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By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

West and Russia have big stakes in post-election events in Bosnia and Herzegovina

General elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina brought about the weakening of nationalist parties and leaders, who have been keeping the country in a state of dysfunction and far from EU membership for more than two decades. Moderate Bosniak and Croat politicians, Denis Becirovic and Zeljko Komsic, won two of the three seats in the Presidency of BiH, which is the collective head of state. However, they will be joined, on behalf of Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, by Zeljka Cvijanovic, a puppet of Milorad Dodik, the most popular politician in the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a strongly pro-Russian leader who advocates weakening and even dissolution of the state.

This composition of the three-member Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore does not give much hope that the country will become more functional and turn to reforms, because decisions in this body are made by consensus, which will be almost impossible in the next four years, as it has been until now, due to obstructions from the Serbian entity and its representative.

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Although the OSCE observation mission concluded that the general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive and overall well organized with fundamental freedoms respected during the campaign, the election story is still not over. In the Serbian entity, since the night when the results were announced, there have been quite massive protests by the opposition Party of Democratic Progress, which believes that the elections for the president of the Republika Srpska were rigged and that their candidate Jelena Trivic won, not Milorad Dodik, as the final results say. "It is not me who was stolen from the people of Republika Srpska were stolen from," Trivic told thousands of supporters in the city's main square. "I will never accept the theft, and especially not the theft of the people's will". Bosnia's election authorities, multi-ethnic election commission, expressed concerns over widespread problems at polling stations and reports of irregularities and vote-rigging in the general election last weekend. They ordered ballot checks at over 1,000 polling stations and promised to investigate all potential failings before certifying the results of the vote.

Bosnia's election commission president, Suad Arnautovic, said the body had to order the unsealing of ballot boxes and vote recounts at around 1,000 polling stations 16% of all such locations in the country. He said that's because poll workers there "did not do their job in accordance with the law". Trivic and the two other largest opposition parties said the ballot was rigged by Dodik's supporters and demanded a re-count of over 65,000 ballots they claim were invalid. If these claims are confirmed, strong political turbulence may arise in the Serbian autonomous entity, given that Milorad Dodik has been the most influential politician since 2006, but has been under attack for years by the opposition, as well as Western governments, as a centre of corruption and as a leader who works against the constitutional regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the four-year civil war.

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Because of this, Dodik has been under United States sanctions since January 2017. Sanctions against him were renewed and expanded in January of this year, and on that occasion the US Treasury Department announced that Dodik's divisive ethno-nationalistic rhetoric reflects his efforts to advance these political goals and distract attention from his corrupt activities. Cumulatively, these actions threaten the stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of BiH and undermine the Dayton Peace Accords, thereby risking wider regional

instability. The final outcome of the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina creates concern about the wider security challenges in the Balkans and Europe, and in connection with Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Namely, Milorad Dodik is a strongly pro-Russian politician and has met with Vladimir Putin twice since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the last time just 12 days before the elections, which was an obvious pre-election move. That is why Foreign Policy rightly calls him "Putin's Most Loyal Balkan Client" and considers that a hard-line Bosnian Serb leader Dodik has given the Russian president a firm foothold in the Balkans.

The elections held on October 2 were therefore an opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina to reduce the possibility that Russia, through its collaborators in the Serbian entity, would provoke a new crisis point, thereby taking some of the Western pressure off of Ukraine and redirecting it to the Balkans. Hence, the stakes in the election outcome in BiH exceeded only local importance. That risk has not been completely eliminated, and if Milorad Dodik's victory as president of Republika Srpska is confirmed even after investigating all potential failings at a large number of polling stations, the instability of the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue, as well as Russian influence.