

Focus Group Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina

March/April 2014

INTRODUCTION

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI or the Institute) commissioned focus group research in three cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from March 27 to April 1, 2014. NDI designed the study following February 2014 protests, which began in Tuzla over unpaid wages and mismanaged privatization connected to local industry, and soon spread to other cities, predominantly in the Federation of BiH (Federation or FBiH) entity, though smaller protests also occurred in the Republika Srpska (RS) entity. Protests grew increasingly violent in the first few days, when several government buildings were burned, including the Presidency's Office in Sarajevo and several cantonal government headquarters. As the large-scale protests subsided, hundreds of protesters organized into "citizen plenums" in various cities to flesh out demands. Some demands, such as the resignation of several cantonal government officials, were met, though more substantive reforms to address underlying frustrations with the economy and corruption by government and party officials have been limited.

This focus group research explores in a qualitative manner public attitudes toward the protests and violence in the country; perceptions of the reactions (or lack thereof) of political actors; and the degree to which citizens believe that they can hold their leaders accountable.

The purpose of focus group research is to understand the attitudes, opinions, and experiences of ordinary citizens, who are randomly recruited to reflect, to the degree possible, a representative cross-section of society as a whole. The findings of focus group research cannot be extrapolated, however, as being statistically representative of the population as a whole.

A total of nine focus group discussions were held in late March and early April, as follows:

- Three sessions with each of BiH's main ethnic groups -- Bosniaks (Sarajevo), Croats (Mostar), and Serbs (Banja Luka);
- In each location, one session with citizens age 18 to 35 of mixed gender, and two groups age 35+, split by gender;
- Respondents were screened for their likelihood to vote in the upcoming October 2014 general elections; and
- Journalists, party officials, and those actively protesting in February were screened out in order to isolate the views and impressions of average citizens/voters.

The research was overseen by NDI's BiH-based staff and a Washington, D.C.-based opinion research consultant. The recruitment and moderation of the groups were conducted by Partner MCA, based in Banja Luka.

OVERVIEW

Previous NDI public opinion research had established that, whatever their differences, citizens agree that the country is in terrible shape economically, politically, and socially. These focus groups confirm that assessment. Bosniak participants in Sarajevo, Croats in Mostar, and Serbs in Banja Luka use practically identical terminology in describing the current state of the country's affairs. This essential uniformity explains a fairly common understanding of the causes of the February 2014 protests in Bihac, Mostar, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, and several small towns. Though the proximate cause of the unrest is tied to government malfeasance at the local and cantonal levels, the demonstrations are seen more broadly as reflecting a dysfunctional political system, including administrative paralysis, pervasive corruption, and economic stagnation.

“Corruption, unemployment, political parties that are doing good things just in their interests, general dissatisfaction: that is how our current situation looks.” – Sarajevo, male, 35 years+

“The situation is really very bad. There is nothing bright in our situation. I cannot measure, but, after the protests, I had a feeling that politicians heard something and that something good will happen. Overall situation, as it is now, is more than poor.” – Sarajevo, mixed-gender group, 18 to 35 years

“The only thing that I can say is that the situation is bad. There are lots of bad things going on in our country and I cannot choose one good thing right now. Talking to friends, listening to the news, all I can hear is that something bad is happening. The crises, crime, corruption, poor people, social cases... Mostly negative things!” – Mostar, mixed gender group, 18 to 35 years

“The overall situation in BiH: poverty, unemployment... The near future is not that bright, especially for young people.” – Banja Luka, female, 35 years+

“The biggest disappointment is that all politicians have promised a lot and done nothing... Whoever came to power did exactly the same – nothing. But they've become millionaires.” – Mostar, female, 35 years+

