

THE IMPACT OF FLOODS AND LANDSLIDES ON THE 2024 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Natural Hazards and Elections Series

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the impact of extensive flooding and landslides on the conduct of local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2024. It evaluates the response of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in the complex administrative environment of the country, including their preparedness and capacity to manage a potential crisis just two days before polling. The case study provides a brief description of BiH's administrative structure and legal frameworks—to illustrate the multiple jurisdictions and institutions that must be considered in emergencies. It then focuses on EMB responses to flooding impacts: on campaigning; mechanisms of cooperation; special voting arrangements; and documentation gaps among eligible voters. The study concludes with lessons learned and specific considerations for developing a stronger electoral emergency response plan centrally.

While the 2024 local elections were generally regarded as successfully managed—despite the challenges posed by floods and landslides—a thorough analysis reveals several key areas for improvement. The situation highlighted:

- *Weaknesses in interagency collaboration*, particularly a lack of communication between agencies and the BiH Central Election Commission (CEC).
- *The need for a prompt response by all relevant stakeholders*. The EMB had to find innovative solutions to include all voters while adhering to the legislative framework.

- *The importance of adaptability*, as previously seen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Failure to adapt can lead to lower turnout or the derailment of the election schedule, which may compromise electoral integrity. Adaptability is served by:
 - *Anticipating emergencies in the legal and operational framework.* As yet, the floods and landslides have not led to significant reforms in the legislative framework or operational regulations. Incorporating provisions in the Election Law for postponing elections in emergencies, and amending procurement procedures, would allow for greater flexibility in crisis response.
 - *Building EMB capacity for emergencies.* The BiH CEC—currently understaffed and lacking sufficient crisis management capacity—should prioritize building its ability to respond to emergencies. Tools like the Electoral Risk Management Tool (ERMTTool), specialized software designed for practitioners with immediate responsibility, can assist with this (Alihodžić 2020)—as can horizon scanning to identify emerging risks and better plan for future crises.
 - *Human resources and institutional cooperation* are key to deploying such tools. Investing in capacity-building initiatives, such as the CEC’s Centre for Education, could enhance the resilience of the electoral process in several dimensions—from hazard preparedness to fostering greater public confidence and participation.

The materials used for the preparation of this case study include information from the CEC and other competent agencies, including the Civil Protection Service of the Federation of BiH. Much of this is publicly available (e.g. on the websites of the BiH CEC, international organizations and news media). Additionally, an interview was conducted with a senior BiH election officer on 13 February 2025 (who remains anonymous), with the guiding questions available in Annex A.

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INTRODUCTION

BiH has experienced several large-scale floods over the last two decades, including two catastrophic floods in 2010 and 2014. Extreme weather events have become more frequent, causing loss of life, human displacement and damage to property and infrastructure (BiH and UNDP 2021). The trend seen in BiH aligns with the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, whose Sixth Assessment Report (IPCC 2022) predicts that damage and losses from coastal and river floods will substantially increase in Europe this century.

The 2014 floods had some impact on the electoral process, including campaigning (OSCE/ODIHR 2015). As in 2010, they occurred in May and December and were caused by unusually high precipitation. According to the BiH Federation Hydro-Meteorological Institute, rainfall exceeded previous records with over 420 mm recorded in the north of the country. Until October 2024, however, no extreme weather event had coincided with election day

itself. This paper will focus on the most recent floods in BiH, which occurred in October 2024—just two days before the local elections. Therefore, this was the first time in the recent history of BiH that EMBs' natural hazard preparedness, response and coordination mechanisms were tested at all levels.

This case study will first describe the legal and institutional background, not least because BiH's constitutional setup is complex and decentralized. Subsequently, the case study will delve into actions and steps taken by the BiH CEC to address new challenges and to make the elections accessible to all citizens. It then concludes with the main findings, lessons learned and actions that could increase capacity and resilience to confront future electoral emergencies.

1. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Constitution of BiH states that it consists of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The Constitution also prescribes that Brčko District of BiH exists 'under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and falling under the responsibilities of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which territory is jointly owned by the Entities, shall be a local self-government unit with its institutions, laws, and regulations' (BiH 1995: article VI.4).

While electoral responsibilities are divided between the state and entity-level institutions, there is a state-level election law. The Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH 2024) was first adopted in 2001 and has seen numerous amendments aimed at technical improvement of the electoral process. In March 2024, 43 days before the CEC announced the elections, amendments to the BiH Election Law were introduced by the Office of the High Representative in BiH (OHR 2024) in an attempt to increase the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. The OHR is an ad hoc international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of the civilian aspects of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (OHR n.d.).

