



Beyond Dodik: Party Politics and Power in Republika Srpska



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Summary

This report analyses political power in Republika Srpska within the post-Dayton system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on the interaction between ethnic politics, clientelist networks and institutional design. It suggests that nationalist party dominance is sustained less through individual leadership than through entrenched patterns of patronage, wartime narratives and weak rule of law. While the formal end of Milorad Dodik's presidency could indicate political change, the report argues that his influence might persist through broader systemic structures capable of reproducing elite control beyond any single actor. The analysis further highlights how entity-level autonomy, international oversight and fragmented governance might constrain democratic accountability and limit cross-ethnic and programmatic political competition. By shifting attention from personalities to structures, the report provides a contextual understanding of how governance operates in Republika Srpska and outlines why meaningful political transformation remains difficult, but is not entirely foreclosed.



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Introduction

Republika Srpska finds itself at a critical political juncture following two snap elections, in November 2025 and February 2026, that highlighted the resilience of its long-standing political networks. The November election followed the unprecedented removal of Milorad Dodik, the former President who was legally barred from office in August 2025. Rather than signalling a break from entrenched elites, however, the political landscape adapted quickly. Dodik's chosen successor, Siniša Karan, secured victory in both votes, after a February rerun triggered by reports of voter intimidation and electoral irregularities.¹

Although formally out of office, Dodik continues to influence political outcomes through loyal allies and established party structures, demonstrating that changes in formal roles have not disrupted the broader system of power. This system predates Dodik and has been characterised throughout the post-war period by weak state institutions, patronage networks and enduring ethno-political divisions.² Thirty years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, political authority in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is still

negotiated through ethnic identity, coalition bargaining and informal loyalty networks. Nationalist parties continue to dominate elections, raising questions about the mechanisms that sustain their power.³

The public debate often frames Republika Srpska's politics around Dodik, portraying him as the embodiment of nationalist resistance. While his influence is undeniable, focusing solely on individual leadership risks overlooking the broader structures that allow power to persist despite formal changes. This report therefore shifts attention from individual leaders to the system, examining how party organisation, clientelism and ethno-politics interact in everyday life. By analysing access to public services and employment, and systems of political loyalty, the report maps the patterns that underpin political influence in Republika Srpska. The goal is not to make definitive causal claims, but to describe observable dynamics that explain the enduring resilience of nationalist parties and their leaders.

¹ *Centralna izborna komisija BiH objavila rezultate: Prednost Karana skoro 11.000 glasova, veća nego u novembru*, Avaz, 8 February 2026, <https://www.avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/1022412/centralna-izborna-komisija-bih-objavila-rezultate-prednost-karana-skoro-11-000-glasova-veca-nego-u-novembru> (accessed 10 February 2026); *"Siniša Karan wins the repeat vote, securing the position of President of Republika Srpska"*, European Western Balkans, 9 February 2026, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/02/09/sinisa-karan-wins-the-repeat-vote-securing-the-position-of-president-of-republika-srpska/> (accessed 10 February 2026).

² "Who Will Succeed Dodik as Bosnian Serb Leader?" *Balkan Insight*, 30 September 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/30/who-will-succeed-dodik-as-bosnian-serb-leader> (accessed 1 November 2025).

³ Ola Listhaug and Sabrina P. Ramet, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina since Dayton: Civic and Uncivic Values', *Religion, State and Society*, 42, no. 4 (2014), pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2014.987442>; Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23–25.



Institutional Design and Ethnic Power-Sharing

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system is widely regarded as highly complex, as a legacy of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. The Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war but at the same time institutionalised a fragmented state structure based on ethnic representation.⁴ It divided the country into two semi-autonomous entities: the Federation of BiH, with a Bosniak and Croat majority, and Republika Srpska, with a Serb majority. Use of the original Serbian name is politically and symbolically significant. The term *Srpska* derives from Srbi (Serbs) and denotes an ethnic-national identity rather than a territorial link to the state of Serbia.⁵ The self-governing Brčko District was also established (see Figure 1). Each entity maintains its own president, parliament and government, while Sarajevo is host to the central institutions and the rotating tripartite presidency.⁶

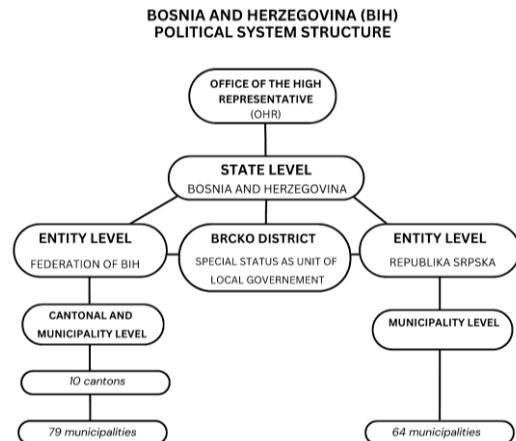


Figure 1: Political System Structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁷

The consociational system was designed to secure peace by balancing ethnic representation rather than fostering civic integration. It follows a power-sharing logic in which the three constituent peoples, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, are granted extensive veto powers within state institutions. This principle is most clearly reflected in the tripartite presidency, which comprises one representative from each group, directly elected from their respective entities.⁸ Minority groups such as Roma, Jews

⁴ Landguiden, *Bosnien och Hercegovina*, <https://www.ui.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/europa/bosnien-hercegovina/> (accessed 13 October 2025); Landguiden, *Bosnien och Hercegovina: Inrikespolitik och författning* (2025), <https://www.ui.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/europa/bosnien-hercegovina/inrikespolitik-och-forfattning/> (accessed 13 October 2025).

