



BIH'S POLITICAL PARTIES: AGENTS OF CHANGE OR STATUS QUO?

Enes Turbić

BIH'S POLITICAL PARTIES: AGENTS OF CHANGE OR STATUS QUO?

Enes Turbić

- What is the actual impact of political parties on the social development of BiH - do they contribute to stabilization or act as a factor of destabilization?
- To what extent do political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfil their pre-election promises, and what institutional or societal mechanisms exist for monitoring their implementation?
- What is the actual impact of political fragmentation and the large number of parties on the political stability and institutional functionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina?
- How does the formation of coalitions without programmatic and ideological affinity, frequent changes in government, and the instability of political alliances affect the institutional stability and functionality of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina? How do political crises, unpredictable shifts in power, and inter-party disputes shape the social atmosphere within the country?

The transition to a multi-party-political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia began in late 1990, within the broader context of the democratization of socialist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. The first multi-party elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were held in November 1990, formally marking the end of the one-party rule of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. These elections represented a crucial political transition, through which the Socialist Republic of BiH entered a new era of political pluralism -an era that would soon be overshadowed by deep ethno-national divisions culminating in armed conflict. The elections were won by three national parties representing the country's constituent peoples: The Party of

Democratic Action (SDA) as the leading Bosniak political force, the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH) representing the Croat population, and the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) as the main Serbian national party.

Since then, the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina has remained exceptionally complex, both institutionally and practically. The foundations of this system were established by the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, which simultaneously ended the war and institutionalized profound ethnic and territorial divisions. The country was constituted as a complex federation composed of two entities (FBiH and RS) and the Brčko District, which holds a special sta-

tus. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) is further subdivided into ten cantons, each possessing its own constitution and government. At the state level, there exists a collective Presidency and a bicameral Parliament, whose functioning requires an almost constant consensus among representatives of the three constituent nations.

Within this constitutional and political environment, an exceptionally complex party system has developed. According to the latest data from the Central Election Commission of BiH, over 190 political parties are registered in the country. This number illustrates a high degree of political diversity, but also underscores the challenges in forming stable parliamentary majorities. The large number of parties is often a consequence of local initiatives, personal political ambitions, as well as ethno-national mobilization.

Despite this diversity, several political actors have consistently dominated the electoral processes since the early 1990s. Among them, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH), and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), which succeeded the positions formerly held by the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), represent parties with the most enduring and widespread political infrastructure. Alongside these, significant influence is periodically exerted by the Social Democratic Party of BiH (SDP BiH), Our Party (Naša stranka), People and Justice (Narod i pravda), the Democratic Front (DF), and the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP), which further attests to the dynamism as well as the complexity of the Bosnian political scene.

1. What is the actual impact of political parties on the social development of BiH - do they contribute to stabilization or act as a factor of destabilization?

Political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina exert a profound and multilayered influence on society, shaping political culture, interethnic relations, and the everyday lives of citizens. Although the formal multi-party system was established with the aim of democratization, in practice, parties often function as instruments for preserving elite power rather than as drivers of social progress.

Political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina frequently employ nationalist rhetoric, particularly during election campaigns, in order to consolidate their voter base. This rhetoric, which often involves the propagation of fear and hostility towards other ethnic groups, further deepens societal divisions and complicates the process of building interethnic trust.

Frequent changes in government and coalition formations, often lacking clear programmatic foundations, lead to political instability. This practice results in inefficient institutions and hampers the implementation of long-term policies that could improve citizens' lives. The political arena in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by personalization, where the focus is placed on party leaders rather than on concrete policies. The media often serve as platforms for promoting political elites instead of providing objective information to the public, which further undermines democratic processes.

Many political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina lack concrete programs that address the real problems faced by citizens, including unemployment, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure. Instead, they rely on populist messages that fail to offer long-term solutions. The influence of political parties on Bosnian society is predominantly negative, as rather than being agents of change and development, they often act as obstacles to progress. Their rhetoric and practices deepen social divisions, hinder institutional functioning, and distance the country from democratic standards. Positive change requires

a transformation of political culture, greater accountability of parties, and more active citizen participation in political life.

2. To what extent do political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfill their pre-election promises, and what institutional or societal mechanisms exist for monitoring their implementation?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political life is marked by the persistent problem of unfulfilled electoral promises, which significantly shapes citizens' perceptions of the political system and the quality of democracy. Analyses and studies indicate that the vast majority of pre-election pledges fail to materialize in practice—a phenomenon attributable to the country's complex political structure, poor coordination among various levels of government, and the prevailing dominance of clientelism and the particularistic interests of political elites.