The EMBs in BiH include the following election commissions and polling station committees: the BiH CEC; municipal and city election commissions;¹ the Election Commission of Brčko District of BiH; and polling station committees, appointed for each election. There are in total 143 election commissions. The CEC is appointed by the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, while the municipal/city election commissions are appointed by the municipal/city assemblies/councils, subject to the CEC's approval.

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¹ According to the [Law on Principles of Local Self-Governance in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), a city is defined as a unit of local self-government established based on an agreement on association of two or more municipalities, each having at least 30,000 citizens, namely in whose city centre as an urban area live at least 10,000 citizens. A municipality is a unit of local self-government that is established by the law upon meeting the prescribed criteria.

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Elections are held every four years, with a two-year gap between general and local elections, which are held separately. Local elections are held for the following institutions: municipal councils in the Federation of BiH; municipal assemblies in the Republika Srpska; municipal mayors in BiH; city councils in the Federation of BiH; city assemblies in the Republika Srpska; city mayors in BiH; and the Assembly of Brčko District of BiH.

There were a total of 26,089 candidates on the ballots for the 2024 local elections, representing 110 political parties, 58 coalitions, 78 independent candidates, 43 independent candidates from national minorities, and 9 lists of independent candidates (BiH CEC 2024a). A total of 3,402,246 voters were registered to vote. Registration in BiH is passive, meaning that all citizens who are 18 years of age and obtain an identification (ID) card are automatically recorded in the Central Voters' Register. Depending on their residence, the voters received two ballots and could cast them at 5,817 polling stations² established in the country. Polling stations are organized for categories of voters as follows:

- *Regular voters*—who vote at regular polling stations unless bedridden or living in institutional settings—in which case they have the right to vote by mail.
- *Those voting in absentia*—people with displaced person status whose current permanent or temporary residence differs from the constituency for which they vote.
- *In-person voters*—who have displaced person status and who have registered to vote in person in their municipality of permanent residence from 1991, as well as the BiH citizens who have refugee status (if not registered to vote outside BiH).
- *Out-of-country voters*—refugees and persons temporarily residing outside BiH, who vote either by mail or at BiH's diplomatic and consular offices (having applied and registered to do so).

Voters elect their representatives through two election systems: for municipal/city mayors and representatives of national minorities a majority system is used, while proportional representation operates for electing municipal/city council/assemblies and the Assembly of Brčko District of BiH.

Postponing elections

The electoral process—including the deadlines for the conduct of elections and publishing the confirmed results—is prescribed in detail by the BiH Election Law and regulations passed by BiH CEC. Article 14.2 of the BiH Election Law sets forth that a decision to postpone elections at a particular polling station or a constituency is issued by the BiH CEC based on the facts indicating that the election cannot be conducted in line with the law. Paragraph 4 of this article

² Including mobile teams, polling stations for voting in absentia, in person, and by tendered-enveloped ballots.

reads that the postponed elections are to be conducted within 7 days, and no later than 30 days, from the day designated for voting in the regular elections (BiH 2024). This is the only mechanism in place to ensure that voters affected by any incident can exercise their right to vote.

The 2020 local elections, scheduled for 4 October 2020, were postponed due to a delay in providing the funds necessary for their conduct (AP 2020). This came about as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a profound impact on all aspects of society in BiH throughout 2020. While the election administration modified regulations such that individuals diagnosed with Covid-19 or in isolation due to the virus had the right to cast their vote on election day, concerns were raised about the fact that some citizens were unable to exercise this right—largely due to poor organization and a lack of coordination between relevant institutions (Pod lupom 2021).

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2. NATURAL HAZARDS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines a hazard as ‘a process, phenomenon, or human activity that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, social and economic disruption, or environmental degradation’ (UNDRR n.d.a). It further notes that ‘natural hazards’ are predominantly associated with natural processes, where hydrometeorological factors may play a significant role. It also argues that a hazard becomes a ‘disaster’ only when it impacts a society or a community lacking adequate protection mechanisms, including financial resources, coordination, and warning systems (UNDRR n.d.b). On this account, hazards may sometimes be natural but disasters are not.

BiH has always been susceptible to disasters due to being very rich in river systems, but also very reliant on its hydro potential. This reliance on water exploitation can contribute to flooding and landslides, as seen in October 2024. The first ‘major’ flood happened in November 1925. Several measurement stations recorded maximum water levels (rivers Una, Vrbas, Sava and Neretva). The next ‘major’ flood occurred in April 1932, primarily affecting areas along the River Sava. In November 1934, the River Neretva again reached unprecedented water levels. All these floods caused devastation and loss of life. During the period 1965–1976, abundant rainfall caused high water levels of rivers and their tributaries, with catastrophic floods occurring on average every two years (Duranović 2020).

