

EDUCATION OF YOUTH AND VOTER TURNOUT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

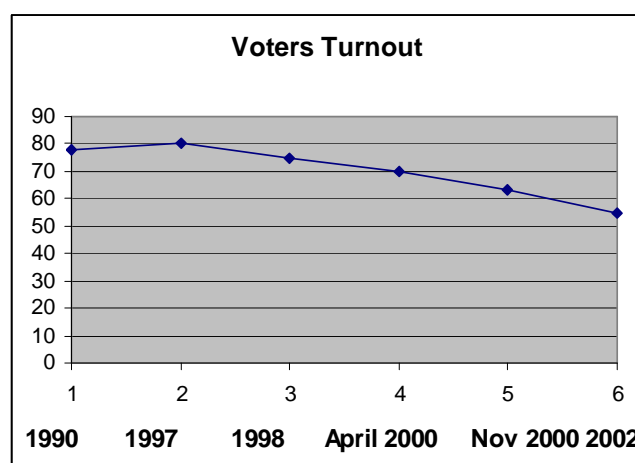
With the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement on December 14, 1995, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended and the Organization for Stability and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) took over organization of elections. In 1999, the nongovernmental organization Association of Election Officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina (AEOBiH) was established under the auspices of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) and was tasked with conducting professional education programs for election officials and promoting networking among them in order to foster exchange of experiences and improve the election process.

The work on organizing elections in BiH has been extremely demanding. Actually, since the end of war until today, only in 1999 and 2001 there were no elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The first postwar elections were held in 1996. These were the general elections that were followed by: municipal and extraordinary elections for the National Assembly of Republika Srpska in 1997 held as a result of the parliamentary crisis, general elections in 1998, municipal (April) and general (November) elections in 2000, general elections in 2002 and the latest round of municipal elections to be held on October 2, 2004. The Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina was also established in 2001, and at that time responsibility for organizing elections was handed over to local authorities.

The organization of elections contributed to the stabilization of the country and symbolized the end of war; however, it has also made BiH citizens fed up with election activities. In addition to that, a large number of citizens who originally registered as postal voters received citizenships of their host countries in the meantime and thus lost interest for voting in BiH elections.

The voter turnout in the elections held in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the first multi-party elections in 1990 shows a tendency of declining. The turnout at the first multi-party elections in 1990 was almost 80% while in the last elections in 2002 it was only 55, 5 %.



As part of election preparation activities, the AEOBiH has also worked on voter education and information projects in order to increase voter participation in elections, with a particular focus being placed on returnees and young voters.

By looking in the Central Voter Register it can be concluded that in the 2002 elections the number of young registrants born between 1970 and 1979 (23 to 32 years old) is approximately the same, while for the age group born after 1979 this number is declining.

1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1998	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
42692	46044	46355	45436	46344	47919	50343	49502	50226	43287	29859	25045	12856	2728	693

There are no indicators of turnout of young voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the amount of work required by holding frequent elections renders such analysis impossible. In order to increase participation of youth in the election process, the Association of Election Officials implemented two important projects. These were complemented by municipal election commissions' visits to local schools ahead of every election with the purpose of animating young people to vote.

The first project entitled "Democracy and Elections" was implemented in six secondary and six elementary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an extra-curricular education program about elections. The best students who won top grades at the final quiz competition, received computers as awards.

The second project entitled "Winter and Summer Youth Camps" dealt with education of final year students in secondary schools. Organized in the countryside, the program allowed several groups of students from different ethnic backgrounds to learn more about elections during their school holidays and to practice designing informative election posters, campaign managing, ballot counting, etc. These young people were later given an opportunity to be engaged as Polling Station Committee members for the 2002 elections.

During implementation of these projects young voters acquired various types of new knowledge:

1. Awareness of the election system, voter registration, election administration, and need for protection of integrity of the election system through civic supervision;
2. Ability to actively participate in the election process (analyze, evaluate and believe in the possibility of elections);
3. Citizens' virtues (impartiality, tolerance, objectivity).

However, young voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina still do not have enough information on the election process at their disposal because all projects implemented by various international and local organizations in our country are of short duration and usually do not include sufficient number of young people.

The generally underdeveloped economy additionally diminishes perspectives of young people in BiH as they continue to imagine their future outside its borders. According to the UNDP survey, almost 60% of young people would like to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It will therefore be extremely important for me, and all of us attending the Conference on behalf of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to learn more about experiences in solving similar problems from other ACEEEO members and guests.

One of the initiatives we consider very useful in this aspect is the ACEEEO project "First Time Voter". We are very pleased to have been given an opportunity to act as partner organization in this project, and are happy that three young persons from our country got a chance to work together with young people from other countries and acquire ideas about possible ways of increasing interest in elections.

We believe that only the long-term education programs, which would involve larger groups of young people, as well as networking between ACEEEO members to maintain constant exchange of information, may soon start yielding positive results.

Irena Hadžiabdić,
Sarajevo, August 13, 2004