that the physical destruction of this organization’s last stronghold in March 2019 would also cause their ideological narrative to disappear, been proved to be naive?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Political elites of countries that participated in the fight against the so-called Islamic State promoted the narrative about successfully completed operations and victory, primarily for the sake of their domestic public.

This resulted in the naive conclusion that this group is no longer a threat to modern security.

However, it was clear that their territorial placement was only a phase in their development. Their

military destruction did not mean the destruction of their ideology, which still exists and very successfully radicalises groups and individuals.

### **MOBILIZATION AGAINST ISLAM**

**Atlantic Initiative:** How would you comment on the fact that the “reactivation” of these circles is now “encouraged by appearances and the rhetoric of political leaders that has recently dominated the global public space” and apparently might have served as the “trigger”? For example, French President Emmanuel Macron caused particularly sharp criticism and reactions from the Islamic world with his speech about the alleged crisis of Islam and the “need for restructuring” of this religion?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Today’s situation is such that anything can be a trigger. It is not even necessary for something to happen for one to be encouraged to take radical action. Some individuals and groups have been radicalized, and daily observe the phenomena and activities confirming their radicalization, who are ready to engage in violent acts at any time.

President Macron’s speech is an example of how a terrorist act is taken advantage of for the purposes of public mobilization against Islam as a religion due to internal political needs. Particularly considering the overall political, economic and social situation in France.

Labelling an entire culture or religion as a potentially threatening actor is completely out of place and inappropriate. I am sure that his speech will be used to radicalize individuals and groups in the future, and it will often appear as “evidence” by terrorist ideologists.

**Atlantic Initiative:** In your opinion, what is the role of political rhetoric in inspiring terrorism?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** It is big because every word spoken in a public space spreads and multiplies very quickly. In today’s world involving enormous opportunities for consumption and creation of information, and huge opportunities to communicate owing to technological developments, space has been created for radical narratives and rhetoric calling for violence.

This rhetoric doesn’t necessarily need to be present in public spaces or highlighted as a part of a political position by individuals or groups. Radical rhetoric is omnipresent in certain Facebook groups and in comments on news portals.

In such a situation, even moderate political rhetoric lives much longer than the moment it was uttered because it quickly transforms into a radical one, considering the deeply anchored radical views of individuals and groups on “opposite” sides.

**Atlantic Initiative:** The French opposition leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, says that there is “hatred against Muslims disguised as secularism in France,” and that “we must respect Muslims.” The right-wing populism, often with elements of Islamophobia is rising in the EU on the one side, and that in turn is being used by terrorist groups for radicalization and self-legitimization. To what extent is this a vicious circle where dangerous extremes feed one another?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Radical political rhetoric is increasingly present in Europe because advocates of extreme political platforms moved to the mainstream political space from the societal margins. Their once marginal influence on society is increased largely due to terrorist attacks, which win them a certain amount of political power through the election process. Then, with everyday media presence, they disseminate hate speech and racism.

Terrorism contributed to the growing fear and occurrence of extreme political platforms and racism in Europe. Their activities increased fears among members of the Islamic community, and at the same time strengthened the radicalism among its extreme members. It seems that radicals on both sides have stripped us of the possibility of a normal dialogue or the development of narratives that would normalise societal processes.

### **TERRORISM AND RADICALIZATION IN CROATIA**

**Atlantic Initiative:** Although the recent armed attack at St. Mark's Square in Zagreb was officially deemed to be three attempted homicides of police officers, it was also confirmed that it contained elements of terrorism. What is your view of this phenomenon?



I SEE NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FOLLOWERS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND TAKFIR IDEOLOGY  
(PHOTO: VEČERNJI LIST)

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Such an offense has elements of a terrorist act, considering that the information available has given rise to the conclusion that it was a radicalized individual. But it is impossible to identify the motive, therefore it is hard to say whether it was a classic terrorist attack.

This incident is a warning that radicalized individuals do exist. Society should take the existence of the radicalization process seriously and examine the reasons for the development of such radicalization.

**Atlantic Initiative:** Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic recently spoke about radicalization at the Croatian Parliament in the aftermath of the attack. He sounded worried about the rise of radical political rhetoric in Croatia. How do you explain this phenomenon?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Radical political rhetoric is a feature of all democratic societies, caused by different political, economic and social circumstances. The Prime Minister warned that turning a blind eye and minimizing radicalization may have vast consequences in the

future. Furthermore as a society, we should face this phenomenon and take immediate action to curtail it.

Facing radicalization is extremely complicated for modern democratic states and societies because democracies are unable to control all social processes. Any increased control or use of repressive measures leads to authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and a denial of democracy.

#### ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

**Atlantic Initiative:** Are rightist terrorism and violent extremism comparable to terrorism based on the so-called takfir ideology (identified “as an ideological substrate based on which violent extremist views and activities were developed”), and how?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** I consider them comparable only in regards to how they radically shape platforms that exclude others even in their own culture, and the perpetration of political violence that causes fear and further radicalization. To me, they are enemies

of democracy and of societies of equal and free people, regardless of their cultural background. In that regard, I see no difference between them.

**Atlantic Initiative:** What is your view of the approach taken by the Republic of Croatia and its security institutions to the issue of radicalism threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina? We often hear reactions from Bosnia and Herzegovina about exaggeration and politicization, but to what extent does it prevent actually dealing with this security issue?

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Reactions to security assessments do not surprise me, because it is extremely difficult to choose your words when warning others about radicalization, without making it sound, to some, like an exaggerated assessment or misinterpretation of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Unfortunately, I cannot see any big potential for change in this communication; on the contrary, it seems to me that it is decreasing and that our mutual understanding is fading away. This can have consequences for our ability to successfully face the problem of radicalization.

**Atlantic Initiative:** What do you think about the outcome of the recent US elections, and what impact could it have on our region in geopolitical terms?

#### HYBRID RIVALRIES

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** A somewhat increased engagement by the USA in the region which was absent during President Trump's Administration is likely. President-elect Biden has a lot more experience in international politics, and he knows the situation in the region well enough to be able to contribute to some new policies and approaches.

However, we should not forget that the USA is not the only external actor that has interests in the region, and that the USA is not the only creator of crisis management models in the region. There will be no unilateral moves, and they will try to agree first with Russia, the European Union and Turkey, who are the key external actors present in the regional security complex.

