

Sociocultural Fault Lines Series

Bosnia and Herzegovina



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Introduction

This report is a sociocultural study addressing Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) societal fault lines. A **sociocultural fault line**^a is defined as an exploitable source of instability within a community, country or region of the Operational Environment (OE). It consists of connected systems of exploitable conditions that affect the centrally important issues of public governance, economic well-being, social cohesion, and communal resilience. Fault lines develop over time and—like the exploitable conditions that create them—are often leveraged by domestic and foreign actors to advance their interests. Fault lines analysis can increase the situational understanding of the OE and serve to provide insight for military decision making.

This report proceeds in four sections with an added description of the methodology used. The first section establishes the context for the analytic judgements by introducing a background for the analysis. Section two discusses BiH's sociocultural fault lines, including key judgments predicated on the intersection of several exploitable conditions which created them. Section three explains how each of the fault lines may be exploited, by whom, and the significance of this for the OE. Section four articulates the implications

**SOCIOCULTURAL
FAULT LINES** are
“exploitable
sources of
instability in the
human domain;
they can be real
or perceived.”

a Sociocultural Fault lines result from the combination of several Exploitable Conditions with observable effects interacting and hardening to create a new, more resilient constellation. GCKN's Exploitable Conditions exist temporally, whereas Fault Lines develop over time and eventually burrow into the fabric of society, making them more difficult to mitigate and resolve.

EXPLOITABLE CONDITION (EC) + EC + EC ——— time ———> FAULT LINE



Figure 1. Bosnia and Herzegovina Territories, GCKN.

of exploitation for the U.S. Army. The report closes with a short description of the analytical methodology that led to the author's findings.

Background

Three main political communities account for more than 95% of the BiH population: Bosnian Muslims (often referred to as Bosniaks), Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats. Each group's identity is defined by both its ancestral ethnic birthright and its distinct religious affiliation. The highly ethnicized system of BiH is a breeding ground for nationalist sentiment, as contemporary politicians vie for power by claiming to defend the interests of one ethnicity—Bosniak, Serb or Croat—over the others. The history of the Bosnian people and the cultural and political heritage of the Western Balkans contributes to the foundation for endemic sectarian conflict still present today.

In 1908, Austria-Hungary unilaterally declared its annexation of Bosnia, strategically timed to coincide with Bulgaria's declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire.

This action sparked protests from many of the world's great powers and became known as the "Bosnian Crisis."¹ Relations between Austria-Hungary and its neighbors, especially Serbia, Italy, and Russia, were permanently damaged—and Serbian nationalists were angered—contributing to the conditions that led to World War I.² Moreover, the 1908 annexation separated Serbs geographically from the other two ethnic groups. This separation continues to be an important centerpiece for social and political discord today.

After World War I in 1918, Yugoslavia was established as the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This was the first union of the South Slavic people as a sovereign state, stemming from territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under the leadership of Peter I of Serbia, its first sovereign, the region began to develop and stabilize. The Kingdom gained international recognition in July 1922 and changed its name to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on October 3, 1929.

