

# the dominance of ethnic parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue

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Ethnic parties have dominated politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) for over 25 years. While some narratives look towards multi-ethnic parties as vehicles for political change, I argue that this is not supported by empirical evidence. Ethnic party politics are inherent to consociational democracy in BiH and it is possible to distinguish four separate party subsystems defined by ethnicity. Electoral support is constant over time for parties of the same ethnic category with negligible cross-ethnic voting. The narratives of (ethnic) party leaders reflect and reinforce this system. It is not feasible to expect change from multi-ethnic politics in a country whose institutions are built on the notion of ethnic representation.

## BiH democracy: a competitive struggle for the ethnic vote

Political parties are central to representative democracy. They have a key role to coordinate between elected leaders and citizens as the link between citizens' interests and the political system of a country. Through elections the party system is bound to reflect social cleavages and divisions within society and this is no different in BiH. Since the first elections in 1990, parties representing the three main ethnic groups have dominated BiH politics, while multiethnic and non-ethnic parties have not managed to take hold across the whole country. The narratives of party leaders also reflect this divide, in contrast to narratives by (mostly) international actors that see multiethnic parties as vehicles of change. Essentially it is possible

The main goal of consociational democracy is to govern social cleavages in non-violent ways through electoral and communicative practices. Party elites cultivate narratives that reinforce social cleavages while competing to win the most votes among their ethnic group. The consociational political system of BiH emphasizes competition between parties of the same ethnic affiliation, while inter-ethnic electoral competition is minimized. However, this was realized at the cost of reinforcing societal divisions and splitting the electorate along ethnic lines.

to speak of a divided party system in BiH, or more precisely of a party system with several distinct party subsystems. This setup favors ethnic parties and makes multiethnic politics especially difficult.

Political parties form around politically relevant social cleavages. In much of Western Europe these include relations between center and periphery, religious and secular, urban and rural, economic cleavages between capital and labor, as well as materialist and post-materialist values.<sup>1</sup> Party interactions and competition along such cleavages are what constitutes a party sys-

<sup>1</sup> Lipset, S.M. & Rokkan, S. (eds.). 1967. *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: The Free Press.

tem.<sup>2</sup> For a long time in BiH confessional affiliation was the only politically relevant factor. In the absence of a unifying nation-building process, social movements based on faith led to the emergence of three main ethno-political groups, along the religious divide of the population. Thus, Croat parties developed that were affiliated with the Catholic church, just like Serb parties close to Orthodox Christian institutions, and Bosniak parties with ties to the Islamic Community in BiH. As a rejection of politicized religion, secular parties emerged with strong links to organized labor. All this happened in the late 19th and early 20th century.

During the first democratic elections in 1990, this initial form of party system was re-established after decades of one-party rule. The dominance of the secular Communist Party of Yugoslavia was challenged by three ethnic parties that brought together Croatian, Serb or Bosniak members but with a great diversity of interests within each party. At this moment we could rather speak of three national movements of the particular ethnic groups, which also incorporated the narratives and political heritage of national and cultural organizations and parties from the early 20th century. The decisive victory of the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA), the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS), and the Croatian Democratic Union BiH (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica BiH, HDZBiH) in these elections shaped a multi-party system predominantly based on ethnicity. The three parties, in addition to the former Communist Party, now called the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska partija, SDP) form the four main segments within the contemporary BiH party system. All new parties today were primarily established through splits within these four core parties, and only occasionally through the transformation of previously existing societal organizations.

While the first elections brought ethnic interests to the forefront, wartime events and the post-war political system further reinforced their dominance. The political system established through the Dayton Peace Agreement placed an emphasis on the institutionalization of ethnicity through a consociational model of democracy. The main goal of consociational democracy is to

govern social cleavages in non-violent ways through electoral and communicative practices. Party elites cultivate narratives that reinforce social cleavages while competing to win the most votes among their ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> The consociational political system of BiH emphasizes competition between parties of the same ethnic affiliation, while inter-ethnic electoral competition is minimized. However, this was realized at the cost of reinforcing societal divisions and splitting the electorate along ethnic lines.

Today, political contest in BiH takes place within ethnically defined segments of the population, creating three ethnically bound party subsystems with a high degree of independence, in addition to one less well defined non-ethnic party subsystem. This can be empirically verified by looking at voting patterns for ethnically defined party groups across time for the BiH Parliament. Using Sartori's terminology, in BiH we can identify a complex party system with a dominant role for the three ethnically defined party sub-systems and one non-ethnic party subsystem.

## the four party subsystems of BiH

The elections for the House of Representatives of the BiH Parliament are the only contest in which all relevant political parties in the country compete against each other. Between 1996 and 2014, seven elections were held with 114 political organizations filing candidates, out of which 93 were political parties and 21 pre-electoral coalitions.<sup>4</sup> Both the coalitions and the parties running in elections regularly changed and only two parties ran independently in all seven elections. The vast majority of parties and coalitions, more precisely 58%, won seats only in a single election, while only one quarter won seats in more than two elections.

