

Electoral Design, Party Competition and Institutional Weakness in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Causal Mechanisms Shaping a Fragile Democracy

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Abstract: This article analyses how electoral design, party competition and intra-party practices shape democratic fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ethnic voting and the dominance of national parties originated with the 1990 elections and the narrative of the “agreement of peoples”, later reinforced through the post-Dayton institutional structure. Using a conceptual approach and a within-case analysis, the article draws on academic literature, constitutional rules, European Court of Human Rights judgments, election-monitoring reports and the author’s earlier research. It identifies mechanisms through which electoral rules strengthen competition within ethnic blocs, while proportional representation functions inside an ethnically segmented framework that encourages patronage and limits programmatic politics. Weak intra-party democracy further concentrates power among party elites and undermines state institutions. The article proposes adjustments to electoral design, the political institutions and intra-party procedures, explaining how these steps could ease incentives for ethnic voting and reinforce institutional capacity.

Keywords: *Electoral design; Party competition; Intra-party democracy; Ethnic voting; Institutional weakness*

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (‘BiH’) represents a case in which ethnic voting and the dominance of national political parties emerged even before the Dayton constitutional framework was created in 1995. The first multiparty elections in 1990 demonstrated that ethnic affiliation had already become the primary axis of political mobilisation, with national parties receiving

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dominant support from voters. This early consolidation of ethnic political identity was reinforced during the pre-election campaigns through the narrative of the “*agreement of peoples*”, which framed national parties as the only legitimate representatives of collective interests – an idea that has been extensively analysed in domestic scholarship. This narrative did not originate with the Dayton Peace Agreement (‘DPA’), although it was later embedded and formalised within the post-war constitutional architecture.

The legacy of the DPA, namely the Annex IV (Constitution of BiH) continues to shape BiH’s political reality by institutionalising ethnic representation as the basis of political governance (Belloni 2009: 345–360). While the Agreement succeeded in ending the conflict, it introduced a complex system of ethnic quotas and veto points that further entrenched political division and slowed institutional integration (Bieber 2018: 176–185). This institutional design has produced a fragmented political landscape in which ethnic identity routinely outweighs ideological or policy-driven competition. Instead of developing stable ideological profiles, political parties have frequently relied on nationalist narratives, reinforcing segmentation within the electorate and hindering the consolidation of democratic governance (Tzifakis 2007: 98–104).

This segmentation has been widely documented in the literature. Research shows that ethnically defined political competition contributes to institutional dysfunction, clientelism, and reduced public trust in governance (Arapović 2019: 120–135). The combined effect of ethnic mobilisation, constitutional decentralisation, and political-administrative fragmentation prevents the development of a cohesive parliamentary system and obstructs the emergence of ideologically grounded political parties. As a result, BiH continues to be characterised by a slow, uneven, and inconsistent process of democratisation, complicated further by regional and international influences on domestic political dynamics.

This article builds on these insights and seeks to examine the interaction between electoral rules, party competition, and intra-party democratic practices as mutually reinforcing factors contributing to democratic fragility. While previous studies have analysed individual elements of this problem, the combined causal pathways through which electoral design, party organisation, and political incentives sustain institutional weakness in BiH have not been sufficiently explored.

Accordingly, this study raises a following question: How do electoral rules, patterns of party competition, and intra-party practices jointly shape institutional performance and democratic outcomes in Bosnia and Herzegovina? To address this question, the article employs a conceptual and analytically oriented approach supported by a within-case examination of BiH. The analysis draws on academic literature, constitutional provisions, European Court of Human Rights case law, election-monitoring reports, and author's earlier scholarly work. The sections that follow set out the theoretical outcomes and the mechanisms linking electoral and party system incentives to political outcomes and propose reform options aimed at strengthening democratic institutions in BiH.

Literature review

The study of electoral and party systems has long occupied a central position in political science, given their role in shaping political representation, governance, and democratic stability. Electoral rules determine how votes are converted into legislative seats, while party systems influence how political actors compete, organize, and articulate interests. In divided or post-conflict societies, these institutional choices carry heightened significance, as they directly affect the incentives for intergroup cooperation as opposed to ethnic polarization.

Electoral Systems and Political Outcomes

Electoral systems determine how votes are transformed into mandates and thus shape core political incentives. Majoritarian systems, such as first-past-the-post, tend to produce stable single-party governments but often do so at the expense of minority representation (Lijphart 1999: 23–28). Proportional representation systems increase inclusiveness by enabling broader party representation, though they also carry the risk of fragmentation and unstable coalitions (Norris 2004: 85–96). Mixed electoral systems attempt to balance these pressures but may inherit the weaknesses of both (Shugart & Wattenberg 2001: 101–119).

In young democracies, electoral systems strongly influence party development and political stability. Proportional representation systems may enable pluralism but can also reinforce ethnic or regional cleavages, especially where underlying social divisions are pronounced (Horowitz

2000: 198–213). In such contexts, fragmented party landscapes make coalition-building difficult and governance more inconsistent.

These dynamics are highly relevant for BiH. The DPA established a consociational model that mandates ethnic inclusion while simultaneously entrenches ethnic divisions (Belloni 2009: 345–360; Bieber 2011: 1783–1802). Instead of facilitating cross-ethnic political cooperation, the system reinforces mono-ethnic party competition, reducing the space for programmatic political alternatives. The proportional representation system used in BiH (Saint-Laguë method) functions within this ethnically segmented environment, which incentivises parties to mobilise voters primarily within their own groups rather than across them.

Studies of divided societies such as Lebanon and Northern Ireland point to similar difficulties: electoral design can preserve peace but also reproduce ethnic segmentation (Sindre 2016; Horowitz 2000). Yet, comparative cases like South Africa show that institutions designed to encourage broader coalitions can promote political accommodation (Lodge 2003; Reilly 2011).

No universal model fits all divided societies (Reilly & Reynolds 1999: 200–215), which underscores the importance of institutional context. For BiH, this context is heavily conditioned by constitutional constraints, ethnic quotas, and the distribution of electoral districts—all of which shape how competition unfolds.

Party System Fragmentation and Ethnic Cleavages

The party system in BiH is highly fragmented and dominated by ethnic affiliations rather than ideological platforms (Fejzić 2021: 45–62). This fragmentation is largely a consequence of an electoral structure that rewards ethnic loyalty and penalises cross-ethnic political initiatives. Parties thus prioritise ethnic mobilisation over programmatic policy development, contributing to political stagnation (Arapović 2024: 80–95; McCulloch 2014: 98–112).