⁵ Volker Wagener, "What is Republika Srpska?" DW, 15 January 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-republika-srpska/a-64373205> (accessed 15 January 2026).

⁶ International IDEA, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Country Profile*, available at: <https://www.idea.int/node/125730> (accessed 20 September 2025).

⁷ ARL International, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Country Profile*, available at: <https://www.arl-international.com/knowledge/country-profiles/bosnia-herzegovina/rev/4067> (accessed 28 September 2025); International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 2018 General Elections – FAQs*, available at: <https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/elections-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2018-general-elections> (accessed 18 September 2025).

⁸ Ola Listhaug and Sabrina P. Ramet, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina since Dayton: Civic and Uncivic Values', *Religion, State & Society*, 42, no. 4 (2014), pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2014.987442>.



and those who identify as “Bosnian” or “Yugoslav” are constitutionally excluded from the highest offices, including the presidency. This exclusion underscores how institutional design privileges collective identity over individual rights.⁹

Above the domestic framework stands the Office of the High Representative (OHR), an international body empowered to oversee – and when necessary intervene in – the political process. The High Representative retains the authority to dismiss elected officials and impose legislation, making Bosnia and Herzegovina a case of limited sovereignty under international supervision. While this external oversight has helped to maintain post-war stability, it has also constrained local political agency and fostered dependency on international mediation.¹⁰

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has the formal attributes of sovereignty, including international recognition and participation in global institutions, its internal political structure constrains the effective exercise of that sovereignty. The extensive powers of the OHR and the autonomy of the entities effectively divide authority between

international and local actors. In practice, this results in what some scholars describe as shared or constrained sovereignty, where the state’s ability to make unified political decisions is undermined by competing ethnic and institutional centres of power. Republika Srpska’s assertive autonomy, combined with weak central governance, therefore raise fundamental questions, such as whether Bosnia and Herzegovina functions as a cohesive state or a loose confederation sustained by external oversight.¹¹

Republika Srpska

Within Bosnia and Herzegovina’s fragmented post-Dayton framework (see Figure 2), Republika Srpska stands out for its relatively centralized and autonomous governance. Although formally bound by the state constitution, the entity exercises broad control over internal affairs, such as education, policing and tax policy. Legislative authority rests with the Republika Srpska National Assembly, while executive power is held by a directly elected president who appoints the government and represents the entity both domestically and internationally.¹²

⁹ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23–25.

¹⁰ Ola Listhaug and Sabrina P. Ramet, ‘Bosnia-Herzegovina since Dayton: Civic and Uncivic Values’, *Religion, State & Society*, 42, no. 4 (2014), pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2014.987442>; Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23–25.

¹¹ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹² National Assembly of Republika Srpska, “About the National Assembly”, <https://www.narodnaskupstinars.net/?q=en/national-assembly/about-national-assembly> (accessed 14 October 2025); Transparency International Bosnia & Herzegovina. “Paramilitary Intelligence Services as a Sign of Open Dictatorship: The Government Introduces Parallel Institutions to Preserve the Regime.” Transparency International BiH. <https://ti-bih.org/paramilitary-intelligence-services-as-a->



Figure 2: Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the entities¹³

As a result of this institutional autonomy, Republika Srpska is often described as a “state-in-waiting”. While still embedded in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it possesses many of the practical attributes of statehood, which shapes political competition. Key Bosnian Serb political parties use this position to justify stronger entity-level centralization and at times to promote narratives of independence or closer alignment with Serbia.¹⁴

[sign-of-open-dictatorship-the-government-introduces-parallel-institutions-to-preserve-the-regime/?lang=en](https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/helping-keep-bosnia-and-herzegovina-together); International Crisis Group. “Helping Keep Bosnia and Herzegovina Together”, Europe & Central Asia (Watch List 2024 – Spring Update), 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/helping-keep-bosnia-and-herzegovina-together> (accessed 10 September 2025); International Crisis Group. Report 214: Bosnia: What Does Republika Srpska Want?, 6 October 2011. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/214-bosnia-what-does-republika-srpska-want> (accessed 10 September 2025).

¹³ European Parliamentary Research Service, “Republika Srpska: Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Serb-dominated Entity,” EPRS,

Republika Srpska’s autonomy, together with its institutional design, reinforces ethnic politics by giving Bosnian Serb-dominated parties structural advantages. Extensive entity-based powers, a proportional electoral system and guaranteed ethnic representation limit opportunities for multi-ethnic competition.¹⁵ Similar dynamics exist within the political institutions of the Federation of BiH, where power-sharing arrangements also entrench ethnic divisions and hinder civic representation. As a result, the institutional framework prioritises collective identity over individual citizenship, consolidating the legitimacy of nationalist parties and their control over resources. These mechanisms operate across parties to maintain stability, limit political competition and challenge central institutions when their interests diverge. Parallel administrative, educational and media structures further reinforce separation, highlighting that ethnic division is a systemic feature across Bosnia rather than a phenomenon unique to Republika Srpska.¹⁶

<https://epthinktank.eu/2014/01/09/republika-srpska/> (accessed 30 October 2025).

