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Observation of the general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (4 October 2026)

Election observation report[1]
Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau
Rapporteur: Mr Jone BLIKRA, Norway, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

1. Introduction

1. At the invitation of the President of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) decided, at its meetings on 24 April and 21 May 2026, to observe the general elections scheduled for 4 October 2026, to set up an ad hoc committee composed of 20 members (SOC-7; EPP/CD-5; ECPA-4; ALDE-3; UEL-1), as well as of the two co-rapporteurs of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), and to conduct a pre-electoral mission.

2. The Bureau appointed me as Chairperson and Ms Yevheniia Kravchuk (Ukraine, ALDE) as Vice-Chairperson of the ad hoc committee ("PACE delegation"). The composition of the delegation is set out in Appendix 1.

3. In line with the co-operation agreement signed between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) on 4 October 2004, a representative of the Venice Commission was present as legal adviser during this election observation mission.

4. A pre-electoral delegation was in Sarajevo and in Banja Luka from 15 to 17 September 2026 to assess the electoral and political environment ahead of the general elections. It met with a broad range of stakeholders to gain insight into preparations for the elections and the challenges surrounding them. It called for inclusive, transparent and trusted general elections and stressed that the legitimacy of electoral outcomes would depend on the full engagement of all stakeholders, voter participation, an open and impartial electoral administration, the effective resolution of complaints and disputes, the protection of media freedom and respect for the fundamental principles of democratic fairness and for human rights (see its programme in Appendix 2 and its statement in Appendix 3).

5. The PACE fully fledged delegation operated from 2 to 5 October 2026 as part of an international election observation mission (IEOM) together with delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA), the European Parliament (EP) and the Election Observation Mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). The programme of the delegation's meetings is set out in Appendix 4.

6. The PACE delegation assessed the legal, administrative, and political context of the elections, the conduct of the campaign, election day, and the resolution of complaints, evaluating compliance with Bosnia and Herzegovina's international obligations and its commitments as a Council of Europe member State.

1. This report was drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.

7. The IEOM concluded that there was genuine competition and that contestants were largely able to reach voters. The political landscape in the country is deeply fragmented and characterised by conflicting narratives still rooted in wartime divisions. The first-time countrywide use of information and communication technologies (ICT) was introduced to address longstanding electoral integrity concerns, although there were some delays and shortfalls during its implementation stage (see the joint press release set out in Appendix 5).

8. The preliminary conclusions and findings were presented at the joint press conference on 5 October 2026.[2]

9. The PACE delegation extends its appreciation to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina for their invitation and assistance, as well as to all interlocutors and international and national partners for their effective co-operation. The delegation also acknowledges the support of the Council of Europe Office in Sarajevo for facilitating the smooth organisation of the pre-electoral mission.

2. Background and political context

10. Bosnia and Herzegovina is under the monitoring procedure of the Assembly and has therefore committed to invite PACE to observe elections. According to the Dayton Peace Agreement constitutional framework, it consists of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), Republika Srpska (RS), and the Brčko District. The country is characterised by complex inter-entity and ethnic power sharing, with Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs, and “Others” represented under quota-based systems.

11. The elections were held amid conflicting political narratives rooted in wartime divisions, deep polarisation, divisive rhetoric, and foreign influence campaigns. While fundamental freedoms were broadly respected, systemic issues, such as ethnic and residency-based restrictions on suffrage, misuse of public resources, campaign finance opacity, media polarisation, and gaps in the complaints and disputes system, undermined full electoral integrity and trust. Significant technical difficulties, issues with secrecy, and unequal opportunities during the campaign further highlighted the need for continuing electoral and constitutional reform.

12. The political environment was marked by renewed fragmentation, contentious coalition negotiations, and heightened ethnic and international tension. The general elections followed the contentious early presidential election in Republika Srpska, the formation and collapse of coalitions at State level, and an ongoing deadlock over key reforms and European Union (EU) integration. Campaigns capitalised on wartime narratives, identity, and regional alliances, with the international context further complicated by the open activities of foreign actors, including Russian information operations.

3. Legal framework and electoral system

13. General elections are governed primarily by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitution (Annex IV, Dayton), the 2001 Election Law with the 2022 and 2024 amendments, and CEC regulations. The extensive legal amendments made by the Office of the High Representative in 2022 and 2024 strengthened safeguards. However, important Venice Commission recommendations to address issues pertaining to ethnicity and residency-based restrictions on suffrage rights, misuse of administrative resources, election dispute resolution, campaign finance oversight and dissuasive sanctions, remain unaddressed.

14. The electoral system is multi-level and complex: voters elect the State tripartite presidency, the House of Representatives, the FBiH and Republika Srpska lower chambers, and cantonal assemblies. The Electoral Law provides sound procedures for democratic elections, but discriminatory ethnicity and residency-based restrictions on the right to vote and to stand remain unresolved, in defiance of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) case law (Sejdić-Finci, Zornić, Pilav and Šlaku judgments) and previous Council of Europe recommendations.

