

# THE ODYSSEY FOR DEMOCRACY



EMBRACING THE VISION OF HOPE AND  
CHANGE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

CLARK CURTIS



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# The Odyssey for Democracy

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*Embracing the Vision of Hope and Change  
in Bosnia and Herzegovina*



By Clark Curtis

Edited by Amanda Loeffert



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## SPECIAL THANKS

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To my dear friend Mirsad Hadžikadić and his unwavering commitment to bring about change in his native country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For without, this book would never have been possible.

To my darling wife of 23 years, Yvonne, and her steadfast support of this work. And to our six rescue quadrupeds, who never think dad can do any wrong.

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And to all in Bosnia and Herzegovina who have embraced the message of hope and change and who have had the courage to step forward and voice their commitment to establishing a more just and democratic political system for all.

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## INTRODUCTION

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I met Mirsad Hadžikadić on August 8th, 2006. He was interviewing me for the Director of Communications position with the College of Computing and Informatics at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Mirsad was the Dean of the college at the time, and I was one of the finalists. My interview with him was the sixth and final of the day for me. One of the first things I noticed about him was his dry wit. Sensing my nerves and that I was a bit tired, he asked with a smile on his face if I wanted anything to drink. “Water?” he asked. Then, more slyly, “Or bourbon?” Just the question alone brought about a quick chuckle from me and put me at ease, thinking I like this guy already. Our conversation was smooth, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Over the next two years, I got to know him better. Mirsad was my boss and often seemed intimidating in our professional setting as higher ed was a whole new ballgame for me, but I couldn’t help but see him as a mentor of sorts. From the beginning, his goal was to encourage young people to pursue education and make their mark on the world. As Dean, he was involved in so many projects that benefited the students, the university, and the community. One such project was the Complex Systems Institute, of which he was founder and director. This multi-disciplinary, university-wide research center provided an intellectual home for researchers, bringing together academia, industry, and federal agencies to advance computing simulation, analysis, and modeling. As I watched his career unfold, I saw the unique way he looked at life and how he addressed problem-solving. It was like he never saw challenges as barriers, only opportunities for interesting solutions.

In 2008, Mirsad stepped down as Dean to pursue a master’s degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government. The news was bittersweet; I was saddened that my mentor was leaving but elated that he was pursuing bigger things. Also, I knew he would return to the University as the director of the Complex Systems Institute and his many other roles as a professor, researcher, and teacher. Our paths would cross many times again.

Upon his return to UNC Charlotte, Mirsad was instrumental in developing the Professional Science Master's degree program in Health Informatics and helped lay the groundwork for the Data Science Initiative, the university's top priority at the time. During this period, our friendship strengthened, as it was no longer the boss/employee mentality for me. He was always there to talk about college-related issues and life in general. So, we became good friends and remained so to this day.

After I left the university in the Fall of 2017 to establish my own communications business, I heard the rumor that he might be running for the seat on the Presidential Council reserved for the elected person coming from the Bosniak ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My first response was WOW, but he had never mentioned it to me, so I didn't bring it to him either. I thought perhaps it wasn't for public consumption yet. A few months later, though, he confirmed the rumor: he was running for president. Of course, I congratulated him and asked him jokingly if it was okay to address him as "Mr. President" moving forward. We made plans to meet for lunch before he departed for Bosnia and Herzegovina later in the Spring.

I remember speaking with a former colleague at the university in May, and Mirsad came up in the conversation. It was a Thursday, and my colleague told me that Mirsad was leaving for Sarajevo the following Monday. So much for lunch! I just wanted to speak with him before his departure and wish him well. Via text, he told me he would be spending the weekend with his family and the grandchildren but to give him a call. Then, my journalist's brain took over. I had been a broadcast journalist for many years before I joined the university. As a network correspondent for NBC radio, I was fortunate enough to cover both Oklahoma City Bombing trials, the Columbine High School Shootings, as well as some other notable events. So, the thought of documenting a story of this magnitude from its inception had my writer's brain churning with potential.

Mirsad's campaign hadn't started yet, but I knew a little about Bosnian history. I said to myself, this is an incredible story and must be documented and shared regardless of the outcome. So, I called him that Saturday and briefly interrupted his family time. Only now, it just wasn't about friends catching up before a long absence. No, I had a story to track down. One that needed to be shared with a global audience.

We spoke of his plans, his thoughts about his new journey in life, etc. I ruminated a bit, then sprang my idea on him. I said this story is going to be

incredible, and it needs to be told. I wanted to interview him throughout the campaign and produce an ongoing podcast about it. He did not miss a beat. In the same easy manner as when he joked the first day we met, he told me, “go for it!” And, I said, I want to do a book too. As a renowned researcher in complex systems, he said, “Only if I win as there will be no interest.” I told him, win or lose, there would be a story to be told, and the book should be written. He needed to let me be the non-scientist decision-maker in this case. His reply, again, was, “go for it.”

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## Who is Mirsad Hadžikadić



IT IS SAFE TO say that Mirsad Hadžikadić is a “complex” individual. He is a native of Bosnia and Herzegovina, never forgetting his roots throughout his life’s work, a professor for over 30 years at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, a revered researcher, scholar, and a 2018 candidate to become the Bosniak representative on the Presidential Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He freely admits that he never consciously thought about or considered running until 2017. So why then? Why the sudden decision to run for president? The answer became clear after learning more about his history and experiences.

Mirsad was born on January 21, 1955, to Sulejman and Zejfa, in the city of Banja Luka, in then Yugoslavia in the northwestern part of the country. At the age of one, his father, Sulejman, moved the family to the town of Novi Travnik, seeking new employment. There he worked at the only bank in the small town and later became the Director of a cultural center that included a movie theater and some other facilities. He worked as a financial accountant at a state-owned firm. Shortly after Mirsad entered elementary school, his father took new employment in Banja Luka with the *Oslobodjenje*, a national newspaper, organizing circulation sales and selling cigarettes through a large network of kiosks under the banner of a large media organization. Soon after, the family picked up and moved back to Banja Luka. His mother was hired as an accountant for a large department store.

A decade later, Mirsad vividly remembers experiencing Yugoslavia’s second-largest earthquake. In October 1969, it shook Banja Luka and neighboring cities, registering 6.1 on the Richter scale. The earth’s violent shifting completely destroyed the family’s apartment and left much of the town in rubble. When the ground finally came to rest, 19 people were killed and thousands

injured. Mirsad says one of those fatalities occurred within 50 yards of the rubble and soot that used to be their apartment. He was only 14.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Mirsad and his family received a camping trailer from his father's employer. They parked it in the courtyard of one of the schools closest to where his parents worked and made it their new home. Within a month, Mirsad and his classmates were informed that they were being transported to the city of Crikvenica in neighboring Croatia (also part of Yugoslavia at the time). They were sent there for safety as a result of the damage to their school and the rest of the city. Mirsad recalls these were extremely hard and emotional times. The students were separated from their families for five straight months. When the school year concluded, the students were bussed back to Banja Luka. Mirsad remembers their arrival back in the city. He says there was a huge bus caravan that pulled into the city. All of their parents were lining the streets to welcome their sons and daughters home. "Oh man, was that emotional," he said, as he caught his first glimpse of his parents in over five months.

When it came time for college, Mirsad says people just assumed that he would follow in his older brother's footsteps: enroll at the University of Banja Luka and major in electrical engineering; that is just what people did at the time. But the decision was not that simple. His then-girlfriend had decided to study law at the University of Banja Luka. So, he told her that if she was certain about taking that direction for her career, then he would also enroll and study law to spend more time together. However, as he explains, that decision was not to the liking of his mother. He recalls the morning when he awakened and had yet to start classes. He found a note from his mother next to his bed. "I would really love you to consider electronics." When he spoke with her, he said that he would do it if it meant that much to her. Her response, "yes, you are too good of a student to go to law school." Just a Bosnian connotation by a concerned mother, Mirsad added.

At the urging of his mother, Mirsad changed his major to electrical engineering. Luckily, the last two years of the electrical engineering program included a computer science track that Mirsad found much more interesting to pursue. Though he never developed an extreme passion for computer science, it still became a wonderful choice for him. "I'm really interested in everything, how it all works," he says. He was able to combine the tools of computing and information technology in this drive to "understand everything."

Mirsad completed his undergrad degree in computer science and contin-



Mirsad and Mirzeta wedding picture, December 25, 1976

ued to earn his master's degree. During his freshman year in 1976, he met Mirzeta Komic, who was also majoring in computer science in the College of Electrical Engineering. They hit it off instantly, sharing similar interests in travel, reading, meeting new people, dancing, and learning new cultures. They married that same year on December 25, 1976. In the summer of the following year, they had their first child, Lejla. After completing his master's degree, Mirsad then served in the military for one year, which was mandatory for all males in the country. Following his tour of service, he went to work for a large electronic giant, Rudi Čajavec, which handled defense and commercial contracts. In 1983, Mirsad and Mirzeta had their second child Adnan.

Mirsad's passion for learning and exploration then brought him to the United States. In 1984 he applied for and was accepted as a Fulbright Scholar at Southern Methodist University. Raising two young children, he completed his Ph.D. in three years.

He applied for and was hired as an associate professor at UNC Charlotte in 1987. From there, it was the normal process of growing as a faculty member, getting funding, and then tenure. However, in 1989, Mirsad decided to return



Mirsad and Mirzeta on SMU campus, 1984

to his native country with his wife and children, with the sole intention to stay and pursue his computer science career there. That was his plan from the beginning—travel to the United States to complete his Ph.D. and return to work in his homeland. However, upon his arrival, he quickly learned that things had changed; the country that he left some five years before was transitioning from socialism to capitalism, and the economy was not doing well. In his words, “it seemed that no one cared about research and development,” which was his passion, so he returned to the United States and UNC Charlotte.

Mirsad’s return to the United States set him on a path towards an illustrious career in academia and business. He used his passion for research and development to bring together academia, industry, and federal agencies with the aim to advance computing simulation, analysis, and modeling by addressing hard-to-solve world problems in a systemic approach. He was a leader and innovator of change, serving as Chair of Computer Science and as the Associate Director of the School of Information Technology. He also helped shepherd the transition from UNC Charlotte’s School of Information Technology, which was housed in the College of Engineering, to an independent College of Information Technology, which was later renamed as the College



Mirsad becomes the first dean of the College of Information Technology at UNC Charlotte, 2001

of Computing and Informatics. Mirsad served as its founding dean. During his tenure as dean, he also founded and became the Director of the Complex Systems Institute. In 2008, his interest in social change led him to receive a master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

Upon returning from Harvard, Mirsad was actively involved with and became the founding Executive Director of the Data Science Initiative, which has now evolved into the School of Data Science. During his long and illustrious academic career, he also served as the Director of Medical Informatics and Orthopedic Informatics Research groups at the Carolinas HealthCare System and a manager in the Health Systems Integration Service Line at Deloitte and Touche. Never forgetting his roots, he served as President of the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina in Washington D.C. and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian-American Academy of Science and Arts.

The need to understand how everything works and how he can continue



10th Anniversary of the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina (ACBH) Gala Ball in Washington, D.C. February 25, 2017. Then-Vice President Joe Biden, Jr. was the keynote speaker and honored with the ACBH Lifetime Achievement Award for his role in stopping the genocide and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Photo courtesy of Advisory Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

to blend the worlds of computing and information technology continues to drive Mirsad. “I was never a ‘get into the minute details’ type of person within the computer science discipline. It never attracted me. I ended up being a ‘systems person,’ which is a really cool name for someone who knows a little about everything and not much about many things in-depth,” he says happily. This curiosity led him to understand the keys of fundamental laws that drive any system or individual. Instead of focusing on thousands of problems and getting discouraged, he tries to figure out one or two fundamental issues that cause those problems, thus systemically addressing complex situations.

“I can see the parallels between physics and economics, the human body and society, music and logic, or family and country,” he says. “I then change the vocabulary and apply the same solution to two different problems so social scientists, for example, and doctors can then understand one another, addressing the same issue. Simply put, I translate my world into their languages, and suddenly they understand. Essentially I become an intermediary between multiple disciplines in the search for commonalities, not differences.”



10th Anniversary of the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina Gala Ball.  
Mirzeta lower left. Mirsad top row left. Photo courtesy of Advisory Council of  
Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Mirsad in the College of Computing and Informatics Visualization Center, UNC Charlotte. Photo courtesy of Wade Bruton, UNC Charlotte.

Being a systems person—that “really cool name,” as Mirsad calls it—has served him well. His drive to understand how everything works has been a catalyst in his research at UNC Charlotte. As founder and Director of the Complex Systems Institute, he takes great pride in instilling this same curiosity within his graduate students. They model and simulate countries and human behavior, for example, which allows him and his students to better understand and formulate hypotheses and answers to their research questions.

This curiosity of his want to know and understand everything has laid the groundwork for his latest journey, to create a vision of hope and change in his native country of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In January of 2018, Mirsad announced his candidacy for the Bosniak presidential council seat in the tripartite system in his native country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Though he never had even contemplated running for political office, let alone the presidency in his homeland, his life decisions and storied history show otherwise. Every decision in Mirsad’s career seemed to be leading to this point. These life experiences collectively connect the dots as Mirsad pursues his inner calling to better Bosnia and Herzegovina before it is too late. Some of his friends and family may have been caught off guard

by his sudden decision to run for President, but not one of them could claim surprise.

From law school to electrical engineering, to computing and informatics, to politics, Mirsad often said, “I never really knew what I wanted to do when I grew up.” Perhaps that question has finally been answered. Thus, the Odyssey for Democracy began.

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## The Decision to Run



**I**N MAY OF 2017, a conversation with Samir Avdaković, a friend from Bosnia and Herzegovina, changed Mirsad's life forever. Mirsad knew Samir through the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the two had been friends for several years. Over the years, Samir expressed his growing concerns over the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“We have a very, very rich history of over 1,000 years, a rich country, very smart people,” says Samir. “However, since the war, it has been a very black period in the history of the country. The political leaders have been focused on nationalism, fascism, corruption, fear-mongering, etc. These conditions have no basis for the future for us as a people or our children. The politics are a catastrophe for all of the people, Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks. They have caused the destruction of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

The ruling nationalist parties are comprised of: the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which claims to represent the interest of the Bosniaks; the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), which makes similar claims regarding the interest of the Serbs; and the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ). The nationalist parties gained control after the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, which ended the Bosnian war that had been ongoing since 1992. The Accords were intended to end the war but not create a sustainable political structure for the county moving forward. Instead, the Accords fueled the ethnic divide by establishing a tripartite presidential council made up of Bosniak, Serbian and Croat representatives. It is a well-known fact within Bosnia and Herzegovina, neighboring countries, and the global community that corruption exists due to the current political structure.

These parties are also well-known for stealing elections by buying votes for

themselves and burying votes for their opponents by finding ways to ensure those votes were lost, made invalid, incorrectly counted as votes for their own party, or never counted. Their misuse of public resources resulted in poverty, high unemployment rates, and the young's mass exodus to seek employment in neighboring countries or European Union. The nationalist parties control public business and media outlets, and the blatantly open nepotism that feeds the leadership of those businesses is common and well known. The citizens are well aware of the existing corruption but are reluctant to speak out with their votes. Many are apathetic, believing that nothing can be done. Others want change but fear they will lose their jobs if they show their support for non-nationalist parties. The ruling parties take full advantage of the fear factor, emphasizing any change will result in war.

Samir's dire concerns for their country's future compelled Mirsad to act, starting with the upcoming 2018 presidential elections. Samir decided to reach out to his friend Mirsad about running for the Bosniak presidential council seat. Knowing him as he did, Samir felt he could bring new life, perspective, and energy. He believed that Mirsad could rescue Bosnia and Herzegovina from this dark period and unite the country again. He would bring, says Samir, a love of his country, a vision for the next ten, twenty, or one-hundred years. Mirsad's experience living and working in the United States for nearly 30 years as an esteemed professor and his connections from Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in Europe set him up to be the perfect candidate in Samir's eyes.

After attending a conference in late May of 2017 in the city of Teslić, they convened at a local restaurant. Over Cuban cigars, Samir said to Mirsad, "I think you must be a candidate for the Bosniak presidential council seat in the upcoming election." He recalls Mirsad saying, "excuse me?" To which he readily replied, "yes, I think you!" Mirsad did not immediately agree, but he did grin and say, "all we need is you and me to win."

As a renowned scholar in complex systems, the answer was not hurried. Mirsad openly admits this was the first time that he had ever consciously considered such a move. He ruminated for nearly four months, during which he kept in constant contact with Samir. He spoke with and consulted his wife Mirzeta as he contemplated this life-changing decision. Mirsad was keenly aware that running for the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina would separate him from his family. He also consulted friends and colleagues at



Mirsad and Samir pose with students from the Bosnian Academy of Arts and Science at a conference held at the Hotel Kardial in Teslić, May 2017

UNC Charlotte. Many were skeptical that he could win, which only motivated Mirsad's decision to run.

"When making my final decision, I always came back to the words of Samir, indicating there may never be another election. The country as we know it will probably disintegrate," says Mirsad. "And I thought to myself: if that is so, who am I, because of the comforts I have, to decide not to even try? That is what pushed me over the threshold of the decision."

In early October of 2017, Mirsad and Samir were in New York City for the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences annual meetings. After a day of meetings, Samir finally pressed Mirsad for a decision. He remembers that they were sitting in a parked cruiser when he finally posed the question. After a moment, Mirsad said simply, "I will run."

"I was so happy," says Samir. "I was very proud that as a result of my opinion and analysis of the country, he had agreed to seek the Bosniak presidential council seat. However, this movement was not about me; it was about Mirsad coming at this very dark time in our history and that he could be the light for the future."

And perhaps symbolically, in the distance some 100 meters from their parked cruiser, they could see the Statue of Liberty in the background.