¹⁴ Jelena Subotić, ‘Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide: A Reflection on a Controversy’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24.1 (2022), pp. 71–82.

¹⁵ Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁶ “Who Will Succeed Dodik as Bosnian Serb Leader?” *Balkan Insight*, 30 September 2025, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/30/who-will-succeed-dodik-as-bosnian-serb-leader> (accessed 1 November 2025)

Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).



These internal advantages also shape Republika Srpska's role at the national level. Republika Srpska holds 14 of the 42 seats in the national House of Representatives, the lower chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina's parliament responsible for passing national laws and approving the state budget. This distribution reflects Republika Srpska's demographic weight, but it also illustrates its limited influence over state-wide decision making. As a result, citizens often view entity-level elections held every four years as more consequential than national ones, since they directly determine local leadership, policy and access to resources.¹⁷ Despite its broad autonomy, however, Republika Srpska remains legally integrated into Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order. State-level laws prevail in areas such as defence, foreign policy and monetary regulation, while entities retain control over internal governance. This asymmetrical arrangement sustains peace but perpetuates tensions between Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the de facto capital of Republika Srpska, over competences and sovereignty.¹⁸ These tensions are also reflected in party politics, as political parties pursue conflicting visions of sovereignty and state authority.

¹⁷ Sarajevo times. "The Republika Srpska National Assembly elects the new Government". 22 December 2022. <https://sarajevotimes.com/the-republika-srpska-national-assembly-elects-the-new-government/> (accessed 1 October 2025). Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23–25; National Assembly of Republika Srpska, "About the National Assembly," <https://www.narodnaskupstinars.net/?q=en/national-assembly/about-national-assembly> (accessed 14 October 2025); European Parliamentary Research Service, "Republika Srpska: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Serb-dominated Entity," EPRS,

Key Political Actors in Republika Srpska

The Serbian Democratic Party,¹⁹ which was founded by Radovan Karadžić in the 1990s, was fundamental in shaping the political identity of Republika Srpska. It emerged as the leading nationalist force during the war and institutionalised ethnic mobilisation, securing near-total dominance throughout the 1990s. Scholars classify it as a rigidly ideological right wing nationalist party that drew support almost exclusively from Bosnian Serb voters. Its focus on Serb unity and its alignment with Serbia frequently placed it at odds with Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war peace implementation efforts. The party's legacy laid the foundation for political parties, particularly the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), to adopt similar nationalist rhetoric while broadening their appeal.²⁰ The Serbian Democratic Party not only obstructed post-war peace, but openly advocated the linking of Republika Srpska with Serbia. Its 2007 programme explicitly referenced the "right of Republika Srpska to self-determination" once the Dayton Peace Agreement was no longer in effect, framing secession as a legitimate long-term political

<https://epthinktank.eu/2014/01/09/republika-srpska/> (accessed 30 October 2025).

¹⁸ Maja Sahadžić and Bojan Vlaški, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina: Horizontal Coordination Still Under Construction', in *Horizontal Intergovernmental Coordination at Local and Regional Levels* (Cham: Springer, 2025), pp. 47–65.

¹⁹ For consistency and clarity, this report uses the English translations of political party names rather than their original Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian forms. A list of parties with their original names and abbreviations is provided at the end of the report.

²⁰ Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23–25.



aspiration and demonstrating its operation within a maximalist nationalist framework.²¹

The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) was established in 1996 as a splinter group from the Serbian Democratic Party. It initially positioned itself as a moderate, social-democratic alternative but evolved over time. Jasmin Mujanović argues that the SNSD can be classified as an extreme right wing, nationalist and secessionist party that also incorporates certain social democratic elements in its economic and welfare policies. In this way, the contemporary SNSD combines populism, nationalism and selective social democratic ideas.²² Today, it represents the dominant force in Republika Srpska's politics, securing 50.39% of the vote in the 2025 snap election.²³ This dominance is evident despite an east-west divide.²⁴ The SNSD has a strong position in the more economically and politically influential western part of Republika Srpska, where it exercises control over all municipalities either independently

or through coalition arrangements with smaller parties. At the same time, the party has expanded its influence into eastern areas that have traditionally constituted the electoral base of the Serbian Democratic Party. Decision making over budget allocations and major investment projects was largely centralised under Dodik's government, giving the leadership significant leverage over regional development. Consequently, many eastern municipalities perceive themselves as politically marginalised and economically disadvantaged. Although demands for increased decentralisation are beginning to emerge, these concerns are frequently overshadowed by broader priorities related to preserving Republika Srpska's cohesion and autonomy.²⁵

While the SNSD blends nationalist and social democratic narratives in its rhetoric, its political practice is primarily defined by ethnonationalism, populism and secessionist claims, which justify its classification as an