15. The system is further characterised by constituency malapportionment, fragmented party competition along ethnic lines, and challenging administrative requirements for candidate and voter registration.

2. https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/668052.

4. Election administration

16. The election administration comprised the CEC, 143 municipal or city election commissions, over 5 200 polling station committees, and mobile teams. The CEC operated under increased responsibility, managing the first nationwide rollout of ICT for biometric voter identification and ballot scanning, a reform intended to address concerns over possible voter impersonation and fraudulent counting.

17. The 2024 legal amendments provide for countrywide use of electoral ICT. The ICT introduction was made in response to previous concerns of voter impersonation and fraudulent counting and with a stated aim to further protect the integrity of the elections. However, the law lacked sufficient provisions for effective implementation and the deployment of ICT devices was carried out hastily, with limited time for testing, voter education, and training of election officials. To enable the use of scanners, the CEC had to use broad discretionary powers to change the ballot format without a legislative amendment, replacing candidates' names with numbers. Technical preparations were marred by significant delays in device procurement, short timelines for training of over 20 000 polling officials, and limited time for voter education, especially among elderly and rural populations. The CEC is under-resourced and guidance to lower commissions was partial and delayed in places.

5. Voter registration

18. The permanent Central Voter Register includes over 3.4 million voters: 2.1 million registered in FBiH institutions and 1.26 million in RS; 48 078 registered to vote from abroad (20 polling stations were organised for out-of-country voting in 13 countries), and special provisions were made for homebound and institutionalised voters. Registration was generally passive and widely trusted, but concerns persisted about deceased voters, imprecise database links and voters maintaining official residency but residing *de facto* abroad.

19. The preliminary voter list was not published online as prescribed by law, limiting public scrutiny. Disenfranchisement of persons deprived of legal capacity by courts continued, contrary to obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

6. Candidate registration

20. Candidate registration was broadly inclusive. The CEC certified 75 of 77 parties and all four independent candidates, plus 29 coalitions for a total of 7,028 candidates, of whom 2,977 were women. The 40% gender quota in candidate lists was met, but women remained under-represented in leadership positions and faced persistent barriers as "placeholders" rather than party leaders.

21. Broad and duplicative document requirements, including demanding electronic and hard-copy filings, may have served as a barrier to new contestants. Two parties were denied registration across the country for insufficient support signatures, while five others qualified only for lower-level elections. Further, three candidate lists were not registered. The CEC did not publish the respective decisions related to candidate registration, including findings on identified deficiencies, detracting from transparency. It referred 24 political parties to the Prosecutor's Office on suspicion of forged signatures, while proceeding with their registration where all requirements were met, including the required number of valid signatures. Appeals of five CEC certification decisions were filed, some of which challenged the registration process and the CEC's competence to verify the authenticity of voters' signatures; all five CEC decisions were upheld by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitutional Court.

7. Gender and minority representation

22. Despite legislative gender quotas, the visibility and leadership of women in the campaign remained low. Only 14% of State and entity lists were headed by women, and women's presence in party decision-making was limited. Election law requires campaign gender equality, yet tangible impacts were not observed.

23. The system maintains ethnic quotas but continues to deny "Others" full rights to participate at the highest levels, in violation of ECtHR judgments.

8. Election campaign

24. The campaign was competitive but deeply polarised along ethnic and regional lines. War-time narratives, divisive rhetoric, and negative campaigning dominated. Although the official campaign lasted one month, under new legal amendments, a ban on "early campaigning" was heavily enforced, resulting in an unprecedented volume of fines, mostly for social media posts.

25. Misuse of public resources was systemic: authorities at all levels revised budgets, increased salaries and pensions and distributed social benefits and one-off payments, providing material inducements to voters and distorting the electoral playing field. Significant allegations of vote buying, intimidation, and systematic pressure via State patronage and contract allocation were raised, though few criminal proceedings resulted.

26. The online environment was marked by extreme polarisation: anonymous and partisan media, click-bait networks, AI-driven content, divisive rhetoric and manipulation via co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour.

9. Campaign finance and the use of State resources

27. Although recent reforms improved disclosure and CEC oversight, material campaign spending is still not fully transparent or timely. Donations and expenditures must be reported, but third-party campaigning remains unregulated, timelines for audits are not fixed, and the CEC's Audit Department is under-resourced. Candidate and party spending grew significantly, with new forms of online advertising and indirect support not fully regulated.

28. Direct and indirect use of State resources by officeholders, including publicly funded events and "budget amendments", further blurred the lines between State and party, especially at entity and cantonal levels.