THE FEBRUARY PROTESTS

The protests and attendant violence merited the attention of a broad cross-section of citizens, yet, beyond common assessments of causation, perceptions of the events vary considerably by ethnicity. Bosniaks voice support for the protests as a justifiable response to both official

misconduct and generally unacceptable economic and political conditions, frequently bemoaning the fact that the demonstrations were not larger, more widespread, and expanded into the RS. The prevailing sentiment in support of such mass action was that it might be the only way to get the attention of recalcitrant politicians. In Mostar, where violence damaged the headquarters of the leading ethnic Croat party, a Bosniak party, and several government buildings, participants saw the demonstrations as a mainly Bosniak matter, voicing suspicion of both the motives and the tactics of the protesters, and dismissing the events as politically contrived. Croats often depict themselves as the true victims of the current situation in BiH, marginalized and lacking effective representation in the entity they share with Bosniaks, while Serbs have, according to Croat participants, “what they want” in what they describe as a “mini-state”. For their part, Serbs seem to hold views closer to those of Bosniaks – acknowledging the protests as an understandable reaction to the circumstances in the Federation, if not quite voicing support for them. A number of groups made a distinction between supporting the right to protest as a legitimate way of expressing dissatisfaction and supporting these protests in particular, which were deemed unfocused and frequently violent.

“The protests are the result of citizens’ dissatisfaction. However, the participants of these protests are coming from only one people in Mostar [Bosniaks].” – Mostar, female, 35+

“The protests are misused by certain politicians. They are suitable only for Sarajevo. This is not the way the protests should work.” – Mostar, female, 35+

“I do support protests. They are a democratic right of the people. However, we need protests without the violence.” – Sarajevo, female, 35+

“There should be more people involved. Once a majority of people are involved, we can expect more results.” – Sarajevo, mixed gender focus group, 18 to 35

Most focus group participants believe that the protests began as a genuine reaction to the political and economic situation. Many also sense that, after the first days, they became more politicized, with various factions trying to co-opt the demonstrations for their own purposes. Some believe that they were orchestrated from the start, an opinion found mostly in Croat groups, while others – specifically youth in Banja Luka and Mostar – speculated on a connection between the protests and the upcoming elections. As to who may have orchestrated or moved to take advantage of the demonstrations, many participants said that opposition parties had the most to gain—though some participants in Sarajevo and Mostar are fairly convinced that governing parties were actually behind the events. With frequently changing political coalitions at the Federation level, it seems to many participants that all major parties are implicated.

While some said that a certain amount of violence was to be expected, no one condoned such actions—with the exception of a few young men in the Bosniak sessions. Indeed, the violence and the burning of buildings were exactly the reasons given by many who said they did not

support the protests in the first place. The destruction of public property and burning of official buildings turned many against the protests and, for many, undermined their legitimacy as a public expression of dissatisfaction. In all three Serb groups, but in no others, the burning of the national archives housed in the BiH presidency was mentioned and done so in a uniform manner, suggesting that this particular fact was featured in RS media in a way that it was not in the Federation. In Sarajevo, it was noted that the burning of kiosks and other private property could do nothing but cause more economic distress to the owners, aggravating the very conditions that the protestors were decrying.

“Yes, there must be a certain rebellion, but we cannot burn what is already ours.” – Sarajevo, mixed gender group, 18 to 35

“Yes, I am for protesting as democratic right, but burning and demolishing, I am strongly against this!!” – Sarajevo, male, 35+

“Protests are legal as a democratic right, however, the violence and demolition of property that the whole BiH built throughout the years, this, I do not support!” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

“Every country should have the right to demonstrate dissatisfaction, but not through violence. I do not support violence.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

Although the violence and arson were denounced in all groups, and there was broad support for prosecuting the perpetrators, participants unanimously rejected the notion that charging those responsible for the violence as terrorists was appropriate.¹

The question of why similar outbreaks did not occur in the RS provoked comments on differences between the two entities concerning government structure and political climate. Many Bosniaks and Croats reflexively respond that “fear” among RS residents prevented them from raising protests, before pointing to the largely monoethnic composition of RS society and the “strong hand of Milorad Dodik [President of the RS]” as rendering demonstrations much less likely both to start and to succeed in RS. They frequently contrast the relatively simple structure of the RS to the splintered nature of the cantonal government system and fractious constellation of parties in the Federation. Some Croats praise Dodik for his strength and for “building the RS”, and seem to wish they had a similarly strong leader for their ethnic group.