²¹ Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010). International Crisis Group. "Helping Keep Bosnia and Herzegovina Together", Europe & Central Asia (Watch List 2024 – Spring Update), 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/helping-keep-bosnia-and-herzegovina-together> (accessed 10 September 2025); International Crisis Group. Report 214: Bosnia: What Does Republika Srpska Want?, 6 October 2011. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/214-bosnia-what-does-republika-srpska-want> (accessed 10 September 2025); FENA, "SDS: Prijedlog federalizacije BiH izuzetno opasan," *Klix.ba*, 16 May 2007, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/sds-prijedlog-federalizacije-bih-izuzetno-opasan/070516060> (accessed 20 November 2025)

²² Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²³ Al Jazeera Staff and News Agencies, "Barred Bosnian Serb leader Dodik's party wins presidential election," *Al Jazeera*, 23 November 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/23/barred-bosnian-serb-leader-dodiks-party-wins-presidential-election> (accessed 9 January 2026).

²⁴ Parties and Elections in Europe, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Parties and Elections in Europe* <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/bosnia-herzegovina.html> (accessed 24 October 2025).

²⁵ International Crisis Group. "Helping Keep Bosnia and Herzegovina Together", Europe & Central Asia (Watch List 2024 – Spring Update), 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/helping-keep-bosnia-and-herzegovina-together> (accessed 10 September 2025).



extreme nationalist party. This framing was clearly expressed in the 2016 Republika Srpska referendum, which asked whether 9 January should remain the entity's national day. The date is controversial because it marks the 1992 proclamation of Republika Srpska, a key moment in the outbreak of the Bosnian War. By insisting on celebrating this date despite a ruling by the Constitutional Court that it is discriminatory against non-Serbs, the SNSD has reinforced an exclusionary, ethnically defined understanding of political legitimacy.²⁶ This combination has allowed it to operate as a broad catch-all party, consolidating control over both political and institutional structures. When reforms to strengthen national institutions are debated, the SNSD systematically rejects any proposal perceived as weakening the entities. Its discourse emphasises the threat of Bosniaks "institutionalising their demographic majority" at the state level, a narrative that the SNSD strategically deploys in

programmes and election campaigns in order to mobilise voters.²⁷

In the 2025 snap election, Republika Srpska's political landscape was dominated by the two major nationalist parties, the SNSD and the Serbian Democratic Party, and there was only minor support for smaller or emerging parties (see Table 1). Candidates for the smaller parties, such as the Alliance for New Politics (SNP) and the Ecological Party of Republika Srpska (EPRS), obtained less than 0.5% of the vote,²⁸ which highlights the limited space for civic or programmatic alternatives. Only the SNSD and the Serbian Democratic Party consistently secure meaningful representation, including multiple seats in the National Assembly, while smaller parties typically gain only one or two seats. Because party identity in Republika Srpska is shaped more by ethnic affiliation than policy platforms, only the strongest parties can compete meaningfully at the state level or within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁹

²⁶ Mateusz Seroka, "The Serbian referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 28 September 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-09-28/serbian-referendum-bosnia-and-herzegovina> (accessed 15 January 2026); Balkan Insight, *Bosnian Serbs staged referendum affirming January 9 as the entity's national day*, 25 September 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/20/bosnian-serb-leader-puts-justice-referendum-on-hold-09-20-2017/> (accessed 15 January 2026).

²⁷ Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1sted, 2020).

²⁸ Parties and Elections in Europe, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Parties and Elections in Europe* <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/bosnia-herzegovina.html> (accessed 24 October 2025); Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Results of the 2022 General Elections

https://www.izbori.ba/Rezultati_izbora/?resId=39&langId=4#/5/0/0 (accessed 29 January 2026).

²⁹ Al Jazeera, *Bosnia's Republika Srpska Votes for Dodik's Successor: What to Expect*, 22 November 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/22/bosnias-republika-srpska-votes-for-dodiks-successor-what-to-expect> (accessed 29 January 2026).



Table 1. Presidential Election in Republika Srpska 2025

Candidate	Political Party	Votes (no.)	Votes (%)
Siniša Karan	SNSD	222,182	50.39%
Branko Blanuša	SDS	212,605	48.22%
Dragan Đokanović	SNP	2,018	0.46%
Nikola Lazarević	EPRS	1,698	0.39%
Igor Gašević	Independent	1,353	0.31%
Slavko Dragičević	Independent	1,066	0.24%

Source: [Parties and Elections in Europe, ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina’, Parties and Elections in Europe](#) (accessed 24 October 2025).

Sustaining Nationalist Party Dominance

Despite regular elections and a formally competitive party system, political competition in Republika Srpska is structured by deeper institutional and socio-economic mechanisms that consistently favour nationalist actors.³⁰ These mechanisms extend beyond individual leaders and instead reflect enduring patterns of clientelism, understood here as the systematic exchange of material benefits and access to public resources or services for political loyalty, mediated through personal and party-based networks rather than formal institutions.³¹

³⁰ Aleksandra Zdeb, ‘Doomed to Fail? Rebound Effect and Conflict Management Problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina’ (Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie) <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.23.010.18436> accessed (15 January 2026).

³¹ Kıvanç Yıldırım and Herbert Kitschelt, ‘Analytical Perspectives on Varieties of Clientelism’, *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 20–43.