In 1941, during World War II, Axis forces (principally

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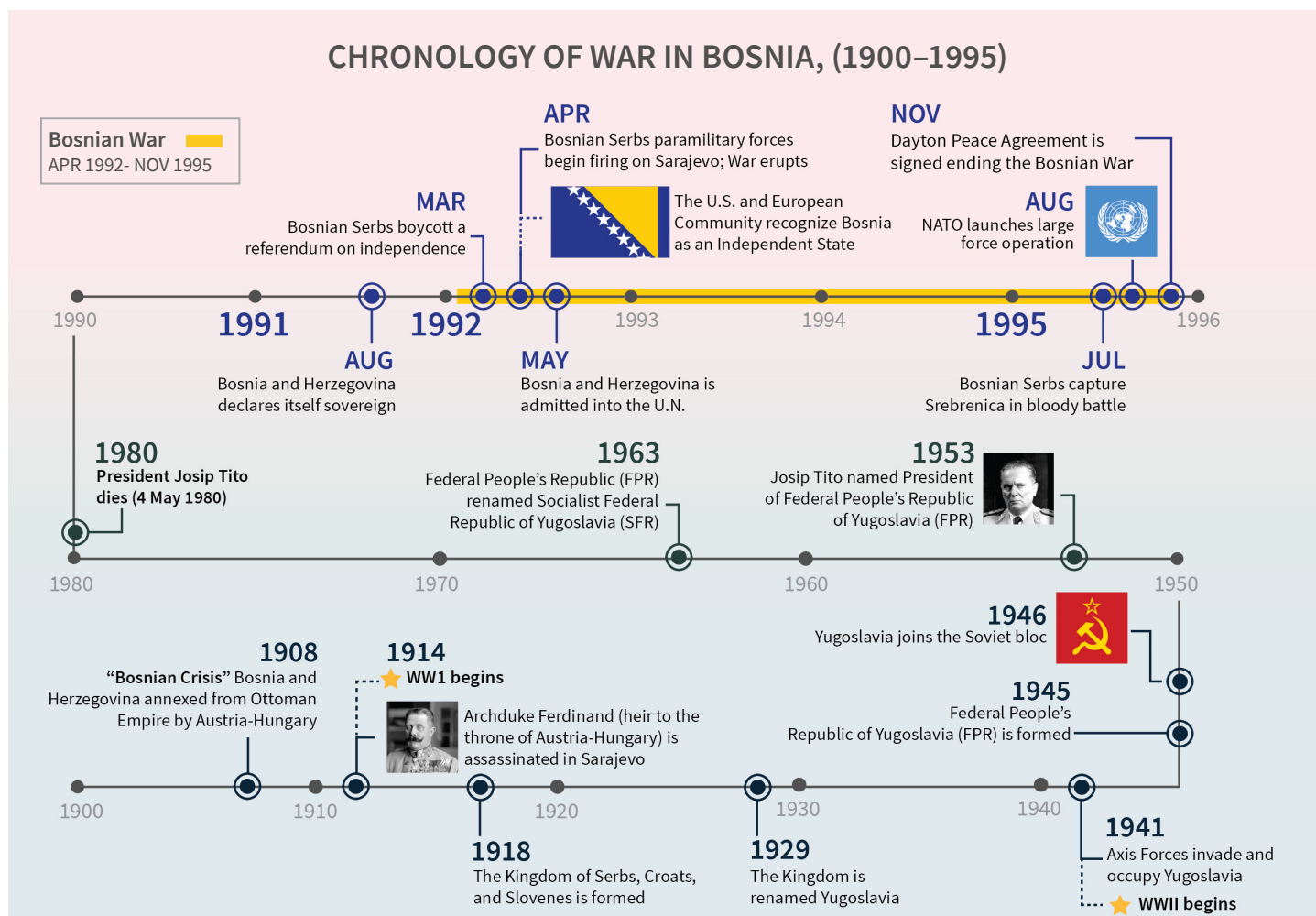


Figure 2. Chronology of War in Bosnia, (1900-1995), GCKN.

The Road to War

Yugoslavia is established as a country in the early part in the 20th century. It is an ethnically diverse country comprised of six republics. Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) population is among the most ethnically and religiously diverse republics in the state—although the Slavic people within BiH are not significantly genetically distinct. The major differences are religious and, to a limited extent, linguistic. Over time, the language differences are less important, while the ethnic, national, and religious differences become increasingly concerning.

By the 1970s, the Bosnian Muslims expand to become the largest segment of the population within the republic. As their prominence grows, many of the Serbs and Croats emigrate as a result of the ethnic entanglement associated with Muslim enlargement. The Yugoslavian President, Josip Tito, credited with maintaining ethnic peace, dies in 1980. Without his pan-Slavic influence, ethnic and nationalist tensions begin to rise. By 1991, Muslims make up more than 40 percent of the Bosnian population, with ethnic and religious groups intermingled throughout the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Yugoslav republics begin exploring independence. BiH also prepares to break away, but the Bosnian Serbs determine that independence is a security threat. Without ethnic and religious alliances located in other Yugoslav republics to augment their influence, Bosnian Serbs feel a pronounced sense of vulnerability as a minority in an emerging state.

When Bosnian Muslims (by this time referred to as "Bosniaks") and Bosnian Croats vote for independence in a 1991 referendum boycotted by the Bosnian Serbs, lines are drawn. Soon after, several areas within BiH with large Serb populations declare as Serb-Autonomous Regions. To enable this move, the Yugoslav People's Army, backed by the former Serbia republic, begin supplying secret arms to the Bosnian Serbs to secure parts of the country. With Yugoslavia crumbling, and its republics forming independent states, stability in the region is threatened. Bosnian Serbs act first—and act in interest of their own ethnic security. Their attacks force Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks to fight for their homes, freedom, and lives as the entire country erupts in conflict. As a result of the initial attacks, the Bosniaks, the Bosnian Croats, and Croatia band

together to combat the Bosnian Serbs, who are reinforced by Serbian paramilitary groups. However, when a peace plan fails in 1993, the Bosniak and Croat differences manifest. This results in an alliance break, these two groups turn on each other, and the conflict becomes three-sided.