10. Media environment

29. While the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains formally pluralistic, both public and private outlets are highly politicised and divided. Most media failed to observe legal requirements for balanced campaign coverage. State and entity broadcasters prioritised coverage of incumbents, relegating the campaign to limited or non-prime time slots. Private media provided substantial, but often partisan and non-analytical, election coverage.

30. The proliferation of anonymous and click-bait websites contributed to a fragmented and manipulated information space. Legal protections for media freedom exist, but journalists reported sustained intimidation, lawsuits, threats, and political pressure, causing a significant chilling effect.

11. Disinformation, influence, and foreign interference

31. The election was strongly affected by co-ordinated disinformation and foreign influence operations:

– Russian influence was observed via the presence of networked information campaigns, including the presence and subsequent expulsion of the Russian "Rybar" blogger wanted for US election interference, who was reported to travel through the country during the election period.

– A US-linked network of lobbyists and campaign advisers attended rallies of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and reportedly worked for the Republika Srpska government and/or party, raising questions about foreign services being paid with entity public funds, in potential violation of party financing laws. On 25 September, the Constitutional Court prohibited payments from the Republika Srpska budget under that contract.

32. Anonymous and AI-driven content, along with clickbait and polarising social media campaigns, undermined the integrity of debate and left voters vulnerable to manipulation.

12. Civil society and observation

33. Citizen observation enjoys a robust legal framework. The CEC accredited 1,557 citizen observers, 756 international observers, and thousands appointed by parties and coalitions. Civic coalitions, notably Pod Lupom and Transparency International Bosnia and Herzegovina, played a vital role in long-term and election day observation. Their findings were central to the public and international understanding of persisting irregularities and legal enforcement gaps.

13. Election day

34. On 4 October, the PACE delegation split into 9 teams and observed the voting and the counting in Sarajevo and its surroundings, as well as in Banja Luka, Mostar, Srebrenica, Trebinje, Visoko, Kakanj, Zenica, Travnik, Vitez, Busovača, Jablanica, Prozor, Konjic, Goražde, Foča, Trnovo, Kladanj, Živinice, Banovići, Buna, Čapljina, Drežnica, Ljubinje, Berkovići, Gradiška, Prijedor, Kozarac, Bratunac and Vlasenica.

35. Election day unfolded in a calm and generally well-organised manner. International observers and party monitors were welcomed and able to observe all stages. However, significant technical difficulties with the new ICT, including biometric identification failures and ballot scanner issues, delayed opening in many precincts and led to long waits for voters.

36. In almost one-fifth of polling stations observed, serious shortcomings in ensuring vote secrecy and compliance with procedure were recorded. Vote secrecy was potentially compromised by how polling booths were positioned, with the opening towards the polling station officials, the reason being to prevent the use of mobile phone cameras to photograph the ballots inside the booths. Many polling officials struggled with the complexity of the new systems and made procedural omissions. Manual and electronic counts, in most stations, showed only minor discrepancies.

37. Nearly half of polling stations were not accessible to persons with reduced mobility, and awareness of special needs among officials varied greatly.

14. Counting and tabulation

38. Counting was performed with varying degrees of procedural compliance. In one-fifth of observed counts, significant errors or omissions were noted, including failure to check protocol arithmetic, incomplete integrity checks and occasional interference by party observers. In a number of cases, results protocols and scanner-generated preliminary results were not posted, reducing transparency.

39. While the process for the tabulation at Municipal Election Commissions was generally positive, issues were reported with the new ICT management system, data entry errors and insufficient premises.

15. Legal challenges and the complaints system

40. Legal complaints regarding campaign violations, premature campaigning, misuse of public resources, and polling day irregularities were routinely submitted, but the CEC and courts remain under-resourced for effective and prompt handling. Most electoral disputes reviewed in the pre-election period related to social media activity and early campaigning; only a fraction addressed larger structural abuses.

41. The CEC's broad interpretation of campaign infractions and the discretionary application of penalties prompted concern that legitimate political speech was being sanctioned and that misuse of resources was not being effectively challenged.

42. Court review of complaints took place in most cases, but appeals to the Constitutional Court affirmed the exclusion of candidate lists on technical grounds and did not address broader equality or suffrage violations.

43. Transparency of decisions was weak: CEC and judicial findings were not always published or reasoned in full, and court hearings were closed to the public.

16. Post-election environment

44. After election day, the CEC announced preliminary results and initiated procedures for appeals and recounts. The establishment of results on 24 October was followed by a period of coalition negotiations between the main winning parties (the SNSD, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH)), protracted by ongoing disputes over mandate allocation, representation of constituent peoples, and future government formation.

45. Controversy continued over the use of Republika Srpska entity public funds for international lobbying and the recent Constitutional Court prohibition of such payments. Coalition talks anticipated a stagnation in EU integration pending institutional reforms and international scrutiny of government formation.