Governance and State Fragmentation

A persistent obstacle in Republika Srpska is the pervasiveness of clientelism and bribery, where corruption scandals often involve prominent political figures. All the governments of the country have faced difficult economic and social conditions, but these practices are deeply embedded in the political system. The 2024 *Nations Transit* report scored Bosnia and Herzegovina 3.18 out of 7 on the Democracy Score, categorizing it as a transnational or hybrid regime.³²

Corruption and weak rule of law continue to have direct consequences for economic performance. Much like Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, the entity has experienced a slow and uneven recovery

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1641798>; Jean-Louis Briquet, ‘Clientelism’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 29 December 2015 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/clientelism> (accessed 28 January 2026).

³² Neven Anđelić, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Nations in Transit 2024*, Freedom House, 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/nations-transit/2024> (accessed 3 December 2025).



since the global financial crisis. Large-scale privatisations, including of Republika Srpska Telecom and an oil refinery, produced a significant but temporary increase in public revenue in the late 2000s, fostering a misleading sense of economic progress. These gains were not converted into long-term development or structural reform. Instead, higher taxes and the prospect of reductions in social spending have increased the risk of social discontent, further weakening confidence in political and economic institutions.³³ Public dissatisfaction reinforces this lack of trust. Citizens report extremely low levels of confidence. In an international survey, just 16% said they were mostly or completely satisfied with the country's direction, while nearly 60% were mostly or completely dissatisfied – the highest level of discontent in the survey. This reflects a deeply frustrated core of the population.³⁴

In a context where institutional trust is low and formal governance mechanisms have been weakened, political authority often becomes increasingly personalized. Leaders with strong public profiles can translate personal popularity into organisational

control, consolidating influence over party structures and state institutions.³⁵ Over time, this form of charismatic legitimacy is routinised through networks of loyal allies, producing a system where influence depends less on formal office and more on loyalty and proximity to the leader. Many political parties in the entity revolve around strong leaders whose identity shapes the party's image and strategy, reinforcing perceptions of "one-man rule".³⁶ It has been noted that leaders often emphasise Bosnian Serb autonomy and identity in ways that appeal to both urban and rural communities, helping to unite supporters and strengthen their influence. While Dodik is the most visible example, these mechanisms operate more broadly beyond any single individual.

As Herbert Kitschelt notes, strong presidential powers often encourage clientelism because political competition becomes centred on individuals and their networks rather than coherent policy programmes.³⁷ When politicians make vague promises instead of presenting clear policies, they have wide discretion to give favours to supporters. This keeps people loyal because they benefit personally, even if the politician

³³ International Crisis Group. Report 214: Bosnia: What Does Republika Srpska Want?, 6 October 2011. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/214-bosnia-what-does-republika-srpska-want> (accessed 10 September 2025).

³⁴ GEO-POWER-EU, *Public Opinion on International Actors, Security, and EU Integration in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood* (2025) <https://geo-power.eu/portfolio/item/new-report-public-opinion-on-international-actors-security-and-eu-integration-in-the-western-balkans-and-eastern-neighbourhood/> accessed 15 November 2025).

³⁵ Herbert Kitschelt, 'Linkages Between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities', in *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, ed. by Herbert Kitschelt, Kirk A. Hawkins, Juan Pablo Luna, Guillermo Rosas, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 814–846.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Herbert Kitschelt, 'Linkages Between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities', in *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, ed. by Herbert Kitschelt, Kirk A. Hawkins, Juan Pablo Luna, Guillermo Rosas, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 860–861.



does not deliver real policy change. In systems dominated by personalised politics and clientelism, voters often cannot tell whether voting for a politician will result in real improvements or meaningful change.³⁸ This uncertainty can lead voters to base their choices on ethnic identity, personal loyalty or favours, rather than on politicians' stated policies or plans.

Clientelist practices are used by both governing and opposition parties. Milan Miličević, mayor of Teslić and president of the opposition Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), was arrested on suspicion of abuse of office and attempting to influence voters. This cross-party prevalence suggests that clientelism is rooted in the political structures of Republika Srpska, rather than being limited to a single party. It is therefore arguable that clientelism functions as a stabilising factor in nationalist rule, allowing political dominance to persist even as individual leaders come and go.³⁹

The Dual Face of Corruption

Throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, cases of corruption shape the everyday lives of citizens. In both Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

bribery and informal payments have become a regular part of accessing public services. One of the most striking examples of corruption in everyday life can be found in the healthcare sector. Patients often face significant informal costs for receiving even basic medical care. For instance, women report having to pay extra sums simply to ensure that doctors provide proper maternity care. Some patients offer additional payments pre-emptively, fearing that without them they will not receive adequate care. In more extreme cases, there have been reports of patients being misdiagnosed or pressured into costly procedures, illustrating the potentially life-threatening consequences of corruption in healthcare.⁴⁰ A bribe of approximately €125 is commonly required to obtain adequate healthcare in parts of the country.⁴¹

These findings demonstrate that corruption is not merely an elite-level phenomenon but a routine feature of daily life that shapes how citizens access essential services. Beyond healthcare, corruption also affects employment in public institutions. Public sector jobs are a significant source of stable employment, and many positions are filled according to political connections rather than

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 848.