With tensions already high, Bosnian Serbs view statehood as a threat to their identity. If Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes a state, the previously enjoyed majority control and influence garnered by being a part of a larger Serbian group would be reduced or even lost. Bosniaks see independence as a promising future and an enviable way to secure a homeland. All three positions are notably exploited to ignite greater divides. Muslims in the area, not tied to any contiguous republic, have been regularly displaced in the Yugoslav state despite their growing numbers. Bosniak interests, like the Bosnian Croats, whose population is only half or less the size of the other groups, are tied directly to fear and anger waged by the atrocities placed upon them by the Bosnian Serb initial attacks.

The road to war is ultimately about ideological differences—peppered with religious and ethnic overtones. Ironically, all three groups draw their historic roots from the same Slavic origins. But with the future of a Yugoslavian state in question, each of the groups are uncertain and motivated to act or react for different reasons. Bosnian Serbs are concerned about their potential reduction of influence and motivated by fear. Bosniaks are motivated by retaliation after the attacks and abuses by the Bosnian Serbs. Bosnian Croats are motivated, to some degree by fear and to some degree by the arrangement that protects their outsized interests.

After several years of bloody battles, with the number of deaths on all sides of the conflict accumulating, each group only becomes more entrenched in its positions and more and more unwilling to compromise. Thus, intergroup resolution seems improbable and international intervention inevitable.

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German-led) invaded and occupied Yugoslavia, which became partitioned between Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and client states including fascist-run Croatia. As the war continued, guerillas increased their resistance against the Axis and civil war erupted between Communist Partisans, Fascist Croat *Ustache*, Royalist Serb *Chetnicks*, and various state Home Guards. Ethnic-based popular violence rose significantly. Communist Partisans, led by Josip Tito (backed by the Allies) become the dominant force at the end of war. Tito's strength and success as a military leader earned him widespread notoriety, leading to his political leadership.

After World War II, the greater Yugoslavia became a socialist dictatorship under President Josip Broz Tito. Tito, part-Croat and part-Slovene, presided over six diverse republics, including BiH.^b A forceful leader, Tito was praised for creating Yugoslavia's independence and he paved his own path unaligned with Moscow or Washington through an authoritarian dictatorial rule that unapologetically and effectively quelled ethnic tensions and conflicts in the area.³ But as time passed, the endemic sectarian conflict, although hidden, was resurrected. Then, after Tito's death in 1980, a power vacuum developed. It was free of past dictatorial constraints and allowed Yugoslavia to slide into a period

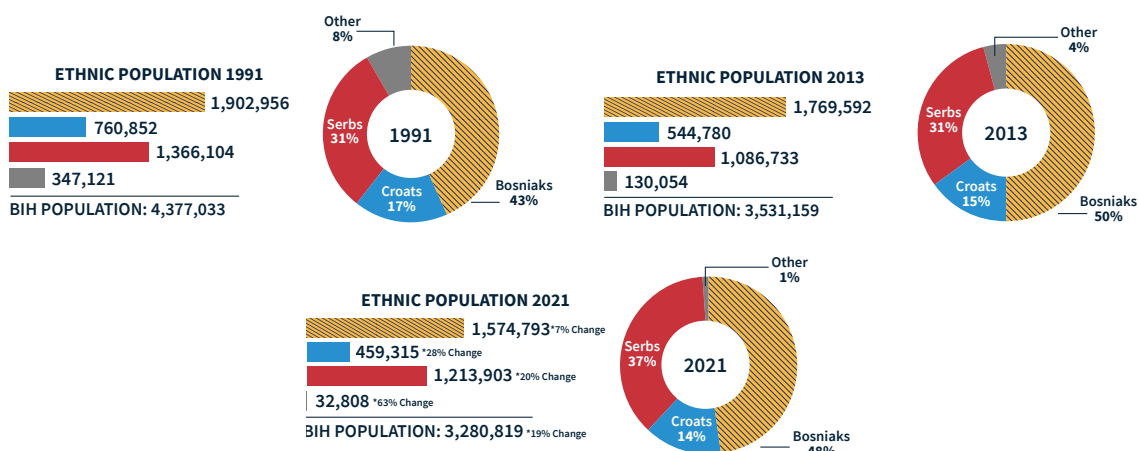
of intense instability that revealed latent ethnic and religious factions. The breakdown, previously controlled by Tito's leadership, was fueled by ethnonationalism. In the fall of 1992, ethnic conflicts contributed to the collapse of Yugoslavia and was the onset of a long and brutal war. Ultimately, this led to the breakup of Yugoslavia into several new countries, as well as internal civil conflict within BiH. The ensuing armed conflict would cauterize the endemic sectarian conflict still present today.⁴

At the root of the Bosnian War was nationalism and territorial control. After a decade of economic decline, the internal fight for control among different stakeholders—especially over land rights—advanced. Economic hardship triggered fears of additional conflict associated with resource scarcity and arrived at the height of ethnic and religious discord. Accordingly, when BiH declared its independence in 1992, it was in a vulnerable social, political, and economic state, and previous discussions about partitioning the country only fueled ethnic divides. All of these conditions intersected, creating massive instability and explosive tensions throughout the early 1990s, and ultimately erupted into war.