China also has long-term strategic goals involving a breakthrough in Europe, and an instable region with corrupt societies which is ideal for that. Some activities will be in the hands of diplomacy and negotiations, and some in the domain of geopolitical games, which means that we should not expect any radical moves or new policies that would push the region from its current, less stable state into one of greater stability.

**Atlantic Initiative:** What is your comment on the growing influences of Russia and China in the region, and manifestations thereof? Is this area the space for simultaneous hybrid wars and hybrid actions? As you once said, goals are always strategic.

**Vlatko Cvrtila:** Russian influence has grown as the USA's interest in the region decreased, accompanied by the powerlessness of the European Union to influence democratization processes in the region.

At the same time, China has been using its position as an external actor offering investments that are indispensable in weak regional economies.

All available means are being used in these strategic positioning processes, and the most effective ones nowadays are hybrid means that use information tools to create narratives of partnership and friendly relations in the public space, aiming at long-term strategic connections.

This interest by great powers really flatters small countries that do not know that it always gives rise to a level of dependence that is hard to escape. Anyway, the region will continue offering space for hybrid rivalries of external actors, limiting the possibility for regional actors to create political choices that will guide them to the only logical outcome –European integration. ■

**EXPERT ANALYSIS** The leading terrorism expert in BiH and the region writes for the Atlantic Initiative about recent attacks in Europe

# Terrorist attack in Vienna

## Social context and the deceptive outcomes of the deradicalization process

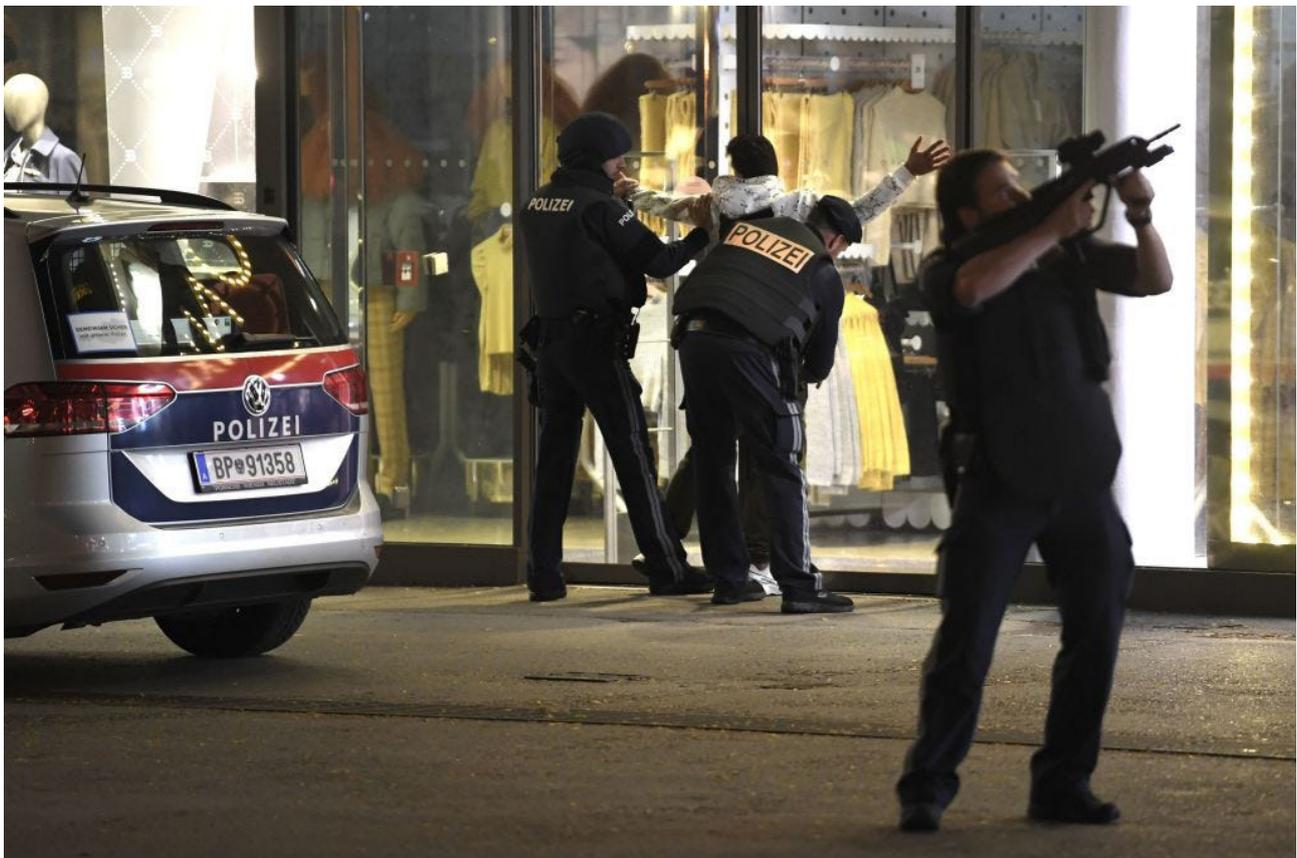
The process of radicalization into violent extremism is context driven



Written by: Prof. dr Vlado Azinović

At around 8pm on Monday 2 November 2020, a lone attacker fired several dozen bullets from an automatic rifle at walkers and guests sitting in restaurants and coffee shops at six central locations in Vienna. Four people were killed and 23 wounded. The attacker was shot by two police officers nine minutes into the attack. He was identified as Kujtim Fejzullai, an ethnic Albanian; a citizen of Austria, where he was born, and of Northern Macedonia, his parents' country of origin.

The next day, the so-called Islamic State (in Arabic: *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham*, the organization also known as *daesh*, *ISIL*, *ISIS* or *IDIL*) assumed responsibility for the attack via its media platform Amaq News Agency. It turned out that Fejzullai had tried to join ISIL as early as 2018, but he was stopped in Turkey and returned to Austria, where he was sentenced to 22 months in prison in 2019.