Left to right:  
Mirzeta, Mirsad,  
wife, and Samir  
Avdakovič in  
front of the Club  
Quarters Hotel in  
New York City,  
October 2017



Annual meeting of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts  
and Sciences in New York City, October 2017



Mirsad and Samir dine at the Lights Restaurant in Sarajevo before addressing the nation on Face TV to announce his candidacy, January 12, 2018

## The Work Begins

Initially, Mirsad says he entered the process with the sole intent of changing the dialogue of the political discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina: the prevailing negativity about the past, the fear of the ruling nationalist parties, and the sense that nothing could be done to invoke change. He wanted to present an alternative, express that perhaps it doesn't have to be that way. He wanted to bring forward new, positive, and fresh ideas with a vision of hope and change that would hopefully push others towards a new way of thinking.

On January 12, 2018, Mirsad formally announced his candidacy for the Bosniak presidential council seat on Face TV in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The election would take place on October 7th of that year. He says the response to his announcement was overwhelming on many fronts. He received both positive and negative feedback, which made him pause and reevaluate how he wanted to move forward.

"No one seemed to complain about me being a candidate," says Mirsad. "However, they were saying I couldn't win because of the lack of infrastruc-



Meeting with over 200 supporters from business and academia at the Hotel Bristol in Sarajevo two days after his formal announcement, January 14, 2018

ture and that I was not affiliated in some way with any political party, let alone the nationalist parties currently in control. They felt the uphill climb would be too difficult when trying to combat those in charge who literally buy elections, the fact that they own and control practically everything, and a system that is so inherent of corruption and irregularities.”

Mirsad says some told him that those who never voted were unlikely to start now, which historically included the young and the diaspora outside of the country. He was well aware that their votes were crucial for any type of positive change to occur. Despite these concerns, he was encouraged by the overall positive response to his candidacy. Many of his new supporters rallied behind him because, for the first time, they were offered an honest candidate whose platform sought to serve the people rather than the candidate or party in power. Mirsad was overwhelmed by volunteers who contributed their time and effort toward supporting his candidacy.

“Following a second TV appearance in May of 2018, and the response following, it became even more evident that my mindset had to change to



From left to right: Kemal Hanalić, professor at the University of Sarajevo, Mirsad and Samir

garner the support and following that would be needed to challenge those currently in power,” says Mirsad. “It was at that moment that my whole mindset changed from creating a dialogue of the political discourse in the country to one of winning. I knew I had to do everything in my power to win, and if so, the people would support the effort.”

Mirsad realized that the support was not just for him but his platform at large. As he gained momentum, his candidacy quickly grew into a movement, as it would soon be called the Platform for Progress Movement. By cultivating a message of hope and change, Mirsad could bring together those who oppose the nationalists’ divide and conquer strategy. Together, with his growing number of supporters, there might be a chance. Encouraged, Mirsad vowed to devote his heart to his cause and believe that he could win. Despite the odds, he would not waste his opportunity to change the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mirsad said, moving forward, he wanted to be the spark that ignited his people into action. He wanted to encourage the people of Bosnia and

Herzegovina to take responsibility for the country, to actively contribute to the solution, rather than passively wait for change that may never come. To this end, Mirsad set his mind on not just running but on winning. His message changed; he used his new momentum to carry him up to the October election.

“I stressed I *could* win, and I would do everything in my power to do so,” says Mirsad. “I stressed this was going to be a long-term process—that together, we were creating a movement that could be the cause for making changes in the country, regardless of how long it took. And that regardless of the results in October, we would form a political organization and continue to the fight moving forward.”

Of course, Mirsad knew his path wouldn’t be easy. By running for president, he was opening himself to attacks on his character. Though he was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he knew his opponents would focus on the fact that he had spent the last 30 years living and working in the United States. He warned his family and his supporters and braced himself for the impact. Shortly after announcing his candidacy, Mirsad was accused of being an American pawn. Of course, he was not, but it hurt him to think that these attacks might curb the enthusiasm for his movement. His opponents released a smear campaign: price tags indicating the cost of each item of clothing and accessory. The accompanying message read: “This is a rich guy, do you think he really cares about the poor?” He says there was also a photo taken at a Masonic lodge meeting. The opposition had superimposed his face on one of the those in the picture and the statement that “this is proof he is a Mason.”

In addition to attacks on his character, his opposition enlisted a media blockade. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, all major TV, radio stations, and newspapers are “owned” and controlled by the ruling parties. Any positive coverage for Mirsad would be buried or blocked.

“Whether someone would want to bring physical harm to me, I couldn’t say,” says Mirsad. “I know it has happened in the past, but I tried not to dwell on it. I had no money to hire protection, so I accepted the dangers knowing the cause was worth the price regardless.”

The early days of his campaign seemed bleak. The opposing parties were attacking his platform and character, burying his rebuttals, and suppressing his coverage. Worst of all, Mirsad was separated from his family. His wife, children, and grandchildren remained in Charlotte, North Carolina, while he kicked off his campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



A photo of a superimposed image of Mirsad's head appeared in this photo of a group of Masonic members

The night before he left, his family gathered for a send-off party. In the morning, he would board a Lufthansa flight to carry him towards a rocky political path.

“I knew, when getting ready to leave the gathering, that I would not see any of them before my flight, and it would be a long time before I would, except for Mirzeta,” says Mirsad. “I became aware of the haplessness of the separation and what the cause that I had devoted myself to had created. I began to cry like a baby and couldn’t remain in the house any longer. So many prices, I thought, a person must pay in order to do something like this. And again, there was that pause to question myself: was it worth it? But I said to myself and Mirzeta—while still crying in the car—that it is worth it and that I must do my part.”

The following day, Mirsad bid his farewell to Mirzeta and boarded the flight for Sarajevo. Embarking on something more significant than he had ever imagined at the time but driven by a calling to bring hope and change to his beloved country. In the long hours of his flight, he reflected on what he was leaving behind. He couldn’t stop thinking about the night before and how hard it was to say goodbye to his family. Over and over, he pictured the faces of his daughter, his son, his two grandchildren. His wife. He allowed

himself to feel the grief of separation. After a layover in Munich, it was a short trip to Sarajevo. As the plane began its approach over the rolling mountains and surrounding lush green valleys, Mirsad began to lay his grief aside.

“I thought to myself, look at me; I’m in Sarajevo to run for a presidential council seat when I would normally be back in Charlotte this time of year with family and friends. Wow, I thought, six months ago, I would not have guessed in my wildest dreams that I would be thinking about such life choices that had thus far transpired and the complexities of it all.”

Although his family was not physically with him, he had their love and support on his side. As each mile brought him closer to home, the path in front of him began to clear. He reminded himself that the right thing is rarely the easy thing. Today, he left his family behind. But tomorrow, he would make history.

## The Family Reacts



### Mirzeta Hadžikadić

Mirzeta and Mirsad had been married for 41 years when she first learned of his ambitions and calling to run for president. They had gone through and seen so much together after four decades of marriage. On that cool Fall evening in October of 2018 at their Charlotte home, Mirsad broke the news that he was seriously considering running for the Bosniak presidential council seat. He told her of his conversation with their mutual friend, Samir Avdaković, and the words that continued to ruminate in his heart, “there may not be another election within Bosnia and Herzegovina as we know it, because it will probably disintegrate.” He explained that it was his calling and perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the country that they both loved so dearly.

“To be honest, we never spoke about anything like this,” says Mirzeta. “So, I never even had an inkling that this was something that he was possibly considering, let alone how serious and driven he was to pursue this new chapter in his life. He always had an innate ability to connect with people, but I never sensed or imagined something like this. It’s almost as if the conversation with Samir rebased something unknowingly that had been burning inside for a long time.”

Mirzeta admits her first reaction was, *why?* Why does he need this now? He already had a successful and established career at the university. He was instrumental in starting the College of Computing and Informatics and served as its first dean. He founded and was the director of the Complex Systems Institute and helped launch the Data Science Initiative, which was considered a top priority for the university. She thought of how revered he was by family, friends, and colleagues. Why would he consider leaving it behind?



Mirsad and Mirzeta at 10th Anniversary of the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herze-govina Gala Ball in Washington, D.C. February 27, 2017. Photo courtesy of Advisory Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“When we first spoke, I was not for it, and it was very hard to accept,” says Mirzeta. “From my perspective and knowledge of politics, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this would be so challenging and seemingly out of character for him—particularly since he is not a professional politician. Of course, I also had concerns about his safety on so many levels.”

Mirzeta worried about what the ruling nationalist parties would do to tarnish his impeccable image. She noted the inherent corruption that runs rampant, using their power and money to buy votes and rig the elections in their favor. They control and own the country’s media, thus allowing them to

say or do whatever they want. And, of course, she was very concerned about his personal safety.

Mirzeta says they had many conversations following the initial news of her husband's desire to run for president. She says that he told her it was in his heart and spirit, his calling, and if he did not do this, he would feel that he had failed. He was driven to start the dialogue of change and hope and believed that the people would embrace his message.

Following these conversations, Mirzeta says she began to reflect and connect the dots. She recalled how driven he was during the 1992-1995 war to help his native land and citizens. After moving to the United States, he organized food drives to collect money to send back to support those in need. He also devoted his time to help refugee families in Charlotte who had escaped the war, genocide, and other atrocities. Although he had left his home country, he never stopped trying to make it better.

Later, he served as the first president of the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina in Washington, D.C., after it was formally registered. At that time, she says, the world refused to acknowledge that Srebrenica—where Serbian troops murdered over 8,000 men and boys—was the worst genocide site since the Holocaust. However, in 2005, the council helped get a resolution passed by the United States Congress to officially acknowledge that the events qualified as genocide.

In 2007, he helped found the Bosnian-Herzegovinian-American Academy of Science and Arts. Its mission was to aid the advancement and development of arts and sciences in the Bosnia-Herzegovinian Diaspora in the United States and Canada. Four years later, he co-founded the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Cultural Center, which is dedicated to addressing the cultural, educational, and social needs of Bosnian Americans living in greater Charlotte.

All of this is to say that Mirzeta knew Mirsad loved his home country. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so surprised about his presidential bid, especially because he stepped down as dean of the College of Computing and Informatics at UNC Charlotte to pursue a master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government. But again, she says there was never any talk about politics or running for president. But, reflecting on all of his achievements, she began to think that her husband had always, unconsciously, been laying the groundwork for this new chapter in his life.

“After the initial shock hearing of his plans and apprehensions of his want to run for the Bosniak presidential council seat and then speaking with him in more detail, it all began resonating and coming together for me,” says Mirzeta. “For change and democracy to become a reality, it is in the hands of everyone to make it happen. And perhaps yes, he could be the catalyst for it to become a reality. In my heart, I knew he would do his best, and I hope his message will resonate loud and clear across the country. So right now, I can only ask God to protect him and us as a family, and in the end, it will be the best for Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

At the possibility that he might win, Mirzeta grins and says, “we have lived together for 42 years and had to make a lot of tough decisions over those years. We will, when the time comes, do it this time as well.”

### Lejla Hadžikadić-Gusic

Lejla, the eldest child, says she is just like her father, a 100 percent clone through her actions and thought processes. She and her husband, Said, reside and work in Charlotte. Lejla is a physician at the Levine Cancer Institute at Atrium Health, specializing in Breast Surgical Oncology. Said is a Cyber Security Engineer at Atrium Health. They also have two children, Tarik and Isak.

As Lejla says, the family gathered on a chilly starlit November evening at Dressler’s restaurant in Uptown Charlotte, where they would come together every two months or so. She remembers having a round of drinks before her father broke the news.

“He started,” as Lejla says, “I want you to know that I’ve been thinking about running for president of Bosnia.’ There was dead silence at the table as we all were trying to process what we had just heard. Of course, our mother already knew, but Adnan and I and our two spouses were deafeningly quiet. And then Adnan broke the silence and said, ‘way to go, Dad. Kudos! I’m all in for you.’ I, because of my nature, remained quiet.”

When she finally did speak, it was only to say, “really?” Where Adnan had been excited, Lejla was more practical. She immediately asked him if he had done his research, did he think about his family, the impact all of this would have on his job, family, career, finances, all of those things. As a cancer surgeon, she explains that it is her nature to do extensive research before determining whether an idea is good or bad.



Lejla graduates from the North Carolina School of Science and Technology, 1995

“I am and always have been supportive of him, but these were specific questions directed at him,” says Lejla.

Mostly, she wanted to know how this was going to impact the entire family. She had spent many years moving around the East Coast with her medical practice; for the first time in 25 years, she was back in Charlotte. She was devastated to learn that, after finally returning to be closer to her family, her father might be moving away. He had always been her biggest mentor, supporting her through school. Now that they were in the same city, she wanted that for her two children. She says her father acknowledged the strain his run would have on the family.

“Though being supportive, the thoughts of apprehension continue to run like an uncontrolled wildfire in my mind,” says Lejla. “He is an honest man, a good man, with the intent of helping his country. I was concerned about the impact of all of this on his family and his health and safety. He is not a politician. So, I was very concerned about all of this.”

She was troubled that he seemed to want to put his home country be-

fore his family. But despite her reservations, she knew deep in her heart that there was a need for change in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ever since the war, the citizens continued to fight for their existence. Though the Dayton Accords brought an end to the war in 1995, three presidents represent the ethnic groups. Meaning, she says, it is not a country; the corrupt politicians have taken advantage of the fractured state to preach separation, to create a common enemy for citizens to fight against and fear. Lejla fully understands the need for change, that there should only be one unified country and one president.

“If it were not my father embarking upon this, I would be the most vocal supporter of all,” says Lejla. “However, I hate the fact that it is him, though I will be supportive of whatever he does. Just knowing him as I do, there is no question he is the man to do it. Again, he is not a politician, but he is an honest man with an honest soul and a love for his country. Somewhat of a ‘Kennedyish’ style comparison, some are saying, which I abhor, as he was assassinated. It’s almost a love-hate reaction. What he is about to embark upon is so gravely necessary for the country, but he and his family will suffer as a result. But in the end, if he is willing to make the sacrifice, then I have to be as well.”

For Lejla, if her father were to win, it would be a bittersweet moment. She sensed she would be thrilled if her father could pull it off, but at the same time, it would also mean he would be away from the family and his grandchildren for four years.

### Adnan Hadžikadić

Adnan, Mirsad’s younger child, and his wife Melissa also live in Charlotte. He is a Global Business Services Financial Manager for BSN North America at Essity. Melissa is a Senior Project Manager at Compass Group.

Unlike his sister, when Adnan heard his father’s news at dinner, he admits that he was immediately impressed. “I instantly said, ‘good for you’ and ‘go do it.’ I knew instantly, because of the person he is, why he was doing this, and that support was the best thing he needs. So, I told him to let us know if there was anything we could do to support him.”

Adnan quickly understood that his father’s intent was not to win necessarily but use this opportunity as a platform to get in front of more people across the country and share his vision of hope and change. Together, they had a



Adnan and Mirsad

chance to invoke lasting change rather than heading down the same path that would not lead to any prosperity. Adnan said his father emphasized this was an opportunity and a platform where people would have to listen. Mirsad knew it would be a financial hit and a big risk from a career standpoint, but in the end, he felt this was his calling.

Unlike his mother, Adnan didn't have to connect any dots. He was aware of his father's work, of all the different projects that bound him to his home country. His involvement in politics there and reaching out and assisting the citizens. So, in hindsight, for Adnan, he saw that he had been laying the groundwork for future plans to one day be the voice of change and accomplish the goals he had for himself the country.

“As his son and looking back, I don’t think he had ever found what he wanted to do in life. I think this internally bothered him to an extent, as he was always searching. He knew whatever he put his mind too he would always put himself 100% behind it and see it through with all of his ability. So, when this opportunity came up, it probably made more sense to me than others. He never wanted to do something for financial gain or be in the limelight and receive praise from others. He always wanted to do something to leave a legacy and leave anything he touched better than when he got there. It seemed to me that this was the best chance for him to fill that void.”

However, like the rest of the family, Adnan could not keep from thinking about the physical and emotional dangers his father’s presidential run could bring. Adnan said he was most concerned about his father’s name being tarnished by dirty politics. He knew how hard his father had worked to establish a good name and reputation for himself—a man admired and respected by family, colleagues, and friends.

When Adnan shared those concerns, his father looked him straight in the eye and said, “I can sling the mud and fire with the best of them and emerge from the smoke the same man that I have always been.” Adnan, seeing the fire in his father’s eyes, believed him.

Thus, Adnan didn’t share his sister’s concerns about his father putting his country first.

“As his son, this is so amazing to me,” says Adnan. “My dad growing up was my hero and the toughest, strongest person I knew at that point in my life, and to see him take such a chance is so astonishing to me. The risks that he was taking from a career and personal level and putting his homeland above all—that leaves me speechless. I’m humbled by it all. When you know he has always been this kind of a man, but you are now at an age when you can really appreciate and understand it, it is truly an eye-opening experience.”

As for winning, Adnan envisioned how truly amazing it would be and could have only imagined how ecstatic he would have been. But at the same time, knowing things would no longer be the same. He thought of simple things, like sitting down for an afternoon cigar and some father-son bonding or just dropping by to see how he is doing or playing fantasy football together on a crisp Fall Sunday afternoon.

Faced with the thought that his father might win, it would then be the time for him to accept the reality and adjust his life accordingly.

## Building a Campaign from the Ground Up

*July 2018*



MIRSAD ARRIVED IN BOSNIA and Herzegovina in May of 2018 to begin his campaign in earnest. Prior to his arrival, volunteers were being assembled who would make up most of his campaign team. At the time, they were “somewhat disorganized” and had a lot to learn. But despite having full-time jobs elsewhere, the volunteer team bonded and united over the common goal of creating a new tomorrow for their homeland.

Upon his arrival, Mirsad was very aware that only two and a half weeks were remaining for the team to finish obtaining the 5,000 signatures needed to secure his name on the October ballot. Additionally, they needed to raise 20,000 marks (equivalent to \$15,000 USD). To do this, the team purchased and set up stanchions, similar to small vendor stands, along the streets of Sarajevo and local malls. The volunteers soon learned that his presence at the stanchions always drew more people to see him in person and speak with him. Mirsad then made it part of his daily routine over the ensuing two and a half weeks to appear at as many locations as possible.

One day, two students had stopped by a stanchion to gather additional information about Mirsad and his message. One was very interested in it while the other stood a few steps away, looking at his phone. Mirsad asked if he wanted more information on the political program, but the student responded that he is not into politics. Two hours later, as Mirsad was leaving for his office, the student who was “not into politics” came back and said: “I watched some of your interviews, and now I get what you are trying to do.” When Mirsad questioned what he meant, the student replied, “You are trying to make us take responsibility for the state of the country, to change ourselves,

and to contribute to the community. You want us to be the sparks of that change. I AM a spark now.”