More recently the United Nations Development Programme notes that, according to the World Risk Report from 2017, BiH is ranked among those with high exposure to natural hazards. Specifically, out of 145 local government units, 91 have a significant risk of floods and landslides, while 27 have a high risk (UNDP n.d.). Most of the territory experienced a slight increase in annual precipitation in the period 1961–2016, with no significant changes in extreme precipitation indices from 1991 to 2016 (BiH and UNDP 2021). However,

according to the same report (under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), BiH can expect a temperature rise ranging between 1°C and 6°C, depending on climate scenarios, and with that, seasonal extreme weather events (high temperatures and heavy rainfall). Climate change—or, our current 1.1°C warmer world—has already affected Europe via extreme events during the spring and autumn. BiH is no exception, with events so far this century including flooding (in 2004, 2010, 2014 and 2024) and drought (2012).

Landslides were also triggered, dislocating previously marked mine fields.

Flood-affected elections in 2014

In the third week of May 2014, heavy rains fell across the country, resulting in massive flooding in the northern, eastern and central regions near the borders with Croatia and Serbia. A low-pressure system, referred to as 'Yvette' or 'Tamara', affected a vast area of Southeastern and Central Europe, bringing floods and landslides. Some areas in BiH received more than 250 mm (and in some cases up to 300 mm) of rain per square metre, marking the highest rainfall recorded in the country for 120 years. This caused severe and sudden flooding in several major rivers including the Bosna, Drina, Una, Sava, Sana and Vrbas, along with their tributaries. Landslides were also triggered, dislocating previously marked mine fields. BiH has the highest density of land mine contamination in the world. During the wars of the 1990s landmines were laid in strategic areas of the country, for example along border areas and riverbanks. Between 1,300 and 1,800 km² are thought to still be contaminated with landmines and unexploded munitions, across over 13,000 different locations. There are 25,000 warning signs of landmines across the country (Davies 2014).

Urban, industrial and rural areas were submerged, leaving them cut off from electricity and communication, significantly damaging roads and transportation infrastructure. As a result, numerous homes were destroyed or left underwater, displacing many households, and 23 people lost their lives (Dnevnik.hr 2014). The 2014 floods were estimated to have caused damage and losses equivalent to 9.3 per cent of Global domestic product (GDP) (EUR 1.27 billion) and 5.6 per cent of GDP (EUR 763.4 million) respectively, a total of nearly 15 per cent GDP that year. The hardest hit economic sectors were agriculture, transport and manufacturing (BiH et al. 2014).

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The 2014 floods impacted electoral campaigning, meaning that campaign activities were notably less visible in flood-affected areas. Some political parties (such as the Social Democratic Party of BiH) decided to forego campaign billboards and posters to give financial assistance to flood victims (OSCE/ODIHR 2015). It is worth noting that the BiH CEC was one of the first EMBs globally to pilot the Electoral Risk Management Tool. Developed by International IDEA and first tested in 2012 for pilot projects and analysis of elections, BiH CEC then used it for the 2014 elections to monitor the effects of the floods, monitor the election results process, analyse invalid ballots, and sanction members of the polling station committees for any irregularities in their work. The analysis showed that 183 polling station locations were submerged at the time of flooding, with some municipalities experiencing destruction of infrastructure, premises and equipment, including ballot

boxes. This disaster led to the internal displacement of around 25,353 voters (Hadžiabdić 2015).

3. FLOODS AND THE 2024 LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Ministry of Security, acting as a coordination mechanism in protection and rescue efforts, had prepared a natural hazards risk assessment in 2012 and updated it in 2017 and 2020 (Ministry of Security 2020). According to the assessment, the total surface of BiH exposed to a high risk of floods (category 4) is 97,391 hectares, with some 284,000 citizens living in these high-risk areas. However, due to the complex administrative setup of BiH, lower administrative units each have their plans and competent bodies, which in turn also organize their operations centres (in the case of the Federation of BiH (FBiH), the FBiH Civil Protection Administration's Operations Centre coordinates with the entity level). Further, each level of authority has its coordination mechanism prescribed by either a plan or a regulation. At the federation level, the relevant coordination system in place is the FBiH Operation Flood Defence Plan (part of the Protection and Rescue Operation Plan). This involves various stakeholders (FBiH Hydro-Meteorological Institute, Agency of Watershed of the Adriatic Sea, FBiH Civil Protection Administration and BiH Ministry of Security).

In October 2024, severe rainstorms resulted in catastrophic floods and landslides across central and southern Bosnia, causing 27 fatalities and extensive property damage. Jablanica municipality was particularly affected, with landslides burying an entire settlement under debris, including rocks from a quarry (Emric 2024). Human activities (like quarrying and hydroelectric power) and natural factors (such as water saturation and steep slopes) resulted in a dangerous combination of natural and human-made hazards, leading to landslides. The Civil Protection Administration estimated that total damages amounted to some EUR 158 million. This figure includes damage to railway and road infrastructure.