As for Serbs themselves, fear is mentioned, particularly by women, as a reason the protests did not spread to RS. In some cases, that sense of fear was connected to the strong rule of one party and one man, while others worried that demonstrations and violence could lead to another war. Serb men and youth are more inclined to think that the protests did not spread because the RS is

¹ Government prosecutors have brought forward terrorism charges against some of protestors.

slightly more stable than the Federation, and because people are more passive. The lack of protests in the RS is not, however, synonymous with citizens' acceptance of the situation in the entity. Some young Serb participants suggest that, if conditions do not improve, similar protests in the RS may surface in a few years, once the current generation of leadership is replaced.

"I think it is up to people's mentality. The society slapped the politicians by not protesting. It is a moral slapping." – Banja Luka, male, 18 to 35

"Dodik is 'God and a stick' in the RS." – Sarajevo, mixed gender group, 18 to 35

"The economic situation is far worse in the RS but the fear is great. People are in a situation to think that as long as they have personal safety, everything is ok." – Mostar, male, 35+

"Fear... they were blackmailed, forbidden..." – Sarajevo, female, 35+

"The RS wants separation, and they wanted to show that they were good, that they could get their own state." – Sarajevo, mixed gender focus group, 18 to 35

"I think that these protests have Bosniaks' sign because they are more threatened than us." – Banja Luka, male, 35+

"Dodik has a strong personality. The things he says are the law. Our politicians are not as brave as he is. He cares about his people. I know that their salaries (in RS) are not that great, however, people are kept quiet. They have some kind of respect for Dodik." – Mostar, female, 35+

OFFICIAL REACTIONS TO THE PROTESTS

There was broad agreement that politicians did not react in a very forceful or constructive way in the first days of the protests. Leaders in the Federation were seen variously as hiding, prevaricating, blaming others, and trying to figure out some political advantage to be gained from the unrest. Many mentioned that, for at least the first two days, there was no reaction at all from the politicians, who were waiting to see what others would do. Zeljko Komsic, a member of the tripartite state presidency and leader of a new political party, Democratic Front, was virtually the only political leader who drew praise, though only from Bosniaks in Sarajevo, and pointedly not from Croats. Fahrudin Radoncic, then-Minister of Security and subsequently dismissed from the position, was mentioned in all three cities as one of the first to react, though neither quickly nor forcefully enough. Bosniak women are especially annoyed by what they saw as a fruitless debate among law enforcement and other government officials over competencies and responsibilities rather than the clear response required by the situation. For their part, Serbs assess Federation politicians as weak and ineffectual, while giving some credit to Dodik for his assertion that there would be no such protests there.

As to whether or not politicians “took the protests seriously,” participants feel that they were caught flat-footed and only reacted when the public and news media forced the issue. A small handful of politicians were judged to have used the protests for political self-aggrandizement in an election year, and not as impetus to address the problems faced by the state, entities, and citizens in a new or more creative way. Almost no one expects political leaders or parties to espouse significant changes in order to improve the political and governance situation in the country unless the citizen pressure of the protests can be maintained and expanded.

An ensuing question on what politicians *should do* yielded few specific ideas beyond some calls for changes to the constitution, reduction of the number of parties and the size of the administration, and a move to a “government of experts.” Croat participants, especially youth and women, are convinced that the change needed is the so-called third entity for their ethnic group.

“RS politicians said that protest would not happen in the RS. It was internal issues of the FBiH. FBiH politicians had different opinions: some said it was rage of the people, other that protests were unnecessary.” – Banja Luka, male, 18 to 35

“Nothing significant would change, but some things will be handled differently.” – Sarajevo, mixed gender group, 18 to 35

“They [politicians] were scared for a while. They were scared that people would attack their own property, police protected their homes.” – Mostar, male, 18 to 35

“I cannot remember any reaction, as if they all kept quiet. I have a feeling they did all this, organized protests.” – Mostar, male, 35+

“I think that they all kept quiet, even our politicians were like ‘as long as they do not touch me’...” – Banja Luka, female, 35+

“I cannot recall anyone saying anything smart, talking to people.” – Sarajevo, female, 35+

“Politicians were nowhere near the media for two days. Suddenly, the prime minister of Sarajevo Canton gave a statement that he is against the violence. The question is where he was while the buildings were burning down.” – Sarajevo, female, 35+