1 FEJZULLAI DURING THE ATTACK IN VIENNA: AN ILL-FATED CANDIDATE FOR ISIL IN SYRIA  
(PHOTO ASIA NEWS)

Fejzullai was released early from prison due to good behaviour and his participation in the prison deradicalization program implemented by the DERAD association. The Slovak police announced that Fejzullai had attempted to buy ammunition for an automatic rifle the previous summer, and that their Austrian colleagues had been warned about it. Their Austrian counterparts have admitted that they overlooked this information.<sup>1</sup>

#### ILL-FATED ASPIRING FIGHTERS

The attacker's profile matches trends that have been observed in recent years with regard to similar terrorist acts carried out in the West. He was young, most likely from a non-functional immigrant family, and had a fluid national identity – neither fully Albanian from Northern Macedonia, nor fully Austrian. He was a high school dropout who had a history of conflict with the law. He was ideologically radicalized through a militant narrative that focuses on a community's alleged suffering because of their global identity, and the need to respond to such suffering with unselective and brutal violence.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the attacker belongs to a category of perpetrators identified in analysis of recent terrorist attacks - in different locations - in relation to the emergence of so-called Islamic State: those who could not, dared not, or were not able to join ISIL in Syria and Iraq for some reason, and so sought to redeem themselves by carrying out attacks of this kind. Research indicates that in more than 80 percent of such terrorist attacks, perpetrators were unsuccessful candidates to become ISIL fighters, who tried to compensate for this failure by using violence against their own local communities.<sup>2</sup>

As early as summer 2014, the then second-in-command in the ISIL hierarchy, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani as-Shami, held out the possibility for such "redemption" in an announcement:

"If you are not able to find an I.E.D. or a bullet, then single out the disbeliever... Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. Do not hesitate. Be merciless. If you are not able to do that either, burn his house, or his car or shop, or destroy his harvest."<sup>3</sup>



FEJZULLAI: HE DID NOT ABANDON VIOLENCE

A projectile launched from a US military aircraft in late summer 2016 permanently prevented Al-Adnani from witnessing the results of his aggressive ideological proselytising. He aimed at expanding the base for recruitment of future terrorists and crowdsourcing for so-called low intensity-high impact terrorism, and this offers us a lens through which to consider Kujtim Fejzullai: the ill-fated and unsuccessful ISIL candidate, the terrorist who paralyzed Vienna for a short while with his mindless act on 2 November, 2020.

### THE LOST SOULS

It is quite possible that more light will be shed on the psychosocial profile of the 20-year-old attacker with time. For now, this insight is limited to statements by people who knew him, and they coincide with dozens of descriptions we have heard in recent years about perpetrators of similar attacks. His lawyer said that Kujtim was a “quiet and fairly reclusive” man who gave the impression of a “lost soul searching for its place.” He also described him as a harmless person who did not give rise to any suspicion of being capable of doing evil.

According to the same testimony, Kujtim was unable to explain what had made him attempt to go to Syria previously. The mentor who managed his case under the DERAD program said that the young man was impressed by the “jihadist groups”, especially the most radical ones that promoted the concept of *takfir*.<sup>4</sup>

He had very naive views of religion, believing that “like a good fairy, God fulfils every wish expressed through prayer.” According to the testimony of the DERAD director, such beliefs can be subsumed under “a literalist kind of fundamentalism”.<sup>5</sup> **Such persons’ understanding of the world, and of their place in it, usually rests on a simple black-and-white matrix developed through so-called low-level complexity argumentation.**

Narratives promoting this kind of view of the world seem to be particularly attractive among young people in diasporas in the West. They are usually second or third generation immigrants, searching for an authentic identity of their own that does not require loyalty either to the “homeland”, or to the place they live in but still don’t feel is their own.



**NAPAD U BEČU**  
(FOTO ASIA NEWS)

It is adolescents who have already embarked on the natural processes of separation and individuation - i.e. the gradual taking of personal responsibility for emotional, behavioural and cognitive functioning, with an increasing level of independence from parents - who mostly engage in such a search. This process is often accompanied by misunderstandings and conflicts within the family, and young people sometimes rely on simplistic but radical narratives when opposing parental authority. Research has shown that the process of ideological radicalization that can lead to extremism is mostly driven by the need to satisfy social urges.

A significant number of young people seek (and often fulfil) in radicalized circles the primary social needs that they are deprived of in their own families: (self) respect, a sense of belonging, identity, and meaning. Different generational views of the world around you can make the separation process more difficult in diasporas. Parents are typically well integrated into the new environment because they know what it has given them compared to the home community they emigrated from. This feeling may be more diffuse among young people, and marked by their own experience of incomplete or failed integration, (real or perceived) injustice, marginalization, stigmatization and xenophobia - often based on racism and Islamophobia.

This is why the urge for separation from parents through the fulfilment of these primary social needs can be stronger among diasporas. It is no coincidence, then, that young people in these communities are particularly exposed to recruitment for the purposes of extremist groups. They deploy militant narratives and specific dynamics of internal social inclusion to easily and assertively impose value and identity models that are adopted as *a priori* and unquestionable, with very little or no critical thinking.

#### **SOLDIERS OF THE CALIPHATE**

The tragic proof of this assumption is the video that was posted on social networks by 20-year-old Kujtim Fejzullai, originally from the village of Celopek near Tetovo, immediately before the attack in Vienna. Armed with an automatic rifle, pistol and machete, now calling himself Abu Dujana al-Albani, he swore allegiance in Arabic to the new caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi.<sup>6</sup>

A *Gastarbeiter's* child, in conflict with family and community, thus became a soldier of the Caliphate. He gave up his own life and took four innocent ones in a mindless nine-minute crusade that seemed to be the culmination of his tragic self-actualization.

It is interesting to recall here that people come into contact with such ideas and those who promote them in the Balkan diasporas in the West mainly via informal congregations gathering in improvised houses of worship, or in the privacy of family homes. For more than two and a half decades, the most radical ideological narratives of this kind - but also the efforts to expand and consolidate them in their countries of origin - have come from such micro-communities operating in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that of around 1,100 men, women and children originally from the Western Balkans who joined one of the warring Islamist factions in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016, more than a quarter came from the diaspora, mostly from Austria.