The war was one of the most destructive and deadliest conflicts in Europe since World War II, killing over 100,000 people within a span of three years in a country with a

b The Yugoslav federation was divided into six constituent states and two autonomous provinces. Their formation was initiated during the Second World War and finalized by 1946. The republics and autonomous provinces of Yugoslavia included: Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Socialist Republic of Croatia, Socialist Republic of Macedonia, Socialist Republic of Montenegro, Socialist Republic of Serbia (with its autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina) and Social Republic of Slovenia.

BIH ETHNIC POPULATIONS, (1991-2021)



*In part, population decline since the 1990s is due to large "exodus" of citizens among all ethnic groups to other countries in Europe. Many leaving are the younger and more educated/skilled segment of the population that would be a main potential constituency for pro-Euroatlantic reforms.

Figure 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina Ethnic Populations, (1991-2021), GCKN.

Ethnonationalism is the desire to define a nation ethnically by common ancestry, language, territory, cultural traits, and history, and to keep it homogenous and separated from other groups. Although ethnonationalists do not necessarily see their own group as superior, they perceive group boundaries as real and inflexible, and believe that group allegiance is an important basis for social life.

population well short of five million.⁵ Much of the killing was later classified as genocide. Although the dead were vastly outnumbered by the victims of abuses, including rape, torture, and imprisonment in concentration camps, the issue of genocide was and continues to be source of contention. For those involved, there was no common understanding of what occurred during the Bosnian War. Accounts of the atrocities differed on all sides and engendered bitter acrimony and deepened strife among the ethnic groups. In effect, each ethnic group's experience and memory were markedly at odds with that of other groups, creating three, possibly four, vastly different narratives.^c It was, and still is, said that "one side's military victory was another side's war crime."⁶

Nearly thirty years after the end of the Bosnian War, BiH is still struggling with acute challenges. At the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992 and the start of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina had 4.3 million people. The war created considerable population movement in the country: Around 2.5 million people were forced out of their homes; over 500,000 people fled to countries outside the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, over 700,000 to Croatia, about 500,000 to Serbia and Montenegro, and 810,000 were internally displaced within Bosnia.⁷ According to UNHCR statistics, 80 percent of all refugees were Bosniaks, 13 percent Bosnian Croats, and 6 percent Bosnian Serbs.⁸ By the end of 1997, 540,000 Bosnians (i.e., around one-fifth of the pre-war population of BiH) had already been granted permanent status abroad with little incentive to return. These population shifts created significant disruption to BiH stability, and today the country remains out of balance.

Although prejudices have existed in the region for centuries, the recent war created significant lingering effects. One of the most hardened effects is the deeply entrenched social and ethnic divisions. Thus, contemporary ethnic animosities and constituent conflicts are exploited regularly by key ethnonationalist leaders espousing carefully crafted hatred politics designed around themes relating to the war. These dynamic effects are rooted in the sociocultural fabric of the country. BiH's sociocultural fault lines coalesce around the concept of ethnonationalism—and not a moderate level of it, but one steeped in polarized and rigidified conceptions of it—a persistent challenge that dramatically orchestrates the country's main problems.

As the primary source of the country's troubles, ***Ethnonationalism remains the principal factor undermining post-war state building.*** It maintains toxic and permeating divisiveness among the country's three main ethnic groups. Each group, particularly its elites who benefit from this polarity, has been largely unwilling to relinquish or sublimate its current share of influence and control for broader Bosnian interests. In fact, any ideas of a unified state are easily countered by rhetoric bolstering one group's agenda while threatening another group's identity and position. Consequently, ethnonationalism remains a prime organizing logic for each constituent group and its main stakeholders in BiH. Belligerents easily whip up ethnonationalism on all sides to maintain a state of perpetual sociopolitical gridlock, further deepening the country's problems.