This phrase, “I am a spark”, became a running theme to describe those who were committed to being the catalysts for change.

Volunteers also hit the streets throughout Sarajevo, going door-to-door collecting signatures and handing out literature.

“We also had to quickly organize volunteers in other cities,” says Mirsad. “This entailed busing the forms to other targeted locations around the country. All of us made calls to friends, friends of friends, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the United States. There were times people would just show up at the stanchions indicating they ‘liked that guy.’ So, we would give them a form. It all was such an interesting dynamic, but we all knew what we had to accomplish and the deadline we were under.”

As Mirsad explains, it was a frontline all assault battle for two and a half weeks, but in the end, they secured 8,000 signatures and raised the needed funds for his name to appear on the ballot.

In the meantime, there were countless meetings. Mirsad would meet with those who wanted to contribute to the campaign, offer their help, etc. It was a flurry of commotion and activity. Even if he wanted to, Mirsad didn’t have a moment to sit down and second guess his decision.

However, the long, tireless, and grueling days had to continue. Town hall meetings needed to be organized in cities around the country, even in parts where citizens would not be allowed to vote for him due to the stipulations within the Dayton Peace Accords, which established a tripartite presidential council. Depending on where they lived, citizens voted for either the Serbian, Croat, or Bosniak candidates. Even though some couldn’t vote for Mirsad, the goal was to educate voters about his platform so that they may choose the candidate that most closely matches his ideals. They would arrive at the polls with the knowledge that change is possible. Such was life under an accord established to end a war but not designed as a permanent structure for governing a country.

Media exposure was crucial in communicating the message of this relatively unknown, independent candidate to the masses. However, doing this by the traditional means of print, TV, and radio would be next to impossible.

“We knew going in that the major media portals are owned by the state and thus controlled, infiltrated, and influenced by the ruling nationalist parties,” says Mirsad. “This is where these state-owned media portals receive their

money and thus are mightily influenced by the ruling parties, which, in turn, make it very difficult if not impossible for us to gain access to any coverage.”

## Identifying the Core Campaign Team and Strategies

By early July, the movement had identified the core campaign team, who began strategizing and taking inventory of what needed to be done. The team started crunching the numbers to determine precisely how much money would be needed to carry out the campaign and which fundraisers would be most successful. To aid their efforts, the team recruited experts in business, education, and healthcare to advise Mirsad and share their wisdom to develop the best strategies moving forward. Other tasks involved fine-tuning the platform’s message and figuring out how to disseminate it across the country. The team also reviewed several reports from organized focus groups to analyze how the people perceived Mirsad, the campaign, and his chances of winning.

“It all looked very good,” says Mirsad. “We also took the time to review three potential campaign slogans that our team had developed based on feedback from our research via social media. These ideas would then be presented to the focus groups to get their feedback based on their surveys and then develop a campaign slogan that we all agreed on. This indeed was a very exciting process.”

Although the campaign team was pressed for time, Mirsad began to feel good about his chances. The campaign was on track to heat up in September, giving them some time to prepare and execute their strategies. The biggest challenge was fine-tuning the platform’s message.

“We wanted the people to understand that those in power are there for their own benefits,” says Mirsad, “Not the country. We want them to wake up and understand that this can’t go on forever and to overcome the prevailing sense of entitlement by the ruling parties and understand they are just recycling resources and redistributing the wealth among members of their own party to the exclusion of everyone else.”

But for this to happen, Mirsad said the message going forward would have to reflect this as the citizens had grown accustomed to being manipulated and swayed by the rulers of the country with their continued message of 25 years of doom and gloom.

“We will not use fear as part of our message,” says Mirsad. “Our focus will be one of hope and how together we can affect the future. We will not forget

the past, but we will not bring it up every election cycle in order to show the old way is not the way to a new future.”

Mirsad believed that mutual collaboration and citizens accepting that they are all part of a diverse society makes them even richer. With this, they can work together to create a unified country moving forward. They must understand that differences are good. There is no reason to fear who they are and the important role they have in bringing change to the country.

The team began targeting young people, believing that demographic would be critical to the movement’s success because, as Mirsad said, “They aren’t tainted by the past, unlike many of the elders.” He appealed to the students and young adults because they didn’t see him as a typical candidate. They seemed to like that he could speak to them on their level, leveraging his experience as a university professor. They were not used to having an open dialogue, sharing their ideas, and asking questions. As he points out, this engagement was new and exciting, watching these young people become sparks for the Movement.

Mirsad says his initial travels to the town hall meetings and the universities dispensed with any further “wow” moments. The American in him started coming out and saying, “I’m in this to win!” He started becoming more and more comfortable with his new role as a candidate. His frequent meetings with his campaign staff were always constant reminders of his team’s monumental work. Yet, there was much to do.

“I recall another one of our early meetings that July with the inner circle of the team and our new potential campaign manager,” says Mirsad. “As he laid out all of the things we will have to do, the money needed, the timing of everything, we all looked at each other. Our current campaign manager turned to me and said with a big smile on his face, ‘it’s all your fault for getting us into this mess and this tough spot.’”

## Walking the Road of Genocide



MIRSAD KNEW THE THREE days of the March of Peace were going to be physically and emotionally demanding, a true test of his fortitude and strength. The March began in 2005 in tribute to the victims of the Srebrenica genocide that occurred during the Bosnian War. On July 11th, 1995, Serbian troops overran Srebrenica's safe zone, which had been established by the UN and occupied by over 450 Dutch UN peacekeepers. Despite these numbers, the Serbian forces took the city. In the ensuing days, an estimated 10,000-15,000 men and boys fled to Tuzla, the nearest Muslim safe haven, located over 60 miles from Srebrenica. During that attempted escape, the Bosnian Serb troops massacred over 8,000 men and boys, their bodies unceremoniously dumped in mass graves in the surrounding woods and countryside. The March of Peace traverses "Death Road," that same winding, mountainous dirt road between Srebrenica and Tuzla.

The three-day March begins in Tuzla and ends in the small village of Potočari, a suburb of Srebrenica, where the memorial center is located. Graves of those who have been found and identified dot the hillside. A stone wall sits in the center of the memorial, etched with the names of those who have been identified over the years. On the third day, a service is held to honor those who lost their lives as well as funerals for discovered remains that have been identified through DNA testing over the previous year.

For the first time, on July 8th, 2018, Mirsad joined six to eight thousand other participants as they began their three-day trek to Potočari. The crowd included survivors of the genocide. Others came from small villages, towns, and cities from across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Europe, and worldwide to honor and pay their respects to those who lost their lives during their flight from the Bosnian Serb army. Mirsad did not come as a candidate for president. This, he says, was not a time for campaigning but rather a time



Mirsad seen with his wife Mirzeta. The March of Peace is an annual peace walk in Bosnia and Herzegovina organized in memory of the victims of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. Bosnians and foreigners gather each year to traverse along “death road,” where thousands tried to escape to Tuzla from Srebrenica. The first March was held in 2005 on the tenth anniversary of the genocide.

to coalesce with survivors, learn their stories, meet family members of those who lost their lives, and speak with people from around the world who had traveled many miles to participate.

Day one was a mixed day of sun and rain as the participants made their way over the rugged hills and the mountainous road where thousands had fled for their lives. At the end of each day, participants had the option of staying in a makeshift camp along the road or the homes of those along the march route. Mirsad elected to stay in the locals’ homes so that he could listen to their stories and recollections of those fateful days in 1995. He met a 72-year-old widow who had lost her husband and two sons. He was struck by how positive and upbeat she was, despite her horrific losses. Another elder, experiencing the onslaught of dementia, had lost her short-term memory but

could paint a vivid picture of those terrible days. Mirsad says the stories were endless and immensely touching throughout the journey.

Day two proved to be the hardest, physically pushing the participants to their limits as they negotiated steep inclines across hilly terrains through a torrential downpour. To better accommodate the thousands of marchers, the government had widened the road by cutting trees alongside its edges. Unfortunately, removing the trees also opened the road to flooding. The steep inclines transformed into a river of knee-deep mud. Many lost their footing, knocking into the person behind them, unable to regain their balance, and needing assistance to get to the top. The feeling of togetherness and community was palpable as strangers—Mirsad included—leaned on each other, both needing and providing the assistance necessary for completing the treacherous 20-mile pilgrimage.

On day three, the sun appeared once again, making travel much safer and less strenuous. The locals brought much-welcomed food and water to the marchers during the final leg of the March. On this last day, Mirsad met a man who had participated for many years. He told Mirsad that entering the village of Potočari would be unforgettable and change his life forever. Mirsad was aware of the mass graves along the hillside and believed himself prepared for the sight. However, he was shocked by the visceral reaction, the onslaught of feeling, that he experienced when they arrived on the village's outskirts.

As Mirsad and the pilgrimage made their way into Potočari, he knew exactly what his friend had meant. The road was lined on both sides with survivors of the genocide—grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters. When they arrived, there was only silence. No one, not the marchers nor the bystanders, said a word. The only sounds that could be heard were crying as the tears flowed from those who had come out to pay their respects and the occasional sound of a camera shutter. As Mirsad described it, "It really affects you to see the depth of pain the survivors continue to have etched in their souls, the respect they showed to those of us who made the three-day journey and their remembrances of the loved ones they lost. It was very hard."

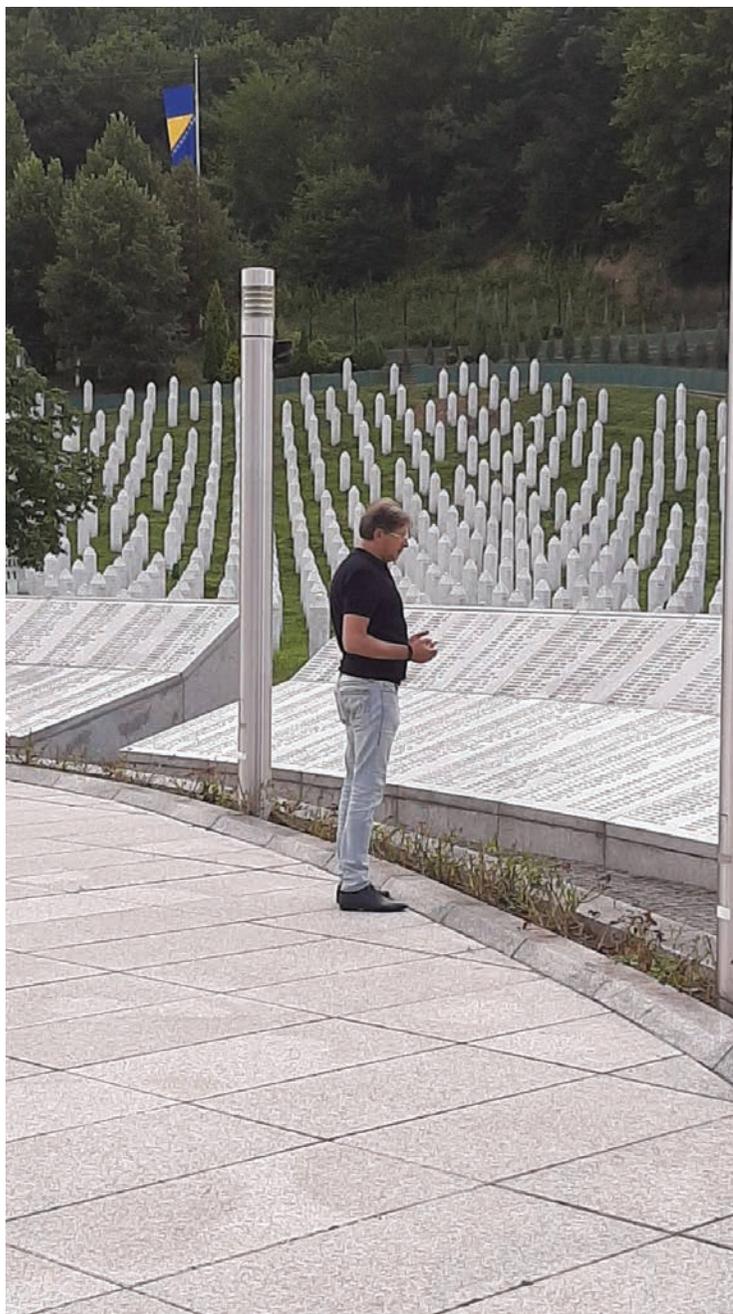
Mirsad says the experience was very moving in many ways—that you cannot understand this pain until you walk with them and eat with them. He heard stories that were similar but also very different, hearing firsthand the cruelty they experienced. Some stories he couldn't repeat. "The humiliation," he said, "you cannot imagine—there are people who can think of those



Srebrenica Genocide Memorial



Srebrenica Genocide Memorial



Mirsad pauses for a moment of silence

things, to inflict such pain on another human being, so it does affect you in many, many ways. It was hard to see.”

In the heart of Potočari, Mirsad and the thousands of others saw the hillside dotted with the grave markers of those killed and identified. The memorial’s stone wall was etched with the names of the thousands who lost their lives fleeing the army of Republika Srpska in those few fateful days in 1995. The memorial center was a final, dignified resting place for the souls lost to the genocide.

These three days proved to be very emotional, thought-provoking, and life-changing for Mirsad. He walked Death Road, where the worst genocide in Europe since World War II occurred only twenty years before. He saw enduring pain etched in the faces of everyone who lost loved ones and lined the road in silence. They had gathered to honor those who had come from around the world to pay their respects. The walkers shared a common dream of never letting the memory of this horrendous atrocity die. They shared the hope that they could prevent it from ever happening again. He met with and heard the stories of the survivors—stories that were just as vivid as if the massacre had just occurred hours before. Seeing the thousands of grave markers dotting the hillside and the names of the dead etched in a stone wall changed him in a way he didn’t expect. It left him raw and emotional and more motivated than ever to invoke change in his native land in his pursuit of the presidency.

“The experience showed firsthand the inhumanity and injustice the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have endured over the years,” said Mirsad. “The value of my fight against it, knowing that the majority of the citizens are unprotected and defenseless—it is the responsibility of the politician to protect those who depend on them to establish a just society, a fair society, in which they can flourish and lead a dignified life. It gives me ten more reasons to do what I need to do.”

## The Inherent Challenges of Hitting the Campaign Trail

*August 2018*



WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION just two months away, the pace quickened for Mirsad and his campaign team. The days on the campaign trail were long, starting at dawn and often not ending until well into the wee hours the following morning. These appearances included town hall meetings, talks with IT industry professionals, addressing students and professors, and informal meet and greets at local cafes. He wanted to personally engage with the citizens and listen to their concerns as he shared his vision for Bosnia and Herzegovina's future. But always keeping in mind that they couldn't actually ask for a person's vote until the final 30 days before the election.

Mirsad knew from the beginning that traditional media coverage of these events would be next to impossible due to the media blockade by the mainstream media outlets that are influenced by the ruling nationalist parties. This was made abundantly clear when he was invited to be a keynote speaker at a Tuzla conference for technology and entrepreneurship.

"I was one of three keynote speakers at the conference," says Mirsad. "However, you never would have known it from the media coverage. They all reported on the conference and took pictures, which did not include any of me, and made no mention whatsoever that I was a speaker. A rude awakening to the realities of the media blockade and the challenges that lied ahead the next two months leading up to the general election."

Over the next few days, Mirsad and the campaign made stops in several small towns in the surrounding area. He explains that the citizens' allegiance was to the ruling nationalist, ethno-clerical parties. This made his chances of gaining a following in these small towns slim. However, Mirsad wasn't

deterred, as the Platform for Progress went ahead with the town hall meetings as planned. At the town halls, the citizens heard Mirsad's message and had the opportunity to engage, ask questions, and voice their concerns. This was something they were not accustomed to from the ruling parties. Those leaders would come in, often paying supporters to attend and busing them to the event—never engaging with them or taking questions. Mirsad's new and fresh approach was different and gaining attention, which made his campaign threatening to the opposition leaders.

"People did come," says Mirsad. "They would listen to my message, and some would engage and ask questions at the end of my talk. However, that is pretty much where it stopped. I was more than happy to stay longer and meet with individuals one on one after the town hall meeting, but many were afraid to do so out of fear for themselves or their families."

Their places of employment are more than likely owned and run by the nationalist parties. If privately owned, they could be negatively affected by the authorities who usually send them inspections to find something "illegal" and issue hefty fines to the business. To be seen speaking with Mirsad or even just attending his events might result in the loss of their jobs. He remembers an owner of a successful furniture company that was very nervous about speaking with him after a town hall meeting. Mirsad asked why and the owner said that he feared for his employees, who could suffer if someone in the party found out the two had spoken.

Another time, Mirsad was having lunch with some local business owners in a small town in central Bosnia. He asked them how they would like to see the country improve. Their answer was straightforward: the government must not create the problems in the first place. They all had a story where inspectors came to their businesses, made false allegations, and issued undue fines. There were instances of employees getting let go because they may have been seen at a rally. They lamented how the current government is so corrupt and creates so many roadblocks. Local government officials are forced to take bribes—If they don't, it will cause problems down the road. Discussions also centered around the fact that many young people were leaving the country to find better-paying jobs and escape the inherent corruption. They said that a good job in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state job, and the only way to get them is through party affiliation and nepotism.

Thus, the corruption cycle begins with hatred and divisiveness. People, not

just the young, were becoming sick and tired of the whole system. Healthcare professionals, educators, and tradespeople seek work outside of the country just to get away from it all. Imagine, they said, a country this size, and it is hard to find a plumber.

“This is not even close to a real democracy,” says Mirsad. “During communist times, there was one ruling party, and you knew what was or was not allowed. But now, three ethno-clerical parties have their own set of rules imposed on their own people, so it is now three times worse than it was under communist rule. Everyone carves out their piece of the population, claims them, and then tells them what to do or else.”

During that lunch meeting with the business owners, Mirsad says he was struck by how many people would walk by, and it was obvious from the looks on their faces that they recognized him. He says, “It was as if they had a look of sympathy in their eyes but refused to stop and say hi.”