While this hints at significant and persistent shifts in voter support, a more detailed analysis is needed. In order to do so, the measure of electoral volatility is used, which looks at the total change of electoral

2 Sartori, G. 2005. *Parties and Party Systems*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

3 Deschouwer, K. 2001. Freezing pillars and frozen cleavages: party systems and voter alignments in the consociational democracies. In: Karvonen, L. & Kuhnle, S. (eds.) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments Revisited*. London & New York: Routledge.

4 Author's calculations based on data from: BiH Central Election Commission (Središnje izborno povjerenstvo). 2018. Statistike i rezultat izbora. <http://www.izbori.ba/>, accessed 16 03 2018.

*Derelict buildings in Sarajevo city center plastered with 2016 election campaign posters, klix.ba, Photo by Nedim Grabovica*



support for parties from one election to the next.<sup>5</sup> General volatility for the BiH Parliament elections is very high, tentatively suggesting an extremely unstable party system. There is also significant change over time where voter support shifted by 30% to 74% between two elections. Even if we take into account changing pre-electoral coalitions, the values still range between 18% and 29%. This, however, does not mean that voters in BiH are willing to support any political alternative.

In order to test shifts in voter support between ethnic and multiethnic parties, the 114 political organizations are divided into four general categories based on the criterion of ethnic representation.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, any party can be identified as Croat, Bosniak, Serb or multi-ethnic and any coalition can equally be grouped into one of these four categories. Electoral volatility between the four categories is very low, with an average of 5.8%. This means that there is almost no shift of votes between parties that belong to different ethnic categories. For example, voters will always choose to vote for a Bosniak party, even though their choice of particular Bosniak party can change. Especially voters that voted for Serb or Croat parties almost never vote outside of their ethnic category (on average 1.6%), which limits the ability of multi-ethnic parties to attract such voters.

Using electoral volatility, it is empirically possible to identify four distinct party subsystems in BiH based on ethno-political social cleavages. In such a segmented multi-party system, electoral competition is focused on winning votes from one's own ethnic group and there is virtually no cross-ethnic voting. Among the parties within the

same subsystems there is negligible political distance. Instead of aiming to generate broad political support, political narratives focus on how to best represent the interests of one's own ethnic group. The resulting narratives employed by leaders of ethnic parties often lead to ethnic outbidding and neglect cooperative discourses.

## uncooperative elites in a consociational democracy

Elections and electoral campaigns are a regular feature of politics in BiH. Alternating between the local and national levels, elections are held every two years.<sup>7</sup> This creates an atmosphere of continuous electoral contest framed in the terms of the ethnic party subsystems within which competition occurs. Narratives employed by political parties and their leaders are thus largely directed towards their ethnic electorates and serve to mobilize and coalesce voters.

Take for example three common narratives, those of ethnic federalism, referendums, and centralization, that are differently perceived within each ethnic party category.

Ethnic federalism, strongly ingrained within the narrative of a third Croat-dominated subnational entity, is supported by almost all Croat political parties. HDZBiH especially uses the narrative in an attempt to push for more group autonomy. At the same time this narrative is vilified by Bosniak and multi-ethnic parties as it runs against their narrative for more centralized and effective policy-making. What could be framed as a debate on decentralization becomes distorted into an ethnic competition. Both narratives serve not to shift voters between party subsystems, but rather to boost political support for parties that best represent group interests within their own ethnic categories.

Another example is the use of the referendum narrative amongst Serb parties. In this case an enacted consultative referendum on judicial authority and a proposed referendum on secession were strategically employed by the Serb-dominated Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, SNSD) in the runup to several recent elections. By creating a common and undisputable cause within their ethnic party subsystem, the

<sup>5</sup> As the House of Representatives of the BiH Parliament has only 42 members, the measure of electoral volatility is based on the volatility of votes instead of seats as this is more precise.

<sup>6</sup> Chandra, K. 2011. What is an ethnic party, *Party Politics* 17(2): 151-169.

<sup>7</sup> Elections at the entity and cantonal levels are held simultaneously with national elections.

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ruling party of Republika Srpska was effectively able to sideline all opposition as passive bystanders during the pre-electoral campaign. Simultaneously, the referendum narrative provoked a strong reaction from Bosniak parties, which coalesced voters of both ethnic party subsystems.

Such political narratives are self-serving and further the divisions within the BiH party system. On the one hand, they solidify the ethnic party subsystems and prevent the loss of cross-ethnic voters by creating a strong difference between us and them. On the other hand, they allow for a more radical expression of ethnic interests and competition among parties of the same ethnic category at who best represents the group.

As such, all ethnic political narratives have to be seen through the lens of electoral politics, as their main purpose is generating voter support.

High stakes policies, such as the recent reform of the electoral law, are viewed along these conflicting narratives. In all its iterations the proposal for electoral law reform exclusively deals with notions of descriptive representation by linking the electoral choice of voters to the dominant ethnicity of electoral units. As a result, parties in BiH ensure that they are not just an expression of voters' choice but the main guarantor of ethnic self-governance, replacing state institutions as the primary mechanism to ensure group representation. ■■■