“I cannot recall any of the politicians’ statements during the protests. No one said anything clever or stepped out to talk to the people...” – Sarajevo, female, 35+

“Everyone wants a third entity; we think it would change our lives. Less money would go to Sarajevo.” – Mostar, male, 18 to 35

“We will not have any rights until a third entity is established.” – Mostar, male, 18 to 35

While the resignations of some local governments in response to the protests registered as a consequence of the protests, participants were skeptical as to whether or not they constitute a truly significant result. They are unconvinced that mass actions, such as the February protests, are an effective way to realize such changes, yet raised no other options.

Levels of information on the citizen plenums are very uneven. Bosniaks are aware of them and discuss them in some detail, but have various assessments of their legitimacy and see little likelihood that they will contribute to, much less lead to, substantive change and reform. Criticism of the plenums tends to revolve around the notions that they are unrepresentative in their composition and inchoate in the concerns being discussed and demands being made. On one hand, the plenums are an example of citizen action that is all too lacking in BiH; on the other they have become a repository for public frustration and individual complaints about issues national, local, and personal. Croats are also aware of the plenums, but view them as a Bosniak endeavor, and not one to be taken very seriously. Among Serbs, interest in the plenums was extremely low.

EXPECTATIONS

Across geography, gender, and generation, citizens interviewed in these focus groups agree that major changes and reforms are required if their lives are to improve. However, no individual or group of prominence is viewed as able to bring about change.

Numerous participants mention the need to reach beyond the current leadership cadre to bring in talented people—for example more women—who have not been politically active and who are not defined (and do not view every issue) primarily in ethnic terms. Several, notably a few young Croats, say that the task would require someone who does not identify as strictly Bosniak, Croat, or Serb, while others repeated calls for a “government of experts.” A number of Serbs named Aleksandar Vucic, the prime minister of Serbia and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party, and a few in the Sarajevo groups named Bogic Bogicevic, formerly the BiH member of the Yugoslav presidency prior to the 1990s, as well as Tito, as model leaders. But aside from a basic agreement that the current political actors are neither inclined nor able to make real change, there were no concrete ideas articulated as to who could. There is no contemporary political figure in Bosnia and Herzegovina who can assume the mantle of change in a manner that reaches across ethnic lines.

“What could anyone offer that we have not been lied to about?” – Mostar, female, 18 to 35

“We trust no one anymore; it has nothing to do with ethnicity.” – Sarajevo, male, 35+

“A politician who would not steal and lie and that would work hard and fair for the people has not been born yet.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

Many acknowledge that continuing help from the international community is needed, but also note that international actors have played a significant role in BiH for many years and yet the situation has never been worse. Some participants, particularly Bosniaks, believe that the Dayton Accords, instigated by the international community to end the war, lie at the root of many current problems. Even among those open to the international community's continued presence and involvement, the only specific suggestion for what it can or should do to help at this point was to increase foreign investment.

"I agree they caused a lot of problems, but if it were not for the international community, we would still have a war. How would the three peoples agree?" – Mostar, female, 18 to 35

"I expect investment to boost the economy but I do not expect them to help us solve political issues. At least they have not done it so far." – Banja Luka, female, 35+

"They have only caused problems and have not helped with anything. They are blackmailing us with small financial aid, nothing else." – Mostar, female, 35+

"They are here for 20 years. What did they do? Nothing!" – Sarajevo, female, 35+

"We do not need the international community. We are not moving forward with them, just standing in one place." – Sarajevo, female, 35+

"They imposed on us a constitution that no country in the world has." – Sarajevo, female, 35+

"They [the international community] are not the solution. They are doing nothing, just getting big paychecks!" – Sarajevo, female 35+

"The international community is part of our problem. They are not helping us. We are kind of blackmailed with small financial support, and to be honest, they are not helping us at all." – Mostar, female, 35+

Participants believe that EU accession seems the best incentive and most likely route to solve Bosnia and Herzegovina's problems. But they do not view it as a panacea. Participants believe that Brussels' insistence on addressing ethnic and constitutional issues detracts from reform in social and economic sectors that, for citizens, are top priorities. There is a degree of resentment embedded in this sentiment, of having an outside power dictate, as it were, what the country should focus on, even as there is recognition that outside actors are needed to move the country forward.