As with many young countries, developing effective governance in BiH has been challenging. The country's political configuration, developed out of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, is one of the most complex government structures in the world. It created a great number of superfluous layers of governance (140 ministries at different levels), allowed ethnic vetoes—effectively preventing state-level decision-making, and enshrined group rights above individual rights. Furthermore, certain offices are ethnically exclusive,

^c Research suggests that there is often more sides to a story than the amount of parties involved. This is typically the middle (or most objective) narrative account.

e.g., one cannot simply be a Bosnian to run for president; the candidate must be a Croat, Serb, or Bosniak only.⁹ This system only exacerbates the country's ethnic divisions and effectively limits progress in establishing a functioning national market economy.¹⁰ This is significant because a stable economy would help meet the requirements for the country's admittance to the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and similar security and stability focused multinational organizations. According to recent findings by the EU's governing body, BiH is a long way, both internally and externally, from gaining EU membership as it struggles with an incredibly large public

sector whose ineffectiveness and corruption are causally linked with miscarriages in government function.¹¹

BiH could garner significant support for stability and growth by joining the EU, NATO, and similar Western organizations. Membership could catapult BiH from its current economic troubles and provide the country with additional political and security resources. However, BiH state offices have made only limited progress required for initial membership, rendering nation-wide security and stability a distant and almost fleeting possibility.¹²

FAULT LINES ANALYSIS SUMMARY

The Problem: Ethnonationalism has remained the intransigent bulwark undermining post-war state building.

The Cloud - "The Exploiters"

The clouds represent the range of domestic and foreign actors that leverage or exploit conditions within BiH to advance their individual and collective interests. The domestic actors, which are the individual ethnic nations—Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosniaks—have perfected exploitation they have been exercising for decades. Their proximity to the mountain indicates they have more opportunities to leverage or exploit opportunistic conditions and the fault lines they form, making them the entities with the most consequential impact on the stability and security of BiH. The external actors with the greatest impact on BiH's stability are Croatia, Serbia, and Russia. China, positioned farthest from the mountain (on the right side), Hungary, Turkey, and Iran (on the left side) have a limited but notable impact on BiH. Unlike the regional actors, China's interest is emerging with exploitative relations to BiH in line with its global expansionism but is limited because of Russia's strategic placement in the region.

The Iceberg (Top) - "The Exploitable Conditions"

The top of the iceberg is the operational environment. It consists of a dense network of environmental conditions. Individually and collectively, these conditions, part of a larger framework of exploitable conditions, are exploitative opportunities for domestic and external actors to engage in pursuit of their objectives, often aggravating frayed

lines connecting the ethnic nations and deepening the suspicions and antagonisms. They form a mosaic with each piece shifting in prioritization depending on the interests of actors and the opportunities available for exploiting the condition at a moment in time.

The Iceberg (Below) - "The Fault Lines"

The base of the iceberg represents the reasons for the problem. The epicenter of BiH's socio-cultural problems lie under the waterline, not visible, but impacting and orchestrating the environment. BiH's fault lines are located under the environment and these issues are profoundly consequential for understanding, explaining, and or addressing the BiH troubles. At the top of this core is ethnonationalism, which is both metaphor and metonym for the fault lines—three-nation society, dysfunctional government, and lingering war echoes—that frame the BiH troubles.

The Sediment - "The Explanation"

Ostensibly linked, these three fault lines are linked to the historical, social, and theoretical explanations—consequential elements embedded in the societal fabric of the country. The base explanations for the fault lines have created collective immobility and points to a strong connection between past and present where the "past is prologue".

Notably, historical analyses have frequently focused on the conditions (or surface elements)—political gridlock, war, forced and voluntary displacements, the Dayton Peace Agreements, etc.—but these episodes of the crisis are not surface deep and only offer marginal opportunities for understanding the ends or aims of the crisis.