On 5 October, the FBiH Government declared a state of natural disaster for the FBiH. Additionally, on 7 October, the government decided to designate 8 October 2024 as a day of mourning after the loss of 27 lives. The fact that this day of mourning was not extended to all of BiH highlights the country's complex political environment.

Chronology and decision to postpone

On 8 May 2024, the BiH CEC announced local elections on 6 October. According to the Election Law, elections are held on the first Sunday in October—unless the date conflicts with the observance of a religious holiday of one of the constituent peoples of BiH, in which case it is rescheduled for the nearest Sunday without such a conflict. On 2 October, only four days before polling, the FBiH Hydro-Meteorological Institute issued an orange weather

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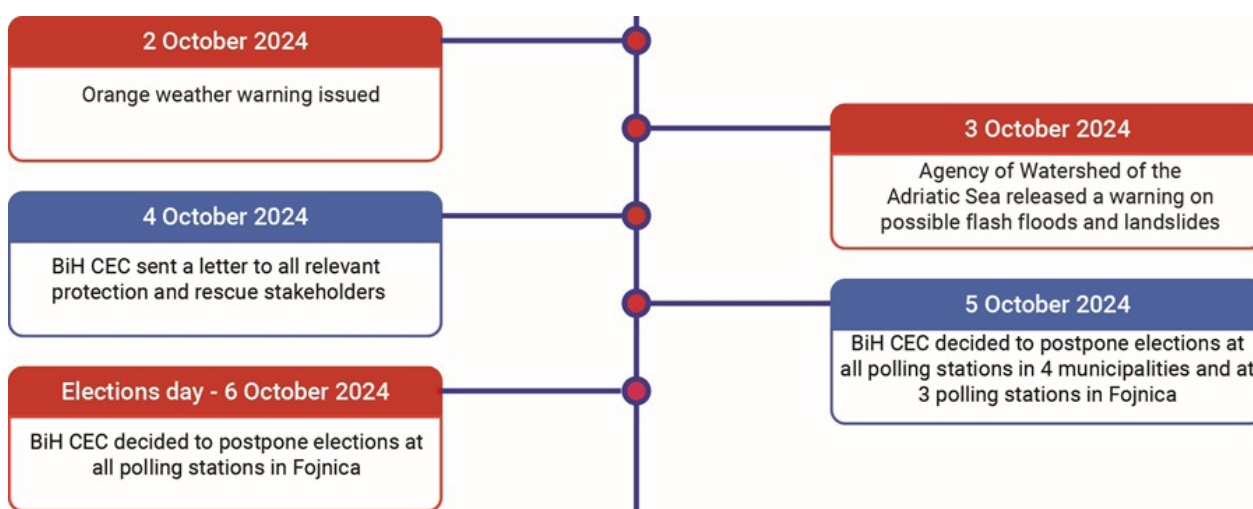
warning for 3 October for Herzegovina and west, south-west and parts of central Bosnia. Expected precipitation was 30 to 60 l/m², locally even 80 l/m².

Under the colour-coded weather risk system, orange is above green and yellow and represents a significant risk, where unusual weather conditions may pose a danger to typical activities, requiring caution. (Red signifies extreme weather risk, characterized by exceptional weather events of intense severity, posing a very high level of danger to the population and necessitating immediate attention and preparedness.) In line with the Protection and Rescue Operation Plan of the FBiH this information was immediately forwarded to the Agency of Watershed of the Adriatic Sea, which subsequently notified all relevant stakeholders and the media of expected flash floods and landslides (N1 Sarajevo 2024).

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The BiH CEC is not part of the protection and rescue coordination mechanism, and therefore it received no formal information or updates about the situation on the ground. Nevertheless, based on the available media information, it wrote to all relevant stakeholders³ on 4 October, requesting to be kept informed of developments to ensure smooth and unhindered conduct of the electoral process (Anon. 2025) (Figure 1). The same day, the FBiH Civil Protection Administration reported that the Civil Protection Unit of the City of Konjic declared a state of natural incident due to heavy rainfall and that the road and communication infrastructure in Konjic and Jablanica municipalities had been interrupted. A major landslide from a quarry above Donja Jablanica had destroyed a great number of houses and there were many casualties and missing persons. Fojnica municipality was also facing casualties.

Figure 1. Timeline of election postponement decisions



Source: Developed by the author, based on information provided by the interviewed election officer (2025).

³ BiH Ministry of Security, Federation Civil Protection Administration, Republika Srpska Civil Protection Administration.