### Paying Respects in Srebrenica

The following day, Mirsad and members of his team traveled to Srebrenica, where Serbian troops massacred over 8,000 people. They made the trip that day, not to campaign but to honor Hatidža Mehmedović, one of the founders of the Mothers of Srebrenica who had recently passed away in July. During the genocide, she had lost her husband, their two sons, and her two brothers. Mirsad was so moved to see those who had come out to pay tribute to this woman who had suffered so much. For the last 25 years, she had dedicated her life to human rights and social justice, never wavering from her mission to raise awareness about the massacre and bring those responsible to justice.

The trip also revealed the divide in the country and the region over whether the genocide even occurred. While there, the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Mihajlović, issued a statement regarding the passing of Mehmedović. During the speech, she said, “who will bury her husband or her children now?” a mockery, Mirsad says, of Mehmedović and the thousands of others who had lost loved ones at the hands of the Serbs.

“How deeply disturbed must a person be to pose that question knowing Republika Srpska troops were responsible for the deaths of her loved ones and thousands of others,” says Mirsad. “The killings were horrible, but something like this is even worse. I was so disturbed by this and the pain it was



Hatidža Mehmedović stands among the tombstones at the genocide memorial in Potacari. Photo courtesy of Remembering Srebrenica.

inflicting on the survivors that we issued our most harshly worded release to date, condemning the statements from Mihajlović. It became the most widely shared and seen document by the Platform to date.”

### Growing Frustrations with Corruption

The business owners’ stories and the disturbing comments from Mihajlović were beginning to weigh on Mirsad’s spirit. He knew that he had to stay positive, move forward, and battle with the viral sense of apathy amongst the many citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina claiming nothing could be done.

“As a candidate for president, I was in the position to see and hear all of the unthinkable examples of corruption that citizens shared with me all around the country,” says Mirsad. “And the amazing thing to me is the fact that those in power didn’t even try to hide it.”

These stories troubled Mirsad. A telling example was from a very well-established and successful businessman in Sarajevo, who rubbed elbows with

the politicians, but never got caught up in the corruption himself. When Mirsad spoke about inherent, open corruption in the country, the businessman told him, “there is no corruption.”

Shocked by his statement, Mirsad asked how he could say that. The businessman replied, “what we have here is purely criminal.” He explained to Mirsad corruption is when the system is working, and you provide some grease here and there. Deals made under the table. Doing favors for someone else before someone else can, which are *sometimes* punishable by law. That, he said, is corruption. Here, as he explained, it is criminal behavior, and everything they do is punishable by law.

For Mirsad, a man with deep roots in academia, it was all troubling but also served as a motivating factor. He said some were telling him not to give up, to please not give up. Despite his surprise by the leadership’s corruption and the citizens’ apathy, he never considered giving up. With the election less than two months away, Mirsad became even more driven to travel around the country and spread his message that together they could unite and start a new chapter in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“I would also tell people they needed to look at themselves in the mirror,” says Mirsad. “I told them they needed to change their attitudes and behaviors and accept that they elected the politicians who are actually working against the interest of the citizens who elected them. I told them, ‘you have apathy and say nothing can be done when you have no one to blame but yourselves.’ I just needed to wake them up!”

His message would go beyond this, though. He explained that his vision was not an easy fix. That it was for the long term and that they, the citizens, needed to choose to take the country back. They could create a system of leaders who could be trusted to act for the country’s good, not just their own.

Mirsad knew that people were still afraid to show their support for him and the Platform at the polls in October. Under the established system of voter intimidation, voters are required to take a picture of their completed ballot and send it to campaign headquarters or their employers. This means that there is no anonymity in the voting process. Those in power know exactly how the citizens cast their votes. That pressure alone makes it difficult for many to vote their conscience when it could mean losing their job or worse.

“On one hand, I understand this fear of repercussions,” says Mirsad. “However, this did not happen overnight. It was gradual, and people were willing to

obey and got there willingly. And now, even though they can see with their own eyes what has happened, they pretend that everything is fine and that there is no other way. It is all going downhill, and the country is going to hell, and it still isn't on their radar."

### First Town Hall Meeting in Sarajevo

Sarajevo is the largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina, so Mirsad was excited to have the opportunity to hold a town hall meeting there in August. The setting was the historic Museum of Literature and Performing Arts in the heart of the city. It is located in an old family house that was built in the middle of the 19th century and is considered a cultural-historical monument, which is now owned by the state. The evening started with some unexpected developments. Plans to hold the meeting in the beautiful courtyard had to be moved inside the museum due to heavy rains that day. Traffic flow to the museum was blocked as coincidentally, veterans of the Bosnian War were protesting in front of the parliament, which was not far from the museum. But despite these minor setbacks, over 120 locals from all walks of life attended, some politicians, actors, and young people from public life.

Unlike the other candidates, Mirsad spoke for an hour about his vision for the country and fielded questions from the audience, as he does at all of his town hall meetings. The meeting ran an hour over schedule as attendees made their way to the front to ask their questions. It likely would have gone longer if the venue allowed it. Mirsad took this as a great sign. Unable to directly ask for their vote at that time, he explained his vision and urged people to cast their vote for whomever they choose. After that evening in Sarajevo, he was encouraged as he genuinely sensed the citizens were beginning to understand and embrace his message of hope and change.

### The Long and Grueling Days on the Campaign Trail

As Mirsad described it, there are two types of days: Sarajevo days and travel days. On travel days, he would start around 6 a.m. as he and his team prepared for the day, which included town hall meetings, meetings with local business leaders, media opportunities if they arose, brief tours of the towns and cities they will be visiting, late dinners, and then back on the road to Sarajevo.

On Sarajevo days, he got to sleep in until 8 a.m. or so, which was a simple

luxury. Sarajevo days were packed with meetings, at least one media event, dinners with special guests. Like travel days, Sarajevo days often ended after midnight, but unlike travel days, these hours before dawn were Mirsad's quiet time. On either day, sleep was often a lost commodity. As Mirsad would often say, "sleep is overrated."

Despite these long, long days, Mirsad says his team remained upbeat. After a long meeting at the end of a long day, the team would often want to stay up chatting, continuing the discussion. New volunteers had joined the campaign at that time, bringing fresh energy with them. Mirsad felt their confidence in the Platform growing to the point where it was starting to be recognized by citizens around the country.

"We were seeing a lot of respect from major players who were now inviting us for conversation," says Mirsad. "But there was still more work to do. We enjoyed the role of being the underdog, underfunded, a volunteer-driven movement that is trying to change the people who are in power. People are starting to gravitate to the fact that we are not a part of the problem but offering a new and fresh approach that they want to be a part of."

The team worked to leverage their new, refreshing approach against the governing leaders' ongoing method of preaching nationalism, fear, and aggression towards those who oppose their beliefs. However, some members of his campaign had lived through the years and years of corrupt behavior by the ruling parties. They urged Mirsad to be a little more aggressive in his messaging and responses to opposing parties' attacks. However, younger members of the team were adamant that Mirsad and the Platform were above that path.

"The interplay moving forward was going to be very interesting," says Mirsad. "Come September, when the official campaign period begins, there would be more attacks on us, which would directly impact our strategies. Our hope was to set the tone and address the issues rather than reacting to what others have done. But we knew that couldn't go on forever and that we had to be prepared, knowing the opposition is a well-oiled election machine and would do everything they can to win and derail our path."

In the month leading up to the election, the Platform would have to be more aggressive in its messaging and respond to attacks and allegations. Mirsad wouldn't bow to nationalism and its use of fear to sway the voters. He would use every advantage, such as walking the streets of Sarajevo and meeting as many locals as possible. He also intended to do this on the two days

of silence before election day, which does not allow active campaigning. He would not be campaigning, but he would certainly be seen.

“We might change into something that is not who we are, but such is life,” says Mirsad. “We will delay our new tactics for as long as possible despite those on our team who would like to get there sooner. We are very young, love what we are doing, and learning every day. We still need to learn more, but we make up for it with our new, innovative ideas and constant energy. In the end, I think we will be fine.”

The Platform was built on integrity and idealism, unlike anything the voters had seen in the past. As a result, people were not prepared and were sometimes slow to understand his ideology. This caused some critics to misinterpret his methods as weakness rather than innovation.

Mirsad often reminded himself and his team that he was an idealistic candidate and would stay the course for as long as possible. He would do what needed to be done, even if it meant showing a strong hand in his fight for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s future.

“The reality is there will be certain situations that must be dealt with and not be brushed away,” says Mirsad. “The people continue to be influenced by fear and manipulation. Right before the elections, they will receive ‘gifts’—\$40 or \$50—from the ruling parties seeking their votes. During the last general election, people were selling their votes for up to \$200 to \$300. For those on a pension, the money is welcome, no questions asked. It is a business, and it is corrupt.”

### Overseeing the Election Process

In August before the election, the Central Election Commission in Bosnia and Herzegovina had announced a lottery amongst the political organizations that would have candidates on the October 7th ballot. This meant that those organizations could have a seat on the local election commissions that would oversee the counting of the votes. However, the number of representatives and assigned locations of the designated voting places would be randomly assigned. As a mere result of their resources and larger infrastructures, the larger parties will have more of a presence around the country. The local election commissions monitoring the process would have five members, each representing a different political organization. The Central Election Commission established this process to deal with the pervasive voting irregularities.

Of course, the news was welcome to Mirsad and members of the Platform. It was significant for them to be a part of the process. However, being new, young, and having limited resources, finding individuals to represent the Platform on these local commissions was difficult because they weren't well established in many municipalities, towns, or cities across the country. Nonetheless, they tried their best to have representation, given the lottery. They needed to have a presence to oversee the voting process and ensure the voting process is legal and accurate.

"It was no secret that these voting irregularities existed, which is one of several areas the Platform addresses," says Mirsad. "However, to now be a part of the political process, I had no idea how open and accepted these irregularities and fraudulent behavior were, and everyone is participating."

The brokering had already begun. Parties that may have more of a vested interest in an area, but by the luck of the draw, didn't have a representative on that particular local election commission were trying to strike deals. Mirsad had received calls from opponents claiming that the two organizations had similar beliefs, and if the Platform swapped seats for an area, it might be mutually beneficial.

"I asked them how can you say that when you know nothing about us?" says Mirsad. "I told them point-blank that they represent a clero-ethnic party that is totally opposite of what the Platform stands for. With that, I told them we are not even remotely similar and then just hang up on them."

This was a blatant attempt to stack the deck in some areas with the hope that all five representatives on a particular local election commission will be from their party. It opened the door for more overt fraud that Mirsad's party opposed. For example, during a general election, some poll workers checked the chosen candidates on cast ballots. If they didn't like the candidate, they would add a vote for a second person, making the ballot invalid. In other cases, if someone happened to leave a ballot blank, a commission member would fill it out for them. There were also reported instances of ruling parties printing fake IDs and giving them to volunteers to vote twice for their candidate.

"These clero-ethnic parties were literally cheating and stealing votes, and it is being done in the open," says Mirsad. "The whole world knows this is happening, and nothing is being done about it. All of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Union, the United Nations, and the United States—they all have a presence here and just pretend none of this is happening. In the

end, Bosnia and Herzegovina is responsible for righting the ship and bringing an end to this. But it is also the responsibility of the international community who structured and brought about the Dayton Peace Accords, which in essence prevents Bosnians from the opportunity to vote in a democratic election.”

As a candidate for the Bosniak presidential council seat, Mirsad has brought this to the Central Election Commission, the United States Embassy in Sarajevo, and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina from the European Union, His Excellency Valentin Inzko. The position was created to oversee the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace accords. Mr. Inzko has the power to govern the country as a dictator but has never invoked that authority. There has been proposed legislation that would mandate see-through ballot boxes to prevent the illegal stuffing of the ballots by the ruling parties. That legislation was never passed.

“There were days when all of this was quite fatiguing and frustrating,” says Mirsad. “I speak for at least an hour and a half at town hall meetings across the country with a very positive and upbeat message. Only to have people come up to me afterward, saying nothing can be done to change all of the corruption. These are truly the real enemies of the change that is needed. It is so disheartening and disappointing to hear their comments.”

However, when he finally gets back from another grueling day, he pauses to think about the Movement. He knows in his heart that more and more people are starting to hear about them. That members of other parties want to speak with them.

“Then you can say to yourself, it is not for nothing,” says Mirsad. “There is a reason that others want to speak with us, those who want to be a part of the movement. It is those moments that give you the strength to go forward.”

## The Discourse with the Local Media Takes a Turn

The election’s official campaign period was just a few weeks away, and the state-run media blockade had no signs of being lifted. Nor did Mirsad anticipate anything changing until those media outlets were forced by law to provide one to three minutes of prepackaged coverage. Thus, Mirsad and the Platform had to continue leveraging social media the best they could to reach the country’s citizens.

However, during two recent town hall meetings, a chink appeared in the local media’s armor. Mirsad and his team members had traveled to Bugojno,



Mirsad with  
Valentin Inzko

a smaller town located some 80 miles northwest of Sarajevo, for a town hall meeting. They were met by a local TV crew who wanted to interview Mirsad about his speech topics and then video the opening before leaving. When the crew finished the interview and shut down the camera, they began engaging him in conversation. He says they were just talking like everyday people, like friends having a conversation.

“We started talking about politics, what was wrong with the election process as a result of those in power,” says Mirsad. “We obviously agreed. I thanked them for their time, and I parted ways to get prepared for my speech.

They went off to get a few shots at the beginning and then leave to put the story together.”

Mirsad’s talk lasted over an hour and a half. During that time, he noticed that the crew had finished filming, but instead of leaving as planned, they had taken seats in the audience and stayed to listen through the end. He didn’t get to speak with them again after his speech, but he did receive a text a few days later. They told him that his talk was so remarkable that they had to stay and listen. They told him, “we are one of your sparks.”

“They also told me they could not talk about their support openly, as they were journalists,” says Mirsad. “However, they said they would do everything in their power to tell their family and friends and ask them to share as well. They said, ‘you are our only hope.’”

The following day, Mirsad traveled to Zenica for another town hall meeting. Before the meeting, he was scheduled for a radio interview with one of the local, city-owned stations. The city leaders were members of the Party of Democratic Action, one of the country’s largest nationalist parties, where all of the employees depend on the party’s good graces. Mirsad was totally perplexed as to why he was even invited to do the interview. He could only assume that the person arranging the interview was a very powerful local businessman and that perhaps he was influential enough to make it happen. The interview was slotted for ten minutes to discuss Mirsad’s upcoming town hall, but he was skeptical it would last even that long.

Mirsad was met at the station’s door by the young Muslim woman who would be conducting the interview. She seemed very professional but distant at the same time, perhaps feeling uncomfortable by his presence. She escorted the team back to the studio. She informed Mirsad that she would be asking the questions provided by his team. He had reviewed them prior and expected this, but also told her that she could ask anything else she wanted.

As they got ready, team members took some photos and then left the studio, leaving Mirsad and the interviewer alone. As the interview began, Mirsad again observed that she seemed nervous and cold.

“I started answering her questions, and about 10 to 15 minutes into the interview, she began to look different,” says Mirsad. “Her eyes, her demeanor began to look softer and almost started to be friendly. About 30 minutes into the interview, it was like you were now with someone who really cares, who wanted to protect you.”

She then started asking new questions, ones that weren’t prewritten, which

shifted the meeting from an interview to more of a friendly conversation. After forty-five minutes, she reluctantly said they had to stop the interview. As Mirsad left the studio, the station manager, who had been outside listening, held the door for him. He immediately introduced himself and asked for a picture together. Mirsad, of course, agreed.

The woman who interviewed him also asked if she could have her picture taken with him. One of his female staff stood between them, and the photo was taken. After, as Mirsad and his team made their way to the front door, the woman looked at him and said, “wherever you go, whatever you do, I wish you all of the best. I hope God is with you and that you do remarkably well.”

Mirsad could tell she wanted to say more, but she was fighting it. He turned and looked back, and she was still standing there at the doorway and looking at them. Mirsad asked his team if they had ever seen anything like it. They told him they had never seen such a profound change in a person in such a short period. It only took 45 minutes to change someone’s mind radically.

“I, too, had never seen anything like that,” says Mirsad. “Such a profound change in a person’s attitude, changing right in front of you as you talk. In the end, it had nothing to do with me; it had to do with her depth of despair, with the conditions of the country, with her life. Suddenly, she saw someone who believed that it could be different, who has the energy to do something about it, who believes in hope. It almost gave her that hope back and a glimpse of something different, something possible. And without knowing it, she expressed all of those thoughts and feelings through her eyes and face. It was remarkable.”

The next day, Mirsad received a text message from his daughter Lejla, who seemed to undergo a similar transformation. When he first announced his candidacy, Lejla was the most outspoken of the family regarding her concerns about his decision. She understood his reasoning, but she also feared for his life, his reputation, and the impact that it would have on the entire family. However, as Mirsad points out, her tone in the text had taken on a different demeanor.

“She told me she still didn’t think my decision, in the beginning, was right,” says Mirsad. “But now she could see that over a few short months, I had awoken the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and that they were starting to believe in me and my message. And that, she said, told her that indeed I had a duty and obligation to the people and the country. That was also quite remarkable.”

## The Official Campaign Period Begins in Two Weeks

September 6th marked the campaign period's official beginning and when the Platform could begin paying for campaign-related services. This made it even more challenging to get on and receive coverage from the TV stations. They were legally permitted to charge candidates to participate in any of their political shows.

"Essentially, if you don't pay, you are not invited," says Mirsad. "That made it even harder for us to have a presence because we are not funded like the ruling nationalist parties. They are funded through state budgets or state-owned companies. The only exception was that, by law, the TV stations had to give us a minute a day to fulfill their public service agreement during the campaign period."

During this 30-day campaign period, the candidates could also begin purchasing paid advertising. He met with a prospective campaign manager to get a feel for the costs of producing and airing TV spots around the country.

"He told me just to produce the spot it would cost around 200,000 KM," says Mirsad. "On top of that, it would cost an additional 300,000 KM to purchase the airtime. It would be an additional 150,000 KM to cover general expenses to run the campaign. We were looking somewhere in the neighborhood of 700,000 KM or \$450,000-\$500,000 USD. We didn't have anywhere close to that amount of money, so we had to come up with an alternative strategy."