Immediately after the attack, the Austrian authorities closed two gathering places of such micro-communities - the Masjid al-Tewhid in Murlingenstrasse, in Vienna's 12th district (Vienna-Meidling), and Melit Ibrahim in Hasnerstrasse, in the 16th district (Ottakring). It was announced that neither congregation met the requirement specified in the operating permit - to maintain a positive attitude towards the state and society - and that they directly contributed to the radicalization of the attacker Kujtim Fejzullai and provided refuge to other militant Islamists.<sup>8</sup>

The Tewhid Masjid operated within the Islamic Community in Austria (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich - IGGÖ), and was led by Muhamed Porca. Unfulfilled in his ambition to assume a suitable place in the hierarchy of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBIH) after completing his school education abroad, the Sarajevan then moved to Vienna and began working to undermine and disintegrate the ICBIH. A career Bosnian police officer refers to him as the "Ayman al-Zawahiri of Vratnik" (a neighbourhood in the Sarajevo municipality of Stari Grad) because of his influence on followers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the diaspora.

#### **THE BALKANS' SCHOOL OF RADICALIZATION**

It is believed Porca fostered and encouraged a number of Salafist preachers (Da'is) to go to Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the previous informal leader

of this community, Nusret Imamovic. Porca supported the emergence of Salafist enclaves in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to undermine the authority of the Islamic Community there.

The second masjid to be shut down, Melit Ibrahim, was not affiliated with any umbrella organization in Austria. Nedzad Kucevic, a Bosnian citizen better known as Nedzad Balkan or Abu Muhammad, who was born in Vienna and originally from Tutin in Serbia, is mentioned as an influential person in relation to this congregation.

Unlike Porca, who has so far had no major problems with the Austrian police, this former kickboxer has been arrested several times, most recently in 2019. The charges were mainly for organizing militant groups, membership of a criminal organization, anti-government activities, and recruitment for the Islamic State.

Nedzad Balkan is believed to have participated in the radicalization of several other aspiring ISIL fighters, including Lorenz K., who persuaded a 12-year-old boy to attempt a suicide attack on a Christmas market in Ludwigshafen (Germany) in 2018. Lorenz K himself had planned to carry out a bomb attack on the Ramstein US military base in Germany, with the help of a 16-year-old girl whom he married according to Sharia rules.

An Austrian court sentenced Lorenz K. to nine years in prison. It is believed that Nedzad Balkan contributed to the radicalization of Mevlid Jasarevic, who attacked the United States Embassy in Sarajevo on 28 October 2011, at a time when he was regularly visiting Balkan's masjid in Vienna.

It is also believed that by preaching the ideology of *takfir*, Balkan had a decisive influence on another unrealized ISIL fighter from BiH - Maksim Bozic, who was preparing an attack on buildings of the State Investigation and Protection Agency of BiH (SIPA) in Sarajevo, and on the Tuzla Canton Ministry of the Interior in 2018. In late 2019, Bozic was finally sentenced to six years in prison, and his aide Edin Hastor to three years.<sup>9</sup> *Because of this and other cases, Austrian media referred to Nedzad Balkan as "the worst preacher of hatred" in that country.*<sup>10</sup>

Mirsad Omerovic a.k.a. Ebu Teima, originally from Tutin in Serbia, was one of the influential authorities who participated in the radicalization and recruitment of young people in German-speaking countries. He was arrested in 2014 in an action by the Austrian police under the code name Palmyra, and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Omerovic and a group of his like-minded followers recruited and encouraged around 160 people from the Balkan diaspora and beyond, aged between 14 and 30, to go to Syria. He was also deemed accountable for the deaths of two Austrian girls of Bosnian-Herzegovinian origin, Samra K. and Sabina S.<sup>11</sup>

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT

These examples contribute to the thesis that the process of radicalization into violent extremism is a context-driven process. This realization is very important for the opposite process: deradicalization in the custodial environment or elsewhere.

Such a process begins from the assumption that a radicalized person's way of thinking should be changed first, which should then lead to a behaviour change, primarily involving the abandonment of violence. However, it is quite certain that such a person must separate completely from their previous environment and cut off their contacts with the groups in which they were originally radicalized, as well as with individuals who imposed themselves as unconditional authorities within these groups.

The story of the Viennese terrorist Kujtim Fejzulai testifies to how important this is. DERAD's mentors noticed positive changes in his way of thinking and therefore recommended his early release from prison. However, they probably underestimated the possibility that returning to the original social context in which he had been radicalized would not only nullify the effects of the progress made in prison, but also encourage the strengthening of radical beliefs that eventually escalated through the preparation and execution of acts of brutal violence. This is a tragically belated but important realization for all those who still believe in the concept of deradicalization - an effort with uncertain and often deceptive outcomes. ■

### ENDNOTES

- 1 "Vienna terror attack: Police investigating 21 potential accomplices," DW, 13 November 2020; "Vienna terrorist Kujtim Fejzulai, a football-crazed boy who became a cold-blooded gunman," The Times, 7 November 2020, "Nobody thought Vienna attacker was capable of this, says his former lawyer," CNN, 4 November 2020.
- 2 For more information, see Terrorist Attacks, Failed Attacks and Plots in the West linked to the Syrian- Iraqi Context (2013-2016), Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, Paris, March 2017.
- 3 For more information, see Robin Wright, "Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Voice of ISIS, Is Dead," New Yorker, 31 August 2016.
- 4 Takfir basically means declaring other Muslims infidels and apostates. For more information, see Muhamed Jusić, *Islamistički pokreti: reprezentativan pregled*, Emanet, Zenica, 2005.
- 5 "Vienna terrorist Kujtim Fejzulai, a football-crazed boy who became a cold-blooded gunman," The Times, 7 November 2020.
- 6 Abu Dujana was one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, especially skilled in sword handling, and is mentioned in several hadiths. His name is popular among Islamist militants because of his war skills. Abu Dujana was used as a war name (kunya) by Ainul Bahri, commander of the militant group of Jama Islami (ar. Al-Jamā'ah al-Islāmiyyah); the commander-in-chief of the militant Pakistani group Lashkar-e-Toiba whose real name was never revealed; Gadzhimurad Dolgatorov, the leader of the Dagestan branch of the Caucasus Emirate, and according to available information, at least one BiH citizen, a member of ISIL in Syria, also decided to take this name.
- 7 The dissemination of such militant narratives in the diaspora takes place mainly in German, which has thus become the lingua franca (the common, "umbrella" language) which people from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Serbia often speak better than their mother tongue. Due to differences between the Slavic and Albanian languages, this level of understanding is impossible to achieve in the home region today, and such ethnically and linguistically mixed militant structures are very rare here.
- 8 "Zwei Moscheen in Wien geschlossen," ORF Vienna, 4 November 2011.
- 9 "The second instance judgement in the case of "Maksim Božić and Others", Court of BiH, 5.12.2019.
- 10 Meliha Kešmer, "'Radikalne veze' osoba iz Zapadnog Balkana s Austrijom" ("Radical ties' of persons from the Western Balkans with Austria", Radio Free Europe, 4 November 2020.
- 11 Rodolfo Toè, "Austria Jails Balkan-Born Jihadi Recruiter," BIRN, 14 July 2016.