³⁹ European Western Balkans, *Leader of SDS Milan Miličević Arrested, Opposition in RS Deems Case as Politically Motivated* (12 June 2025) <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/06/12/leader-of-sds-milan-milicevic-arrested-opposition-in-rs-deems-case-as-political-motivated/> (accessed 22 September 2025); Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1st ed, 2020). Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁰ U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Every Day in BiH Must Be Anti-Corruption Day* (1 December 2022)

<https://ba.usembassy.gov/every-day-in-bih-must-be-anti-corruption-day/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

⁴¹ Jasmina Mangafić and Ljiljan Veselinović, 'The Determinants of Corruption at the Individual Level: Evidence from Bosnia-Herzegovina' (2020) 33(1) *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* 2648–2669.



skills or qualifications. Even low-level roles, such as a cleaning job at a university, are often treated as political appointments rather than being awarded on merit.⁴²

Networks of loyalty often extend to the family members of political leaders, further concentrating power and resources. It is not uncommon for relatives of political figures in Republika Srpska to hold influential roles. A prominent example is Igor Dodik, the son of the former president, who has become increasingly visible in both the political and the economic sphere.⁴³ Reports have linked him to allegations of offering political appointments in exchange for sensitive information. The United States has imposed sanctions on him and warned that Republika Srpska risks becoming more of a Dodik family business than a political entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such developments illustrate emerging dynastic tendencies.⁴⁴

The persistence of corruption demonstrates how clientelism becomes embedded in everyday social practices if not regulated through formal institutions. In Republika Srpska, corruption is often mediated through informal networks, such as securing a

medical appointment via a party contact, obtaining public employment through family ties or avoiding fines because a relative works in the police. While these exchanges might appear minor or isolated, together they form a “web of dependencies” that binds citizens to political elites. In this context, clientelism can function as the social infrastructure of corruption, offering individuals practical solutions in an unreliable state while also reinforcing elite control and limiting accountability.⁴⁵

Ethnic Division and Institutional Traps

In Republika Srpska, political parties mainly compete for support among Bosnian Serbs, due to the entity’s constitutionally defined ethnic structure and the dominance of Bosnian Serb-majority electoral constituencies. This system encourages continued loyalty, allowing parties to maintain support even when government performance is poor. As a result, power tends to concentrate in the hands of a small elite, thereby widening social inequalities. Moreover, the dominance of ethnic-based political parties leaves little room for non-ethnic or programmatic parties to emerge, unless other social divisions, such

⁴² Roberto Belloni and Francesco Strazzari, ‘Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo: A Deal Among Friends?’ (2014) *Third World Quarterly* 35(5) 855–871.

⁴³ Freedom House, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Nations in Transit 2024* (Freedom House, 2024) <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/nations-transit/2024> (accessed 29 November 2025).

⁴⁴ Balkan Insight. “With his Hybrid Secessionism, Bosnia’s Dodik is a Threat to the Region” 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/02/with-his-hybrid-secessionism-bosnias-dodik-is-a-threat-to-the-region/> (accessed 28 September 2025). Balkan Insight. “Bosnian Serb Entity Scraps Public Financing for Parties in Blow to Pluralism”. 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/22/bosnian->

[serb-entity-scraps-public-financing-for-parties-in-blow-to-pluralism/](https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/22/bosnian-serb-entity-scraps-public-financing-for-parties-in-blow-to-pluralism/) (accessed 30 September 2025); Freedom House, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Nations in Transit 2024* (Freedom House, 2024) <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/nations-transit/2024> (accessed 29 November 2025).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1sted, 2020); Herbert Kitschelt, ‘Linkages Between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities’, in *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, ed. by Herbert Kitschelt, Kirk A. Hawkins, Juan Pablo Luna, Guillermo Rosas, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 814–846.



as class, were already strong before ethnic politics became central. The power-sharing arrangements are supposed to make politics fairer and more stable, but in practice can help elites to protect their own interests. They can continue to reward their supporters and remain in power, even though the government is inefficient and unaccountable.⁴⁶

These institutional and political dynamics are further reinforced by the continuous use of wartime narratives, which ethnic parties strategically employ to justify their dominance and portray themselves as the sole protectors of their group. In a way, ethnic parties behave as if politics is just an extension of the war. This makes it hard for people from different ethnic groups to work together and leaves little or no room for parties that focus on policies or issues instead of ethnic identity. In other words, the parties use the memory of the war to maintain power and make it difficult for non-ethnic, issue-based politics to take root.⁴⁷

In Republika Srpska, this has been reflected in the institutionalised denial of the Srebrenica genocide.⁴⁸ This involves

disputing the number and identity of victims, glorifying war criminals as heroes and delegitimizing the international court as politically biased against Serbs. Since 2002, genocide denial has been official policy.⁴⁹ These narratives allow political leaders to frame challenges as threats to the Bosnian Serb community, reinforcing loyalty through identity and historical memory. In practice, wartime narratives support clientelism by keeping people loyal, which makes it easier for elites to control political parties and state institutions. Jelena Subotić argues that such narratives are not merely rhetorical, but form a core element of political strategy in Republika Srpska, shaping collective memory as well as contemporary governance.