Research on BiH consistently shows that political actors rarely engage in ideological competition. Instead, nationalist narratives dominate electoral campaigns, reinforcing group boundaries and discouraging coalition-building across ethnic lines (Keil 2021: 400–415; Hulsey & Stjepanović 2017: 35–58). This dynamic is further supported by institutional

decentralisation and asymmetric federal structures, which allow parties to maintain regional monopolies, especially in areas where one group constitutes a large majority (Fejzić 2021: 121-135).

Dominant ethnic parties – notably SDA, HDZ BiH, and SNSD – rely on identity-based narratives rather than programmatic platforms. This has produced political stagnation and limited ideological differentiation, resembling patterns in other post-conflict settings where ethnicity outweighs ideology as the primary determinant of political behaviour.

Domestic scholarship also illustrates how this structure limits ideological differentiation. Authors such as Turčalo (2016) argue that political parties frequently shift their nominal ideological profiles while maintaining ethnic mobilisation as the core of their strategy – an observation consistent with long-term analyses of BiH party behaviour.

Beyond academic sources, civil society monitoring offers important empirical insights. Reports by the Coalition *Pod lupom*, Transparency International BiH, and the Centre for Security Studies document systemic problems in campaign finance, patronage networks, and public-sector appointments, demonstrating how party dominance over state institutions further limits democratic competition.

Social and Party Cleavages

Social and party cleavages have been the subject of extensive research in political science, particularly in how they shape political outcomes. Social cleavages, which can be based on ethnicity, religion, class, or regional identity, often define voter alignments and influence party formation. Lipset and Rokkan's (1967: 20–45) seminal work on cleavages highlights that historical conflicts related to nation-building, religious reform, and industrialization have created divisions that persisted in the form of political affiliations.

In ethnically divided societies, cleavages related to identity are especially prominent, with political parties often serving as representatives of specific social groups rather than broad-based constituencies. Research on Lebanon, Iraq, and Belgium shows that when party systems reflect entrenched social cleavages, they can exacerbate fragmentation and hinder policy consensus (Horowitz 2000: 88–102; Reilly 2011: 111–128). In contrast, cases such as post-apartheid South Africa demonstrate that inclusive party structures

and coalition-building can mitigate the effects of deep social divides (Lodge 2003: 25–39; Sisk 1996: 70–85).

Studies have also examined the urban-rural divide as a significant cleavage that shapes political outcomes. In many democracies, rural areas often support conservative or nationalist parties, while urban populations tend to favour liberal or progressive platforms. This dynamic is evident in countries like the United States, Brazil, and Turkey, where the urban-rural divide influences electoral competition and governance outcomes (Levitsky & Way 2010: 45–63; Norris 2004: 80–95).

The role of political cleavages in post-conflict societies such as BiH highlights the challenges of achieving democratic consolidation. Cleavages that are institutionalized through electoral frameworks and reinforced by party strategies contribute to political deadlock and policy fragmentation. Addressing these cleavages requires reforms that promote cross-cutting political identities and facilitate coalition-building across societal divides.

Murtagh (2019: 300–317) offers an important perspective by highlighting the ambiguous role of civic parties in divided societies such as BiH and Northern Ireland. Civic parties serve as mediators and can provide representation for marginalized groups, but they must navigate barriers imposed by ethnic-based power-sharing arrangements.

Matthias Dilling (2023: 140–158) delves into the internal dynamics of party organizations, noting that intra-party groups, such as factions and territorial branches, are critical for linking societal interests with political decision-making. This linkage function is particularly relevant in divided societies, where parties often face the challenge of balancing internal diversity with cohesive political agendas.

Additionally, McAllister and White (2007: 170–188) explore how party systems in post-communist societies articulate social cleavages, showing that while some emerging democracies mirror the religious and class-based divisions of established democracies, others struggle to effectively represent diverse interests. They argue that the effectiveness of party systems in democratic consolidation depends on their ability to manage cleavages without reinforcing societal divisions.

Overall, the literature emphasizes that party typology – civic, consociational, or clientelistic – plays a crucial role in shaping political outcomes in divided societies. While segmental parties and consociational

arrangements can foster stability through representation, they also risk entrenching divisions if not complemented by inclusive governance practices. Future research should continue to examine how internal party structures and electoral incentives shape party behaviour in post-conflict democracies.

Intra-party Democracy and Political Outcomes

Intra-party democracy refers to the degree of transparency, participation, and inclusivity in internal party decision-making processes. The level of democracy within parties significantly affects their organizational structure, political accountability, and responsiveness to the electorate.

Intra-party democracy is crucial for effective representation, as parties serve as intermediaries between citizens and state institutions. Comparative research shows that weak IPD is correlated with clientelism, leadership centralisation, and reduced accountability (Rahat & Shapira 2017).

Political parties in BiH exhibit a limited degree of internal democracy. Empirical surveys of major parliamentary parties reveal hierarchical structures, opaque candidate selection, and centralised decision-making processes (Arapović 2024). These internal patterns mirror external electoral behaviour: parties maintain strong internal cohesion within ethnic blocs, while member participation and deliberation remain minimal (Hulsey 2017).

The absence of legal requirements mandating internal democratic procedures – such as leadership primaries, internal referenda, or transparent financial reporting – enables party elites to retain concentrated authority (Keil 2021). Because public institutions in BiH are heavily influenced by political parties, weak Intra-party democracy directly translates into diminished institutional autonomy. Domestic scholarship has described this phenomenon as a form of *partitocracy*, where political parties dominate formal state institutions and control key administrative functions. Intra-party democracy affects several political outcomes, such as:

- *Policy Responsiveness and Cohesion*: Parties with robust internal democratic practices often adopt more representative policy positions, as internal debate promotes broader perspectives. However, excessive factionalism can undermine party unity and policy cohesion (Scarrow 2005: 88–105);

- *Voter Trust and Engagement*: Transparent and participatory party processes enhance voter trust and encourage political engagement, as voters perceive these parties as more accountable and reflective of public interests (Rahat & Hazan 2001: 670–678);
- *Candidate Selection and Leadership Accountability*: Democratic candidate selection processes limit the concentration of power within party elites, ensuring that leadership is more representative of party members and societal demands (Kenig 2009: 120–138). However, in parties with weak internal democracy, leadership remains dominated by elite figures, potentially alienating grassroots members and voters;
- *Resilience to Authoritarian Tendencies*: Parties with internal democratic mechanisms are more likely to resist authoritarian pressures and uphold democratic norms, while centralised, elite-driven parties may become conduits for undemocratic practices (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018: 180–195).