**AN INTERVIEW WITH A CAUSE** Prof. Dr. Adis Maksić, Associate professor at the Department for International Relations and European Studies at Burch University, speaks for the Atlantic Initiative.

# Joe Biden's arrival will bring new winds into the sails of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Confrontation with political actors that threaten the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and stronger support to Kosovo's independence are to be expected, says Maksić



MAKSIĆ: A TURN IN AMERICAN POLITICS WILL SOON BE EVIDENT  
(FOTO: VEČER)

Written by: Atlantic Initiative

The American presidential election held on 3 November 2020, probably had the most dramatic finale in the 244-year long history of the most powerful world democracy, comparable only with that of 2000 (Al Gore – George W. Bush).

Despite the fact that, as of this publishing, the outgoing Donald Trump has not recognized his defeat to the Democratic challenger Joe Biden, and that

the entire world watched the painful efforts by the outgoing head-of-state to question, or even suspend, the election process ("Stop the vote count," will be recorded in the political history of the United States), it is clear that the 46th US President-elect won 306 electors, comfortably exceeding the required 270 electors. Biden's victory was the most convincing one in the history of US elections.



**BIDEN AT THE BIH PARLIAMENT IN 2009: WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED?**  
(PHOTO: TPORTAL.HR)

On November 7, American leading media outlets proclaimed Biden the winner of the US presidential election after he was announced the winner in the crucial state of Pennsylvania. Since then, it has been confirmed that the Electoral College (538 electors) would convene on 14 December. The college will vote and then send their votes to several addresses, including to the address of the current US President.

On 6 January, both the Senate and the House of Representatives will verify the electoral votes. Finally, as defined in the Constitution, the new president's inauguration will take place at noon on 20 January in front of the Congress, and Biden will officially assume the office of the US President.

**Prof. Dr Adis Maksić**, Associate professor at the Department for International Relations and European Studies at International Burch University, spoke to the Atlantic Initiative about the effects of the US election, Biden's doctrine, how different it may be from former administrations, and what can the Western Balkan countries expect.

Maksić went to high school in the United States, and then attended Michigan State University, where he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal justice criminalistics. Fascinated by the influence of politics on everyday lives, identities, ambitions and lifestyles, he enrolled at Virginia Tech in 2008 and obtained an MA in political science.

Professor Maksić also gained his PhD at Virginia Tech, winning a 2014 Outstanding Dissertation

Award. He later turned the dissertation into a book that dealt with the dynamics of ethnic mobilization in general, and Bosnia's descent into the 1992-1995 war in particular.

The book, titled "Ethnic Mobilization, Violence, and the Politics of Affect: The Serb Democratic Party and the Bosnian War", is available at the website of its publisher Palgrave Macmillan, as well as Amazon.com. (<https://www.amazon.com/Ethnic-Mobilization-Violence-Politics-Affect/dp/3319482920>). It echoed strongly among scholars and readers.

#### **A MAJOR CROSSROAD**

The recent US elections, Maksić begins, came at the time when US society was at a major crossroads between two directly opposing concepts of national identity.

"The record voter turnout confirms that the American voters recognized the extraordinary stakes of the 2020 elections. The results are still not fully visible because President Trump has been challenging them, with all indicators pointing to the lengthy court processes that could last for several more weeks. Although Joe Biden's victory is clear, Donald Trump will continue to wield political power that is unusual for a defeated candidate. Here, I primarily refer to the passions of his more than 73 million voters who see him not as an ordinary politician but as the leader/saviour in the fight of ordinary people against the alienated Washington elites. It is precisely in this paradoxical space of an "anti-political politician," that Donald Trump's theatrics gain their political potency" says Maksić.



**VUČIĆ AND PUTIN: BIDEN ADVOCATES OPPOSITION TO THE SPREAD OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE**  
(PHOTO: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA)

According to him, there is no doubt that the future of relations among Americans largely depends on how Donald Trump will be using this capital.

“Everything suggests that he will continue using the already tried method of mobilizing skepticism and disbelief against anything official, scientific, or “mainstream”, in order to maintain the narrative of a savior of ordinary men from the corrupt elites. It is in this context that we should view the court processes and conspiracies about supposed vote theft that Donald Trump propagates via social networks. In this way, the outgoing US president conveys a message to his numerous followers about the moral superiority of his position in opposition to the common norms and procedures, which serves as the discursive launchpad for an attack on US democratic institutions”, he said.

However, Maksić believes that the US institutional system is strong enough to withstand these populist challenges.

“Donald Trump will probably refuse to accept defeats in court as well, but other influential Republicans will likely accept reality in time, leaving the president

alone in his extrainstitutional adventure. This will mean a peaceful transition and arrival of Joe Biden’s administration, but not necessarily the political end of Donald Trump. To what extent Biden will be able to fulfil his promise of reuniting the American society largely depends on whether Donald Trump will continue to actively mobilize his followers, deepen cleavages among Americans and challenge the legitimacy of the new president. Nevertheless, it is certainly better for the future of American unity that the messages coming from the position of a president are those that recognize the sentiments of all segments of society, and not only of his own voters,” the Atlantic Initiative’s interlocutor points out.

Initial analyses of the new American administration’s foreign policy indicates that the “United States wants to sit at the head of the table again, and grapple with global threats together with their allies and partners.”

The question arises as to how much will internal policy and polarization allow the US to become more active in international politics, as they are expected to do? Or they reduce their engagement in the Western

Balkans to the empowerment of other partners such as the EU who will act on behalf of the US?