The majority of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina employ electoral promises primarily as a tool for voter mobilization; however, such promises often remain at the level of rhetoric, lacking a concrete basis for implementation. According to research conducted by Transparency International BiH in 2023, it is estimated that less than 30% of key electoral promises are fulfilled, while the remaining pledges are frequently avoided or postponed under various pretexts, including political instability and institutional obstacles.

Regarding citizens' perceptions, two dominant tendencies can be observed. The first is a deeply rooted skepticism toward politicians and the political system. Citizens often feel that their votes have been misused, which leads to apathy and a declining level of political engagement, particularly among the youth. The second tendency involves the continuous monitoring of media and social networks, where citizens attempt to track

the fulfillment of electoral promises, though such information is often fragmented and polarized through the lens of ethnic and political divisions.

This situation has multiple implications for the political life of BiH. The failure to fulfill electoral promises erodes trust in political institutions and fuels voter apathy, thereby diminishing the quality of the democratic process. At the same time, political elites exploit this status quo to maintain power through clientelist networks, rather than committing to genuine reforms. Electoral cycles become repetitive and devoid of substantive change, further entrenching a state of stagnation and polarization.

For all these reasons, the failure to fulfill electoral promises significantly contributes to the crisis of political trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the absence of effective mechanisms of oversight and transparency, as well as active civic monitoring, meaningful improvements in the quality of political life remain difficult to achieve.

3. What is the actual impact of political fragmentation and the large number of parties on the political stability and institutional functionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Political pluralism constitutes the foundation of modern democratic systems. In this regard, the existence of multiple political parties does not necessarily represent a negative phenomenon. On the contrary, a multi-party system enables the expression of diverse ideological, national, regional, and social interests. However, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the vast number of political parties, of which only a few dozen actively participate in electoral processes, raises serious questions regarding the functionality of the political system, the stability of democratic institutions, and the efficiency of state governance.

The primary problem arising from such a large number of parties is the fragmentation of the political scene. In a country already burdened by a complex constitutional arrangement, entity and cantonal divisions, and an ethnically divided political space, this further fragmentation hinders the formation of stable governments. The consequences include protracted post-election negotiations, weak coalition stability, and frequent deadlocks in decision-making processes.

The second problem is the instrumentalization of parties for personal or narrow political interests. A large number of parties lack clearly defined ideological positions, political programs, or long-term strategies, serving instead as electoral tools for advancing the private interests of individuals or groups.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in the specific context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there exists a certain degree of necessity for diverse political representation. Monolithic systems in such a context may generate feelings of exclusion and marginalization, potentially paving the way for further tensions. Therefore, a multi-party system is justified, but only insofar as it contributes to the articulation of societal needs and the advancement of democracy, rather than its disintegration.

One way to enhance the functionality of the multi-party system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to consider amendments to the electoral legislation aimed at raising electoral thresholds and regulating party financing. Such measures would encourage the consolidation around more serious and responsible political entities, while discouraging the emergence of ad hoc parties that serve as instruments for trading political influence. Although the concept of pluralism has its democratic justification, the reality of Bosnian political practice demonstrates that quantitative breadth does not necessarily equate to qualitative value.

4. How does the formation of coalitions without programmatic and ideological affinity, frequent changes in government, and the instability of political alliances affect the institutional stability and functionality of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina? How do political crises, unpredictable shifts in power, and inter-party disputes shape the social atmosphere within the country?

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country where the government is rarely stable or functionally sustainable over the long term. One of the fundamental reasons for this is the practice of forming coalitions without clear programmatic, ideological, or political affinities. Parties located at opposite ends of the political spectrum, or even representing entirely different ethnic and territorial interests, often enter government purely out of pragmatism, motivated by the allocation of positions and resources. Such coalitions, frequently lacking a shared vision or agreement on key issues, generate dysfunctionality, deadlocks, and frequent internal conflicts within the governing structures themselves.

Frequent changes in coalition partners further exacerbate the situation. Governments are reshuffled without clear electoral mandates, often contrary to the voters' will, causing citizens to lose their sense of political orientation and trust in democracy. This state of affairs generates political insecurity, slows down the legislative process, blocks reform initiatives, and prevents long-term planning. The consequence is institutional paralysis, where even the most basic administrative and infrastructural tasks are frequently delayed or neglected.

This is further compounded by persistent political crises that have become an almost regular occurrence rather than an exception. Trials of political leaders, such as the ongoing proceedings against Milorad Dodik, are continually used as instruments for political manipulation, tension escalation, and national mobilization. Instead

of being perceived as an independent judiciary, each case receives a politicized interpretation, which further delegitimizes institutions and deepens citizens' distrust in the system.