Based on the information received, the BiH CEC contacted all municipal/city election commissions that were at risk or already affected (Bihać, Breza, City of Konjic, City of Mostar, City of Visoko, Drvar, Fojnica, Jablanica, Kiseljak, Kreševo and Prozor-Rama). The main concern was not the ability to conduct polling, but rather the logistics of collecting the election materials afterward (Anon. 2025). There are two rounds of transporting sensitive election materials (such as ballots, stamps and poll books) since ballots cast by mobile teams, tendered ballots and absentee ballots are not counted at the polling stations but at the main counting centre in Sarajevo. It was crucial to have accurate information because election materials are transported from the municipal or city election commissions to the polling stations a day before the elections, and their integrity had to be ensured. In the event of a postponement, the materials would stay with municipal or city election commissions under police protection.

Bihać, Breza, Drvar and Prozor-Rama municipalities and the City of Visoko confirmed that the polling stations could be opened. However, the Kiseljak EMB proposed postponing the elections since most poll workers were trying to save their homes. Jablanica also reported that elections could not be held due to the emergency. The election commission of Konjic reported that there was no power or cell-phone signal in some parts of the municipality, stating that they would send their proposals on 5 October after a meeting of the city's central crisis team. Kreševo proposed postponement of the election, while the election commission in Fojnica reported that they could not access three polling stations (Anon. 2025).

After carefully considering all available information, the BiH CEC postponed the elections at all polling stations in Jablanica, Kiseljak, Konjic and Kreševo, and at three polling stations in Fojnica. However, public pressure concerning the possibility of conducting elections in Fojnica was building, and the BiH CEC requested a new report from the FBiH Civil Protection Administration, which it did not receive. It next (Anon. 2025) consulted the municipal election commission of Fojnica to inquire if conducting the elections was feasible, meanwhile instructing it not to open any polling stations pending a new decision. On the morning of election day, the Fojnica EMB reported that additional polling stations were affected and requested the BiH CEC make an urgent decision. It then did so, postponing elections at all polling stations in Fojnica (BiH CEC 2024c). It is worth noting that the BiH CEC made efforts to collect all relevant information, including from local election commissions that had first-hand knowledge of the unfolding situation. To prevent any dis/misinformation concerning postponement, the central EMB issued regular press releases informing the public of all steps undertaken to protect the safety of voters and the integrity of the electoral process.

The election campaign period in BiH starts 30 days before election day and ends 24 hours before the opening of the polling stations. It is a busy period with political parties putting up billboards, organizing rallies, distributing flyers, doing street actions and participating in TV debates. In the 2024 local elections, the last day of the election campaign was Saturday, 5 October. Most

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political parties that had planned to hold central rallies at the close decided instead to halt their campaigns immediately as an expression of sympathy and support, inviting their members and supporters to donate towards the flood relief fund.

A comparison of voter turnout in 2020 reveals a slight decline: 48.41 per cent in 2024 compared to 50.4 per cent in 2020.

Elections in the rest of the country were held as scheduled, and there were no issues with the transport of election materials. The voter registration process was also not affected since, as mentioned, voter registration for in-country voters in BiH is passive; registration of out-of-country voters is still active but is done online, and the voters' registers for mobile teams were concluded 20 days prior. A comparison of voter turnout in 2020 (when local elections were also held) reveals a slight decline: 48.41 per cent in 2024 compared to 50.4 per cent in 2020. While 1,705,520 voters participated in 2020, the number was 1,637,847 in 2024 ([BiH CEC n.d.](#)). This trend may be attributed to the widespread dissatisfaction with the authorities' response to the catastrophic floods and landslides, but also the fact that people were more concerned about saving their properties and livelihoods than going to the polls. Having in mind the very complex administrative setup of the country, there was a delay in response, which was even evident months after the events ([Radio Slobodna Evropa 2024](#)).

Public perceptions

During the campaign period the BiH CEC regularly informed the public about developments concerning likely postponement of the elections. Some public figures entered the debate such as film director Jasmila Žbanić, who argued that this would be an irresponsible waste of resources (an additional EUR 10 million) ([Dveni Avaz 2024](#)). The figure Žbanić quoted had been previously reported by the central EMB at a press conference on 4 October 2024 ([BiH CEC 2024b](#)). Her argument—in line with much of public opinion—was that the elections should have been postponed nationwide as a gesture of solidarity with those affected by the floods; however, she went further in arguing that funds for repeating the election could instead be used to help relief efforts.

An opinion poll of persons over 15 years of age by Klix.ba on 4 October ([Klix 2024](#)) showed that 74 per cent of respondents strongly supported electoral postponement ('yes, absolutely') while 26 per cent were against. According to unpublished research conducted by the marketing agency DirectMedia, Klix.ba was the most viewed news portal in the country at this time (Table 1). Also lending weight to the finding, Klix.ba became a trusted platform for real-time data during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in a highly divided society ([BBC News 2024](#)) it is nonetheless visited by users in both entities of BiH (and in Brčko District of BiH).