17. Conclusions and recommendations

46. The 2026 Bosnia and Herzegovina general elections demonstrated significant progress in technical management, the use of technology for voter integrity, and competitive multi-party participation. Yet, the system remains deeply constrained by discrimination, administrative weakness, and the abuse of public finance for political gain. Foreign influence, information manipulation, and unresolved disputes over constitutional mandates and basic rights continue to undermine trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina's electoral democracy.

47. Democracy begins with a simple principle: every citizen matters and every vote counts. Free and fair elections must guarantee that people can make their choice freely, that all votes are treated equally, and that the will of the voters is respected. These are fundamental values of the Council of Europe.

48. The Sejdić and Finci judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which urges Bosnia and Herzegovina to give equal rights to all citizens, without any ethnic consideration, remains unimplemented by the country since 2009.

49. The PACE delegation encourages the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to take the following measures:

– Constitutional reform: urgently address discriminatory ethnicity and residency-based limitations on suffrage and candidacy in compliance with ECtHR judgments.

– Electoral Law: accelerate completion and implementation of all Venice Commission recommendations, including covering campaign finance transparency, observer rights, and meaningful regulation of online campaigning, and end the disenfranchisement of persons deprived of legal capacity.

– Election administration: enhance CEC independence and capacity; provide for transparent, staged ICT rollouts, robust staff training, and public communication.

– Electoral campaign: strengthen sanctions and oversight for misuse of public resources and premature campaigning, while ensuring proportionality and free-speech protection.

– Campaign infractions should be better defined to allow for a more precise interpretation by the CEC.

– Media and information: empower independent agencies to monitor political coverage and tackle disinformation; foster plural, unbiased media access for all actors.

– Voting process: ensure a better secrecy of the vote by an appropriate positioning of polling booths.

– Complaints and remedies: reform legal standing and resource allocation for challenge and appeal of all electoral processes, guaranteeing timely, public, and reasoned resolution.

– Inclusion and accessibility: improve geographical and physical access for all voters; promote gender equality and minority inclusion in both candidate selection and campaign participation.

– Foreign interference: install systemic monitoring and oversight to detect and counter direct and indirect foreign influence and finance.

50. The Assembly stands ready to work with the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to address the issues highlighted to strengthen the implementation of European democratic standards. This work should be carried out within the framework of the Assembly's monitoring procedure and in close co-operation with the Venice Commission.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on the proposals by the political groups of the Assembly, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

Chairperson: Mr Jone BLIKRA, Norway

Vice-Chairperson: Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, Ukraine

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Jone BLIKRA, Norway *
– Mr Piero FASSINO, Italy
– Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA, North Macedonia
– Mr António MENDONÇA MENDES, Portugal
– Mr Mike READER, United Kingdom

Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

– Mr Ricardo CARVALHO, Portugal *
– Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER, Austria
– Mr Tekke PANMAN, The Netherlands
– Mr Georgios STAMATIS, Greece

European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates (ECPA)

– Ms Elisabetta GARDINI, Italy * **
– Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA, Spain

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Mr Mehmet AKALIN, Türkiye
– Mr Nikolla CAMAJ, Montenegro
– Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, Ukraine
– Ms Lucia PLAVÁKOVÁ, Slovak Republic *

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– ZZ

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

– Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD) *
– Ms Oana MURARIU (Romania, ALDE) *

Venice Commission

– Mr Richard BARRETT, Venice Commission expert

Secretariat

– Mr Bogdan TORCATORIU, Senior Elections Officer, PACE Elections Division

– Mr Damien CESSELIN, Secretary, PACE Monitoring Committee

– Ms Amila BERKOVIC, Assistant, PACE Elections Division

*Participant to the pre-electoral mission

**Did not participate in the main mission

Appendix 2 – Programme of the PACE pre-electoral delegation

Tuesday, 15 September 2026 (Sarajevo)

9:30-10:30 Delegation meeting, with introductory words by:
- Mr Jone Blikra, Head of delegation
- Mr Pablo Hispán and Ms Oana Murariu, co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee
- Practical information by the Secretariat

10:45-12:00 Meeting with members of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission:
- Ms Tana de Zulueta, Head of Mission
- Ms Elissavet Karagiannidou, Deputy Head of Mission

14:00-15:30 Meeting with members of the diplomatic corps:
- Ms Kathrine Biering, Ambassador of Norway
- Mr Anton Pacuretu, Ambassador of Romania
- Ms Miroslava Čaniova, Deputy Ambassador of the Slovak Republic
- Ms María Molina Álvarez de Toledo, Ambassador of Spain
- Mr Adebayo Babajide, Deputy Head of Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina

15:45-16:30 Meeting with the Acting High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina:
- Mr Louis J. Crishock, Acting High Representative
- Mr Mirko Zambelli, Deputy High Representative (DHR) and Head of the Political and Economic Section
- Ms Una Zeger, Head of the Cabinet of the Acting High Representative
- Mr Damir Hadžić, Legal Officer for Electoral & Public Law
- Ms Nasiha Nuhanović, Legal Officer for Electoral & Property Law
- Ms Arijana Čišić Omerović, Senior Political Advisor

16:45-17:30 Meeting with representatives of NGOs:
- Mr Dario Jovanović, Director, Pod Lupom
- Ms Ena Strika, Programme Assistant, Sarajevo Open Centre
- Mr Dervo Sejdić, Roma Info Centre: Kali Sara

17:30-18:15 Meeting with representatives of media:
- Ms Mirjana Popovic, Deputy Editor in Chief, CIN
- Ms Merima Šemić, BHRT
- Ms Mersiha Jaskic, Project Manager, BIRN BiH (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network)

Wednesday, 16 September 2026 (Banja Luka)

13:30-14:30 Meeting with representatives of NGOs:
- Mr Damjan Ožegović, Senior Researcher, Transparency International
- Ms Gorica Ivić, Executive Director, Udružene žene Banja Luka (United Women)

14:45-15:15 Meeting with representatives of media:
- Mr Đorđe Vujatović, President of the UG SEMPER, publisher of the gerila.info portal, Gerila.info

15:30-16:30 Consecutive meetings with leaders and representatives of parliamentary groups of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska:
- Serbian Democratic Party (SDS)
- Party of Democratic Progress (PDP)

Thursday, 17 September 2026 (Sarajevo)

9:30-10:30 Meeting with the President and members of the Central Election Commission:
- Mr Jovan Kalaba, President
- Mr Suad Arnautović, Member
- Mr Vlado Rogić, Member
- Mr Ahmet Šantić, Member
- Mr Željko Bakalar, Member
- Ms Irena Hadžiabdić, Member
- Ms Vanja Bjelica-Prutina, Member

10:45-12:45 Consecutive meetings with leaders and representatives of parliamentary groups of the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina:
- Mr Adnan Efendić, Party of Democratic Action (SDA)
- Mr Damir Mašić, Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH)
- Ms Amra Junuzović-Kljajić, People and Justice party (NiP)
- Mr Marijan Marjanović, Mr Mijo Matanović and Ms Franka Leko, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BIH-HNS)
- Mr Mahir Mešalić, Mr Denis Gratz, Democratic Front/Civic Alliance (DF/GS)
- Mr Dragan Mioković, Naša stranka

15:00-16:15 Meeting with the members of the Collegium of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of the Collegium of the House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina:
- Mr Dragan Čović (HDZ BiH), Speaker
- Mr Nikola Špirić (SNSD), First Deputy Speaker
- Mr Kemal Ademović (NiP), Second Deputy Speaker
- Mr Darko Babalj, Speaker (SDS)
- Mr Denis Zvizdić, First Deputy Speaker (NiP)
- Mr Marinko Čavara, Second Deputy Speaker (HDZ BiH)

Appendix 3 – Statement of the PACE pre-electoral delegation

PACE pre-electoral delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina welcomes electoral reforms but warns of continuing challenges

Sarajevo, 17 September 2026 - A pre-electoral delegation[3] from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) visited Bosnia and Herzegovina from 15 to 17 September 2026 to assess the electoral and political environment ahead of the general elections scheduled for 4 October 2026. The delegation met with a broad range of stakeholders to gain insight into preparations for the upcoming elections and the challenges they face.

The delegation positively noted the recent amendments to the Election Law made by the High Representative in March 2024, which introduce significant technical and procedural safeguards aimed at strengthening electoral integrity and transparency. These include the digitalisation of voting and counting procedures via ballot scanners and biometric voter identification devices, stricter criteria-based appointment procedures for members of the electoral administration at all levels and enhanced mechanisms for campaign finance reporting and media transparency.

The pre-electoral delegation commended the Central Election Committee (CEC) for its efforts in preparing for the deployment of these new technologies, conducting voter education, and train thousands of technical operators and polling stations staff. It noted that the CEC continues to face a significant staff shortage and expressed the hope that serious efforts would be made to support its work.

While stakeholders welcomed these reforms as promising for the restoration of public trust and minimising malpractice, they also expressed concern about the compressed implementation schedule.

The delegation noted that the majority of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the overwhelming majority of stakeholders, strongly support the introduction of new election technologies as a measure to prevent electoral irregularities. It hopes that this will contribute to the general belief that each vote counts, encouraging citizens to exercise their right to vote in large numbers.