FAULT LINES ANALYSIS VISUAL

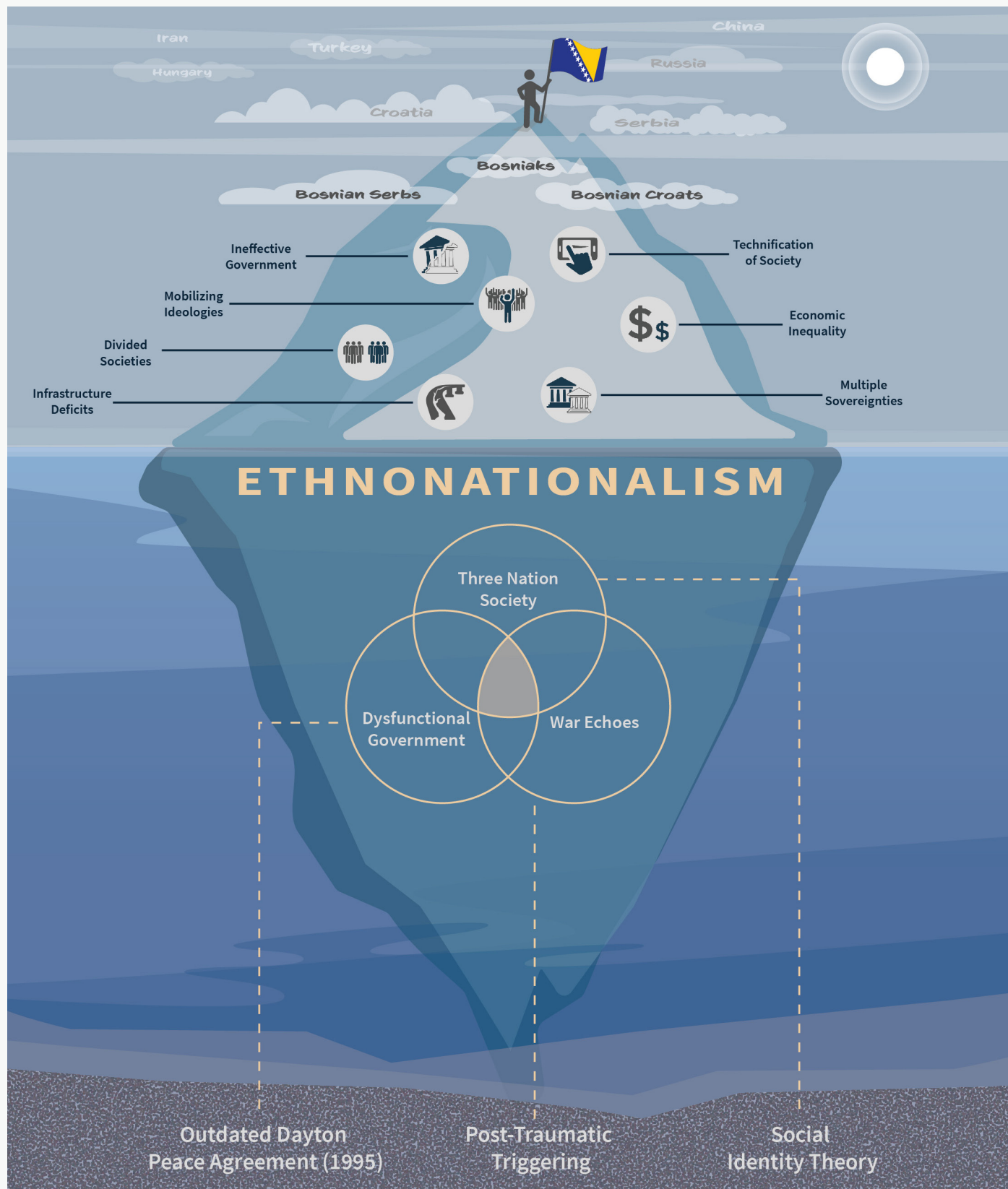


Figure 4. *Fault Lines Analysis Visual*, GCKN.

Enduring and unresolved ethnonationalism in BiH is acting as the stimulant for destructive, proximal influences on the country. These influences are strong and pervasive—and include the exploitable conditions of ineffective and corrupt government, divided societies, multiple sovereignty, mobilizing ideology, and income inequality.^d We surmise that as these conditions unite, they result in **three distinct but mutually reinforcing fault lines:**

ethnically factionalized and dysfunctional government, lingering war echoes, and a de facto three-nation society. These fault lines have hardened over several decades to torpedo national cohesion and stability. Until resolved, they will continue to wreak havoc in BiH.

^d Referred to as the ECF (Exploitable Conditions Framework), GCKN curated a list of the most prominent exploitable socio-cultural conditions. GCKN developed the conditions by conducting a literature review of the future operational environment and determining which widespread conditions were both socio-cultural and exploitable.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S TRIPARTITE PRESIDENCY

The Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a three-member body serving as a collective head of state. The Presidency is comprised of three members—one Bosniak, one Serb, and one Croat. The Bosniak and Croat members are elected from a joint constituency in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the Serb member is elected from voters in Republika Srpska. Presidents can serve no more than two consecutive four-year terms, however, there are no overall term limits. Although the subdivided body is the collective head of state, one member is designated as the Chairperson. The position of Chairperson rotates twice around the three members every eight months, with the candidate receiving the most electoral votes overall becoming the first Chairperson over each four-year term.



Šefik Džaferović

Bosniak President (First Term)

The 7th Bosniak President of BiH
Assumed Office 20 November 2018
Democratic Action Party
Politician, Attorney



Željko Komšić

Bosnian Croat President (Third Term)

The 6th Croat President of BiH
Reassumed Office 20 November 2018
Held Office 2006-2010; 2010-2014
Democratic Front Party (BiH)
Politician, Diplomat
Military Service 1992-1996



Milorad Dodik

Bosnian Serb President (First Term)

The 7th Serb President of BiH
Assumed Office 20 November 2018
Alliance of Social Democrats
Politician, Professor

Figure 5. *Bosnia and Herzegovina Tripartite Presidency*, GCKN.