Intra-party Democracy in Divided Societies

The relationship between intra-party democracy and democratic consolidation in divided societies has been an important focus in political science research. The findings in this area highlight both the potential benefits and the challenges of fostering internal democratic practices within political parties in contexts characterized by deep social divisions.

Research by Rahat, Hazan, and Katz (2008: 670–678) emphasizes the complex trade-offs associated with intra-party democracy. Their analysis demonstrates that while inclusive internal processes can enhance grassroots participation and democratic legitimacy, they may simultaneously reduce competitiveness and policy coherence within party structures. In divided societies, where political parties often reflect entrenched ethnic or ideological identities, such inclusiveness can either bridge societal divides or exacerbate factionalism.

Mersel (2006: 84–113) underscores the necessity of internal democracy as a safeguard against non-democratic tendencies within political parties. His work argues that parties lacking democratic internal procedures may undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions, particularly in societies with fragile democratic foundations. In some instances, legal frameworks have been used to enforce minimal standards of internal democracy to

ensure that political parties contribute positively to democratic stability.

Pennings and Hazan (2001: 270–273) contribute to this discussion by exploring the democratisation of candidate selection processes. They highlight that the inclusiveness of these processes shapes not only intra-party dynamics but also broader political representation. However, they caution that excessive decentralization of candidate selection can weaken party cohesion, particularly in divided societies where cohesive leadership is often critical for maintaining political stability.

Teorell (1999: 372–374) presents a deliberative perspective on intra-party democracy, positing that democratic internal procedures strengthen vertical linkages between parties and civil society, as well as horizontal linkages across societal cleavages. His work suggests that robust democracy fosters transparency and accountability, thus contributing to democratic resilience by creating institutional spaces for negotiation and compromise.

The literature indicates that while intra-party democracy can strengthen democratic institutions in divided societies, its implementation must be carefully managed to avoid unintended consequences. Excessive decentralisation and internal factionalism can weaken party unity, whereas overly centralised structures can alienate grassroots members and erode public trust. In contexts marked by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions, fostering intra-party democracy requires balancing inclusiveness with cohesion. Studies on Northern Ireland, BiH, and others underscore the importance of institutional frameworks that incentivise cooperative behaviour and discourage factionalism.

In summary, the scholarship on intra-party democracy in divided societies highlights both its promise and its perils. Intra-party democracy can enhance legitimacy, representation, and accountability, but it must be supported by broader institutional reforms that address social cleavages and promote cross-community dialogue. The findings suggest that fostering robust internal party democracy is essential for democratic resilience but must be accompanied by mechanisms that mitigate the risks of fragmentation and elite capture.

These sources therefore indicate that each country requires an analysis of the interplay of the electoral system, party system, and typology, as well as intra-party democracy within its own context, as performed in this study. This analysis, however, also requires attention to broader factors that have been identified as contributing to democratic fragility.

Factors Contributing to Failed Democracies

Failed democracies are often the result of complex, interrelated factors that weaken democratic institutions and undermine political stability. These include:

- a) *Electoral Manipulation*: When electoral systems are designed or deliberately manipulated to favor certain political actors, democratic legitimacy can be severely undermined. Gerrymandering, voter suppression, and biased electoral laws can entrench power imbalances (Schedler 2002: 95–110);
- b) *Weak Political Institutions*: Democracies with fragile institutions, such as ineffective legislatures and compromised judiciaries, struggle to provide checks and balances, rendering them susceptible to authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2010: 57–73).
- c) *Identity Politics and Polarization*: The dominance of ethnic or identity-based parties can exacerbate societal divisions, leading to political deadlock and diminishing the possibility of broad, cross-cutting political coalitions (Horowitz 2000: 198–213);
- d) *Lack of Intra-party Democracy*: Parties with opaque and exclusionary decision-making processes often fail to promote accountable leadership and may become vehicles for clientelism and corruption (Aldrich 1995: 130–147). This further weakens party competition and erodes public trust in the democratic process;
- e) *Economic Inequality and Corruption*: Widening economic disparities and pervasive corruption can fuel public disillusionment with democratic institutions, making authoritarian alternatives more appealing (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012: 14–21);
- f) *External Interference and Conflict*: External intervention, both direct and indirect, can destabilise democratic processes and intensify internal divisions. Post-conflict democracies are particularly vulnerable to external pressures that compromise political autonomy (Diamond 1999: 211–229).

Synthesis, and Implications for Bosnia and Herzegovina

The reviewed literature demonstrates that BiH's democratic stagnation results from the interaction of three mutually reinforcing factors:

- a) Electoral design that institutionalises ethnic representation and limits incentives for cross-group political cooperation;
- b) A fragmented party system driven by ethnic cleavages rather than ideological or policy-based competition;
- c) Weak intra-party democracy that centralises power in party elites and restricts institutional accountability.

Although each of these dimensions has been examined separately, their combined effect has received less attention. This article aims to address that gap by analysing the causal mechanisms through which electoral rules, party behaviour, and internal party dynamics jointly shape democratic outcomes in BiH. Integrating insights from international and domestic scholarship with civil society monitoring offers a clearer understanding of how institutional design and political incentives may reinforce conditions of institutional fragility and democratic weakness.

The relationship between electoral systems, party typology, intra-party democracy, and political outcomes is complex and context dependent. Proportional representation systems and programmatic parties tend to enhance democratic legitimacy and voter representation, whereas ethnic-based and elite-dominated parties often exacerbate to political instability and undermine governance. The present research on BiH highlights the detrimental effects of fragmented, identity-based party systems and weak internal party democracy on democratic consolidation. In young democracies, where institutions remain fragile, the interaction of electoral and party systems and the level of intra-party democracy necessitate careful design to balance representation and governance effectiveness. Additionally, addressing factors such as electoral manipulation, institutional weakness, and economic inequality, is crucial to mitigating the risk of democratic failure. Reforms aimed at dismantling clientelistic practices, promoting ideological diversity, addressing demographic challenges, and fostering transparent political processes are essential to ensuring sustainable democratic resilience.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual–analytical design combined with a within-case analysis of BiH. Given the article’s objective – to identify and explain the causal mechanisms linking electoral design, party competition and intra-party dynamics to institutional weakness – this methodological approach allows for a detailed examination of how institutional incentives, political behaviour and constitutional constraints interact within a single, highly complex case. The analysis proceeds in two steps:

1. *Conceptual analysis* of electoral systems, party system theory, and intra-party democracy, drawing on comparative scholarship on divided societies, post-conflict democracies and consociational arrangements. This approach enables the identification of general mechanisms through which institutional design influences political outcomes.
2. *Within-case analysis* of BiH, tracing the operation of these mechanisms within the country’s post-war constitutional framework. This approach follows established methodological guidance for single-case causal analysis, where the goal is to uncover logical linkages between institutional rules and political behaviour rather than to test hypotheses statistically.