A total of BAM 11.5 million Convertible Marks (around EUR 5.8 million) was originally approved for the conduct of the 2024 local elections by the BiH CEC, although EUR 17 million was requested ([Parliamentary Assembly 2023](#)). The basic budget request was EUR 5.8 million with an annex to the budget request for EUR 5.5 million for the introduction of new technologies. An additional EUR 3.3 million was to be paid by the cities and the municipalities in line with

article 1.2a of the BiH Election Law. Only 55.58 per cent of the budget was executed, and at the time of writing the BiH CEC has not released figures for the amount spent.

Table 1. Most visited news websites in BiH, December 2024

Website	Reach-census	Reach-Internet	Visitors (real users)	Page views
Klix.ba	21%	53%	729,582	73,246,173
Olx.ba	16%	42%	573,016	6,645,910
Radiosarajevo.ba	13%	33%	449,475	7,826,511
Srpskainfo.com	11%	28%	391,034	7,093,623
Nezavisne.com	11%	28%	390,431	16,641,666
oslobodjenje.ba	10%	25%	348,292	5,610,077
Raporta.ba	9%	24%	334,143	5,077,223
bljesak.info	9%	24%	325,520	6,869,924
n1info.ba	9%	23%	323,940	3,659,305
slobodna-bosna.ba	9%	23%	311,369	10,320,114
sportsport.ba	8%	21%	296,042	10,820,736
fokus.ba	8%	21%	287,512	1,706,768
hercegovina.info	7%	19%	259,013	2,780,077
tuzlanski.ba	7%	18%	254,334	2,047,585
faktor.ba	7%	18%	243,957	2,321,557

Source: DirectMedia Agency, Media market overview Bosnia and Herzegovina, presented at a workshop organized by the Directorate for European Integration, Sarajevo, 13 and 14 March 2025 (unpublished).

4. RESCHEDULED ELECTIONS

In line with the BiH Election Law, Jablanica, Fojnica, Kiseljak, Konjic and Kreševo were to conduct their postponed elections preferably within 7 days, and no later than 30 days from the election day.

In the days to come the BiH CEC regularly communicated with the affected municipalities to determine the date for rescheduled elections. Four out of the five reported that elections could be held—the central EMB decided to hold elections in Fojnica, Kiseljak, Konjic and Kreševo on 20 October 2024. The

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disaster in Jablanica being far more severe, its elections were rescheduled for 3 November 2024, was the latest date compatible with the law (Anon. 2025).

Election material stored at the local EMBs had survived the floods and landslides. Since polling operations in Fojnica had not been postponed until the course of election day itself, some polling stations had opened and started counting received materials, as per normal procedures. The votes in this municipality were not cast and the public was informed about postponement of the elections (N1 BiH 2024). Voters were informed that the new date would be timely communicated, along with the necessary information. Since the boxes with ballots were already opened at some polling stations, but not used, the BiH CEC decided to change the stamp used for ballots in Fojnica, making a new one that read 'postponed elections'.

In terms of additional costs that might have been incurred due to the floods and landslides, the interviewed officer stated that these were negligible. Budget items included the preparation of the new stamp for polling stations in Jablanica and covering the costs of EMB staff who monitored postponed elections in the five municipalities/cities (Anon. 2025).

Voter ID and special voting arrangements

Two new instructions were issued for all the five affected constituencies. First, since some of the voters had lost their valid forms of ID in the floods (ID cards, passports and driving licences), an alternative option was introduced. A voter who came to an office of the Ministry of Interior and reported their ID documents had been destroyed would be issued a form 'LK-01-4' (with a photograph) that could be used at the polling station. Local EMBs were required to report to the BiH CEC the exact number of such voters and their respective polling stations.

The mobile teams were accompanied by search and rescue teams from the Civil Protection Services, who used their vehicles to reach voters.

In Konjic, six additional mobile teams were established—supplementing the existing two—for voters who, despite not wishing to evacuate, could not reach polling stations due to being cut off from road infrastructure. The mobile teams were accompanied by search and rescue teams from the Civil Protection Services, who used their vehicles to reach voters. Three polling stations in Konjic were relocated, and voters were informed of the new locations. The new mobile teams used the contingency ballots from the relocated polling stations. Additionally, the BiH CEC deployed staff to polling stations in all five affected municipalities on election days (20 October and 3 November) to ensure smooth operations and provide assistance. The situation in Jablanica was far more challenging in terms of ensuring the conditions necessary for safe elections. Only one polling station in Jablanica was relocated, and voters were informed of the new location.

Registration, turnout and results

The rulebooks and instructions used for the original election date were also applied to the postponed elections. No new Central Voters' Register was prepared, meaning that the register used was that concluded on 5 October, except for the excerpts from the Central Voters' Register for voters voting by

mobile teams. The BiH CEC passed a new decision on determining excerpts from the Central Voters' Register for these voters to include all voters who were to vote at a polling station, but now due to infrastructural damage to the roads and inaccessibility would have to vote by newly established mobile teams.