“The general activity of the US in international politics, and their specific engagement in the Western Balkans, are two separate segments. Internal polarization will not slow down the return to the previous structures of American foreign policy. “Joe Biden knows international relations better than most of his predecessors, and he will rely on that experience in order to shape foreign policy despite internal turbulence,” Maksić believes.

### **AMERICA IS BACK**

In the early stages of Biden's mandate, Professor Maksić points out, we can already expect greater US participation in international institutions, return to climate agreements, strengthening of alliances within NATO, etc.

“Biden himself announced this in post-election talks with his transatlantic colleagues, summing them up with the phrase "America is back". Also, a turn in American policy will be evident regarding the issues of Iran, North Korea, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As for the Western Balkans, the region has not been on their list of priorities for a long time, and the fact that Biden's political career has been marked by years of commitment to this part of the world will not change that. This is not due to internal divisions, but due to America's more pressing international concerns. Still, this should not be taken to mean that the change in Washington will not be felt in the Balkans. We can expect a modest increase in US influence, but only in the later stages of Biden's term in office, which will be reflected primarily through the strengthening of Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to NATO. In that context, the United States will exert certain pressures on regional politicians together with NATO partners from the European Union”.

Professor Edward P. Joseph noted that Trump had “lost the Western Balkans” with his “see-no-evil” policy.

We were also interested to hear the extent to which such an approach would affect the policy of the new American administration.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OBAMA AND BIDEN WILL BE SUBSTANTIAL**

Trump's term in office, which undermined the existing consensus of agreed international norms that Western liberal democracies in particular adhere to, from respecting logic, to the achievements of modern science, almost made it meaningless to criticize Obama's term or caution about the international strategy of the incoming administration.

However, it is evident that Obama's multilateralism enabled the strengthening of Russia and China to a significant extent, and that Obama's doctrine underestimated both Russia and China.

Answering this question, Professor Maksić referred to the statement about Obama's underestimation of Russia, with which he only partially agrees.

“It is true that during Barack Obama's term, we saw an increase of Russian influence in Syria, Ukraine, and in the Balkans. Obama's doctrine contributed to that process by making concessions, such as abandoning plans for the construction of a missile defence shield in the Czech Republic and Poland, and a relatively mild reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine. It is certain that these moves contributed to the perception of American withdrawal from the European continent, and have increased Vladimir Putin's appetites. However, Russian assertiveness in the former Soviet republics began even before Barack Obama's term. The Russian blitzkrieg in Georgia and occupation of South Ossetia happened back in 2008, and faced a mild reaction from the then-President George W. Bush,” Maksić analyses.

“The victory of Joe Biden will trigger three paths that will synergistically lead to a greater US presence in our region. One stems from the fact that the White House will host a man who considers such presence a personal achievement, and who is well aware of the dangers of ethno-expansionist policies in our region,” Maksić says.

He believes that Biden will certainly value the fruits of American engagement in the Balkans. This

includes stronger support for Kosovo's independence, a confrontation with political actors that threaten the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and rejection of ideas about drawing new borders in the region that the Trump administration was playing with."

"Also, American foreign policy will regain its idealistic dimension in terms of promoting the values of liberal democracy. In the regional context, this primarily means a shift in the US attitude towards Aleksandar Vučić's regime, which will now be assessed not only by the content of its foreign policy, but

### **BIDEN'S DOCTRINE**

In an effort to predict the future directions of American policy under the 46th president, the important question is whether we have enough information to talk about the nature of Biden's doctrine on the international scene?

"We still don't, but we can form expectations based on current global constellations and the wealth of evidence about Biden's view of the world and the role of the US in it.

Joe Biden is committed to American leadership in international relations, and he is sure to counter the isolationist tendencies we have witnessed in recent years.

Biden's doctrine is likely to be built around the vision of America formulated by Madeline Albright back in the 1990s with the concept of an indispensable nation, albeit adapted to current power relations.

Unlike the unipolar moment that occurred two and a half decades ago, the structures of today's multipolar system will force Joe Biden to balance this concept with a greater dose of realism. Therefore, America will actively participate in all segments of international relations, and where geopolitical imperatives allow it and do not cross against realpolitik calculations, it will go back to the promotion of human rights discourse and the idea of liberal democracy," Maksić concluded.

also by authoritative trends within Serbia. A stronger presence in the Western Balkans will also be the result of realpolitik calculations. Joe Biden is not a fan of Vladimir Putin, and he has called for a stronger opposition to the spread of Russian influences. "This will be reflected in the region through the politics of NATO expansion, and prevention of a vacuum that could be filled by Russia," believes Maksić.

### **BIDEN AND RUSSIA IN THE BALKANS**

NATO and the EU are certainly foreign policy priorities for Bosnia and Herzegovina. How can the new administration help the achievement of these strategic goals of our country, keeping in mind all the problems, including external influences, that have stood in the way of this long and exhausting path?

In his answer, Maksić underlines that American presidents are in a position to create geopolitical trends, sometimes through energetic advocacy, and sometimes through a lack of interest in continuation thereof.

"The unilateralism of Donald Trump's administration did the latter. The American leadership in the NATO alliance has weakened, and no other country is currently able to fill that vacuum. This resulted in the strengthening of regional political centres that are also slowing down Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic path to integration. The growing Russian influence is felt in the mobilization of cultural ties for the purpose of greater media and economic presence in Serbia, Montenegro, and the BiH Entity Republika Srpska. The results of this influence are visible in the increasingly bold and direct resistance of Banja Luka to the idea of Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to NATO. Trends in two states that are regional members of NATO alliance, Montenegro and North Macedonia, have contributed to the perception of the weakening of NATO influence. "The victory of pro-Serbian forces in Montenegro, as well as the pretensions towards North Macedonia from the highest levels of government of another NATO member state, Bulgaria, convey a message that accession to this Alliance is no longer a panacea that eliminates all security concerns," Maksić explains.

## CARROT AND STICK

In this context, says Maksić, Joe Biden's arrival will bring new wind in the sails of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“The return of American leadership will strengthen NATO alliances, and create new energy to counter Russian influence in the region. This will be realized through diplomatic activities that will be bringing the “carrot” to local politicians when they fulfil the conditions for accession to the European Union and NATO, and the “stick” (i.e. isolation) to those who challenge this path and threaten the integrity of countries in the region. Joe Biden will not only be guided by narrow realpolitik calculations but will also defend the principle of the inviolability of borders and promote the values on which the Euro-Atlantic alliances are founded. It remains to be seen how strong this engagement will be, but it is certain that the new administration will more resolutely grapple with problems that are hindering Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration path,” Maksić feels.