The combination of these two levels facilitates an explanation of why particular outcomes, such as ethnic fragmentation, clientelism, or weak institutional autonomy, consistently emerge across electoral cycles. The study integrates several categories of sources:

- Academic literature, including international works on electoral design, party system fragmentation and intra-party democracy, as well as domestic political science scholarship (e.g., Fejzić, Turčalo, Arnautović, Šarčević, Arapović).
- Constitutional and legal documents, most notably the DPA and relevant provisions governing elections, representation and veto mechanisms.
- Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, which provide legal assessments of discriminatory provisions and their effects on political participation (such as *Sejdić and Finci v BiH*, *Zornić v BiH* and *Pilav v BiH*).

- Empirical monitoring reports issued by domestic and international organisations, including the Coalition *Pod lupom*, Transparency International BiH and OSCE/ODIHR. These sources document election-day practices, campaigning, party financing, institutional capture and patterns of political behaviour.
- Author's earlier empirical research, particularly survey-based findings on intra-party democracy and leadership selection practices among major parliamentary parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Arapović 2019; Arapović 2024).

Together, these sources provide a sufficiently comprehensive evidentiary base to support the causal arguments presented in the analysis. Rather than employing statistical techniques, this article relies on causal-process tracing to identify mechanisms operating between institutions and political outcomes. This method focuses on reconstructing the logical sequence through which electoral and party system incentives shape behaviour inside political parties and, ultimately, within state institutions. Three core mechanisms are examined:

- a) *Incentives* created by electoral district design, which structure political competition primarily within ethnic blocs;
- b) *Behavioural patterns* of political parties, particularly their reliance on ethnic mobilisation rather than ideological differentiation;
- c) *Internal decision-making structures*, where weak intra-party democracy centralises authority in party leaderships and reduces institutional accountability.

By identifying these mechanisms across different sources of evidence, the study establishes how they converge to produce democratic fragility and limited institutional autonomy in BiH. As a single-case study, the analysis does not claim universal generalisability. Its findings apply primarily to BiH, though they may hold relevance for other deeply divided societies and/or consociational systems. Another limitation concerns the scarcity of systematically collected quantitative data on intra-party processes. In this article, the particular challenge is mitigated by combining existing empirical studies with extensive monitoring reports.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodological approach is well suited to the article's aim: to provide a coherent causal explanation of how electoral rules, party competition and internal party structures jointly shape democratic outcomes.

Analysis of Causal Links Between Electoral and Party System Factors and Political Outcomes in BiH

Electoral District Design, Ethnic Segmentation and Intra-Group Competition

Political parties in democratic systems play a key role in representing collective interests and offering political solutions to social problems. In BiH, ethno-nationalist discourse predominates among political parties and public policies, and party platforms often fail to reflect citizens' priorities for socio-economic reforms. Ideological affiliations remain weak, and analyses of parties' electoral programs reveal no significant differences in what they promise (Democracy Assessment in BiH 2017: 23). In addition, parties most frequently do not strive to implement their electoral platforms once they come to power, which raises questions about the ruling parties' legitimacy and representativeness.

BiH's electoral and party systems are deeply intertwined with the country's broader democratic deficits. Primarily, many politicians and political parties are primarily identified with the ethnic groups they claim to represent. This phenomenon has been widely documented by domestic scholars, including Fejzić (2022), Turčalo (2019), and Arnautović (2021), who demonstrate that BiH's party system exhibits structural weaknesses characteristic of segmented, post-conflict democracies. Apart from ethnic or ideological affiliation, there are no substantive differences between the political programs of left-wing and right-wing parties, and certainly not in their political practice, especially when they are part of a ruling coalition. Although ideological identity is defined through programs and statutes, day-to-day politics reveal no signs of strict ideological attachment.

The causal relationship between electoral incentives and ethnic political mobilisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be understood without acknowledging the formative role of the first multiparty elections held in 1990. These elections took place within the framework of the Socialist

Republic of BiH but under conditions of intensifying ethnic nationalism across former Yugoslavia. Although more than 40 parties contested the elections, voter preferences overwhelmingly coalesced around three newly established national parties: the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH). Together, these parties secured a dominant majority in key representative bodies. The election results demonstrated that ethnic affiliation had already become the primary determinant of political identity prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, revealing early structural patterns that would later be formalised in the post-Dayton constitutional order.

These elections also introduced what Šarčević (2008) describes as the political narrative of the “agreement of peoples”, in which the three national parties claimed exclusive legitimacy to represent the Bosniak, Serb and Croat communities. This narrative shaped the pre-war constitutional discourse and normalised the principle that representation must be collective and ethnically circumscribed rather than civic or ideological. Ethnically defined political organisation did not originate with the Dayton Agreement but was entrenched through earlier electoral and political developments. The 1990 elections therefore mark the starting point of BiH’s long-term political alignment along ethnic lines, providing a baseline from which contemporary patterns of intra-group competition, electoral segmentation and party dominance can be understood.

Although the electoral system of BiH is often considered one of the most complex in the world, it has nevertheless had some positive effects on democratisation and the legitimization of political pluralism (Democracy Assessment in BiH 2017: 8). The unitary political system as defined by the constitutional framework of BiH is widely recognized as a system based on collective rights exercised through (ethnic) electoral units, rather than individual rights. The current electoral system reflects the social dynamics of the immediate post-war period, which provided a stable foundation for the initial construction of modern political pluralism. Despite the advantages that arise from the creation of an initial fundamental framework for political competition, the current electoral system includes a number of shortcomings, many of which stem from the inherent tension between collective and individual rights. This configuration reinforces the dominance of ethno-national parties by creating incentives for competition within rather than across ethnic groups. McCulloch (2014: 98–112)

argues that proportional representation systems embedded in segmented geographies “reproduce ethnic power bases and inhibit the emergence of broad coalitions”.