They thought about leveraging more innovative approaches with social media, but that presented additional problems. Unlike the United States, social media doesn't cover the majority of the population. More young people tend to have access, but traditionally, they aren't as likely to vote. As a result, the campaign needed to utilize not only social media but traditional outreach as well. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Facebook is the most highly used, much more than Instagram or Twitter, so they chose Facebook as their primary means of social media outreach and would continue moving forward.

"It had been working out great for us," says Mirsad. "Our campaign is probably the third most sophisticated of any party when it comes to using Facebook. When I traveled, someone was always taking pictures, posting them, and writing information. Links to any TV appearances and YouTube videos were posted. It was like we had developed our own social media echo system. Could we be doing better? Yes, but Facebook thus far was working just fine."

## The Official Campaign Period is About to Begin



THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN OFFICIALLY began. The days were long and grueling as Mirsad continued to travel the country, trying to meet as many people as possible. Since the beginning of June, Mirsad estimated they had visited at least 30 towns and cities. He stopped at town hall meetings, colleges and universities, local businesses, the small quaint corner cafés, and even the homes of some who have invited him to rest his feet, sit and share. Though exhausted, he says that he gained momentum each time he saw someone's face fill with hope upon hearing his message for the first time.

One day in early September, following a town hall meeting, he stumbled onto a corner restaurant. His team made an impromptu visit. They weren't expecting much, as the venue was tiny, but Mirsad believed that talking to small business owners could make a big impact. Less than twenty people were sitting down at the restaurant, but Mirsad's team asked if they wanted to meet with him anyway. Most said yes, and Mirsad says during their 45-minute conversation, most admitted that they really didn't care about politics. However, at the conclusion, he says, one man said, "this guy is cool—let's have a barbecue!" So, the campaign team set off to the gentleman's home.

"It was the best grilled meat that I have ever had," says Mirsad. "We had just a wonderful conversation. I must say it was probably the best part of the campaign thus far. It wasn't even planned and to be able to spend the afternoon with such wonderful people. All farmers who grow their own food. And best of all, they said they would all vote for me and urge their families and friends to do the same."

It was then off to Brčko, an independent entity that sits between the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following the war, both sides claimed the city, but the Dayton Accords determined that

it would remain its own entity (similar to Washington, D.C. in the States). It would have its own governance structure and declare whether its citizens would vote for candidates in the Federation or the Republika Srpska.

“We had a wonderful two-hour conversation with a gathering of the citizens,” says Mirsad. “They spoke about their problems, and I shared my vision of how I see the country and what it can become. After our scheduled two-hour time, they didn’t want to leave, so we spoke for another hour or so.”

In moments like that, Mirsad remembered the words of a dear friend who told him, “there may not be another election within Bosnia as we know it because it will probably disintegrate.” Those words continued to be one of the driving forces for Mirsad as he embarked on his journey to become president.

### The First Campaign Rally

Mirsad held his first official campaign kickoff rally in Tuzla, the third-largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The other candidates competing for the three seats on the presidential council would also be hosting rallies. Unlike the town halls, the stakes for rallies were even higher; Mirsad had only one more month to campaign and spread his vision before the citizens go to the polls on October 7th. Instead of the open, casual conversations like he had at the restaurant, the rallies meant big crowds and prepared speeches.

“It is not my nature to read from a paper,” says Mirsad. “I must prepare a list of bullet points, concrete action plans, on how I intend to bring about my vision of change to the country. Up to this point at the town hall meetings, it has been all about the issues.”

The pressure was on. His team also wanted to make this event stand out from all the other candidates. Typically, during a rally, six to seven people would come out on stage and speak and then finally introduce the candidate. The candidate would give their presentation, then leave. No questions permitted.

Mirsad’s team organized an event that was totally different from the norm. They pulled in celebrities and well-known citizens to draw attention. Emil Hadžiefendić, a young, internationally-award-winning classical guitarist, would play during the rally. Mirsad would be introduced by Josip Pejaković, one of Bosnia’s best-known Serbian actors. After speaking for 45 minutes, he would then take questions from the audience and meet them at the stage after his remarks.

“This was our first campaign rally, so I didn’t really know what to expect,” says Mirsad. “But we certainly wanted to introduce the citizens to something they have never seen before. And our message will not only be one of hope and change but, more importantly, how we intend to do it. It’s going to be a whole new ballgame.”

Between 200-250 people attended the rally at the historic National Theatre of Tuzla. These were all locals as they didn’t have the resources to bus anyone else in, unlike the ruling parties who stack the audience wherever they go. Mirsad addressed the audience, reiterating his vision of hope and change for the country, and emphasized that change was impossible without everyone’s commitment. It would take a united effort.

“I thought it went very well for our first official campaign rally,” says Mirsad. “It was new and refreshing. A totally unusual style for such rallies. Following the rally, I had a lot of very nice conversations with some of the attendees. It was obvious that our message was starting to spread and resonate.”

## The First Televised Debate

In thirty days, Mirsad’s team hosted nine more rallies. At this same time, they also prepared Mirsad for face-offs, or debates as they are known in the United States. He was invited to participate in face-offs on three major TV stations, which is required by law during the official campaign period.

Leading up to that first debate, Mirsad anticipated that he would be approached by candidates from other opposing parties requesting conversations about possible alliances. Some would ask him to drop out and join their party instead. During a presidential race, it is common for candidates to drop out, either because they don’t appear to have a chance to win or simply because of intimidation and pressure from the ruling parties. It is all part of the political landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mirsad did indeed receive those calls in the final days leading up to the elections. He also had several secret meetings with individuals from some of the opposing parties who had no possibility of winning. These meetings had to be held in private because of the nature of the political landscape and the influence and dominance the ruling parties have over others. They were too afraid to be seen with him, as it would indicate they supported his cause and might have ramifications for them and their supporters. They assured Mirsad they and their followers would voice their support at the polls, ac-

knowledging that any endorsements too early might backfire and cause harm to Mirsad's campaign as well.

"I was a bit anxious, as I have never witnessed or seen these face-offs before. People running for the same office on the same stage discussing policies and their approach," says Mirsad. "However, I was looking forward to it. It would allow me to talk about anything and, of course, be able to show my face to a larger audience."

Though he accepted the invitations, he did not know if his opponents would do the same. He says it is no secret that the candidates from ruling parties do not like to participate if there is even a remote chance they might be questioned about their policies and the state of the country. As such, all six candidates were invited to participate in the first face-off, but only three accepted. The three no-shows were from major parties and pulled out of the debate last minute.

"They are well aware that they are the ones who brought Bosnia and Herzegovina to its current place," says Mirsad. "They are afraid of any conversations that would question that. They prefer to have everything scripted and not question their authority. They continue to express the need for change, that they are the only ones big enough to be able to do anything about it even though they are the root cause of it all."

As for the debate, Mirsad remembers the moderator being very hurried in his questioning style, which was all new to him. Each candidate's response was strictly timed, which didn't allow for any detailed answers, which was Mirsad's preferred way to respond.

However, Mirsad felt pretty confident in his answers overall. His strategy was mainly to be honest and true to his Platform, but he also wanted to be interesting and draw attention. One question asked, "what country would you visit first as a member of the presidential council?" Mirsad's first thought was Serbia because of its importance in the region and the need for open dialogue and collaboration. However, he had once been asked by a supporter at a town hall meeting in Tuzla after suggesting Serbia to a similar question, "why not China," which he found incredibly thought-provoking. So, his answer to the moderator was China. He explained this would provide the opportunity to improve the country's economic stability and show that Bosnia and Herzegovina has international reach, knowing the answer would get a lot of people talking.

The final question caused a major stir, and Mirsad knew his answer would only fuel the flames. The moderator asked if the candidates supported same-sex marriage. The first two candidates immediately answered no. The time-frame for answering was strict, so Mirsad also did not hesitate; however, his answer was much different.

“This is a very traditional country, and I knew that a yes would result in lost supporters but at the same time gain some,” says Mirsad. “I wanted to take more time to craft my answer, but I couldn’t because of the time restrictions. My answer would have to be from the position of a president responsible for all citizens’ well-being, not just some, and not based on politics or lost votes but just my opinion, hoping it would stir controversy. My answer was yes, much to the surprise of the moderator.”

Following his answer, Mirsad couldn’t help but think of an earlier suggestion from an associate who told him, “you need to shock them be it good or bad, just shock them as it will stir more publicity for the campaign.”

Despite his initial reservations about how the face-off would play out, Mirsad was quite pleased with the initial reactions he received. He says he really enjoyed the opportunity to share a totally different perspective in the national spotlight and hopefully force people to think and open up the dialogue even more around the country.

“During the face-offs, I continued to present myself as one who questions everything and will truly make people think,” says Mirsad. “I will not tell them what they want to hear. But if I’m in conflict over which side of the questions to support, I will go with the more shocking one. I look forward to that opportunity moving forward.”

## Shaping the Campaign Message

Mirsad knew the importance of crafting and reworking his campaign message to suit the country’s different crowds. The electorate is incredibly diverse, with many different nationalities, religious affiliations, and political organizations. His team had to think of different ways to present the same message to appeal to people who could attend a rally.

“I have had numerous discussions with my campaign staff regarding the messaging,” says Mirsad. “We are all aware of the challenges, but in the end, the consensus was to stick with the same general message but localizing it

depending on the location. From there, it is our job to gauge how responsive the audience was. How long it takes them to open up and start processing the information.”

Mirsad says they watch the body language of those in the audience, the expressions on their faces. Perhaps a smile and a nod as they start to grasp the message, and a light bulb seems to go off—They may begin to talk differently, engage more, take pictures, and come to the stage following the rally to meet Mirsad and express their support for the Platform.

“Our best estimates were that of those in attendance, 20 percent would go home as new members,” says Mirsad. “However, the best way we have found to gauge how we are doing is still through social media, particularly our Facebook page. We post information about the rallies, our recent debates, etc., and closely monitor who likes, shares, and so on. We certainly received a spike after we labeled the three candidates from the major parties who did not participate in the first televised debate on national TV as cowards.”

### New Use of Campaign Funds

Mirsad was rapidly gaining support but was still leagues below his competitors financially. The Platform simply did not have the financial resources to put together a media campaign that would even remotely compete with the established political parties. Their opponents would flood every city in the country with their billboards, banners, messages on TV, etc. Despite this, the campaign team remained positive.

“They came up with what they called a guerrilla campaign. We created thousands of fliers, a single white page with the message ‘think with your own head, be a spark’ followed by the hashtag of the campaign, and no mention of me. A team of about 35 scoured Sarajevo and placed them all over. They were extremely excited about this approach as it was their idea, and they had a sense of ownership.”

The team had devised another plan on how to allocate some of their campaign funds for more media exposure moving forward. Since they could never catch up to Mirsad’s opponents, they decided not to spend all of the funds on advertising.

“Instead, we decided to donate some of the funds to certain organizations around the country. Though the contributions were small, ranging from \$350

# Misli svojom glavom

Flyer used as part of the guerrilla marking campaign before the election

MIRSAD

**HADŽIKADIĆ**

Pravi predsjednik za novu BiH  
*Budi i ti iskra promjene!*

#IJASAMISKRA

#MH2018 #HADŽIKADIĆ2018

MirsadHadzickadic



[mirsadhadzickadic.ba](http://mirsadhadzickadic.ba)



to \$700, it was money well spent,” says Mirsad. “We didn’t talk politics with these organizations or ask for their support at the polls. We were just trying to make a connection with those in need. And these small efforts served as motivation for our volunteers to become more involved with the Platform.”

The Platform donated to several organizations: a soccer club, the Mostar Diving Club, and two organizations that work with mentally and physically disabled citizens. Before that war, the soccer club in Mostar was one of the best teams in Yugoslavia. But due to the city’s divisive nature, it had lost its right to play in the stadium. Mirsad wanted to support the team and help bring it back to prominence.

The Mostar Diving Club supports a 400-year tradition of jumping off the top of the internationally famous Mostar bridge into the Neretva river.



Diver jumps from the historic Stari Bridge, commonly referred to as the Mostar Bridge, which crosses the river Neretva in Mostar. Photo courtesy of Szodorai Imre (Hun), CC BY 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

It is a long and enduring tradition that embodies the history and longevity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Donating to these charities was Mirsad's way of signaling that Mostar should be united once again and that he would support them as president.

### The Campaign Heads to Mostar

Mostar is a heavily divided city, home to large populations of both Croats and Bosniaks. Mirsad showed up as a relatively unknown, independent Bosniak running for president. It was a very challenging environment to hold a rally, but Mirsad never shied away from challenges. His team held their first rally at Mostar on September 19th.

The rally was held at the historic Hotel Bristol, located along the banks of the Neretva River. The room set aside for the rally was filled to capacity, with the crowd filtering out into the hallway. Those in attendance again welcomed this new non-traditional approach to political rallies as the event lasted for over three hours.



The city of Mostar. Photo courtesy of Alistair Young,  
CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

“I must admit I had some anxious movements leading up to the event,” says Mirsad. “This is a very divided city, ethnically, religious, etc. And for a relatively unknown independent candidate to come in and try to sway citizens to cast their vote for me would not be easy. But to my surprise, there was much enthusiasm and positive energy in the room. It was clear that those in attendance wanted to be there, and they seemed starved for change and were eager to take that message away and share it with others. It was a wonderful feeling and will certainly be hard to top this one moving forward.”

Those in attendance included citizens from Mostar, supporters who made their way from Sarajevo, and the young. Mirsad couldn’t help but notice the faces of the youth who had come out to show their support. Some were diaspora who were visiting the country during the late summer months.

The head of a local organization in Mostar called Mirsad in the following days indicating people could not stop talking about the event. As it turned out, the rally also opened the doors for several other meetings with local business leaders and members of some of the opposing parties.



The now infamous black BMW used during the 2018 campaign

“The energy level is truly changing as we get closer to the election,” says Mirsad. “You can sense it at each new rally we attend, meetings with business and government leaders or passersby on the street. Even those within the party, the level of enthusiasm and excitement is on the rise as they too are seeing firsthand the fruits of their labor.”

Part of Mirsad’s strategy was to become more involved within the local communities. He participated in small gatherings at local cafes for one-on-one Q&A sessions, volleyball or basketball tournaments, and barbecues to bring the community together and create a sense of belonging. This also provided a new and innovative approach to advertising. He used a black BMW from a friend. The car featured Mirsad’s image and the Platform for Progress logo predominantly displayed on the doors.

## Entering the Final Two Weeks of the Campaign



THE LONG AND GRUELING days of canvassing cities, towns, villages, and neighborhood cafés across Bosnia and Herzegovina has subsided a bit. With the October 7th presidential election less than two weeks away, the focus shifted to the two remaining face-offs and campaign rallies. Mirsad continued his efforts to energize the electorate and instill the hope and vision that together, change and a new beginning were possible.

The Platform was also keeping a close eye on the national polls. According to one poll, Mirsad was trending fourth among the six candidates for the Bosniak presidential council seat. In another, he was trending second. This gave his team hope, but unfortunately, they knew that the numbers only reflected a small portion of the population, making them generally unreliable. Still, it put the potential outcome into perspective. Each of the major parties had anywhere between 70,000 to 160,000 members, and it would take 150,000 votes to win.

“Realistically, given I am running as an independent and relatively unknown, we should be looking at generating perhaps two to three percent of the total vote, so say the experts,” says Mirsad. “However, if we could get 10 percent of the overall vote, that would put us in the neighborhood of 70,000 votes or just about half of what would be needed to win. That would send shockwaves through the other parties, and the country for that matter. And that would not even consider the 10 percent or so who decided not to vote for me because they didn’t think I had a chance or 10 to 15 percent that was stolen due to the inherent corruption.”

If he received 10 percent of the vote, and Mirsad felt confident he could, they would immediately establish a party or formal political organization after the election. Until then, Mirsad would run as an independent under the

umbrella of the Platform for Progress Movement, with no affiliation to any other party or political organization.

“That would then give us four years to prepare and get ready for the next general election, and have people at all levels of the local governments around the country, and would make us a very competitive party come the general elections in 2022.”

Given the circumstances and the monumental task at hand, Mirsad continued to tell the media that he had confidence in his victory. Everything about his campaign was different, and the citizens had never seen anything like it. At his campaign stops, he reminded people to go out and vote, saying that it was a long-term process that started with them, even if they chose to vote for someone else. He was bolstered by the encouragement he received from the people of Mostar. They told him to keep going, not to give up regardless of the outcome.

Mirsad reflected on the businessman who encouraged him not to give up, stay the course and not do anything with any of the existing parties. “He told me he hoped that I didn’t win,” says Mirsad. “He said, if you win, that means you had to strike a deal with one of the existing parties. He said, I want you to remain pure; the movement to remain pure and draw upon those with the same vision for the country. He told me, ‘I want you to lose now so that in four years, you will win with the right people and for the right reasons.’”

Mirsad wanted to win for the right reasons. With the election looming, he was comfortable with his standing, hopeful even. In general, he never sets his expectations too high or too low. He knew that he put up a good fight and that things were the way they should be, even with the lack of funding, organization, and media access. “We are doing really, really well!”

## Ten Days and Counting

The pace quickened for Mirsad in the remaining days before the election. He spent the time reaching out to as many people as possible to share his vision of change for the country. He held a workshop, attended by many young people, who voiced their concerns about why the youth and others were leaving to find work in other countries, particularly Germany. They asked Mirsad what steps he would take to prevent this from happening, to entice them to stay.

He stopped in a small neighborhood in Sarajevo, where over 50 people gathered to hear his message and ask questions. They had so many questions

that they didn't want him to leave. They wanted pictures, another speech, more questions answered.

One of the most memorable stops was for another campaign rally held in Novi Travnik, just northwest of Sarajevo. Novi Travnik used to be the center and capital of Bosnia during the Ottoman Empire, but it wasn't the historical connection or the rally that made it stand out. Rather, the meaning was personal, as Mirsad's grandparents lived there. They were buried there, along with his parents and other relatives. For Mirsad, it was sort of like a homecoming. Fortuitously, it also happened to be his best-attended rally so close to the election.