The postponed elections were conducted without any incidents, in a calm but sombre atmosphere due to the scale of destruction and loss of life. All the international observation missions present in BiH on 6 October (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), Association of World Election Bodies, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities) left the country before postponed elections were held. However, the elections on 20 October and 3 November were observed by other international organizations present in BiH, including the European Union Delegation, the Office of the High Representative, foreign embassies, and domestic non-governmental organizations. One of the largest domestic observation missions organized by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections 'Pod lupom' concluded that the postponement had allowed flood-affected citizens to exercise their right to vote and in safe conditions (Pod lupom 2024). In its final report, the OSCE/ODIHR mission reported on the events that led to the postponement of elections, also mentioning the steps the central EMB took to ensure safe and credible elections (OSCE/ODIHR 2025). No special recommendations were issued.

According to the BiH Election Law, election results must be confirmed within 30 days following election day. This obligation was largely met: results were confirmed on 5 November, exceptions being the four localities voting on 20 October—Jablanica, Kiseljak, Konjic and Kreševo—as well as Čapljina, the City of Mostar, Foča, Gacko and Prozor-Rama. The reason more municipalities and cities had unconfirmed results is that except for Fojnica, which voted later, mobile and tendered votes from areas where elections were postponed had not yet been counted. Mobile and tendered ballots, as well as postal votes, are counted at the main counting centre in Sarajevo, and the process involves a series of verifications prior to the counting. Tendered ballots are used by voters whose current permanent or temporary residence differs from the constituency for which they vote. So a person in Jablanica could vote for Prozor-Rama or Mostar if internally displaced or, for example, residing in a nursing home. This means that the results for these two municipalities could not be published until all the voters had cast their ballot. However, all results for every level of authority were confirmed on 16 November 2024.

There was a slight decrease in voter turnout across all municipalities and cities compared with 2020's local elections, including in areas where electoral postponement took place (Table 2). In some, such as Konjic, there was a slight decrease in the number of registered voters, affecting the final turnout. It should be noted that nor was 2020 a 'normal' local election year, taking place during a very different kind of natural hazard—the Covid-19 pandemic. So instructive comparisons may be difficult to draw.

One of the largest domestic observation missions organized by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections 'Pod lupom' concluded that the postponement had allowed flood-affected citizens to exercise their right to vote and in safe conditions.

Table 2. Voter turnout in 2020 and 2024, selected constituencies (those with postponement)

Municipality/city	2020 local elections			2024 local elections		
	Registered in CVR*	Voted	Percentage	Registered in CVR	Voted	Percentage
Fojnica	10.581	5.793	54,7%	10.561	5.449	51,5%
Kiseljak	17.689	9.371	53%	17.940	8.365	46,6%
Jablanica	8.970	5.977	66,6%	8.827	5.853	66,3%
Konjic	22.280	12.697	56,9%	21.965	12.093	55%

Note: CVR is the Central Voters' Register.

Source: Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Izborni pokazatelj, 2020 godina [Election indicator 2020], 2021, <https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/2020/Zbirna_Statistika_2020.pdf>, accessed 23 April 2025; Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Izborni pokazatelj, 2024 godina [Election indicator 2025], 2024, <https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/2024/zbirna_statistika_2024.pdf>, accessed 23 April 2025.

5. CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

While the 2024 local elections were generally regarded as successfully managed—despite the challenges posed by floods and landslides—a thorough analysis reveals several key areas for improvement.

It is symptomatic that no agency reached out to the BiH CEC to coordinate an electoral emergency response.

First of all, the situation exposed weaknesses in interagency collaboration. It is symptomatic that no agency reached out to the BiH CEC to coordinate an electoral emergency response. Secondly, the crisis demonstrated that emergencies and crises call for a prompt response by all relevant stakeholders. In this case, the central EMB had to find innovative ways to include all voters, while observing the legislative framework. Thirdly, adaptability is important, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, and can make the difference between success and failure. Resilience can be strengthened by introducing special voting arrangements—as in this case—or allocating additional human and financial resources, for example (Alihodžić 2023). But if an EMB fails to adapt, this can lead to lower turnout or the derailing of the election schedule which, at scale, may undermine the integrity of elections.

As discussed in International IDEA research on electoral integrity and the Covid-19 pandemic (James, Clark and Asplund 2023), countries were in a weak position to respond if they had poorly designed electoral laws and codes, under-investment in elections, or fewer voting channels available to citizens. The floods and landslides of 2024 have yet to lead to any major reforms concerning the legislative framework or operational regulations in BiH.