Various court cases have shown that the current system violates certain constitutional norms and international human rights conventions (Democracy Assessment in BiH 2017: 8). This was first demonstrated by the *Sejdić and Finci vs BiH* case, which challenged the three-member Presidency of BiH based on ethnicity. Under the current system, presidential offices are explicitly reserved for Bosniak, Croat, and Serb members. Citizens of ethnic minorities have brought a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), claiming that this structure violates their rights by prohibiting them from holding presidential offices. In December 2009, the Court ruled that the exclusion of candidates for these offices on the basis of ethnicity violated Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits discrimination, as well as Article 3 of Protocol 1, which relates to the right to free elections. The political establishment in BiH has been unable to implement reforms to bring the country into compliance with the Court’s decision, creating a protracted constitutional crisis that impedes BiH’s progress towards further EU integration. The election of a Serb member of the rotating tripartite Presidency of BiH from Republika Srpska (‘RS’) entity and a Bosniak and Croat member from the Federation of BiH (‘FBiH’) entity is also an issue that challenged in the *Zornić v BiH* and *Pilav v BiH* cases. Citizens of Bosniak and Croat ethnicity living in the RS and citizens of Serb ethnicity living in the FBiH have also challenged different issues before the ECtHR, and it has been found that the current system violates their rights on similar grounds. The impossibility of resolving these issues stems from their constitutional entrenchment. Reforms would require a significant restructuring of state institutions and would potentially prompt a broader debate on a system that extends ethnic division of power beyond presidential offices.

In addition to these fundamental challenges regarding the representation and legitimacy of ethnically based offices, the electoral system faces challenges in strengthening stable governance and ensuring effective technical administration. Competition for votes along ethnic lines results in a highly fragmented electorate, leading to frequent political crises and volatile parliamentary majorities and governments. Electoral administration

is often plagued by fraud and mismanagement, and the implementation of election results is slow, incomplete, or subject to obstruction. Overall, the BiH electoral system serves to entrench ethnic and entity divisions and thus poses obstacles to the consolidation of parliamentary democracy (Democracy Assessment in BiH 2017: 8-9).

The post-war consociational framework of democratic institutions in BiH has effectively transferred substantive power from state institutions to political parties. The complexity of BiH's electoral system and multiple levels of government require broad coalitions to secure qualified parliamentary majorities, form governments, and pass regulation. The relatively low level of actual legislative authority in state and entities parliaments creates a model of political party rule based on ethnicity rather than ideology or program. As parties compete within specific ethnic blocs for vote share, a political culture of cooperation has not developed, either in terms of inter-party relations or relations between parties and civil society (Arapović 2019: 161-162).

Political parties do not foster democratisation and a culture of meritocracy. Most parties perceive concentration of power within their ranks as a result of collectivist, ethnic political representation, which reinforces divisions in public opinion. This enables parties to maintain a persistent fear of ethnic tensions and intimidation. Once this topic is taken for discussion, all other political issues become relatively marginal. Thus, issues such as meritocracy in governance, management of public funds, efficiency and accountability in decision-making, and public sector employment are hidden from the public scrutiny, while the media treats lawbreaking, political malpractice, and corruption primarily as entertainment. This cover masks deficiencies in the rule of law and meritocracy, allowing the political elite to legitimise entrenched practices (Arapović 2019: 163-164).

Public policy management is often shaped by personal, party or ethnic interests rather than the public good. This creates clientelist networks in the wider public that influence the functioning of state institutions. Patronage networks are particularly problematic when embedded in the judiciary, regulatory, control, and inspection bodies, limiting these institutions' ability to exercise an oversight role alongside the media, academia and civil society.

First, hyper-politicization has led political elites in both opposition and ruling parties criticizing sincere attempts to improve the political

system as tactical politicking, demagoguery, and/or populism. Second, due to the politicization of the media, media outlets often insist on political responsibility, but limit their criticism to specific political opponents, or their activities are perceived as such by certain segments of the public. Third, clientelism and political bias contribute to a passive stance among the academic elite, which over the past two decades has struggled to assert its political voice and contribute significantly to policymaking. This results in key political processes and decisions occurring without the participation of credible expert actors and analysis, which is detrimental to both the academic elite and broader society. Finally, trade unions and similar interest groups have been weakened by the economic transition, and their function today primarily represents the interests of war veterans' groups, considered the most influential non-partisan interest group. All these factors reinforce the dominance of political parties in BiH and underscore the limited authority of state institutions (Arapović 2019: 165-166).

Despite various attempts to reform the political environment, BiH's complex constitutional framework has the effect of structuring the electorate along ethnic lines. As a result, parties tend to compete for the votes of their own ethnic community, and voters systematically cast ballots along these divisions. There is no overarching political option that appeals to all voters. Politics is often paralyzed by the potential for dual ethnic vetoes. Due to the ethnic composition of the population in within the entities, the entity veto in the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH can be described as an ethnically biased veto (e.g., almost all deputies from the RS entity are of the same ethnicity), with the "vital national interest" veto available to ethnic blocs in the House of Peoples. The entire state-level decision-making process follows this segmented structure.

To summarise, polycentric ethnic nationalism constitutes the predominant ideological determinant of the political landscape in BiH, and high constitutional decentralization, political-administrative fragmentation, and electorally reinforced ethnic collectivism prevent the organic consolidation of parliamentary democracy and the development of programmatic political competition – both on the supply and demand sides of the political market.

Moving forward, the interactions among electoral systems, party systems, and intra-party democracy in post-conflict societies like BiH are critical to understanding democratic stagnation and institutional fragility. Electoral

systems establish the framework governing the distribution of political power, while party systems determine how political actors compete and interact. Intra-party democracy, on the other hand, reflects the degree of internal participation, transparency, and member engagement within parties. These three dimensions can mutually reinforce democratic governance or exacerbate political fragmentation and autocratic tendencies.

*The Role of the Electoral and Party System in
Intra-party Democratization*

BiH's consociational electoral framework, as enshrined in the DPA, institutionalises ethnic representation by allocating political positions according to ethnic quotas rather than ideological alignment. Scholars argue that this system has entrenched ethnic divisions and prioritised identity over democratic competition (Belloni 2009: 345–360; Bieber 2011: 1783–1802).

BiH's electoral and party systems are instrumental in perpetuating democratic defects. The electoral system, designed to maintain ethnic balance, instead fosters political fragmentation and inhibits the formation of broad political coalitions necessary for stable democracy. This system reinforces ethnic power bases, reducing political pluralism and inclusivity, thereby violating fundamental democratic principles (McCulloch 2014: 98–112; Arapović 2024: 159–162).

The party system in BiH is highly fragmented and shaped by ethnic affiliations rather than coherent policy platforms. This fragmentation sustains political polarisation and obstructs efforts to consolidate party ideologies (Fejzić 2023: 45–62). Party systems emerging from ethnically segmented electoral structures lead to weak political cohesion, making coalition-building unstable and prone to crisis. The dominance of nationalist parties (such as SDA, HDZ, and SNSD) has produced policy stagnation and hindered democratic consolidation, as noted by comparative studies of post-conflict democracies like Northern Ireland and Lebanon (Sindre 2016: 78–93; Horowitz 2000: 198–213).

