

Local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive amidst legal reform but lacked genuine public engagement, international observers say

SARAJEVO – Yesterday’s local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive and efficiently prepared with fundamental freedoms respected, following extensive changes to election legislation imposed by the High Representative to increase the integrity of the election process, despite insufficient efforts to promote public engagement, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (the Congress), and the European Parliament (EP) found that election preparations were managed professionally, although there was a significant burden to implement the new regulations within a short timeframe and with inadequate resources.

“These welcome reforms added important safeguards to the election process, but they are not yet fully effective,” said Corien Jonker, who headed ODIHR’s election observation mission. “Now all political parties need to come together and find a common path forward for the future of their country and seek to build the trust amongst citizens that is currently missing.”

Some 3.4 million people were eligible to vote in yesterday’s elections. Due to heavy flooding in some areas of the country ahead of the elections, voting was postponed in five municipalities. Election day itself was calm and procedures were largely followed, but the secrecy of the vote was often compromised and observers noted some instances of serious irregularities that indicate pressure was put on voters.

Candidates could campaign freely in the run-up to the election. Regrettably, the election authorities did not sufficiently address allegations of misuse of public resources despite numerous reports. Only a few parties appeared to campaign across ethnic divides, choosing instead to compete for votes within ethnic boundaries, at times dwelling on issues of wartime trauma.

Women continue to be under-represented in public and political life, demonstrating that efforts to achieve more balanced gender representation in elected and appointed bodies have not been sufficient. At the same time, women continue to face frequent misogynistic language and threats, and had a limited role and visibility in campaign events.

“We welcome a generally well-organized election, although efforts to maintain the secrecy of the vote are essential. We regret that the number of female candidates for mayoral positions remains very low, underlining the need for targeted efforts to improve the representation of women in local leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” said Carla Dejonghe, Head of the Congress delegation. “In particular, new rules are needed that would ensure gender balance in the mayoral race.”

“We invite the Central Election Commission to continue along the positive path that has developed ahead of these elections as we move towards the 2026 general elections,” said Lucia Annunziata, Head of the EP delegation. “At the same time, we consider that further improvements to the existing electoral procedures are needed, as the voter register needs revision and the use of ICT should be improved and thereafter extended to the whole country, to increase public trust in the election process.”

While the media environment is pluralistic, there was only limited coverage of the campaign on major media outlets, while the media regulator failed to address obvious bias by one of the public broadcasters. Combined with increased political pressure on journalists and the division of media along ethnic lines, this provided voters with insufficient information to make an informed choice on election day. At the same time, verbal attacks and threats against journalists continue to have a chilling



effect on the media's ability to operate freely. A number of local media outlets as well as the most popular national online portal organised debates during the campaign, a welcome development.

The international election observation mission to the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina totalled 240 observers, made up of 202 ODIHR-deployed experts, long-term, and short-term observers, 25 members and staff from the Congress, and 13 from the EP.

For more information, please contact:

Katya Andrusz, ODIHR: +48 609 522 266 or katya.andrusz@odihr.pl

Stéphanie Poirel, Congress: + 33 3 90 21 52 44 or Stephanie.POIREL@coe.int

Raffaele Luise, EP: +32 470880101 or raffaele.luise@europarl.europa.eu