FL1: Factionalized and Dysfunctional Government

BiH is beset with a deep-seated and longstanding governability crisis, which is the result of ethnonationalist demagogues capitalizing on ethnic fragmentation. The ethnic character of the state is fully demonstrated by BiH's tripartite presidency system. BiH's political structure was an outcome of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. The agreement led to the state in its present form that transformed a former Yugoslav republic into an independent country. At the time, it was intended to be a short term construct to end conflict and provide governance until a self-determined government could be formed.¹³ However, the three sides have not been able to craft a new system or structure to replace the original agreement. In many ways, Dayton only succeeded in transforming a military conflict into a political one. While peace resulted,^e the agreement seemed to deny all parties what they had tried to achieve during the war. As a result, the same conditions that started the war linger—and permeate the core of BiH's political and social environment.

Dayton attempted to forge post-war nationhood but was unable to mitigate extreme ethnic impulses or heal war traumas. The system only pieced together ethnopolitical units that to this day do not functionally collaborate. Because of the leading U.S. role in Dayton, combined with its involvement in security actions in Bosnia, ongoing government dysfunction fuels anti-American narratives. Adversaries use these narratives to undermine American influence, despite the U.S. government's twenty-six years of support to the country.¹⁴ Thus, while the Dayton Peace Agreement brought open armed conflict to a close, the ongoing extension of a temporary construct has created a political impasse that is inhibiting meaningful progress, and it simultaneously counters U.S. and Western efforts to bring progress.

The Presidential structure and the complicated political system impede any kind of movement toward unity and only insulate government congestion. Government actions are not well integrated across the tripartite system and are mostly conducted within ethnic silos. Government resolutions require many levels of approval with no clear guidelines in place to enforce them, thereby further degrading the effectiveness of the competitive tripartite system.¹⁵ Even decisions to distribute International Monetary Fund (IMF) funds, intended to alleviate the stress and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on BiH, were unnecessarily delayed because the triple layers of approval did not happen in a timely manner.¹⁶ This example is one of many that explain the complications and ineffectiveness of necessary government functions under the tripartite system.

The Dayton Peace Agreement established two main political entities within BiH: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), composed of mostly Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, and the Republika Srpska (RS), populated mostly by Bosnian Serbs. Each entity covers about half of the state's territory, although Bosniaks alone comprise more than half of the state's population (and combined with the Bosnian Croats account for over two-thirds the state's population). Brcko District, a small cooperative district in the northeast, is the third political division, and has a mix of constituent peoples. Further, in 1995 the agreement established political oversight by an international arbitrator known as the High Representative. To date, all the High Representatives named have been from EU countries, while the United States remains an important stakeholder involved

^e The peace resulting from the Dayton Agreement is often referred to as negative peace—or the absence of war or end to physical hostility. Most do not believe true (or positive) peace was ever achieved since there was never a resolution to the ethnic grievances that motivated the violence.

in financial and security assistance for the country.^f (See the image on page 17 for an overview of the political structure established by the agreement.)

The provisions of the Dayton Agreement are not conducive to state building. The RS paradoxically is rather functional in terms of decision making. It is authoritarian and centralized in its form. However, it does not coordinate or communicate with the FBiH. Conversely, FBiH is ineffective because it is a federation *within a federation* and includes Bosnian Croats who are intransigent in demanding their own entity and entitled to a third of the state decisions while comprising less than one-fifth of the population. These obstacles only sustain state problems and forestall the promise of national unification. Moreover, the system is maintained (and abused) principally by vociferous ethnic support fomented by the ethno nationalist elite benefiting from it—and who exploit the lack of international will to change the system. Paddy Ashdown served as BiH's High Representative from 2002 to 2006. He was effective in leading efforts to improve the country; however, since his departure in 2006, the High Representative's influence and support has steadily declined. This combination only fuels the divisions and ongoing friction in the country *and* creates ammunition for U.S. adversaries who like to highlight the West's roles.¹⁷

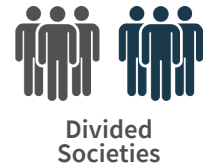
Repeated intransigence between the FBiH and RS demonstrate the determination by stakeholder groups to exploit nationalist sentiment and separatist rhetoric to maintain influence. This influence, in turn, inflames national political tension through unresolved ethnic frictions and distrust among constituent elements.¹⁸ Political elites depend on support from ethnic enclaves and, once elected to office, practice exclusionary politics to benefit fellow ethnic group members.¹⁹ There is no incentive to change, as each of the constituent groups benefit under a status quo that enables perpetual factionalization, which enables and sustains the gridlock.