"I was apprehensive about this visit," says Mirsad. "During two or three previous stops, the crowd was minimal, as they were afraid to be seen in public at one of my rallies—the parties in control told them they could not be seen with me. However, this time was different. There were over 300 people in attendance, and the venue was full. We also had a live feed on Facebook from the rally. Almost 43,000 people watched over the next few days. More than 1,000 people liked and shared it. I must say it was a huge success."

The response to his campaign was overwhelming. Mirsad took it as a sign that the movement and his message were resonating with the electorate. Since they were barred from most media outlets, he attributed his success to their aggressive use of social media. In addition to live streaming their events, Mirsad also held live weekly Q&A sessions. He estimated that his message was reaching between 60-70,000 people a week via Facebook alone.

It was clear that people were not only hearing his message but responding to it. He recalled when he was walking in the Old Town of Sarajevo, on his way to a meeting, and was approached by a young man who wanted to thank him for what he was doing for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The young man said Mirsad gave him hope and energy to join the fight and become engaged in political life. Then, without waiting for a reply, he walked away.

"I said wait a minute, wait a minute! He turned, and I asked his name and what he did," says Mirsad. "He replied he was a music major and had two more years to finish his degree. What then, I asked? He told me, 'that depends on you.' I must say, that was really hard to hear but, at the same time, a great compliment. To see how much hope he and other youth have around the country and the want for change—It brought tears to my eyes."

A bit shaken from the encounter, Mirsad proceeded to his meeting with a university professor and psychologist who had started her own business.

She wanted to express her support and enquired how she could help. As a psychologist, she understood the people and wanted to advise how to approach them. They spoke for about 20 minutes or so as Mirsad outlined his long-term vision.

“She then looked at me, straight into my eyes, and said, ‘Mirsad, I have no time for long-term plans, as my oldest daughter is graduating in two years and she began to cry,’ he says. “I then realized she feared that her daughter, like many other youths, would leave the country in hopes of finding a better place.”

The psychologist collected herself and said her only wish was for her entire family to be close to each other and together. Mirsad knew the enormity of his campaign and what it could really mean if he won. Countless people had approached him with similar heartbreak, and he didn’t want to let them down.

“It is then that you realize how deep their want is for change,” said Mirsad. “For those who say it can’t be done, I now share these stories with them. I tell them who will fight for these people. I tell them they must get out and vote, get engaged, and be a part of the change.”

## The Final Push



**T**HROUGHOUT THE CAMPAIGN, MIRSAD and I had spoken almost weekly via Skype or the occasional phone call from the backseat of his car after a long and grueling day of campaigning and meetings. I was interviewing him for updates on the campaign for the podcast we had been doing since May. He was adamant about sticking to our schedule, as the podcasts had become a staple for many people—both in the United States and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, on October 2nd, I was fortunate enough to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As my plane slowly made its descent into Sarajevo, I was awestruck by the beauty of the surrounding mountains. The haze and late-day rays of sun embraced the sprawling peaks and their vast meadows, casting a mesmerizing image of a set of mighty waves making their way to shore as the mountain tops peaked in and out of the blanket of haze that had settled in for the day. I felt like a lucky benefactor of nature's paintbrush on that day.

I was met at the airport by Samir Avdaković, Mirsad's friend, who approached him about the prospects of running for president. What a lovely man he was; he greeted me as if I were a brother that he had not seen for some time. Samir was my guide for the next several days. We stopped for lunch at the Park Prinčeva restaurant along the side of a nearby hill that overlooked the city. How beautiful it all was. Then it was off to meet up with Mirsad.

We met on the Vistafon restaurant's patio, where he was taking a short break between campaign stops. There was time for a quick bite and the occasional puff on a cigar and some conversation with his campaign workers before hitting the road again for a rally that night. It was so wonderful to see him and, of course, experience all that was happening in person.



Samir and Clark at Park Prinčeva restaurant overlooking Sarajevo



The Park Prinčeva restaurant, Sarajevo



The Park Prinčeva restaurant, Sarajevo

## 80-Seconds Heard Round Bosnia and Herzegovina

Two days before, Mirsad had participated in the campaign's final face-off, appearing on the country's largest public TV station. It was his last opportunity to talk about the country's issues and his vision with his opponents before the election. However, things did not go as planned.

He had been told that the candidates would be separated into two groups rather than having all of the candidates on stage at the same time for the face-off. One group represented candidates from the established parties, while the others made up the lesser-known opposition parties. The station considered the nationalist parties as favored to win and lesser-known parties as having little or no chance of winning the election. The separation meant that the nationalist parties would debate amongst themselves, not engaging with the other parties at all. These guidelines concerned Mirsad since the separation was meant to elevate the voices of the past and suppress the voices of the future.

He reached out to the station to ask why and who made the decision. Earlier in the campaign, he participated in a face-off on a radio station owned by the same people, and all candidates were allowed to participate at the same time. As is the norm, none of the candidates from the major ruling parties showed, as they didn't like sharing the stage or leaving open the possibility of being publicly criticized for anything. Mirsad and the three opponents who did show up engaged in a lively debate, and Mirsad was looking forward to a similar arrangement. However, this time, Mirsad was told the board of directors decided to divide the candidates into two groups. The boards of the public Service and TV stations are influenced by politics, just like the state-run media outlets, and the boards are made up of members from the established parties.

"This is not natural at all," says Mirsad. "I voiced my displeasure over the format with the station management and told them they were directly influencing the citizens by putting forth the impression that you want them to think are the favorites. And by doing so, the station was showing bias towards the establishment and not allowing the voices of change to debate with them all at the same time on the stage."

Despite his displeasure, the format would remain as planned. A young campaign worker came up with a plan. The campaign worker suggested doing something really meaningful: protest the debate by publicly expressing his displeasure and then walking off the stage. A journalist friendly to his campaign agreed. He told Mirsad nothing would shake up the citizens more than simply walking out.

For the three days leading up to the debate, Mirsad ruminated over what he should do. It was a risk. He could stay and address the public and reinforce his ideals before the election. Or he could make a bold statement by doing the exact opposite.

In the minutes leading up to the face-off, Mirsad still hadn't made up his mind. But then, right before the event was to start, the moderator was behaving as if Mirsad and his campaign had not lodged a complaint. Mirsad knew what he had to do. He would not participate in such a farce. He would dissent.

"I wanted to let the people know I was not happy," says Mirsad. "I wanted to shake and shock them into thinking about their position in the country and what they needed to do to bring about the necessary change."

Mirsad took the stage. During his allotted 60 seconds, he talked about the bias of public service TV. When his 60 seconds were up, he continued to speak. At 70 seconds, a timer went off. At 80 seconds, the moderator interjected and told him his time was up.

“With that, I wished all of the participants a good debate, including the moderator, as I did not want to show ill will towards them,” says Mirsad. “Then, I walked away and left the studio.”

It shocked the nation. Everyone from the local media to the state-run outlets was reporting on it. The Platform’s social media platforms blew up. Comments from “you are king!” and “this is how it is done!” and “thanks for saying upfront what is being done to the citizens.” The support was overwhelming. It was similar coverage and reaction to Mirsad’s answer to the question on same-sex marriages.

“Through these two historic moments, we had defined the campaign,” says Mirsad. “Suddenly, things were different. We had changed the politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I’m really glad I made the decision to walk off the stage. And that the seed was planted within me by one of the young members of our team.”

Of course, some second-guessed his decision, asking why he turned down this opportunity to address the nation about his views for the future. A lost opportunity, some were saying.

“In the end,” he told me with a smile on his face as we sat at the restaurant in Sarajevo, “I’m so glad I did it. So many have approached me and thanked me for having the courage to do what nobody else has ever done before—To show that I care this much about the people. I smile because these people are the ones that give us hope to keep fighting for our rights against the establishment. I smile because I showed that I would not be manipulated by others and that I do have the best interests at heart for Bosnia and Herzegovina. That I had the courage to do what is right, not what is expected.”

During our short conversation, a police officer approached Mirsad and thanked him for what he was doing. The restaurant owner came up and asked if there was anything he could do to help out. He explained that he never allowed any party to come to his establishment. “But yours—yes,” he said, offering his restaurant as the setting for the election night party. This also made Mirsad smile, who was about to depart for another campaign rally that evening.

## The Final Days

With only three days left before the official one-day quiet period before the October 7th election, the campaign was operating at top speed. There were two more town hall meetings, several radio and TV interviews, and a final opportunity for Mirsad to address the nation on October 5th. Mirsad was looking forward to the challenge, as each was an opportunity to wake up the nation, and if necessary, shock them into doing the right thing.

### October 3rd: The Final Campaign Rally in Sarajevo

I arrived at the Bosnian Cultural Center, located in the heart of Sarajevo's Old Town, about 30 minutes before Mirsad's first and only Sarajevo rally. What a lovely setting in this old historic structure located at what had been the original Great Sephardic Temple, Sarajevo's largest synagogue.

When I walked in, I was concerned because only a sparse crowd dotted the grand auditorium's 800 or so seats. However, I needn't have worried. While chatting with some campaign staffers, one tapped me on the shoulder and pointed behind me. What had been a sparse crowd was now a sea of faces, filling the auditorium to capacity. Elders, middle-aged, and young people had come to hear Mirsad speak. I knew that the classical guitarist, Emil Hadžiefendić from Tuzla, would play and that Josip Pejaković would introduce Mirsad, but it was so powerful to see it in person.

For the next 40 minutes, Mirsad spoke to a captivated audience. I didn't understand a word he was saying, but I didn't need to. Instead, I watched the audience. Each face, riveted on his every word, told a story—one of pain, suffering, anguish, and hope for a brighter future. That told me all I needed to know.

Then, keeping with his unconventional approach, he took questions from the audience and brought his campaign team on the stage for introductions. The team shared their stories of why they had joined the Movement. Mirsad closed the rally, and a sea of people flooded to the stage to greet him, hug him, have their pictures taken with him, and thank him.

As I stood watching and trying to soak up the moment, a young man by my side, 26-year-old Emil Pasić, asked if I was part of the campaign. I said no and explained he was my former boss and a dear friend. I had been documenting his story and was allowed to come to Bosnia and Herzegovina to experience



Sarajevo campaign rally October 3rd



Classical guitarist Emil Hadžiefendić performs at the Sarajevo campaign rally



Josip Pejaković introduces Mirsad at Sarajevo campaign rally



Mirsad addresses the audience at Sarajevo campaign rally



Platform for Progress campaign team introduced during the Sarajevo campaign rally



Mirsad takes questions from the audience following his address at the Sarajevo campaign rally



Mirsad poses for pictures with supporters following the Sarajevo campaign rally

it all in person. He asked me to describe Mirsad in one word. At first, I wasn't sure. I didn't know if only one word could encapsulate all that he is. After some thought, I told him: remarkable. Mirsad is remarkable. I then asked if Pasić was a volunteer with the campaign. He answered no; he had only just learned of Mirsad and his message of change and came out to show his support. What a moment it was to meet a stranger who was so taken in by my friend, a man who might change the course of his life and others.

Pasić had lived in Sweden for 18 years before moving to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2011 to open his own business. He explained that he was sick and tired of the system. For seven years, he felt oppressed, saying that it was almost impossible to work within the system after the war. He felt looked down on by others because of the state of his country. This was why he was so moved by Mirsad's vision for change and how it would help people all over the country.

"It generally takes me a month or so to decide on something of this importance for me and my country," says Pasić. "But it only took me ten minutes

after hearing his speech that he will take us where we want to go and in a much shorter time than others have tried since the war. He *is* the spark.”

Pasić knew this would be a long process, but Mirsad needed the support of the young and old alike more than ever. A tear formed in his eye, his voice breaking when he said that it wasn’t just about Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the world.

“It makes me emotional as I really love this country, and it’s impossible sometimes to see how there could be a difference until the right person comes along,” says Pasić. “I know it will take all of us to make this happen, but Mirsad is the guy holding the steering wheel, and we are all passengers in the car with him. It’s all going to be good, I hope, and I wish. Maybe not for me but for my kids. I need to be a part of the process.”

Mirsad was shocked to see that every seat been filled in that auditorium, and crowds had spilled out into the hallways. He took it as a sign that people were listening to his message and adopting it for themselves. It was a show of ownership by the citizens of the message he had been sharing since May.

### October 4th: The Final Campaign Rally in Zenica

Located some 40 miles to the north of Sarajevo, Zenica is the third-largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The venue for the last rally of the campaign was at the Bosnian National Theatre located in the heart of Zenica. As I entered the building and made my way up a series of stairs, over 200 people had already assembled. Mirsad enthralled the crowd with his speech, and at the end, many surged forward to ask more questions and take photos. Again, I proudly watched my friend interact with the people of this nation.

After, we made our way to a quaint small restaurant where campaign members had gathered. I took the opportunity to finally sit down and speak with Mirsad. Prior to this, the campaign’s schedule had been too tightly packed since my arrival to really sit down and talk. We started by talking about how many people were joining and showing enthusiasm for the Platform.

“This was really a wonderful ending to the entire campaign,” says Mirsad. “Over the course of the last two days, it became so clear that our message was really starting to resonate. I was thanked for bringing hope back into their lives. These comments make me feel very good about the movement’s long-term potential. So many people say they want to be a part of it. They told me I can’t leave now and that I must stay and continue the fight.”



Mirsad addresses supporters during the last rally of the campaign in Zenica

Many came to the rallies to learn more about him and his message, but he says the difference now was that the majority of those in attendance already know who he is and have come to show their support. In the early days of the campaign, no one knew his name. Now, he is approached by people on the street who recognize him and want to ask questions or snap a photo. Most often, though, he says that they just want to thank him.

“This was all so encouraging,” says Mirsad. “My only regret was that I wish we had three more months to reach out to the citizens. In my heart, had we had that time, this would have almost been a sure thing despite the odds we have been up against.”

### October 5th: The Last Chance to Address the Nation

On the evening of Friday, October 5th, Mirsad had his last opportunity to address the nation before the election in two days. His campaign staff and followers offered a slew of advice for this final address. Some wanted him to be aggressive, to come out swinging against the corrupt ruling parties. Others wanted him to stay upbeat and positive, to show himself in direct contrast to

that corruption. Mirsad listened and strategized his approach—a blend. He would be firm but civil.

During his interview with the host, he addressed his key issues: voters who supported his cause but weren't convinced he could win. They believed him to be the best candidate but were put off by his lack of infrastructure. If they voted for him and he lost, it would be a wasted vote. Instead, they would vote for the "lesser of two evils" when it came to the ruling parties.

"I couldn't address these issues without naming who those who were responsible, which I had stayed away from throughout the campaign as I didn't want to stoop to name-calling," says Mirsad. "However, this was my last opportunity to name those responsible, and what they had done in the past was not in the best interest of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Mirsad then spoke with the host about the nation's key issues and his plans for the country's future. He looked directly into the camera and addressed the nation for several minutes rather than looking at the host. At the very end of the conversation, he turned to the camera one last time. He addressed the nation, inviting the citizens to vote to combat the existing apathy in the country.

Following the interview, the host told Mirsad his address was marvelous. Those in his campaign said the most powerful moment was when he turned to the camera and directly addressed the nation. One supporter went as far as to say it was a "planetary speech." The feedback overall was very positive.

"I felt good about the evening," says Mirsad. "The decision to look directly into the camera and address the nation was strategic, as it was the last day of the campaign. It was important to leave the population with the last message in terms of what was important, why it was important, and what differentiates us from the others. It was also an opportunity for me to talk more about myself and the movement. The last few weeks of the campaign and the input I received helped me clarify the issues and the message. This was the perfect platform to do that, as it meant a lot for the overall success of the campaign."

Mirsad, who normally thrives on high-energy situations, was spent after the interview. Though you'd never know it from his calm and collected demeanor, he was emotional over the opportunity to address the nation one last time. He was nervous, being on national TV, not having notes to refer to, speaking off the cuff from the thoughts churning in his mind. He didn't want to lose his train of thought. He wanted to be concise, terrified of messing up.

"I was saying one thing and trying to figure out what I would say next at

the same time,” says Mirsad. “That is not always easy. It had to be smooth and flowing. You cannot look the nation in the eye and stop, and then think, and lose your train of thought. It had to be powerful and connected. Emotional, but not too much, I just didn’t want to mess up, to be honest.”

Following the TV appearance, his staff monitored the social media activity. By the next morning, the overall views and likes had reached 19,400. The campaign’s goal was to reach 20,000 views by election day. Those numbers brought a smile to his face.

“We had three obvious bumps in social media engagement throughout the campaign,” says Mirsad. “The first after my stance on same-sex marriage, the second when I walked off the stage during the face-off on national TV, and then my personal address to the nation two days before the election.”

### October 6th: The Official Quiet Period Before Election Day

The day before the election was quiet, as no official campaigning is allowed by any candidate. However, that does not bar them from being seen in public. Mirsad took full advantage of that opportunity, hoping to get out and about around the city to meet people.

It was a cool, crisp morning, and I arose early and strolled down the long and winding street from my hotel as the city slowly awakened. Merchants were carefully placing fruit and vegetables in front of their stores. There were elders on the corner basking in the morning sun with a cup of espresso in one hand, a cigarette in the other, no doubt lamenting the ills of the world. I made my way through Old Town to the city where I would meet Mirsad and his wife, Mirzeta, at the Eternal Flame, a memorial to the military and civilians victims of World War II. I saw them approaching, hand in hand. There was a heavy feeling in the air; I could sense the start of this long journey, and its outcome would soon be in the hands of the citizens of the country.

Together, we walked the streets of Sarajevo. No longer an unknown candidate, Mirsad was stopped countless times by supporters. A shoeshiner crouched to his knees along the walkway, looked up, recognized the presidential candidate, and said, “you have to have clean shoes.” Laughing, Mirsad complied. A German couple traveling with their Hungarian friend had flown in and made arrangements to meet with him. They were there because they wanted to vote in person. Some walked by and did a double-take, mouthing the words, “that’s Mirsad Hadžikadić.”