The delegation stresses that legal shortcomings, particularly with regard to residency and ethnicity-based restrictions, continue to prevent some citizens from participating fully in elections These issues, which have been repeatedly highlighted by the Venice Commission and the ODIHR, remain in breach of binding judgments from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), such as Sejdić and Finci, judgement, where the ECtHR found violations of the right to stand for office and participate on a non-discriminatory basis. The PACE pre-electoral delegation urges Bosnia and Herzegovina's authorities to decisively move towards constitutional and legislative reforms, so that all citizens, including minorities and those not affiliated with the constituent peoples, can enjoy equal voting and candidacy rights.

Another critical issue repeatedly raised during meetings was the deep polarisation of the political environment, which has contributed to institutional deadlocks and delays in key reforms affecting Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration process. Many interlocutors reported challenges to the constitutional order, especially stemming from divisive actions and rhetoric by political leaders in Republika Srpska (RS). Recent events, including the repeat early election for President of RS – and subsequent complaints of irregularities such as voters casting ballots without valid ID, alleged signature forgery, and manipulation – underscore the ongoing need to strengthen the accuracy and transparency of the voter register and procedures for election dispute resolution.

Divisive rhetoric, hate speech, misuse of administrative resources, pressure put on civil servants, endemic corruption and clientelism, combined with a certain political apathy in society and a widespread lack of trust in politicians, were among the issues of concern raised by the PACE pre-electoral delegation's interlocutors. The campaign environment was also affected by the recent death of Ratko Mladic and the public and political reactions that followed.

The delegation welcomed the diversity and vibrancy of Bosnia and Herzegovina's civil society. It recognises the important work of the organisation Pod Lupom, which plans to deploy significant numbers of long- and short-term observers and provide independent oversight throughout the electoral period.

3. The pre-electoral delegation comprised Jone Blikra (Norway, SOC), Head of Delegation, Ricardo Carvalho (Portugal, EPP/CD), Elisabetta Gardini (Italy, ECPA), Lucia Plaváková (Slovak Republic, ALDE), as well as Pablo Hispán (Spain, EPP/CD) and Oana Murariu (Romania, ALDE), co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee (ex officio).

The media environment remains central to the democratic process, yet stakeholders continue to express concerns about self-censorship, financial constraints – especially those impacting the public broadcaster – and recent legislative initiatives affecting media freedom, which include re-criminalisation of defamation in Republika Srpska and restrictions on non-profit organisations. The delegation calls on authorities to ensure that journalists can perform their duties free from intimidation, threats, or legal harassment, and to promote balanced and diverse coverage for all electoral contestants.

Campaign integrity and financing are also issues of concern. Although new tools have been introduced for financial reporting and oversight, persistent challenges remain regarding transparency and enforcement. The CEC's capacity to audit campaign finance is constrained by insufficient staff and resources.

The delegation urges the authorities to ensure equal access to the electoral process for all citizens, including minorities, women, youth, and internally displaced persons. Women remain under-represented in political office, despite a 40% mandatory quota for candidate lists and progressive placement requirements. Effective enforcement and additional measures are needed to ensure genuine gender equality in elected bodies and campaign activities.

In the short time before election day, the PACE delegation urges the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to intensify their efforts to ensure a level playing field for all electoral contestants. It encourages civil society organisations to continue playing their vital role in monitoring, reporting on, and promoting democratic standards. By implementing reforms, addressing remaining core challenges, and fostering constructive dialogue, Bosnia and Herzegovina has an opportunity to strengthen democratic values and promote public trust in its institutions.

In conclusion, the PACE pre-election delegation reiterates its call for inclusive, transparent, and trusted general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The legitimacy of electoral outcomes will depend on the full engagement of all stakeholders, voter participation, an open and impartial electoral administration, the effective resolution of complaints and disputes, the protection of media freedom and respect for the fundamental principles of democratic fairness and respect for human rights. The delegation strongly encourages both domestic and international partners to observe all stages of the electoral process.

During its visits to Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the pre-electoral delegation met with leaders and representatives of parliamentary groups of the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, members of the Collegia of the House of Peoples and the House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Acting High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the President and members of the Central Election Commission, the Head and Deputy Head of the ODIHR EOM, members of the diplomatic corps in Sarajevo, as well as representatives of the media and civil society.