Trump's term in office was marked, among other things, by the crisis of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, and this is why the political forces in our country that are in favour of EU and NATO membership rejoiced at Biden's victory. However, the Obama administration, when Biden was vice-president, was also marked by the withdrawal of the United States from the Western Balkans region, which opened the door to numerous malignant influences.

We wanted to know if there were grounds to expect a big comeback for American influence in our region?

“Joe Biden will be the president, and not vice-president of the USA. Unlike Barack Obama, foreign policy is his strength. I think Biden will use his rich experience to leave a legacy in American foreign policy that will not be the same as that of the administration in which he was the vice-president. The incoming president sees the American role on the international scene through the prism of the inherent conflict between Western values and authoritarian forms of governing. In this conflict, American hard power is no less important than soft power,” Professor Maksić explains, adding:

## RUSSIA AND CHINA

Furthermore, according to Professor Maksić, Russia has a geopolitical advantage in these conflicts that take place on its borders. Meanwhile the United States, as an overseas power, has unsuccessfully tried to pull out of apparently endless military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“The situation with Syria is not much different either, given the traditional Russian military presence in that country and Washington's quite understandable withdrawal from the mission to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad, which could have pushed the US army into more “quicksand.” Obama thus inherited a constellation of a multipolar world that does not leave much room for manoeuvring the way that the US administrations had in the first decade after the Cold War.

In a cautious search for a delicate balance between geopolitical imperatives and the promotion of democratic values, Obama's preference for diplomacy and multilateralism resulted in decreased American influence in several turbulent geopolitical areas. I think that the differences between Obama and Biden will be substantial in this matter. Here, I do not refer only to a stronger attitude towards Russia, but to relations with China as well, considering that Donald Trump's mercantilist and confrontational policy towards China developed a certain inertia. This is a direction that the new president will not change easily. If we recall Biden's criticism of China for its disrespect for human rights, I'm not sure to what extent he wants to reverse it.”

“Unlike Obama's moral multilateralism and reluctance to use hard power, Biden's approach will be more assertive when it comes to relations with Russia and China. Consequently, this means strengthening American influence in our region as well. However, I would not call this trend a “big comeback” given that there will be no return to the dominant presence that the US had in the region until a decade and a half ago. So, these changes will happen, but we have to observe them through a nuanced prism.” ■

**ANALIZA** Renowned political analyst, psychologist, journalist and researcher writes for the Atlantic Initiative

# Local elections - what then?



LOCAL ELECTIONS: IS BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AT A TURNING POINT?  
(PHOTO: ANADOLIJA)

Written by: Dr. Srđan Puhalo

Local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were originally scheduled for 4 October 2020. The Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEC) decided to postpone the elections until 15 November because legal preconditions had not been met before the initial date.<sup>1</sup> In simple terms, competent institutions did not provide funding to hold the elections.

Apart from the postponement, the COVID-19 pandemic also marked the recent elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the developments that preceded them.

It had multiple influences on the elections. Although the pandemic started as early as March of this year, it seems that it did not have any influence on

the creation of pre-election strategies by the political parties, who were preparing for the pre-election campaign as if COVID-19 did not exist.

## A NEW REALITY

This was most evident at the beginning of the campaign. Almost all parties took a routine approach with video clips, billboards, posters and partisan events, which caused an increase in the number of infected persons, both among citizens and political leaders.

Some ten days later, there was an increase in the number of COVID-19 positive cases. This was followed by pressure from health professionals and

the public to put an end to pre-election meetings, or at least to limit the number of participants. Many political parties accepted these suggestions and gave up mass events, moving their pre-election campaigns to small spaces, conventional media, and social networks.

Such an environment largely contributed to narrowing down the manoeuvring space of political parties with large memberships, while small and poor parties adapted to the “new normal” more easily.

On the other hand, COVID-19 contributed to a change of priorities among voters. Suddenly, the protection of vital national interests, abolishment of the Entities, and secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina became less important. Instead, issues around the quality and organization of healthcare, hospital equipment, the number of COVID-positive cases, and number of deaths gained importance.

Apart from health topics, issues surrounding the state of the national economy, preservation of jobs, regular salaries, the functioning of the school system, and overall life in the age of the coronavirus came to the fore. Although these were local elections, many political parties could not offer adequate responses to these issues.

These two events and everything that arose from them substantially influenced the election results in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

#### **WHAT HAPPENED IN BANJA LUKA?**

Local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were held in 141 local communities, 70 municipalities in the Federation of BiH and 62 municipalities in the Republika Srpska and Brčko District. For the purpose of this article, we will analyse only four cities that marked the recent elections.

After 22 years of SNSD’s rule in Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković from the PDP was elected mayor. Considering that Banja Luka is the administrative, economic and cultural centre of the BiH entity of Republika Srpska, it is quite clear how important this opposition’s victory is.



**STANIVUKOVIC: THE NEW MAYOR OF BANJA LUKA**

Nobody even considered, let alone predicted Stanivuković’s victory.

Several factors contributed to the electoral victory of PDP’s candidate in Banja Luka.

Before running for mayor, Stanivuković was a delegate at the Republika Srpska Parliament, where he and his colleagues Jelena Trivić and Nebojša Vukanović drove the government representatives crazy with their performances and rhetoric.

Their duels with Milorad Dodik,<sup>2</sup> and an incident when the Republika Srpska police minister slapped Stanivuković, are well known.<sup>3</sup> Stanivuković was trying to demonstrate that he was not afraid of Dodik, and that he did not respect Dodik as a politician. It is important to note that Stanivuković had launched his campaign for Banja Luka mayor long before the official announcement of his candidacy. He relied on social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) more than on conventional media.

**MANDIĆ: NEW POLITICAL  
FORCES IN SARAJEVO  
(PHOTO: NAŠA STRANKA)**



He produced events and publicly announced them, and the media either broadcasted or ignored them. Apart from social networks, Stanivuković was constantly in the public among citizens, which yielded results. Politicians in power and media close to the government accused him of being too young, incompetent, a reality show politician, a tycoon's son, and a traitor of Serbs, but Stanivuković eliminated and ignored all the accusations through persistent and deliberate work.