By embedding nationalist ideology widely throughout society, these parties ensure their survival over time, relying on shared beliefs rather than the authority of a single leader. Ethno-nationalist parties present themselves as the primary representatives of their ethnic group, signalling that alternative voices are less legitimate. While these parties have experienced a gradual decline in influence compared to similar parties in neighbouring countries, they remain firmly

⁴⁶ Herbert Kitschelt, 'Linkages Between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities', in *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, ed. by Herbert Kitschelt, Kirk A. Hawkins, Juan Pablo Luna, Guillermo Rosas, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 814–846; Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1st ed, 2020).

⁴⁷ Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Jelena Subotić, 'Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide: A Reflection on a Controversy', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24.1 (2022), pp. 71–82.

⁴⁸ *Srebrenica: Timeline of a Genocide*, International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, <https://www.irmct.org/specials/srebrenica/timeline/en> (accessed 15 January 2026); *Srebrenica Genocide: No Room for Denial*, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), <https://www.icty.org/en/outreach/documentaries/srebrenica-genocide-no-room-for-denial> (accessed 15 January 2026)

⁴⁹ Jelena Subotić, 'Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide: A Reflection on a Controversy', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24.1 (2022), pp. 71–82.



embedded in the country's complex multilayered system of governance, allowing them to exert influence across multiple levels of power.⁵⁰ Importantly, no party has achieved complete dominance over its own ethnic community as other parties and actors still hold some sway. In Republika Srpska, however, the SNSD has maintained a leading position since 2006, demonstrating that ethno-nationalist parties can sustain long-term influence even without total control. In short, while their influence has weakened somewhat, nationalist parties remain an enduring force.⁵¹

International Actors and Local Power Networks

External actors, including international organisations and foreign governments, play an important but deeply ambiguous role in Republika Srpska. Rather than fundamentally challenging entrenched clientelist and nationalist structures, international engagement has often interacted – and at times aligned – with existing power networks. Political elites in Republika Srpska have demonstrated a great capacity to adapt to international norms in ways that maintain the appearance of compliance while preserving control. For instance, recent legal developments, such as the recriminalization of defamation and proposals for a “foreign agents” law, show how local leaders can take

advantage of the way international organisations and rules work. These measures restrict criticism, narrow the civic space and place financial and administrative pressure on independent media and civil society organisations, while still appearing to meet international expectations.⁵² In particular, the defamation and proposed foreign agents’ laws threaten NGO financing and civic engagement, tightening control over civil society. In this way, international norms function less as constraints than as instruments that can be selectively appropriated by local elites.⁵³

At the same time, targeted measures by external actors, such as the US sanctions imposed in 2023 on individuals linked to bribery and electoral manipulation, can reveal how entrenched elite networks operate independently of formal positions of power. While the sanctions punish specific actors, they cannot dismantle the informal structures through which elites exercise control, allowing these networks to persist and maintain dominance even when individuals are targeted. Thus, the sanctions highlight the resilience and adaptability of local power networks, showing that external pressure alone cannot fundamentally disrupt elite control.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1st ed, 2020), p.32; *Ibid.*, p. 34; Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson (eds.), *Party Politics in the Western Balkans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

⁵¹ Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1st ed, 2020).

⁵² Transparency International Bosnia & Herzegovina, ‘Paramilitary Intelligence Services

as a Sign of Open Dictatorship: The Government Introduces Parallel Institutions to Preserve the Regime’ (Transparency International BiH) <https://ti-bih.org/paramilitary-intelligence-services-as-a-sign-of-open-dictatorship-the-government-introduces-parallel-institutions-to-preserve-the-regime/?lang=en> (accessed 2 January 2026).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*



This persistence is also reflected in the control of public information. Media control in Republika Srpska is facilitated by weak legislation, politicized oversight bodies and entrenched patronage networks. These conditions allow political leaders to exploit existing structures. Recent legal measures place increasing pressure on independent media, reflecting the ruling party's growing control over information channels and the public sphere.⁵⁵

These domestic measures, combined with weak enforcement of formal rules, create opportunities for local elites to strategically interact with international actors. In Republika Srpska, political leaders survive by endorsing EU and NATO values when it serves their interests, or by threatening instability if they fail to secure financial or political concessions. As Mujanović notes, this functions as a form of blackmail directed at the international community. This dynamic can be understood as a “stabilitocracy”, a term used to describe semi-authoritarian regimes that provide the appearance of stability to external actors

while managing domestic tensions to secure their rule.