PACE will deploy a fully-fledged election observation mission to observe the scrutiny of 4 October 2026 alongside the ODIHR, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the European Parliament and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Appendix 4 – Programme of the meetings of the PACE Electoral Observation Mission

Friday, 2 October 2026

8:15-9:15 PACE Delegation Briefing

9:30-10:00 Opening by the Heads of the Parliamentary Delegations:
- Mr Luis Graça, Special Co-ordinator
- Mr Jone Blikra, Head of PACE Delegation
- Ms Allessia Claes, Head of OSCE PA Delegation
- Mr Davor Ivo Stier, Head of EP Delegation
- Mr Sverre Myrli, Head of NATO PA Delegation

10:00-10:30 Welcoming remarks by international community representatives:
- Mr Rick Holtzapple, Ambassador, Head of the OSCE Mission to BiH
- Mr Louis J. Crishock, Acting High Representative
- Mr Luigi Soreca, Ambassador, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to BiH
- Ms Bojana Urumova, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Sarajevo

11:00-13:15 Briefing by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission:
- Welcome and overview of the EOM's work – Ms Tana de Zulueta, Head of Mission
- Legal Framework, Electoral dispute resolutions – Ms Svetlana Chetaikina, Legal Analyst
- Election Administration – Ms Marcela Mašková, Election Analyst
- Election Technologies – Mr Vladimir Misev, Information and Communication Technologies Analyst
- Political overview, the Contestants and the Election Campaign – Mr Dimash Alzhanov, Political Analyst
- Social Media and Online Campaign – Ms Madalina Voinea, Political Analyst
- Media – Mr Ivan Godársky, Media Analyst
- Briefing by Long Term Observers deployed in Sarajevo – Mr Junie Joseph and Mr Ib Kok Hansen (LTO1), Mr Christian Konrad and Ms Patricia Cavanagh (LTO2)

15:00-16:30 Elections and Socio-Political Context:
- Ms Ivana Korajlić, Executive Director, Transparency International Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Mr Dario Jovanović, Project Manager, Pod Lupom
- Mr Darko Brkan, Executive Director, Zašto ne/Istinomjer
- Ms Ena Strika, Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar (SOC)

17:00-19:00 Candidates/Parties contesting the elections:
- Ms Mia Karamehić-Abazović, Naša stranka (NS)
- Mr Boris Luketa, President of the SDS Youth Wing and Member of the SDS Presidency
- Mr Nebojša Vukanović, President, Za pravdu i red (ZPR),
- Mr Nenad Grković, Member of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Saturday, 3 October 2026

9:00-10:30 Campaign and Election Coverage Panel:
- Ms Marija Ćosić, Deputy Editor, Raskrinkavanje
- Mr Željko Tica, Editor-in-Chief of TV Programme, RTVFBiH
- Mr Denis Džidić, Executive Director and Editor, BIRN BiH
- Ms Mirna Stanković-Luković, Journalist, Portal Raport
- Ms Borka Rudić, Secretary General, Association of Journalists
- Ms Leila Bičakčić, Director, Centre for Investigative Reporting

– Ms Maida Bahto Kestendžić, Project Co-ordinator, Press and Online Media Council
– Ms Tina Jelin Dizdar, Journalist and Reporter, N1 Bosnia and Herzegovina.

11:00-12:30 Election Administration and Legislation:
– Ms Irena Hadžiabdić and Ms Vanja Bjelica-Prutina, Members of the Central Election Commission
– Mr Almir Badnjević, Agency for Identification Documents, Registers and Data Exchange
– Ms Amela Odobašić, Assistant Director, Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA)

12:30-13:30 ODIHR EOM Briefing continuation:
– Election Day procedures, Marcela Mašková, Election Analyst
– STO Reporting, Max Bader, Statistical Analyst
– Security, Peter Marron, Security Expert

13:30-14:45 Meeting with E-Day drivers and linguistic facilitators

Sunday, 4 October 2026

7:00-19:00 Election Day – Observation in polling stations

Monday, 5 October 2026

8:00-9:00 Internal meeting of the PACE delegation (debriefing)

15:00 Press conference

Appendix 5 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission

Genuine competition in Bosnia and Herzegovina's elections in fragmented political environment and with difficulties in electoral administration, international observers say

There was genuine competition in Bosnia and Herzegovina's 4 October general elections and contestants were largely able to reach voters. The political landscape is deeply fragmented, characterised by conflicting narratives still rooted in wartime divisions, the international election observers said in a statement of preliminary findings and conclusions today. The first-time countrywide use of information and communication technologies (ICT) was introduced to address longstanding electoral integrity concerns, although delays and shortfalls limited transparency in the implementation stage, the statement says.

The election administration made considerable efforts, but persistent institutional and operational constraints, combined with its increased responsibilities, affected the efficiency and timeliness of its work, the observers said. Suffrage rights continue to be subject to discriminatory restrictions based on ethnicity and residence. Some broad legal provisions unduly restricted political discourse in the pre-election period.

"Yesterday marked an important milestone for elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with new voting technologies used country-wide for the first time. This achievement was made possible in part thanks to the sustained efforts of the Central Election Commission, and to all those who participated in and contributed to this process," said Luis Graça, Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the OSCE short-term observer mission. "We encourage the newly elected leadership and legislators to build on this progress, advance further electoral reforms, and continue strengthening democratic institutions and processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

"We saw a clear commitment of election officials to administering the vote in a safe and transparent manner." said Sverre Myrli, Head of the NATO PA observer delegation. "More than three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains important for the security of the entire Western Balkans and the wider Euro-Atlantic area. Strong democratic institutions, respect for the rule of law, and political dialogue are fundamental elements of that stability, which we will continue to support jointly with the rest of the international community."