The party system, deeply entrenched in ethnic divisions, prioritizes internal group loyalty over national policy advocacy. This dynamic undermines the establishment of ideologically driven political competition. Furthermore, the lack of transparency and accountability within electoral and party

structures fosters political distrust and voter apathy, further weakening democratic institutions (Keil 2021: 400–415; Arapović 2024: 139–145). Effective anti-corruption measures and mechanisms to counter clientelism remain underdeveloped, exacerbating governance issues. Ethnic-based quotas limit cross-ethnic political coalitions and impede the emergence of issue-based parties that could enhance broader democratic participation (Hulsey & Stjepanović 2017: 35-58). Political parties in BiH often replicate external ethnic segmentation internally, with decision-making power concentrated within ethnic party elites, thereby limiting inclusive leadership selection and accountability (Arapović 2024: 139–145).

The results of the author's previous study on the leading BiH parliamentary parties demonstrate that intra-party democratic practices remain weak due to hierarchical leadership structures and limited transparency in candidate selection (Arapović 2024: 130–152). The internal governance of ethnic-based parties often mirrors their external electoral behaviour, prioritizing top-down decision-making to maintain ethnic loyalty rather than fostering member engagement (Hulsey 2017: 35-58). The absence of intra-party democracy undermines public trust in parties and weakens their legitimacy, contributing to voter apathy and the growth of anti-establishment movements (Koole 2020: 200–215).

BiH's legal framework for political parties does not mandate democratic internal processes, such as member-led referenda or primary elections for leadership selection (Keil 2021: 400–415). The decentralized governance model further exacerbates inconsistencies in party operations between the FBiH and the RS entities (Fejzić 2021: 13-40).

The absence of enforceable internal democracy standards across entities perpetuates uneven levels of political accountability and reinforces regional party monopolies. Similar challenges have been observed in post-colonial and transitional democracies, where weak intra-party democracy correlates with clientelism and political instability (Rahat & Shapira 2017: 215–230).

Despite international efforts by the EU, OSCE, and Venice Commission to promote democratic reforms, these interventions have had limited success due to the entrenched ethnic dynamics and resistance from local elites (Tzifakis 2007; Börzel & Grimm, 2018). International strategies often emphasize stability over genuine democratic competition, inadvertently reinforcing the power of entrenched parties that resist reforms (Canen *et al.* 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations for Structural Reforms

Understanding the interactions between electoral rules, party system behaviour and intra-party democracy is essential for identifying realistic pathways to strengthen democratic governance in BiH. As stated, these dimensions serve to support each other and are all necessary for the functioning of the democratic process. Yet, in BiH's post-conflict environment, each of these dimensions currently operates in a manner that reinforces fragmentation, discourages programmatic politics and entrenches party dominance over institutions. A meaningful step forward therefore requires addressing incentives and practices simultaneously across all three dimensions.

The interdependence between BiH's electoral system, party system, and intra-party democracy creates a self-reinforcing cycle that perpetuates democratic stagnation:

- *Electoral Framework*: Institutionalizes ethnic division and limits the emergence of programmatic parties.
- *Party System*: Sustains fragmentation and hinders coalition-building.
- *Intra-Party Democracy*: Constricts internal party reform and reduces public trust.

Addressing these interlinked issues requires comprehensive electoral reforms that incentivise cross-ethnic cooperation, enhanced legal frameworks for intra-party democracy, and targeted support for issue-based political platforms. The findings suggest that without such reforms, BiH's political system will remain vulnerable to gridlock, clientelism, and weakened democratic legitimacy. To break the cycle of democratic defects, BiH must implement holistic reforms in its electoral and party systems to foster greater political competition, transparency, and accountability.

Reforming Electoral Design: Modifications Within the Existing Proportional Framework

Several evidence-based reforms emerge from the literature and empirical findings about the redesign of the internal components of the current proportional representation system, namely in the direction of strengthening representativeness and reduction of ethnic incentives:

- (a) *Redesign of Electoral Districts*: The current territorial segmentation creates strong incentives for intra-group competition, as electoral districts mirror ethnic geography. Adjustments – such as larger, multi-member districts or a single electoral district for the House of Representatives – could reduce incentives for ethnic outbidding and encourage parties to appeal beyond their core constituencies.
- (b) *Candidate List Reform*: Open lists create some accountability but also strengthen internal party bargaining. Introducing mandatory gender and minority quotas, rotating lists, or semi-open lists can broaden internal participation and reduce leadership monopolisation.
- (c) *Ensuring Equal Weight of the Vote*: Disproportionalities between cantons in the FBiH entity and the single-entity district in the RS distort voter equality. Technical recalibrations, long recommended by ODIHR and domestic experts, could improve representativeness without altering the consociational foundations.

Taken together, these reforms do not aim to alter the constitutional identity of the system — a politically untenable path — but instead reshape incentives within the existing framework to reduce ethnic segmentation and strengthen civic representation.

Revitalising the Party System:

Incentives for Policy-Oriented Competition

The party system in BiH is unlikely to undergo fundamental transformation without adjustments to the incentives that shape political behaviour. Yet, even within existing constraints, several reforms can strengthen the political marketplace:

- (a) *Strengthening programmatic commitments*: Parties should be required to publish programmatic platforms accompanied by measurable policy benchmarks. Civil society and media capacity to monitor the implementation of party promises must increase. This aligns with empirical findings highlighting a significant divergence between party programs and subsequent governing practices. Strengthening civil society, ensuring media freedom, and promoting political education can increase political participation and exert pressure on political actors to act in the public interest (Tzifakis 2007: 98–104; Börzel 2018: 89–97).

- (b) *Enhancing transparency in coalition formation*: Coalition agreements currently remain opaque, contributing to clientelism and weakening public trust. Requiring coalition agreements to be published and debated in parliament would increase accountability and reduce space for patronage-driven governance.
- (c) *Restructuring Campaign Finance Rules*: Political finance is a major vulnerability within the system. Transparency International BiH has repeatedly emphasised that unchecked funding sources and weak auditing strengthen party patronage. Strengthening campaign finance regulations would restrain the informal networks that currently dominate political competition.
- (d) *Supporting cross-ethnic cooperation*: Although large-scale constitutional reform remains improbable, incentives for joint electoral lists across ethnic lines — inspired by Belgium and Northern Ireland models — could encourage moderate positions and weaken ethnic monopolies.

