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Boekbespreking van: Gender, Equality and Welfare States

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Hans Schmeets and Jeanet Exel, *The 1996 Bosnia-Herzegovina elections: an analysis of the observations*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1997, ISBN 0-7923-4505-3.

It has been said that the elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina on 14 September 1996 were the most complicated in the history of mankind. Six different elections took place on one day in two different Entities (the Federation of Moslems and Croats, and the Republica Srpska) and in the country as a whole (fortunately the even more complicated local elections had to be postponed). The country was deeply divided and destroyed after four years of cruel warfare during which a large part of the 140 opstina's (the municipal areas) were ethnically cleansed. More than 50% of the 3.2 million voters lived either abroad as refugees or elsewhere in the country as displaced persons. The Inter Entity Boundary Line split the country and more than 50 opstina's up along ethnic lines and made the freedom of movement (one of the conditions for free and fair elections as defined in the Dayton-agreement) almost impossible.

Despite these bad conditions the international monitoring operation, as described and analysed in Schmeets and Exels book, was very successful. Never before in the history of elections observation has such an extensive coverage of polling stations on election day been accomplished. More than 900 international observers delivered 4101 reports, covering more than 70% of the 4600 polling stations.

One of the innovative proceedings in this monitoring operation was the spectacular performance of a Statistical Unit, lead by the Dutch authors of this book. Based upon earlier experiences (a.o. the Russian elections), they drafted the questionnaires and wrote a data-entry programme system, which made it possible to process the data assembled by the international observers very quickly. Thanks to this Statistical Unit the Co-ordinator for International Monitoring (CIM) was able to present with authority a well-documented preliminary statement only 48 hours after the elections.

Surprisingly enough, considering the bad conditions, the CIM was able to report, that based on the overall view of the international observers, almost all polling stations throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina had been run extremely well on election day. It was reported that voting had been conducted in a proper way at 97% of polling stations and that the Polling Station Committees had conducted their work in a professional and impartial manner.

An unexpected and spectacular positive result. Unfortunately, due to the fact that most of the observers went home the day after the elections, it was not possible to repeat the same intensive way of reporting during the counting process that took another week. For that reason only 67 of the 142 counting centres were covered. In the 120 reports that were delivered a large number of technical problems were witnessed, but all in all, indications of systematic violations and possible fraud were seldom seen.

In spite of these overwhelmingly positive indications it must be said that this statistical analysis of the Bosnia-Herzegovina elections gives a too rosy picture of the real events during the whole electoral process. This is inevitable because this book

reports on the main task of the Statistical Unit, i.e. to cover the events on election day, whereas it was the task of the CIM to give an assessment of the whole electoral cycle, assisted by 25 long-term observers, deployed for 6 weeks before the elections all over the country. During this pre-election period many serious violations of the criteria for free and fair elections, as formulated in the Dayton Peace Accords and the Copenhagen OSCE-document, took place. Several major irregularities with respect to registration were reported ("election engineering"). Several public manifestations of opposition parties were disturbed. Some of the candidates were intimidated and harassed. There was no real freedom of access to the official, party-run media.

Even the picture of the events on election day itself is too rosy, because the questionnaires (like the action-radius of the short-term observers) were mainly concentrated on what happened in and around the polling stations. Yet one of the main problems during the whole electoral cycle, and also on polling day, was the lack of freedom of movement. One of the crucial elements in the Dayton Peace Accords was the right given to refugees and displaced persons to return to vote in the area where they lived in 1991 before the fighting started. Although a special bus system, protected by the IFOR-troops, was installed, the authorities failed to establish a climate in which these voters could cross the Inter Entity Boundary Line without fear of intimidation.

These were the main reasons why the CIM was unable – despite the positive reports of the observers on election day – to give a statement, so eagerly wanted by the US government, that these elections had been "Free and Fair". Instead he stated "that these elections are at best a first step out of the period of deep and violent conflict towards the aspiration of a democratic future for Bosnia-Herzegovina."

These elections cannot be looked upon as a final, crowning, stage of a process of democratization. On the contrary. They should be considered as an example of how elections can be used as an instrument of crisis management, as a first stage in a long-term, peace-keeping, institution-building process. Independent election monitoring is a crucial element in order to give such a process the necessary credibility. The contribution of the Dutch Statistical Unit, as described in this book, gave this monitoring process an extra professional dimension on election day.

Ed. van Thijn