Street leading to Old Town Sarajevo



Fresh produce stands near Old Town Sarajevo



Baščaršija Square



The Eternal Flame is a memorial to the military and civilian victims of the Second World War in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina



Mirsad looks on as he receives a shoeshine the day before the election



Mirsad meets with a Bosnian couple from Germany who traveled to Bosnia and Herzegovina to vote in person



Mirsad, Mirzeta, and members of his campaign team stop by for some cake and pizza at the birthday party for Amar Avadaković, the son of his dear friend Samir Avadaković



Casa United Restaurant, Sarajevo



Casa United Restaurant, Sarajevo

We walked through the city, soaking it all in. Later, we went to a birthday party for his close friend Samir's son, Amar. With the election looming, Mirsad still made time for his friends and family. We all indulged in pizza and cake, and it was then back out to walk.

We made another stop at a local restaurant, Casa United, where Mirsad met with a small gathering of supporters for food and conversation.

As the sun began to peek behind the neighboring mountains, we made our way back to the Old Town for dinner. The others from his campaign team had gone on their way as they had obligations to prepare for the next day. As we sat for our meal, we chatted about the day and his plans for the next and how it felt to have his name on the ballot.

"It was not an easy feeling," says Mirsad. "The results would determine everything whether we would continue with a good result or be deflated with bad results and figuring out how to rally everyone again. The bottom line was we'd look at the results and the baseline and then determine our next course of action."

Mirsad's only fear was that they might never know the accurate baseline.

He worried that people would support his cause but choose not to vote for fear he wouldn't win. He was also concerned by the inherent electoral fraud that knowingly exists and how many votes he could lose as a result.

We called it a night. Just like I had seen them in the morning, he and Mirzeta walked away, hand in hand. All of the strategizing, grueling hours, sleepless nights, and countless town hall meetings and rallies across Bosnia and Herzegovina had come to an end.

Mirsad and Mirzeta planned to vote in the morning, then again walk the streets as they are allowed to be seen in public on election day. Though he couldn't openly campaign, it would make a statement because an appearance like that from the major parties was totally unheard of. So, he would again walk, meet with people, and wait until the decision of who would govern the country had been made. It was up to the electorate to determine if they believe in Mirsad's message of change and that together, they can be the catalyst of a new Bosnia and Herzegovina. They will determine if Mirsad should be the next Bosniak representative on the Bosnian and Herzegovinian presidential council.

## Election Day

*October 7th*



IT WAS ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL, sunny Fall morning in Sarajevo. I again walked down the long and winding street from my room to Old Sarajevo, en route to the heart of the city. On my way, I took in the melting pot of people more closely, the storied histories, old and new, of the structures lining the walkway and the surrounding mountains with all of their beauty in the morning sun. I reflected on what a historic day this could be for the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I met Mirsad and Mirzeta at our spot near the Eternal Flame. They approached, again walking hand in hand, but it didn't feel the same as yesterday. There was something different about his gate, his countenance, on this election day. Perhaps it was just me, knowing the significance of what he and the Platform had accomplished in such a short period. But as I had grown to know him over time, you just knew the importance and significance of this day for him and possibly the country. We greeted each other with hugs then set off with a few members of his campaign team. We casually made our way to a very narrow side street, so narrow it would have been considered an alley in the States. Mirsad stopped to greet supporters, who wanted to shake his hand and wish him good luck as we made our way to the polling station where he, Mirzeta, and citizens from across Sarajevo would cast their ballots.

As we entered, it was dark and somewhat mysterious and uninviting. We made our way to the top of a short staircase, and then the wait began. I could tell from the look on Mirsad's face that his nerves were churning, but at the same time, he naturally talked and joked with other people in line waiting to cast their ballots.

Only two people at a time were allowed into the voting area. We waited in



Street leading down to Old Town Sarajevo (election day, October 7th)



Baščaršija Square (election day, October 7th)



Above and right: The people of Sarajevo





Pedestrian walkway from Old Town Sarajevo to the city  
(election day, October 7th)



Entrance to the polling station (election day, October 7th)



Mirsad and Mirzeta wait in line to vote in the dimly lit corridor of the polling station

line for half an hour or so before Mirsad and Mirzeta were allowed into the room. Since I wasn't voting, I wasn't allowed to come into the room, but I could see, as the door was cracked just enough, that he and Mirzeta stopped at a table to verify their voter registration and collect their ballots. Then, the doors closed, allowing them to pick Mirsad's name from the list of potential presidential candidates. Minutes later, as the doors reopened, and we could see him and Mirzeta casting their ballots. They then exited the room, and we retreated from the polling station, passing the other citizens waiting to vote and out into the morning sun.

"It was an interesting morning," says Mirsad. "It was the first time I had voted anywhere with my name on the ballot. It was such a different feeling. I actually was surprised at the number of people waiting in line to cast their ballots. But I must say it was a relief to have it over with finally."

The sense of relief was palpable. I could see it on both their faces. Shortly after exiting the voting location, a local TV crew stopped them for a short interview. We then made our way to the main pedestrian walkway, which



Mirsad signing in at polling station



Mirsad casts ballot



A local TV crew interviews Mirsad after voting

leads to Old Sarajevo. A film crew from Germany followed us, documenting his day. We literally couldn't walk more than twenty yards at a time without citizens stopping Mirsad for a handshake, a picture, or well wishes. Eventually, we stopped for a few moments at an outdoor cafe in front of the historic Saint Joseph's Catholic Church.

For Mirsad, this brief pause was a time to reflect on his thoughts about how archaic the voting system is in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He says so much paper is wasted just in the voting process. Several separate forms must be filled out and then placed in the ballot box. So many trees are lost when an electronic process would be so much fairer and less wasteful.

"It is so ironic as you cast your ballot you know how widespread the voter fraud actually is," says Mirsad. "People vote several times. The governing parties have paid off people overseeing the voting process. In some cases, only one party is represented at a polling precinct. On the one hand, there is the appearance of the rigor of the verification process and on the other, the complete disappearance of true democracy."

Mirsad was well aware of this day's significance by the mere fact that his name was on the ballot. Win or lose, that fact alone meant that history was being made. Against all the odds, he had at least come this far. He kept that in his mind and allowed himself to feel pride as he cast his ballot, despite his constant concern over election fraud.

The thought stayed with Mirsad throughout the day. He worried that the fraud would keep him from having any chance of winning, no matter how much support he garnered during the campaign. The ruling parties used corrupt tactics to remain in power. The thought that his new vision of hope and change might not be allowed to materialize was daunting and disturbing.

"Whatever the results, I can't thank my campaign team and all of the volunteers enough for their countless hours of work, creativity, the drive to carry our message out to the citizen of the country," says Mirsad. "Together, we traveled thousands of miles across the country to participate in town hall meetings and campaign rallies and had the opportunity to awaken many to a new message of change and hope for the country. Volunteers who never imagined themselves even voting finding themselves so engaged in the entire process. And to then received their texts telling me that message had awoken them in ways they never thought possible and that they want it all to continue and not stop."

I was listening to Mirsad say this, but I was watching Mirzeta. Her pride

was unmistakable as she listened quietly to the words of her husband. The day was historic for her as well, as she cast her ballot for her husband to be the next president of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She described it as an extraordinary and long-awaited day in so many ways.

“I was very emotional,” says Mirzeta. “I was so nervous that my hands were shaking when checking the box next to his name.” With a smile and a small laugh, she added, “I must have checked the ballot ten times to make sure it was right. I just wanted to make sure they could not say it was an illegal ballot. And what a beautiful sunny day here in Sarajevo. It totally reflects on what is in my heart.”

She shared how proud she was about everything her husband had done and accomplished during the campaign. She was so thankful that she had had the opportunity to meet all of the young people on his team, so full of energy and so trusting in him with great hope for the future.

“It makes you feel so full of happiness for all of them,” she says. “And seeing that maybe this will be the time, the opportunity for them to get a chance to have someone in the presidency who will represent them and push for a change. And those changes will make a difference in the country. I’m just so proud I could be a part of it all.”

Mirzeta also admitted that it has been tough for her. They had been separated for over three months, and though their daily phone calls and video chats helped, she missed his physical presence in her life, the daily interaction, sitting and talking over a morning cup of coffee.

“I also understood the great effort that he had embarked and the journey and what it means for the people,” she says. “And despite missing him, I knew that he is fighting for something much larger. It was great to be able to support him, even though it has not been easy. And we will do it again if we have to make it happen.”

We repeated yesterday’s practice of walking the city. Mirsad received constant well wishes and urges from supporters, young and old, to continue the fight, even if he didn’t win. His message and platform inspired such a strong sense of pride and gratification in these people. Because of their support, Mirsad felt more encouraged than ever to turn the movement into a lasting structure, formal enough to establish a veritable political party.

At the end of the day, a proud but visibly tired man and his wife proceeded back to the city hand in hand to prepare for the gathering that evening with campaign members and friends to await the election results.



Mirsad and Mirzeta make their way to Old Town Sarajevo



Supporters greet Mirsad as he walks the streets on this historic election day

## Awaiting the Results

That evening, nearly 100 supporters gathered with Mirsad at a local cafe, My Face, to await the results. Campaign staffers, family, and friends, all eager and anxious to hear the results of the day. Some were convinced that Mirsad would be elected as the next president. Some were cautiously optimistic after all of their efforts. Others were pragmatic about their chances, steeling themselves for a country that wasn't ready for Mirsad's vision and preparing to fight again in four years.

Cigarette smoke wafted through the air as we glued our eyes on the huge wall screen, awaiting updates. As the early results came in, they showed that Mirsad was polling well in the top three. This brought out a cheer from the crowd. I could see hope dawning on their faces, that maybe they were going to pull this off. People started talking amongst themselves, expressing their support for Mirsad and his accomplishments in the few short months of his campaign. Everyone was genuinely proud to be a part of this historical time in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Supporters greet Mirsad as he walks the streets on this historic election day



Supporters greet Mirsad as he walks the streets on this historic election day



Awaiting the returns at My Face in Sarajevo

The election was looking good for Mirsad early in the night, but as more results came in, the reality began sinking in that he would not be the next president. A crowd that previously buzzed with hopeful energy now deflated as it became clear that it would not be the day for Mirsad and the Platform. Some were devastated, others accepting, but many, especially the younger members of the campaign, looked fierce in their determination. They looked as if it was not a defeat but rather just the first hurdle in their fight to change the country.

One of the determined people in the room was Lana Bečjragić. Lana had served as Mirsad's campaign events logistics coordinator and eventually became his executive assistant during the campaign. As the results came in, and it was becoming apparent that Mirsad was not going to win, she said it wasn't so much about the win on this day but what he had brought to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"In the beginning, his campaign made me feel alive; something woke up inside of me," says Lana. "And based on the 57,000 people who voted for him today, it is a good start, something to build on. He really woke up the youth



Awaiting the returns at My Face in Sarajevo

with his message and many others who hadn't voted before. And in their hearts, they had found someone who cares, who they could vote for."

Throughout the campaign, Mirsad preached to his team that it was not about him but the message. He wanted to clarify that he wasn't committing to running again in four years if he lost this election. He wanted the momentum to be for the movement, not necessarily the candidate. If he lost, he would either run again or perhaps groom someone younger to carry his mantle. For Lana, she hopes that he chooses the former.

"The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina want a strong leader, someone they can identify with," says Lana. "They love him because he cares about who you are and why you do things. If it is good for the country, then it is good for him. He needs to run again. I think he is just crazy enough to change the world, and I want to be a part of it for sure."

Dženita Pašić was another influential person on Mirsad's campaign team. Sharing Lana's determination and support, she handled all marketing, communications, and public relations throughout the campaign. She and Lana spent countless hours traversing the country in their efforts to reach as many people as possible with the message of personal responsibility for the change that was necessary for the country.

The evening wound down into the wee hours of the morning, and people began filtering out. In the end, it was just Mirsad, a cigar in hand, speaking

with the handful of campaign workers who remained. There seemed to be a sense of relief on their faces that the long haul was over, for now. There was also disappointment, but never defeat. They had lost the election, but not their spirit or their hope. There was a real sense of accomplishment. The fight would continue. Stubbing out his cigar, Mirsad hugged the remaining staffers and took his leave. We exited into the early morning air, wondering what the future would hold.

## Pausing to Reflect the Day After



### Winning Doesn't Necessarily Make You the Next President

Bosnia and Herzegovina's electorate had spoken, and Mirsad was not elected to be the next Bosniak representative on the three-member presidential council. To no surprise, Šefik Džaferović of the SDA nationalist party was elected to the Bosniak Presidential Council seat. The SDA has been in and out of power following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early '90s. It is now the largest party in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Of the six candidates, Mirsad, an independent, finished fourth behind the well-established and well-funded candidates of various national parties. In Sarajevo, though, he finished strong in third, outpolling one of the heavily favored candidates from a national party. When all of the absentee ballots were finally counted, Mirsad received over 57,000 votes nationwide. Even though he didn't win, this result was staggering, considering Mirsad was an independent, relatively unknown back in May. He started with an underfunded campaign compared to the competition, piecing together a team one day at a time. By the end of August, he had gained enough momentum to spark the hope that would ignite a fire within his core group of supporters.

Mirsad, Mirzeta, and I met in Old Sarajevo in the late morning after the election. We sat beneath a canopy at an outdoor restaurant as a slight drizzle tapped out a tune above us. He reflected meeting people in the streets the day before, seeing their enthusiasm as they rooted for his victory. When we gathered to watch the results, he thought about his supporters and their high hopes as he moved up rapidly in the polls. But as the results began to come in, so did the reality of what he and his campaign had been up against since the beginning. The truth was that they never had an organized party behind

them, limited access to the media, and no established party infrastructure. In the end, it was no win but an excellent result, he says.

“What’s good about it is that nobody has ever done anything like this before,” says Mirsad. “As an independent candidate, we received close to 60,000 votes or ten percent of the overall vote. We were actually better than several of the parties who had the infrastructure behind them, and suddenly we became a force. Everyone today is talking about the fact that we received so many votes. Talk shows and social media, everyone is talking today about keeping me here as a political resource and how to engage me in future conversations about the government structures. And supporters already talking about forming an organized political party and continuing the momentum.”

Mirsad pointed out that the expert analysts knew how bad the political situation was. They understood that votes would be stolen and how important campaign infrastructure is in this part of the world. In Bosnian politics, the infrastructure of a party is more important than the issues it backs. People depend on the ruling parties for their livelihoods. They are afraid to vote against the parties that have the power to provide or revoke their livelihoods. Because of this, the experts predicted Mirsad would receive between 25,000-30,000 votes. He received twice that much. Mirsad, a scientist at his core, looked to math to show how strong his base actually was.

“We received almost 60,000 votes, which equates to a base of about 120,000 supporters,” says Mirsad. “You multiply by two based on the fact that there were those who voted out of fear for the ruling parties, even though they knew I was the best candidate for them. Many voted for other candidates because they didn’t think I had a chance to win. Votes are also stolen as a result of the known corruption that exists within the existing political system. And we also lost votes as Bosnians, who could have voted for me, decided instead to vote for the Croat presidential candidate, Željko Komšić, to prevent his nationalist opponent from retaining power.”

Though better than expected, the numbers still show that Mirsad, or anyone else running under his platform, has a lot of work ahead to make real progress in overturning the current political climate. The odds were against him from the start, but that never stopped him from fighting, and his campaign proves that there are options for a new political force to be introduced.

One day after the election, Mirsad was already considering his next moves. Should he focus on turning his campaign into a bonafide political party? What steps would he need to take to make it happen? His mind was reeling



Mirsad, Mirzeta, and Clark at Metropolis in Old Sarajevo

with the possibilities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it's all about the political power play. The parties don't deal with or address the issues; they just try to figure out how to stay in power, take all of the money, and control the people.

"Honestly, I would have liked to have won, but it was unrealistic," says Mirsad. "What was realistic—and why I got into this in the first place—was to change the discourse and to have name recognition, which we did. That we could create a new political option, which we did, resulting in young voters coming out to support us. In the end, the results were better than anyone had expected (except for our die-hard supporters who really thought we could win)."

His plans would have to wait, though. The first order of business was to comfort his supporters, who believed that the Platform needed to win right away. He needed to explain to them that winning was always a longshot and that it was really about the long game. They had lost the battle but not the war.

Over the next few days, the ruling coalitions would be established. Then, the Platform needed to regroup, get organized, and plan for the future. As for Mirsad's future and whether he will run for president again, only time will tell. Many supporters were already urging Mirsad to begin his next campaign, saying they couldn't do it without him. But as he emphasized from the beginning, he never wanted to build a base for just one person. To him, being president wasn't about people voting for him, but for his party and the principles it stands on.

"I will be there to support the Platform," says Mirsad. "Whether I run again is highly unlikely. I will support and help groom someone younger. Help to establish them and give them name recognition across the country. They need someone new to lift them up and give them a sense of direction. It is all about the party and the message, not one person, as that is the receipt for failure."

Mirsad believes that the political process was changed with his candidacy. He feels it will have a lasting impact. The country saw a sophisticated, honest, and high-integrity campaign with defined issues, and he was proud of that. Though too modest to admit it himself, Mirsad started a historic movement for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"I'm glad I did it. And I must admit I'm glad it's over." And with a grin on his face added, "I just realized I don't have ten meetings today, and I forgot to shave this morning."

## The Next Steps



IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING the election, Mirsad received many texts and emails from around the country. A lot of the messages were from people apologizing for voting against him. They explained that they had cast their votes for others because they feared a vote for him would be wasted, as they believed he had no chance to win. But after seeing the results of the election, they realized that he indeed could have won. He was a viable candidate with his message of hope and change for the country. There was also a lot of talk surfacing around the country by many of the other party leaders about his results and what it meant for the country to move forward. The numbers were now also indicating that the Platform had approximately 120,000 supporters.

“We had instantly gone from a sense of wow on October 8th to a sense of euphoria just the following day,” says Mirsad. “People were saying ‘this is a force’ and urging me to stay and continue the fight together. People who had been backing other parties were now voicing their support for us. It then became obvious that we needed to act quickly and plan our strategy moving forward.”

Mirsad and his team members met to lay the groundwork to establish the Platform for Progress as a political organization. The Platform published an electronic membership application, and within a couple of days, over 1,500 citizens had applied for membership. They also decided to hold the first Constitutional Assembly of the Platform for Progress, mandated by law, on November 25th. This date was significant for two reasons. First, it was the official statehood day of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And second, on this day in 1943, Bosnia and Herzegovina was re-established by the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia and declared an equal community of Serbs, Muslims, and Croats.