Several steps could be taken at the legislative and technical/operational levels. The BiH authorities might consider adding a provision in the Election Law to include postponement of elections in cases of emergency—because it may not be possible in the future to recover and conduct elections within

the 30-day deadline. Such a reform also entails changing the provision related to the deadline for confirmation of results. This would be of strategic benefit, not least because some local government bodies cannot be established until all votes are counted. The central EMB should request additional contingency funds, a need substantiated by the existing reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022), which states that many changes in the climate system intensify as global warming increases and include more frequent and severe hot extremes, marine heatwaves and heavy rainfall events, as well as, in some regions, greater agricultural and ecological drought. In pursuing the necessary flexibility in crisis response, the BiH authorities should consider amending the public procurement procedures to allow the EMB to procure additional ballots or hire additional staff, as may be necessary and proportionate.

It is also important to build the EMB's capacity to respond to crises and emergencies more widely. The BiH CEC is currently understaffed, lacking the capability to deploy available risk management or foresight tools. Specifically, due to limitations imposed by the EMB's staff establishment plan, the ERMTool, which was piloted in 2012 and 2014, has not been used since. The main reason is an unwillingness on the part of the EMB to recruit. Rather, increasing the number of employees is a lengthy process and ultimately requires approval by the BiH Council of Ministers. Further, this process is often influenced by various political preferences. Even once the staff establishment plan is approved, authorities frequently fail—more often than not—to adopt the budget for BiH's institutions on time, that is, by the end of the year for the following year. This, in turn, halts the recruitment process due to a lack of funds. As an illustration of this situation, it should be noted that the BiH CEC has forwarded its proposed staff employment plan but is awaiting responses.

Together, International IDEA's ERMTool and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's horizon scanning tool could afford BiH's electoral stakeholders excellent strategic foresight. Being able to predict new or emerging risks or threats, including to electoral integrity, would enable the central EMB and local counterparts to better plan human resources, finances and communication. Broad and exploratory or focused on specific project goals, horizon scanning analysis and use of related tools would require an analytic unit to be established and, as mentioned, recruitment of staff. Such a unit would be responsible for feeding in the information and data and preparing the scenarios necessary for adequate planning design. Fortunately, the BiH CEC already has a Centre for Education. While not yet fully operational, the centre would be very well placed to provide training on the use of the ERMTool to all interested parties, and in particular to the lower-tier EMBs. The centre could also provide training on horizon scanning, offering practical exercises or peer-to-peer learning.

While the BiH CEC provided timely information regarding the postponement of local elections in 2024, it is crucial in future to go beyond issuing statements and take a more proactive role in directly addressing citizens' concerns. Social media platforms offer an effective channel for the BiH CEC to engage with the

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Proposed investments must therefore be understood within this dual context of environmental vulnerability and administrative complexity.

public, clarify doubts and offer real-time updates. Leveraging these channels to their full potential ultimately depends on the EMB's human resources—a challenge that cuts across all areas of its operations, from crisis management to voter education. Without sufficient personnel, the CEC struggles to maintain the level of transparency, responsiveness and public engagement required to build trust and participation. These are critical dimensions of electoral resilience and the broader legitimacy of the system.

Importantly, the country remains flood-prone, and the broader governance system is complex and decentralized. These contextual factors heighten the urgency of strengthening institutional capacity and resilience. Proposed investments must therefore be understood within this dual context of environmental vulnerability and administrative complexity. Ensuring that the EMB is equipped to function effectively amid such challenges is essential not only for electoral integrity but also for overall democratic resilience.

ABBREVIATIONS

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEC	Central Election Commission
EMB	Electoral management body
ERMT	Electoral Risk Management Tool
FbiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
GDP	Gross domestic product
ID	Identification
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OHR	Office of the High Representative in BiH
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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ANNEX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ON FLOODS AND THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

Decision-making process

1. What was the time frame for the EMB's decision-making process?
2. What are legislative assumptions for rescheduling the elections?
3. Were good communication mechanisms in place to make an informed decision?

Specific issues

1. Did the floods and landslides affect voter registration and campaigning? If yes, in which ways?
2. Did the EMB undertake some specific measures to ensure the inclusiveness of voters affected by natural disasters?
3. Given the specifics of the administrative setup in Bosnia and Herzegovina, did the EMB have appropriate information on protection and rescue coordination mechanisms at all levels of authority in BiH? If yes, how did it become part of the reporting?

Financing

1. Did the rescheduling of elections cause any additional costs?
2. Were the funds to finance the additional costs available?

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This case study is part of a project on natural hazards and elections, edited by Erik Asplund (International IDEA), Sarah Birch (King's College London) and Ferran Martinez i Coma (Griffith University).

Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: [<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.20>](https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.20)

ISBN: 978-91-7671-930-5 (PDF)



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