*Strengthening Intra-Party Democracy:
The Critical Missing Link*

Intra-party democracy is not merely an internal matter of party management; in BiH's partitocratic context this represents a fundamental question of institutional integrity and public accountability. The strengthening of this aspect would have significant systemic effects:

- (a) *Transparent and competitive selection processes*: Introducing mandatory internal elections for leadership positions and requiring open, transparent candidate selection processes would distribute power more evenly within parties and enhance their legitimacy.
- (b) *Internal checks and oversight*: Creating internal ethics bodies, mandatory audit committees and mechanisms for member petitions would limit leadership monopolisation.
- (c) *Enhancing member participation*: Increasing member engagement in policy development through structured consultations or internal referenda can shift party priorities towards programmatic politics.

The previous research by the author (Arapović 2019; Arapović 2024) demonstrates that weak intra-party democracy in BiH directly contributes to clientelism, opaque governance and diminished institutional autonomy. Strengthened intra-party democracy would thus not only democratise parties but also improve governance across all levels of the political system.

*Synthesis: How These Reforms Address the
Identified Causal Mechanisms*

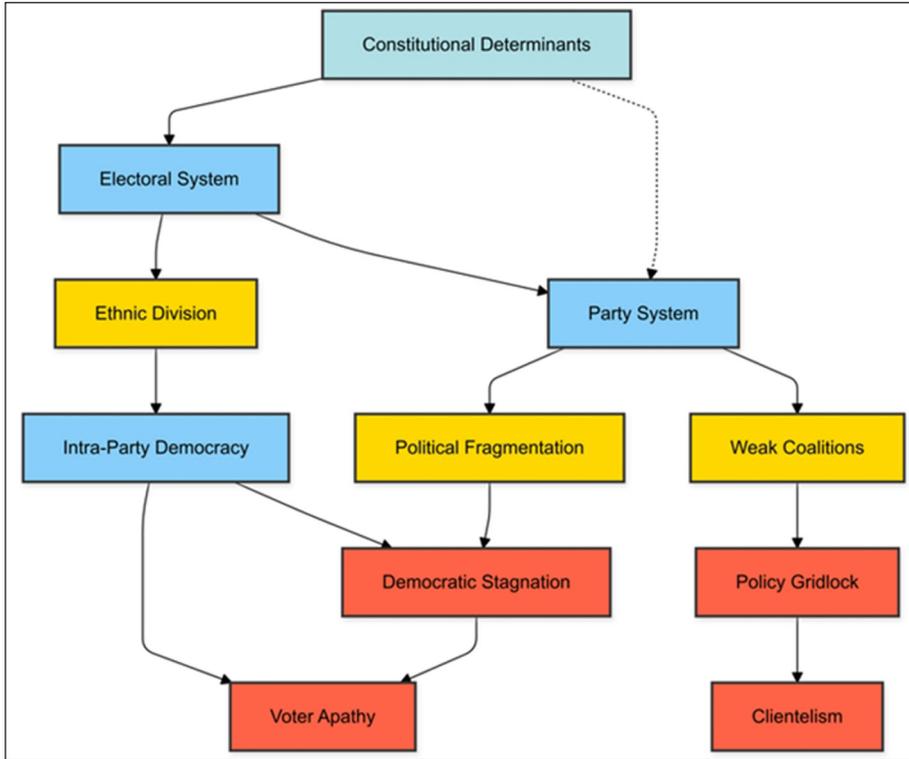
The following table (1) illustrates how proposed reforms address the identified causal mechanisms. It is followed by two illustrations depicting the interconnected relationships between the electoral system, party system, and intra-party democracy as key components influencing democratic outcomes in BiH (figure 1), and how targeted reform recommendations address key systemic issues within the electoral system, party system, and intra-party democracy in BiH (figure 2).

Table 1. How Reforms Address the Identified Causal Mechanisms

Identified Mechanism	Reform Lever	Expected Effect
Ethnic segmentation of electoral units	District redesign	Reduced ethnic outbidding; broader competition
Weak ideological competition	Programmatic oversight	Strengthened policy focus
Patronage networks	Campaign finance reform	Reduced clientelism
Opaque coalition-building	Mandatory public agreements	Increased accountability
Weak IPD	Internal elections, transparency	Reduced elite dominance
Party capture of institutions	Civil society monitoring	Increased oversight
Veto-based paralysis	Incentives for cross-ethnic cooperation	Enhanced governability

Each node in the figure 1. represents a significant element in the political process, while the directed edges (arrows) illustrate the causal links and feedback loops that perpetuate political stagnation.

Figure 1. Overview of causal links: electoral and party system of Bosnia and Herzegovina



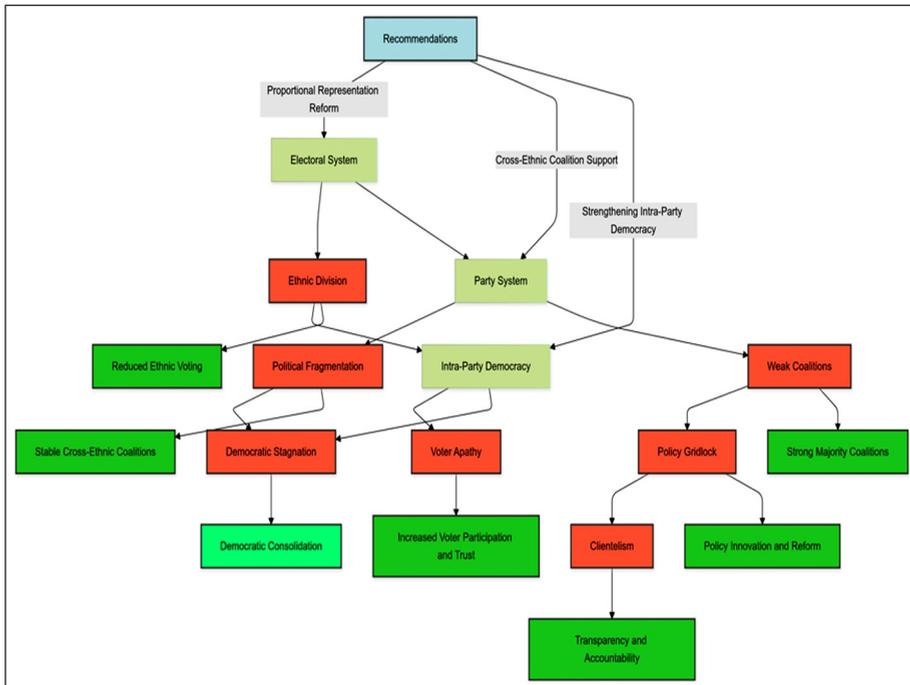
At the core of the system is the electoral framework, which institutionalises ethnic representation and reinforces divisions rather than promoting cross-ethnic political collaboration. This contributes to the fragmentation of the party system, where political actors organize themselves along ethnic lines rather than policy-based ideologies. The ethnic segmentation of the party system leads to weak coalitions that struggle to achieve legislative consensus, perpetuating policy gridlock and democratic stagnation.