However convoluted public attitudes on the EU process may be, a clear consensus emerges in the discussions that domestic political actors have proven themselves unable and unwilling to enact the measures needed to meet EU requirements. EU reform requirements are understandable to the public, but the reform process itself is seen as ineffective.

Domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are described in the discussions as “bit players” in the effort to change BiH. At best, they are seen as identifying problems and occasionally proposing solutions. Comments suggesting that NGOs can possibly assist reform efforts in some limited ways are drowned out by those dismissing them as ineffective and frequently corrupt. A key factor in the general assessment of NGOs is suspicion of their funding sources; participants frequently charge that such organizations are backed by – and do the bidding of – foreign governments, domestic political entities, or other interested parties. “Money laundering” was mentioned among the allegations levied against the third sector. When asked, no one named a domestic NGO that stood out for credibility, effectiveness, or capacity to lead reform.

“People think of them as foreign mercenaries.” – Banja Luka, female, 35+

“Based on what I know on this subject, people are quite disappointed with the NGO sector. I think that we have the largest number of NGOs, proportional to country size, and they are doing things only for themselves.” – Sarajevo, male, 35+

“I do not believe in the NGO sector. They are also under-wrapping their business.” – Mostar, female, 35+

While there is fairly broad agreement that real progress demands changes by citizens in the way they approach politics and policy, the discussion elicited mostly platitudes about being better informed or not voting for the same politicians and parties, and little in the way of specific suggestions for a more robust and constructive role for the average citizen. Bosniak men cited the need for more and larger citizen protests, and pointed favorably to the June 2013 demonstrations concerning identification numbers.² At least one young Croat said that, if the country is to progress, citizens would have to “stop thinking in national terms, and respect others.”

OCTOBER 2014 ELECTIONS

Virtually no one in the focus groups expects the protests to mark a major political turning point. There is little sense that the intensity displayed on the streets will be harnessed to drive change in the behavior of either politicians or voters as the 2014 campaign unfolds and citizens go to the polls. Indeed, there is little discernible sense that the elections can lead to genuine political change or reform. In the sessions with Bosniak and Croat men, several participants indicated that they might entertain new political options in this election. However this openness is not necessarily related to the protests, but to the participants’ general level of frustration, and is

² Political stalemate along ethnic lines prevented the passage of legislation that resulted in the government’s inability to provide identification numbers to newborn children. In June 2013, when parents of a newborn with a treatable disease were unable to obtain identification documents for the infant to travel abroad for medical treatment, thousands of demonstrators protested outside the state parliament as well as elsewhere around the country. Parties deflected responsibility for the situation at each other.

offset by others who acknowledge that they themselves would not vote across ethnic lines even in the hypothetical event that the “perfect candidate, with the best policies and programs” emerged from a different ethnic group. Croat women were particularly vehement in this regard.

“If there is no ‘H’ [Hrvatska, i.e. Croatian] in the name of the party...[then it’s not considered].” – Mostar, female, 18 to 35

“It is important for Croatian politicians to have a strong national consciousness. First, he has to be a real Croat, true Croat; true Catholic, and a person with strong family values. After that, the Croats in BiH will respect him. Not like Komšić. He is Croat only by first and last name.” – Mostar, female, 35+

“We did not vote for Komšić. He was imposed from someone else as a Croat member. He is a Croat, but not representing the Croats in BiH.” – Mostar, female, 35+

Serbs do not see viable political alternatives to consider, as, at the time of the focus groups, there was seen to be no credible or cohesive opposition to the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). Various attempts to best Dodik and his SNSD have fizzled as the opposition has failed to unify effectively. Another example cited was the election for mayor of Banja Luka in 2012, in which a divided opposition helped SNSD prevail. One young Serb notes that any opposition coalition could be worse than the current government, while another posits that the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), the leading opposition party in the RS, could win if Mladen Botic were not its leader. There is general skepticism of coalitions, either because past examples have tended to be fractured, with small parties each looking out for themselves, or, in the case of post-election coalitions, larger parties (SNSD or SDS) have dominated, offering one or more smaller parties some position in the government in order to procure a majority, but not providing for a coherent program of reform.