The EU and other external actors contribute to this dynamic by prioritising stability and cooperation over the enforcement of democratic reforms, which grants these regimes legitimacy and resources despite their undemocratic internal practices.⁵⁶ Despite their seemingly limited formal power, these elites become entrenched precisely because the EU and the US fail to enforce meaningful reforms. They have little incentive to dismantle their clientelist networks, which are essential to maintaining their hold on power, as doing so would amount to political suicide.⁵⁷

Without genuine leverage or the threat of meaningful sanctions against corrupt leaders, western-led reforms are unlikely to achieve substantial change, especially given the weak grassroots political engagement in the country.⁵⁸ Democracy is not a one-time transition but a continuous process that requires sustained civil society engagement to hold political elites accountable.⁵⁹ In Republika Srpska, the kind of sustained civic

⁵⁵ Transparency International Bosnia & Herzegovina, ‘Paramilitary Intelligence Services as a Sign of Open Dictatorship: The Government Introduces Parallel Institutions to Preserve the Regime’ (Transparency International BiH) <https://ti-bih.org/paramilitary-intelligence-services-as-a-sign-of-open-dictatorship-the-government-introduces-parallel-institutions-to-preserve-the-regime/?lang=en> (accessed 2 January 2026); Balkan Insight, ‘With His Hybrid Secessionism, Bosnia’s Dodik is a Threat to the Region’ (2 April 2025).

<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/02/with-his-hybrid-secessionism-bosnias-dodik-is-a-threat-to-the-region/> (accessed 28 September 2025).

⁵⁶ Florian Bieber, “What is a stabilitocracy?” BiEPAG, 5 May 2017,

<https://www.biepag.eu/blog/what-is-a-stabilitocracy> (accessed 15 January 2026); Wouter Zweers, Giulia Cretti and Myrthe de Boon, *The EU as a promoter of ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Western Balkans?*, Clingendael Institute, 8 February 2022,

<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans> (accessed 15 January 2026).

⁵⁷ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵⁸ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.



engagement needed to hold political leaders accountable has been largely absent or too fragmented to be effective. As a result, political elites continue to dominate the system. Meaningful political and economic reform is unlikely because entrenched elites control the state through patronage networks. Reform would directly threaten their power and the risk of legal accountability discourages them from supporting genuine change.⁶⁰

Given the depth of clientelist networks and the ability of local elites to manipulate international actors, effective policy interventions should move beyond symbolic pressure or theoretical support to instead involve credible enforcement mechanisms and sustained structural engagement.⁶¹

Despite these structural constraints, the political system is not entirely static. Political competition still exists in Republika Srpska, even if it operates differently from consolidated democracies. In the November 2025

snap presidential election, the SNSD, under Dodik's handpicked successor, Siniša Karan, secured only a narrow majority, suggesting limited but observable space for political pluralism.⁶²

The February 2026 rerun of the election, triggered by reports of electoral irregularities, further underscores the persistent influence of patronage networks, but also highlights that electoral outcomes can reflect shifts in voter behaviour.⁶³

Together, these developments suggest that while systemic change is unlikely to be abrupt, there is room for incremental, context-specific progress. Independent media and local civic organisations, which are often more embedded in local communities than formal institutions, are some of the few arenas where accountability might emerge. Although such bottom-up dynamics are slow and uneven, they demonstrate that incremental engagement could offer greater potential for fostering trust, oversight and

⁶⁰ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Aleksandra Zdeb, 'Doomed to Fail? Rebound Effect and Conflict Management Problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina' (Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie) <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.23.010.18436> (accessed 15 January 2026).

⁶¹ Jasmin Mujanović. *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 99.

⁶² Balkan Insight. "With his Hybrid Secessionism, Bosnia's Dodik is a Threat to the Region" 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/02/with-his-hybrid-secessionism-bosnias-dodik-is-a-threat-to-the-region/> (accessed 28 September 2025). Balkan Insight. "Bosnian Serb Entity Scraps Public Financing for Parties in Blow to Pluralism", 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/22/bosnian-serb-entity-scraps-public-financing-for-parties->

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⁶³ Centralna izborna komisija BiH objavila rezultate: Prednost Karana skoro 11.000 glasova, veća nego u novembru, Avaz, 8 February 2026, <https://www.avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/1022412/centralna-izborna-komisija-bih-objavila-rezultate-prednost-karana-skoro-11-000-glasova-veca-nego-u-novembru> (accessed 10 February 2026); "Siniša Karan wins the repeat vote, securing the position of President of Republika Srpska", European Western Balkans, 9 February 2026, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/02/09/sinisa-karan-wins-the-repeat-vote-securing-the-position-of-president-of-republika-srpska/> (accessed 10 February 2026).



pluralism than externally driven, top-down reforms.⁶⁴

Concluding Remarks

This report demonstrates that political power in Republika Srpska is maintained less through individual leadership and more through deeply embedded structural dynamics. Ethno-nationalist party

dominance persists due to institutional design, clientelist networks, wartime narratives and weak rule of law, all of which limit meaningful political competition and democratic accountability. While Dodik's formal departure from the presidency marks a change in leadership, it does not represent a fundamental break with entrenched practices. The system continues to reproduce elite dominance beyond any single actor.

List of abbreviations

SNSD	<i>Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata</i> (Alliance of Independent Special Democrats)
SDS	<i>Srpska Demokratska Stranka</i> (Serbian Democratic Party)
SNP	<i>Savez za Novu Politiku</i> (Alliance for New Politics)
EPRS	<i>Ekološka Partija Republike Srpske</i> (Ecological Party of Republika Srpska)

⁶⁴ Aleksandra Zdeb, 'Structural Challenges and Spoilers within Bosnia and Herzegovina's Institutional System', in *Shifting Paradigms*

(August 2025), pp. 181–201
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