Political disputes at the highest levels of government—whether involving ethno-national conflicts, verbal insults, or threats of secession—create an atmosphere of perpetual crisis. The media, often controlled by political centers of power, further fuel the climate of fear, insecurity, and division.

The social consequences are profound. Many citizens, particularly the youth, lose faith in the system, in the possibility of change, and in the idea that this country can become a functional democracy. In such an environment, there is not only a loss of hope but also widespread passivity, electoral abstention, and emigration. People leave not only for economic reasons; political instability, legal uncertainty, and the feeling of living in a dysfunctional state often serve as even stronger motivators for leaving the country.

According to all relevant research and surveys, a significant percentage of young people plan to emigrate, while the number of those returning is exceptionally low. This creates additional demographic and economic challenges: labor shortages, population aging, and a diminishing fiscal capacity of the state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An analysis of the role of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals deeply entrenched structural and systemic weaknesses that seriously compromise the country's democratic development and institutional stability. Although the formal multiparty system was conceived as a means of democratizing and pluralizing political life, in practice, parties predominantly function as instruments for preserving the power of political elites rather than as mechanisms for

progressive social change. Their activities, characterized by nationalist rhetoric, populism, and clientelistic patterns, significantly deepen existing ethnic, institutional, and social divisions.

The failure to fulfil pre-election promises has become the norm rather than the exception, generating profound public distrust in the political system and fostering increasingly pronounced political apathy. The absence of effective institutional and societal mechanisms to oversee the activities of political parties further enables political actors to operate without genuine accountability, thereby undermining the fundamental principles of representative democracy.

The fragmentation of the political landscape and the existence of a large number of parties lacking clear ideological profiles result in chronic political instability, difficulties in government formation, and deadlock in decision-making processes. Coalitions are formed without programmatic foundations, solely for the purpose of dividing political spoils, which leads to dysfunctional governments, frequent political crises, and general institutional paralysis. In such an environment, citizens lose their sense of orientation and faith in the democratic order, while institutions are reduced to mere formal entities, lacking the capacity to act in the public interest.

Ultimately, political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, rather than being agents of modernization, democratic consolidation, and social development, most often represent obstacles to these processes. Changing this state of affairs requires a thorough transformation of political culture, reform of electoral legislation, strengthening of institutional accountability mechanisms, and a more robust engagement of citizens and civil society. Without such fundamental shifts, political life in Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain trapped in cyclical crises, and the prospect of genuine democratization and stabilization will remain merely nominal.

BSF Center for Political, Economic and Social Research is the centre of Balkan Studies Foundation based in Skopje. Our mission is to help societies and governments build a sustainably justice, equality, development and regional cohesion.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

BSF Center for Political, Economic and Social Research does not express opinions of its own.

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

Copyright © IDEFE, 2025

Editor: Sevba Abdula

Editorial Board: Bujamin Bela, Dilek Kütük, Mustafa Işık, Enes Turbić

Coordinator: Hanife Etem, Şengül İnce

Design: Seyfullah Bayram

Printed by: Ajgraf

Cite this paper:

Turbić, E. (2025), BiH's Political Parties: Agents of Change or Status Quo?, BSF Perspective, Skopje: IDEFE Publications.

Dr. Enes Turbić was born in 1992 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After completing his secondary education at Gymnasium Rizah Odžekić in 2011, he studied Turkish language at Gazi University (TÖMER) in Ankara during the 2011–2012 academic year. In 2016, he graduated from the Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy, Trakya University, with a thesis titled *The Independence of Bosnia and the Bosnian War (1992–1995)*. In 2018, he earned his master's degree from the Department of History at the Institute of Social Sciences, Trakya University, with a thesis entitled *The Bosniak Resistance to the Austro-Hungarian Occupation (1878)*.

In 2023, he completed his PhD at the same institute with a dissertation titled *The Political Life of Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian Rule (1878–1914)*, under the joint supervision of Prof. Dr. Jahić from the University of Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sannav from Trakya University (Türkiye). His research focuses on the political life of BiH and the Bosniaks during the Austro-Hungarian period, as well as on the analysis of contemporary political developments in BiH.

His areas of interest include: Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian rule, the history of BiH in the 20th century, the history of the Western Balkans, BiH during the First and Second World Wars, the Bosnian War, and political life in post-Dayton BiH. Turbić has written numerous articles and analytical pieces, presented papers, and participated in academic panels. He is co-author of several textbooks for primary schools. He has also translated various articles and books from South Slavic languages into Turkish and vice versa.