“The sad thing is that there is no opposition.” – Banja Luka, male, 18 to 35

“There is no strong opposition due to mutual arguments.” – Banja Luka, mixed gender focus group, 18 to 35

“Even if they replace him [Dodik], they would not know what to do next. By the time they agree on who gets what... Dodik is no good, but he is better than alternatives.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

“The opposition is in chaos. They all have governed before; I do not know what they are trying to do now.” – Banja Luka, female, 35+

“There was an opposition coalition for mayoral election, and it ended up fighting and assaulting each other. They all are the same – they are not capable of having a clear goal and achieving it.” – Banja Luka, female, 35+

“They cannot agree on anything among themselves, and expect people to trust them.” – Banja Luka, female, 35+

“No! Is this a trick question? Who will get us out of these crises? The main goal of Dragan Čavić [SDS] is to replace Mr. Dodik. I haven't heard anything else, e.g. what is he planning to do after replacing Dodik? It means that everything is done without any real plan and program. Let's make a coalition just to replace Dodik. What will happen after that? Just like a game...” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

“There are no political options strong enough to replace Dodik. They can make coalitions as many as they can.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

“As far as coalition possibilities, it is not that simple and it is not that easy to replace Dodik, because they have no representatives that are strong enough.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

As for the conduct of the campaign and the election itself, the frequently expressed expectation for an election that is democratic is tempered by many comments that assume widespread vote buying. While vote buying seems to register as an offense, the selling of a vote is often justified by the combination of economic need and inadequate political options. Especially in the RS, participants expect the worst, “ugliest” campaign yet with divisive rhetoric, personal attacks, and manufactured controversies.

“It will be dirty and intense.” – Banja Luka, male, age 18 to 35

“I think that this election campaign will be unfair. As you can see from the surroundings, the situation is more serious than ever, and the crises that generated over the years are now coming to the surface. The greater the poverty is, I am expecting the dirtier fight for dominance, and the situation will get even worst in the next years.” – Banja Luka, male, 35+

CONCLUSIONS

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s interrelated political, social, and economic problems seem as entrenched as ever. Participants say that the country’s political institutions have failed to address those challenges. Bosniaks tend to speak of the state and its precarious future, while Croats are mainly concerned with their own ethnic group (often leading with calls for the creation of a third, Croat entity), and the primary interest for Serbs is the RS and its politics. What unites the three ethnic groups is that each hopes for—and none expects—meaningful, tangible change, of any

variety, from political parties, civil society, or the international community. People do not see agents of the change that they want.

Throughout the focus group sessions, citizen disaffection from political and governing institutions is highly pronounced, particularly on economic matters of unemployment and corruption. Citizens see their political leaders exacerbating the situation, rather than working to address it. The extremely low esteem in which political parties are held illuminates the need for them to modify their behavior and employ more effective strategies for governance. Grand pronouncements and dramatic proposals are unlikely to find traction. Accountability measures – from oversight of civil society to watchdog media to pressure from the international community – seem to participants as ineffective as politicians.

Citizens clearly desire accountability and specificity from their political leaders – a theme that emerges powerfully in these focus groups in the wake of the protests. Participants say that they want politicians and parties to work with each other to get things done and to improve life for average citizens. Numerous participants argue that parties should offer specific and realistic policy ideas to confront the country's problems and communicate with the public to build support for those proposals, rather than relying on ethnic arguments and quickly-forgotten campaign promises. However, the space for garnering support from citizens for substantial reforms may be just as limited as the policy options on offer, as austerity measures that may be required to reverse the declining economy might be too tough for citizens to swallow.

Leaders must both manage public expectations and demonstrate meaningful efforts toward attainable goals if their parties are to evolve, build credibility, and regain legitimacy. With elections on the horizon, the public seems ready to turn incumbents out of office, but need to see viable alternatives. Parties that manage to build some measure of public credibility will have the greatest chance for success.