With the pandemic onset and escalation in October, and with the ban on political assemblies, this strategy proved to be much better than those by political parties that relied on partisan membership and the loyalty of public institution employees. Although Stanivuković won the position of mayor of Banja Luka, the coalition gathered around the SNSD<sup>4</sup> will have a majority in the city parliament, which will make his work much more difficult.

If we add the fact that the SNSD is in power in the Entity, Stanivuković will clearly face many obstacles. It is yet to be seen how he will cope.

#### **THE BACKGROUND OF SDA'S DOWNFALL**

In view of this year's developments, changes were much more likely in Sarajevo's municipalities, where the SDA and its coalition partners were in power, than in Banja Luka. Early this year, the government in the Sarajevo Canton changed when a coalition of six political parties was replaced by parties led by the SDA.<sup>5</sup>

This proved to be a strategic mistake because eight months were not enough for the new cantonal government to introduce any significant changes or improvements. Soon after the government change, the pandemic reached Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the cantonal government did not deal with the new situation well. This is certainly one of the factors that contributed to the decline of the SDA's popularity in Sarajevo.

Two scandals involving high-ranking SDA officials also surfaced in this period. The first scandal was related to Vice President Asim Sarajlić, and an audio recording<sup>6</sup> - published by SDA member Semir Efendić - revealing the alleged purchase of votes and trading jobs.

It was followed by the “Ventilators” scandal<sup>7</sup> which involved the FBiH Prime Minister Fadil Novalić, among others. The opposition parties *Naša Stranka, Narod i Pravda, the Social-Democratic Party (SDP) of BiH, and Nezavisna Bosanskohercegovačka Lista* took advantage of this in Sarajevo by loudly criticizing the SDA and its coalition partners, and profited from it in the local elections.

#### **BIJELJINA DID NOT FORGIVE MIĆO FOR DODIK**

When it comes to Bijeljina, their election results are very interesting as well. Five months before the elections, Mićo Mičić, the long-standing mayor of this city and high-ranking SDS official, left the SDS<sup>8</sup> and created his own party, SDS Semberija.

Then he formed a coalition with his fierce former opponents - the SNSD and other political parties (not including the “original” SDS and PDP).

All the odds were favoured Mićo Mičić’s landslide election victory in Bijeljina with the large coalition, but it did not happen. Mičić lost his position as city mayor, but he holds the majority in the parliament with the SNSD. Causes of his defeat can be seen in his radical policy change, for which many citizens of *Bjeljina* did not forgive him.

Also, it is quite clear that his coalition partners did not work for him enough, and he was exposed to many attacks by the BN television, which is very influential in Semberija.

The new mayor of Bijeljina is Ljubiša Petrović, and it will be interesting to see what his relationship will be with the city parliament, where the majority seats are held by the SNSD and SDS Semberija, and the attitude of the Entity government towards the newly elected opposition city mayors.

#### **ŠUHRET AND MIGRANTS**

In the meantime, it was confirmed that Čović’s party lost Tomislavgrad and, despite all attempts, including the candidacy of the state-level minister of justice Josip Grubeša, they could not overthrow Jozo Ivančević in Prozor-Rama.

At the same time, the fallen HSP regained some of its influence. All of this confirms that the opposition is getting stronger among BiH Croats as well, despite Čović having been ignoring them in recent years. This, again, is an indication of some new processes on the political scene.

The mayor of Bihać, Šuhret Fazlić, renewed his mandate, despite the large number of other candidates for his position, and despite the migrant crisis which has been plaguing this city for years. He has sharpened his attitude towards migrants recently, but he is still a moderate option compared to the other candidates.

Fazlić’s victory indicates that the anti-migration rhetoric was not decisive for voters in Bihać. In spite of all adversities, inhabitants of this city are satisfied with how the city functioned in the previous period.

#### **ARE WE FACING THE DAWN OF CHANGES?**

During the overall euphorism in the wake of the elections, we heard that Bosnia and Herzegovina was at the turning point, that this is the beginning of the end for Milorad Dodik and the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), and that the elections in Mostar will illustrate how HDZ BiH stands among Croats.

Although Stanivuković’s victory in Banja Luka will put the wind in the sails of the opposition in the Republika Srpska, the SNSD’s quick downfall can hardly be expected.

Let’s remember the 2012 local elections when the SNSD experienced a much more serious defeat, but did not collapse; on the contrary, it knocked out the opposition in the next elections. We can say that the results in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Teslić, Derventa and some other municipalities was a slap in the face for Dodik and his coalition partners, but I am not sure that he and his party will suffer any serious consequences. Maybe this will come as a timely wake-up call and a signal that the SNSD needs to change its behaviour.

The situation is similar in the Federation of BiH. It is questionable how much *Naša Stranka, Narod i Pravda, SDP BiH and Nezavisna bh. Lista* will be

able to expand their influence and policies beyond the Sarajevo Canton.

Let's recall the similar opportunities they missed in 2000 and 2010, because the SDA still controls a large number of Bosniaks.

For a significant turn in Bosnia and Herzegovina's politics, the parliamentary elections that will take place in two years are much more important than the local elections. By then, the mayors of Banja Luka, Sarajevo's municipalities, Bijeljina, Bihać, and some other large cities will have had to live up to the citizens' expectations and demonstrate through their work that politics can be different in this country. It remains to be seen how much they will succeed.

It is illusory to expect that the new mayors of Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Teslić and other opposition municipalities and their parties will be able to change positions on some basic issues in the Republika Srpska overnight (attitude towards BiH, speeding up the EU accession process, joining NATO) because such things take time, and we must count on active resistance from entity-level authorities.

When it comes to the Federation of BiH, we see no big differences between the opposition and their position regarding the BiH setup and Euro-Atlantic integration. The question if partisan interests will prevail over citizens' interests will be of great importance in that regard.

Finally, it remains to be seen how the HDZ BiH and SDA will do in Mostar, and whether cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have decided whether they are fed up with such politics. ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 [https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/Lokalni\\_izbori\\_2020/Ostalo/Odluka\\_o\\_odgadjanju\\_izbora\\_2020-bos.pdf](https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/Lokalni_izbori_2020/Ostalo/Odluka_o_odgadjanju_izbora_2020-bos.pdf)
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