The election-related laws and regulations overall provide an adequate basis for holding democratic elections and recent amendments strengthened safeguards. Still, important ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations remain unaddressed, including on ethnicity- and residency-based restrictions on suffrage rights, misuse of public resources, election dispute resolution, campaign finance oversight and dissuasive sanctions.

The technical preparations were marked by significant challenges, including notable delays in the receipt of the ICT devices, difficulties in forming polling station committees and recruiting technical operators, as well as late and insufficient training of election commissioners and voter education on the new voting methods and the new ballot.

The 2024 legal amendments provide for countrywide use of electoral ICT. The ICT introduction was made in response to previous concerns of voter impersonation and fraudulent counting. The law lacks sufficient provisions for effective implementation, and the deployment of ICT devices was carried out hastily, with limited time for testing, voter education, and training of election officials.

"Election day unfolded in a generally calm and peaceful atmosphere, both inside polling stations and in their surroundings. Our observers were able to follow the process without impediment and were welcomed by election officials across the country," said Allessia Claes, Head of the OSCE PA observer delegation. "This is encouraging, but our observation also identified shortcomings that should be addressed. We encourage the authorities and all relevant stakeholders to draw on these findings and continue working to strengthen the electoral process ahead of future elections."

Election day proceeded in an orderly manner, but a number of technical difficulties and issues with the complex voting process were observed. Polling officials generally managed the use of the devices adequately, but the process was assessed negatively in a significant number of polling stations observed. Negative observations were mainly attributed to serious shortcomings in ensuring secrecy of the vote and technical issues with the new devices. In one-fifth of the polling stations observed for the count, there were significant procedural omissions, indicating polling officials had a limited understanding of the complex procedures and made attempts to find practical shortcuts. There were only minor discrepancies between the manual and electronic counts in polling stations observed.

Fundamental freedoms were respected, although the broad application of the ban on early campaigning resulted in numerous political actors being sanctioned, affecting political discourse. In the absence of sufficient regulation against the misuse of public resources, entity, cantonal and municipal authorities increased salaries and pensions, and provided social benefits and one-time payments to entice voters, undermining the equality of opportunity for contestants.

“The introduction of new technologies strengthened the integrity of the vote,” said Davor Ivo Stier, Head of the EP observer delegation. “On the country’s EU’s path, further reform of electoral legislation is needed to address the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

“Democracy begins with a simple principle: Every citizen matters and every vote counts,” said Jone Blikra, Head of the PACE observer delegation. “Free and fair elections must guarantee that people can make their choice freely, that all votes are treated equally, and that the will of the voters is respected. These are fundamental values of the Council of Europe.”

In an overall inclusive process, the CEC registered 7,028 candidates, including 2,977 women. Despite uniform compliance with the 40 per cent gender quota for candidate lists, women headed only about 14 per cent of lists for State and entity legislatures and concerns about their nomination as mere placeholders persisted. Recent amendments requiring parties to promote gender equality during campaigning did not result in a tangible increase in the visibility of women candidates in these elections.

Campaign regulations are also applicable online, but institutional frameworks for addressing issues in the online environment are insufficient. ODIHR’s social media monitoring identified a polarized online environment, shaped by anonymous media websites and social network accounts, clickbait networks and AI-generated content, which often included misleading information, divisive and inflammatory rhetoric. The absence of safeguards to protect the online information environment, coupled with the lack of obligations on big tech companies to mitigate risks, leaves voters more vulnerable to manipulative information.

“ODIHR has been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina for six weeks, and in this time we have seen how the divisions in the country are reflected in campaign rhetoric, in the information available to voters both online and in traditional media, and in the election administration. This has continued to impact the level of trust in the election process,” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “The introduction of new technologies could contribute to building this trust, but the process needs to be more transparent, and voters and election officials need to be better prepared.”

Most media monitored by ODIHR failed to adhere to the legal requirement to provide balanced and impartial election coverage. Further, none of the three public broadcasters covered the campaign in news programming, focusing instead on coverage of election preparations and extensive coverage of the respective incumbents in their official capacities. Private media offered substantial but partisan news coverage of the contestants. These factors, combined with moderate participation in debates, limited voters access to balanced information and their ability to make an informed choice.

Although voters and contestants have access to legal remedies, the system of election dispute resolution remains under-resourced, largely ineffective and lacking in transparency. The CEC’s complaint review mechanism was substantially burdened by a large number of complaints, mainly related to alleged early campaigning.