

## The Bosnia and Herzegovina Central Election Commission Successfully Fights Disinformation and Builds Public Trust Using the IFES Playbook

### Success Story

During the 2022 general election, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) faced a serious communications crisis challenging the credibility of the elections and of the Central Election Commission (CEC), including disinformation, hate speech, and inflamed ethnic tensions. The elections took place amid deep political and social polarization, along with controversy associated with decisions made by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Prior to the election, increased risks of political tension, disinformation and hate speech allowed for the manipulation of public discourse for political gain. The election period, described by the CEC as “the most turbulent so far”, led to disinformation attacks across social media platforms and aimed directly at undermining the trustworthiness of the BiH CEC, often emanating from political figures. However, as a result of the trainings, support and Crisis Communications and Combating Disinformation Playbook provided by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the CEC was ready to meet this challenge by engaging in proactive crisis communication to effectively counter disinformation, and preventing cession of the information space to malign actors.

*“... We had several communication crises during the pre-election campaign, on election day and later in the process, and everything we read in the playbook and had heard during our training turned out to be really useful.”*

Dr. Irena Hadziabdic, BiH Central Election Commission

*“Disinformation has become a global problem and challenge... We were facing many attacks as a CEC, especially on Twitter and LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube... We were however ready to respond to these attacks.”*

Dr. Suad Amautovic, President of the BiH Central Election



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This was accomplished through organizational preparedness and scenario planning, active social media engagement and a robust communications strategy which emphasized the CEC’s institutional values and building trust with voters, all key components of the Playbook framework. The lesson of directly responding to disinformation and crisis communications scenarios was particularly important for the BiH CEC, as prior to adopting the Playbook, many in the organization had believed no direct response to disinformation should be given, and that it would be countered by

other actors. The CEC’s progress in building public trust was confirmed by the OSCE/ODIHR [Election Observation Mission](#), which noted that the CEC “administered the electoral preparations efficiently” and “acted in a collegial manner and informed the public about its activities”.

To meet the challenges of mis/disinformation, hate speech and malign foreign influence that democratic institutions and political processes face, the IFES Regional Europe Office (REO) established a working group for Election Management Bodies (EMBs) on Social Media, Disinformation, and Electoral Integrity. The group, first convened in 2020, brings together EMBs from the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, and Visegrad 4 countries, and allows members to engage in peer exchange, share experiences on common

challenges and good practices, as well as facilitate their relationships with social media companies and research organizations.

Working group members identified the need for EMBs to learn a new set of skills to meet the challenges they face in the digital age, noting that EMBs lacked the knowledge and resources to guide them in responding to the threats presented by the proliferation of social media and disinformation to the electoral process. In response to this identified gap, IFES REO partnered with the Brunswick Group to develop a Crisis Communication and Disinformation Playbook for EMBs, informed by EMB interviews. The Playbook is designed to serve as a living template for EMBs to adapt on an ongoing basis, and emphasizes the importance of preparedness as well as protecting the EMB brand.

Following the 2021 Playbook workshop or the SMEID Working Group, IFES partnered with the BiH CEC to operationalize the Playbook ahead of the 2022 elections to further adapt the resource to local context and needs. IFES conducted a tailored training for 15 members of the CEC ahead of the elections and provided additional assistance through a series of consultations in addition to support from two crisis communications and media specialists who were embedded in the CEC and utilized the Playbook as a framework for increasing the CEC's capacity and public trust.

This equipped the CEC personnel with a reference framework for crisis communications and responding to disinformation challenges and solidified the role of responding to these challenges as part of the CEC's mandate. The Playbook helped the CEC to understand what a communications crisis is and how to respond, allowing them to engage in effective and transparent communication to prevent malign actors from taking control of the dominating narrative. The BiH CEC has also established an increased presence on social media and has taken extensive measures to promote transparency and openness, live streaming all events on YouTube during election day, including the opening of polling stations and meetings with international representatives. Dr. Suad Arnautovic, President of the BiH Central Election Commission, noted that many challenges remain for the CEC, including training staff across departments on how to combat disinformation, how to react to disinformation coming from political parties, and how to effectively deal with hate speech, as well as the need for additional dedicated communications staff. The CEC will continue to utilize the Playbook as a resource for future elections, and guide to prepare for future crisis communications and disinformation challenges.

The BiH CEC will have the opportunity to share this experience with their regional peers at the next iteration of the SMEID WG, anticipated for May 2023 in Prague. This peer exchange will inform Playbook adaptation and implementation for other EMBs as well as aim to inspire and highlight good practices for countering disinformation and building public trust.

This initiative was implemented as part of the USAID-funded [Regional Election Administration and Political Process Strengthening \(REAPPS II\) program](#), and further expanded on by the USAID-funded project Supporting Political Pluralism and Governance Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and implemented with additional support from Meta.

*"A very valuable program because it helped us understand what a communication crisis is, and how to resolve it and address it in the best possible way. It has given us many ideas, directed our thinking into a new direction."*

Dr. Irena Hadziabdic, BiH Central Election Commission



*"I have to emphasize my satisfaction with IFES' cooperation...I heard that the playbook was very helpful"*

Dr. Suad Arnautovic, President of the BiH Central Election Commission