Within political parties, the absence of strong intra-party democracy aggravates the problem, as decision-making remains concentrated within elite leadership, limiting grassroots engagement and transparency. This lack of internal democratic processes leads to voter apathy, as citizens lose faith in political representation and perceive parties as unaccountable. Moreover, this dysfunction feeds into the rise of clientelism, where parties rely on patronage networks to secure political support instead of fostering genuine democratic engagement.

The analysis also highlights the role of international interventions, such as those from the EU and OSCE, which attempt to stabilise and democratise the system but often inadvertently reinforce the dominance of entrenched parties by prioritizing stability over substantial reforms. These interventions impact the party system by influencing reform agendas, yet their effectiveness is limited by the persistence of ethnic segmentation and stagnant internal party structures. In summary, the figure demonstrates how the electoral system, party system, and intra-party democracy interact in a self-reinforcing cycle that undermines democratic consolidation. Key negative outcomes such as voter apathy, policy stagnation, and clientelism arise from the failures within these structures, underscoring the need for comprehensive reforms that address the system holistically rather than isolated issues.

The red boxes in figure 2. represent negative outcomes, such as ethnic division, political fragmentation, weak coalitions, policy gridlock, voter apathy, and clientelism. These outcomes collectively contribute to democratic stagnation and hinder governance reforms.

Figure 2. Impact of recommendation on factors and outcomes of the political system outcomes.



Three gray boxes present a package of recommendations aimed at mitigating these issues:

1. *Proportional Representation Reform*: Encourages issue-based voting and reduces the influence of ethnic identity in elections.
2. *Cross-Ethnic Coalition Support*: Strengthens political alliances based on shared policies rather than ethnic divisions, leading to more stable coalitions.
3. *Strengthening Intra-Party Democracy*: Enhances transparency in leadership selection and increases member participation, fostering greater accountability.

The green boxes depict the positive transformations that result from implementing these recommendations:

- a) *Reduced ethnic voting*: Voters prioritize policies over ethnic affiliations.
- b) *Stable cross-ethnic coalitions*: Political alliances become more durable and focused on effective governance.
- c) *Strong majority coalitions*: The formation of coherent governing coalitions reduces legislative deadlock.
- d) *Democratic consolidation*: Institutional reforms lead to a more resilient and participatory democratic process.
- e) *Policy innovation and reform*: Policymaking becomes more responsive and effective, reducing gridlock.
- f) *Increased voter participation and trust*: Enhanced intra-party democracy rebuilds voter confidence and engagement.
- g) *Transparency and accountability*: Patronage-based clientelism is replaced with meritocratic practices that increase public trust in political institutions.

The figure 2. demonstrates that democratic consolidation in BiH requires an integrated reform approach that simultaneously addresses electoral rules, party dynamics, and internal party governance, as illustrated by table 1. By fostering inclusivity, cross-ethnic cooperation, and institutional transparency, these recommendations collectively contribute to a stable and functional democracy.

BiH faces a critical juncture: continue with a political system that perpetuates ethnic divisions and stagnation or pursue comprehensive reforms that could revitalise democratic processes and political stability. The proposed reforms include decentralizing power, restructuring the electoral system for fairer representation, and fostering internal party democracy and transparency. This analysis reinforces that these changes could enable BiH to develop a political system that reflects pluralistic values and promotes inclusivity, rather than perpetuating existing divides.

Ultimately, the choice between finalising state consolidation and advancing democracy is not mutually exclusive. Ideally, these processes should progress concurrently to ensure BiH's long-term stability and prosperity. Substantial and sustained reforms, as outlined in this paper are necessary to create a state that serves all its citizens equitably.

The issue of consolidation of parliamentarism, which corresponds to the development of party pluralism, institutionalisation, constitutional reform and the rule of law, is a key determinant of political polarisation and profiling, both entire society embodied in the electorate, and of political parties. Consolidation represents the completion of democratisation and transition in democracy, and neither transition nor consolidation in context of BiH has been fully achieved, implying that democratization process is therefore slowed down and impoverished. Consolidation occurs when all actors in the political system accept the democratic rules of the game. To assess the completion of the process of transition to democracy, Linz's definitional standard should be included:

"Democratic transition is completed when sufficient agreement has been reached on political procedures to achieve an elected government, when the government comes to power directly on the basis of free and general elections, when such a government has de facto authority to create new policies and when the executive, legislative and judicial authorities created by the new democracy do not have to share power de jure with other bodies" (Linz & Stepan 1996: 133).

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Izborni dizajn, stranačka konkurencija i institucionalna slabost u Bosni i Hercegovini: uzročni mehanizmi koji oblikuju krhku demokratiju

Sažetak: Ovaj članak analizira kako izborni dizajn, stranačka konkurencija i unutarstranačke prakse oblikuju demokratsku i institucionalnu slabost u Bosni i Hercegovini. Etničko glasanje i dominacija nacionalnih stranaka nastali su na prvim višestranačkim izborima 1990. godine i narativu o „sporazumu naroda“, a kasnije su ojačani kroz postdejtonsku institucionalnu strukturu. Koristeći konceptualni pristup i analizu slučaja, članak se oslanja na akademsku literaturu, ustavna pravila, presude Evropskog suda za ljudska prava, izvještaje o praćenju izbora i ranija istraživanja autora. Identificira mehanizme putem kojih izborna pravila jačaju konkurenciju unutar etničkih blokova, dok proporcionalna zastupljenost funkcionira unutar etnički segmentiranog okvira koji potiče patronažu i ograničava programsku politiku. Slaba unutarstranačka demokratija dodatno koncentrira moć u stranačkim elitama i potkopava državne institucije. Članak predlaže prilagođavanja izbornog dizajna, političkih institucija i unutarstranačkih procedura, objašnjavajući kako bi ovi koraci mogli ublažiti motive za etničko glasanje i ojačati institucionalne kapacitete.

Cljučne riječi: *izborni dizajn, stranačka konkurencija, unutarstranačka demokratija, etničko glasanje, institucionalne slabosti*