The Platform had begun establishing a national advisory board tasked

with addressing the country's long-term needs and how the Platform can align itself with those needs now and in the future. They also established a presidential governing board with member representatives for the country's youth, women, and the diaspora.

"We literally have been inundated by those from across the country who now want to be a part of our movement," says Mirsad. "We ran on the promise that we would be all-inclusive as that is how a democracy works. We now must vet those who want to be a part to ensure they live up to the standards as outlined by the Platform."

Mirsad and his team were already strategizing the best candidates for the local elections in 2020 and the general elections again in 2022. The process for choosing a candidate was in the early stages. However, Mirsad believed that they would be prepared to present the best candidates for mayorships and town hall seats.

"The process of selecting the best candidates is very exciting for me," says Mirsad. "The opportunity to really change the country by pushing people to do what they are not comfortable doing. Finding young people, training them, working with them, and emphasizing the importance of becoming politically engaged to bring about change. I very much look forward to this process the opportunity to help them shape their minds not only for their benefit but for the benefit of the country."

This progress was all a result of the Platform's accomplishments during the general election. The Platform proved that it was a real political force—one of integrity, capability, and democracy for the country.

## Taking in What Has All Transpired

Even though he didn't win, Mirsad barely had time to rest after the election. There was much to do in a short amount of time. The urgency was buoyed by the unprecedented success of and positive response to Mirsad's run for president. The Platform was eager to tap into the country's excitement and momentum as it gained supporters.

"I literally had no idea how all of this was going to turn out," says Mirsad. "It is quite gratifying to see how well accepted my message was by the citizens of the country and how well I have been accepted as a catalyst for change. I wanted to change the political discourse of the country—which

happened—and I am humbled daily by the number of people who approach me asking how they can contribute or engage in the political process.”

Mirsad had a greater sense of responsibility and obligation to his new supporters. The challenge now was turning it into meaningful action, a movement that can really change Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. He wanted to be very strategic as he explained what happened and what it all meant moving forward. He emphatically expressed that this does not become a counter personality, as he would not allow his name to be included or associated with the Movement.

“I realize that our followers view me as the person who made all of this happen,” he says. “It is a tremendous dilemma as there are those telling me that Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to see a leader, that they are used to seeing me, and that I must run again. I’m not afraid of being a leader, but I do not want a system built around me. It must be built around processes and the empowerment of the young people of the country to enforce and be a part of the change.”

Being the current leader and the one to find the next leader was an intriguing quandary. He hoped to find and groom a younger candidate to continue the vision and hope for change. Mirsad wanted to act in the background to ensure the next candidate would continue to have integrity and promote the Platform’s ideals.

Finding a worthy candidate to mentor was more valuable to Mirsad than serving in office. His goal wasn’t to serve but to make things better. Grooming this person and being involved in building the infrastructure were most important.

## The First Negative Shots Fired

Two weeks after the election, a scathing article appeared in the *Bosnia Times* attacking Mirsad from all sides. It was authored by an affiliate of the Party of Democratic Action, one of the country’s major ruling parties, which controls much of the media. Many within the Platform, particularly the young, were outraged and wanted to fight back, as they denounced the article as slander. Mirsad, conversely, wasn’t upset by the article. He explained that this was a clear sign that the message of the Platform was being heard. The Party of Democratic Action wouldn’t have published it if they didn’t feel threatened.

“I told our members that countering with a blow of our own on social media was exactly what they wanted,” says Mirsad. “That it would do nothing but give them oxygen by paying attention to the false allegations. I reiterated these claims were not true, so who cares.”

Though not surprising, Mirsad admits that the first shots across the bow were starting much earlier than expected. He felt the first onslaught would come six months or so after the Constitutional Assembly. But it happened only weeks after the election and came from one of the country’s most established political parties.

“The attack,” says Mirsad, “was too obvious, too naive, and much too predictable. I just didn’t anticipate it coming this soon. The battle has already begun.”

### Establishing a Presence Across the Country

The Platform successfully got its message in front of a lot of people in a short period of time before the election. However, as the Platform grew and would officially be formed as a political organization, they needed to change their strategy. The focus wasn’t just on introducing a new message but also becoming well established in cities, towns, and cantons (a combination of counties). The question was where to focus.

During the campaign, Mirsad had been fighting against the cantons. He argued that the cantons were an administrative burden on the entire country, which was already strapped for resources. He spoke about the need to eliminate them altogether. The cantons are only located in the Federation, which represents mostly the Bosniak and Croat populations, not the Republika Srpska, which is also part of the country. His plan was to create a new structure that didn’t rely on the cantons but was modeled on his organization, mimicking what the country should be.

This would entail eliminating the cantons and administratively organizing the country into six well-defined economic regions that are meaningful due to their connectivity, geography, resources, etc. Then, recognizing those regions, becoming established there, and then following those regions towards the best future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. They would cross the boundaries of the Republika Srpska and the Federation, thus emphasizing the need for cross-collaboration of the people. The Diaspora would represent the seventh region.

“This is one of the many issues we face,” says Mirsad. “Whatever we do will have to have an explanation and justification as to why we are doing it that way. So, we are trying to figure out if we can behave the way we want the country to behave so we can show a living, breathing example of what this thing should be.”

The Platform has to learn how to be flexible and allow the local entities to make their own decisions while preserving the principles and capabilities of acting as one organization. The flexibility for every region and city to try their own thing without getting guidelines, directions, and commands from the center would be a true example of democracy working as it should.

“When I look at all of the parties in the country,” says Mirsad, “they mimic the political organization of the communist party, which was the only game in town at the time. When it crumbled, those who organized new parties had come from the communist party. Therefore, if you look at their bylaws, they directly reflect those of the communist party, and the Platform doesn’t want to do that. Perhaps it was good for a one-party system, but it is not good for democracy where people have more rights to express themselves at various levels of the organizational hierarchy.”

Mirsad admits this approach would be controversial. It will be all-inclusive and allow those from other parties to join the Platform, though many members have expressed their displeasure with allowing those from other parties—“outsiders and bad guys,” as they call them—to become members. Mirsad reminded them that “they need to be reformed as well.” He said welcoming others does not mean they will not be held accountable. Who can represent the party, who can be members of its boards, who can become a candidate for the upcoming local elections, will be part of the extensive vetting process. But he says they need to let them in.

“I again remind our people we are beyond the concept of a party,” he says. “We are looking at the best way to restructure the country and move it in the right direction. We are going to surprise a lot of people along the way, including ourselves. We will set new standards and make mistakes along the way. But we will also have some very cool outcomes at the same time. I’m really looking forward to it all.”

Mirsad found it interesting that other parties and politicians were claiming the same things—that new systems of values were needed; that politics can be great and wonderful; that the country can be a high integrity place, and the people must insist on that.

“I have no idea if this is a reflection of what we have been talking about for the last five months or not,” says Mirsad. “But it is wonderful that other people are now talking about it. Politics can have integrity and be beautiful and desirable, not because of the power but because of its impact on society. I’m feeling really good about what I’m hearing; it’s very exciting.”

## Planning for the Constitutional Assembly



MIRSAD AND HIS TEAM knew of the Constitutional Assembly's importance and the significance of holding it on November 25th, Statehood Day. In 1943, the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was formed, restoring the statehood of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and declaring it a country that belongs neither to Muslims, Croats, or Serbs, but one of equal rights for all citizens.

"This will be the most important event thus far in the life of the Platform for Progress," says Mirsad. "We will be bringing a larger group of supporters to the same location. We will announce the official formation of the Platform for Progress. We will define and send our message to the populous of who we are—that we are exciting, energetic, positive, hopeful, and driven by the country's youth. And to send the message that we are a new political force on the stage in Bosnia."

Holding the assembly on Statehood Day also emphasized the start of a new beginning for the country. One in which it could regain its original status as a sovereign country with well-defined borders, which had previously been dissolved as a result of the Dayton Accords. Now, through a united effort, Mirsad's team had the opportunity to steer the country back to a clearly defined nationality.

### Prepping for the Assembly

The first Constitutional Assembly of the Platform for Progress was only two weeks away, and there was a lot to be done before then. First, they needed to finalize the Platform's organizational structure, which was completely different from any other party in the country's political history. Then, they needed to send members a draft of the final set of by-laws and programmatic docu-

ments, which defined the Platform's political agenda. Finally, they needed to complete the list of the most qualified candidates to be the Platform's governing board. These individuals were not required to have a political background, but they did need a track record of honorable behavior. It was also imperative to equally represent the country's youth, genders, and all nationalities and religions. The goal was to stack the governing board with individuals who would act as carriers of change in their local communities. To complicate matters further, they only had 25 minutes to address these topics as well as all the required formalities.

"We were committed to being the first to introduce an electronic voting experience," says Mirsad. "Our plan was to allow all members—in-person and virtually—the opportunity to vote and see real-time results. Of course, we wanted to introduce this at the Assembly to show the effectiveness of the process with the hope of bringing it into political practice moving forward. We also planned to introduce Tech Cloud, a graphical interpretation of people's locations. We must show that we are different than others—that our standards are much higher—while knowing, at the same time, that one mistake could bring us right back into the mix with the ruling parties in the minds of many."

Mirsad admitted his surprise and pride at how far the Platform has come since his campaign began in May. Change began at the grassroots level. The people finally had a chance to disrupt the political process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"The whole world is going through an evolution that we did not expect 15-20 years ago," says Mirsad. "The light of change, the 'spark' can come from anywhere, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is as good a place as any. It's like a small laboratory environment but complex enough for any other place to emulate if it is working well."

## The Growing Sense of Discontent

The first Congressional Assembly of the Platform for Progress came at a time of gloom and discontent. The Platform was making strides, but the country still faced the same problems as the election results indicated. The Nationalists had won again, and the country's power structure remained fragmented, as none of the ruling parties held a majority. No coalition would assume and lead the government at any level. There was bickering from neighboring

countries, such as Croatia, who argued the validity of the individual elected to the Croat presidential council seat.

Additionally, the nationalist parties continued to sow fear by proclaiming that a war would break out if citizens didn't vote for them. Mirsad felt there was no validity to these rumors, that it was just a tactic to manipulate the population into maintaining the status quo. He didn't believe anyone wants, needs, or gains from war.

"All are clear examples of why the Platform is more important now than ever," says Mirsad. "Our goals are in place for the local elections and the general election in 2022. We intend to have enough elected representatives at all levels in order to be a part of the majority."

Mirsad believes that all three sides—the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, each with its own nationalist party—are guilty of the fear-mongering and colluding with each other. They have figured out the winning formula to remain in power: controlling media, companies, and the movement of money, goods, and information.

"There is a part of the population that believes in the message of fear, which the nationalist parties use in their favor," says Mirsad. "This all influences us greatly, and it makes our task even harder moving forward. Nationalist parties literally buy votes by giving people jobs. Imagine 30 percent of the working population is employed by public institutions owned by the nationalist parties. These people will never vote differently in fear of losing their jobs and its impact on their families. So, the longer we wait, the harder it will be to bring about change as more and more people will be on the payrolls of public institutions."

In lieu of this, the number of potential votes for a Platform candidate is shrinking daily. Public companies are hiring extraneous or unqualified staff, pulling tax money from the company to fund elections, forming boards that are not capable or qualified to oversee companies, and appointing CEOs that know nothing about the industry. If companies go under because of mismanagement, they will all lose their jobs anyway. Mirsad and the Platform are committed to exposing the existing corruption and telling those most impacted that it is not in their best interest to follow the party's will or whims blindly. By doing so, they will also be working against the good of their children and all children.

"Our message of hope and change and that things can be done differently for the betterment of the country, and its people will continue," says Mirsad.

“We will continue to push for mandatory electronic voting, which would allow 75-80 percent of the population to vote in true anonymity, which is impossible now because the process is so controlled. Within a year, we could become a very prosperous society if the citizens are empowered to do so through their votes. I’m bullish for making the change despite those who don’t believe it. We just need to give them the mechanism to utilize their inherent power to make a change.”

## The First Constitutional Assembly

*November 25th, 2018*



THE FIRST CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY was held on a rainy day in Sarajevo at Dom Mladih - Skenderija, a youth center that is part of a large entertainment and sports complex nestled in the city's heart. Mirsad, Mirzeta, and some neighbors arrived early for the 4:00 pm event. As they got out of their taxi in the falling rain, he noticed the huge line of people waiting outside the center. He remembered thinking how cool the sight was as, "Bosnians are not known for standing peacefully and not trying to get in front of each other."

As they entered the center, he felt a sense of anticipation as to just how large the crowd might be. A huge crowd surrounded the registration table. Mirsad commented to one of the campaign volunteers that they might fill the facility with this many people. To his surprise, the volunteer told him the facility was already full. He was shocked! The event didn't start for another 45 minutes. The huge crowd of people, if they could get in, would have to stand.

"We had hoped there would be some 800 in attendance, which would have filled the venue," says Mirsad. "However, in the end, there were some 1,200 in attendance, 400 of whom had to stand. There were VIPs, ambassadors, and presidents of other parties who came and had to stand because others had already taken their seats and would not leave."

The event was unlike any the citizens had ever seen before. It was more of a celebration than the traditional assembly. There was a high-tech vibe as members of the audience and the diaspora viewing the event could vote electronically. There were large displays placed around the room, so all could see the result of the voting and a sound system that met with the approval of Mirsad, who loves impeccable sound at such events.



Dom Mladih-Skenderija Youth Center



Inaugural Constitutional Assembly of the Platform for Progress, November 15, 2018



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The program started with a recording of Bosnia and Herzegovina's national anthem, followed by singing the Platform for Progress's anthem, led by Alen Lemešević, who composed the piece. As he had done throughout the campaign at many of the rallies and town hall meetings, Josip Pejaković opened with eloquent remarks about the Platform and the work of Mirsad. Afterward, Mirsad stepped on stage to make his remarks. The crowd exploded as soon as he appeared, all cheering and eager to hear his words. He once again spoke of his vision of hope and change for the country—what had been accomplished in just a few short months and what needed to be done moving forward to bring democracy to the country.

In the end, he explained that none of this was possible without their help. The citizens must be involved and take ownership of the country's dire political climate. They were responsible for those currently in power and had the same power to change the course moving into the future. Together, he explained, the course could be changed towards a brighter future for all. Mirsad assured the crowd that he would do everything in his power to make the country a better place, and he would do everything he could to achieve this goal.

The event concluded with the traditional agenda, as dictated for any Constitutional Assembly, which included the approval of the bylaws of the Platform, the election of members of many of the newly established boards of the Platform, and the members of the Presidential Committee. Mirsad was chosen to be the president of the Platform for Progress, the newly formed political organization.

Mirsad called the whole experience magical. He admitted he had to fight back the tears on numerous occasions when addressing the excited audience and openly accepting the challenges that lie ahead.

"I have always believed that what we have been talking about for the last several months is relevant to the long-term success of the country," says Mirsad. "But it is gratifying when you see more and more people who believe in the same thing. People were standing in the crowd, just to be a part of it. I have no emotional sense of it all being rewarding, but a reassurance that we are on the right path and that something very important will happen if we do our part."

Mirsad reemphasized that he started this journey earlier in the year because of his personal duty and responsibility to the country to help bring about change. He says it is not about taking stock of what has been accom-

plished over the last several months and being proud of what he can accomplish. Though a historic day for the Platform, Mirsad says for him, it is just a sense that the journey has started with two prevailing thoughts in mind: first, the overall goal, and second, doing everything in his power to make the country a better place.

“After the assembly, I kept thinking about the people leaving,” says Mirsad. “Did they like what they had heard and seen? Many had come up to me afterward saying that they liked my talk, that the assembly was great. Thanking me for giving them hope, the courage, and new-found energy to take personal responsibility and be a part of the change. But in the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but think, did they really mean it, or were they just trying to be nice on this eventful day? The questions of ‘did we accomplish our goals?’ and ‘where do we go from here?’ will continue to ruminate in my mind.”

It is the norm for Mirsad, despite his successes, not to dwell on what has been accomplished or take credit for it. He was already looking ahead to the challenges of finding the right people to represent the Platform in the local elections in the Fall of 2020, and of course, the presidential elections in 2022—a daunting task, but a challenge he is more than willing to accept.

“This is a crucial and critical time for the Platform, the people, and the country as a whole,” says Mirsad. “The assembly was a big event, and I hope, in time, it will be seen as a historic event. But I know that I, the people with me and around me, will absolutely do everything to make sure this change actually happens. I will not be disappointed or question my decisions if it does not, nor will I be proud and take the credit if it does. I will not rest or tire until my goal is satisfied, nor will I ever be satisfied no matter what because it can always be better.”

Thus, the official dawning of the Platform for Progress has come, and along with it, the Odyssey for Democracy.

Mirsad Hadžkadić never planned for a life in politics. Yet, in 2018, he decided to run for the Bosniak presidential council seat in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mirsad made the life-changing decision to run, despite the fact that he had a successful, 30-year career as a professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and very little experience in politics outside of academia. However, a conversation with a dear friend from Sarajevo planted the idea in his mind. Samir Avdaković suggested that he run for office because “there may never be another election in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the country as we know it will probably disintegrate.” The words rumbled within Mirsad’s mind for the next several months, and he thought to himself, “if what Samir says is so, who am I, because of the comforts I have, to decide not to even try?”

After announcing his intentions on national TV in January of 2018, Mirsad began this journey in earnest in May of 2018 by building a campaign from the ground up with the hope of instilling a vision of hope and change and shifting the country’s political discourse. However, he soon learned that the odds were stacked against him. He only had five months and limited funds to prove to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina that he deserved their votes. And so, he took his meager funds, limited time, and infinite passion to do just that. He toured the country, meeting and talking with citizens, to share his vision of hope and change.

Though Mirsad was not victorious on October 7th, his results were deemed historic and unprecedented. A relatively unknown, underfunded independent candidate managed to receive 60,000 votes or 10% of the total votes cast. And, despite the defeat, Mirsad succeeded in spearheading a democratic movement, resulting in the formation of the Platform for Progress political organization in November of 2018 and the official dawning of *The Odyssey for Democracy*.



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