Although there have been efforts to improve government function and increase political cooperation, ethnonationalism continues to fuel dysfunction and preserve a weak central government susceptible to corruption and exploitation. In an effort to elevate state function, the international community continues to hold BiH accountable to meet the key requirements recommended for EU accession negotiations.⁸ According to a 2020 EU report, BiH government's commitment to the strategic goal of European integration has remained mostly declarative and has not turned into concrete actions, as political leaders continue to engage in party politics and unconstructive political disputes.²⁰ Notably, politicians can easily leverage the terms of the peace agreement to hold the country in a state of continual disagreement without resolution. The agreement also created one of the most complicated political systems in the world, with a dizzying maze of jurisdictions enabling the country's three main ethnic groups to dominate domestic politics and exert control over key decision-making processes.²¹ For example, the results of the national census took nearly seven years to publish because of the large diaspora, the great number of double passport holders, and disagreement among the constituent groups on a 'methodology' to address the issue. Furthermore, in January 2022, Bosnian Serb President Milorad Dodik and other Serb officials under his control suggested they will no longer respect decisions by the High Representative. Along with this, Dodik

^f According to the U.S. State Department website, the United States has provided over \$2 billion in assistance since 1992; FY 2020 assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina totals approximately \$50 million, including bilateral, regional, and COVID-19 Supplemental funding.

^g To receive EU admittance, states must meet 14 key requirements for initial consideration. To date, BiH has only met part of a handful of these requirements—continually falling short of consideration.

FL1: Exploitable Conditions



Exploitable conditions are a complex mosaic of interacting and, at times, mutually reinforcing and countervailing socio-cultural conditions or ideas that exert enormous pressure on a country or region and portend opportunities or obstacles for advancing interests of any number of domestic or foreign actors, including the United States.



The Dayton Peace Agreement is signed in Paris on December 14, 1995.
Source: en.wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Signing_the_Dayton_Agreement_Milosevic_Tudjman_Izetbegovic.jpg

intensified a secessionist campaign pledging to form an exclusively Bosnian Serb army, judiciary, and tax system.²² Even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dodik worked with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban for exclusive Hungarian medical support to the RS while denying any assistance to the FBiH.²³ While ethnically-driven actions by Bosnian Serbs have been more frequently highlighted in the media, Bosniak and Bosnian Croat elites have engaged in similar measures, undermining other attempts at reforms. So even with efforts to unite the country around a common agenda, the three constituent peoples demonstrate the absence of a shared goal of national unification, preferring their own parochial interests to government and national security—and without weighty consequences, there is little incentive to comply.²⁴

Government dysfunction and gridlock also prevent initiatives to grow a national market economy and increase economic production. External assistance and remittances alone cannot repair the BiH economy, which was heavily indebted and nearly moribund even before the war. BiH leaders have been unable to capitalize on the fact that Bosnia was once the industrial center of Yugoslavia. Furthermore, BiH's government has been unable to rein in social spending—to include what it spends for its war veterans as well as several other patronage disbursements—which is outpacing what it can produce.²⁵ The country's gross domestic product (GDP) has struggled since independence. BiH's inability to increase its trade and develop its industry potential will keep a significant portion of the population in poverty²⁶ and those able to make reasonable incomes will flee the country in search of better employment options.

BiH as a whole has extraordinarily little to offer in terms of employment. It has failed in its attempts to privatize which

has led to a complete collapse of industry and increased reliance on a flawed system of government.²⁷ Moreover, the lack of government funds or funding sources (e.g., industry taxes) not only impedes state development but also makes wanting to remain in Bosnia undesirable for its young professionals. Unfortunately, continued economic struggles will deter international investments, create significant brain drain from Bosnia's most promising next generation of leadership, and reduce the probability of meeting the economic qualifications for a European Community partnership, or EU membership.²⁸ Until these challenges are resolved, employment options and economic growth and any type of government security is unlikely.

The government is predicated on an untenable structure complicated by intractable historical, ethnic conflict. The tripartite presidency and current political system ended armed conflict but replaced it with institutional and political conflict. The Dayton Agreement was not intended to serve as a system of government. However, almost thirty years later, this short term solution still remains. There were three main attempts to overturn it by 2008, but lack of will by the BiH's factionalized leadership—as well as by the International Community—to change or improve the current structure and its procedures has resulted in a “stuck” system.²⁹ The exploitable conditions contributing to this fault line are ineffective government, divided societies, infrastructure deficits, and economic inequalities.

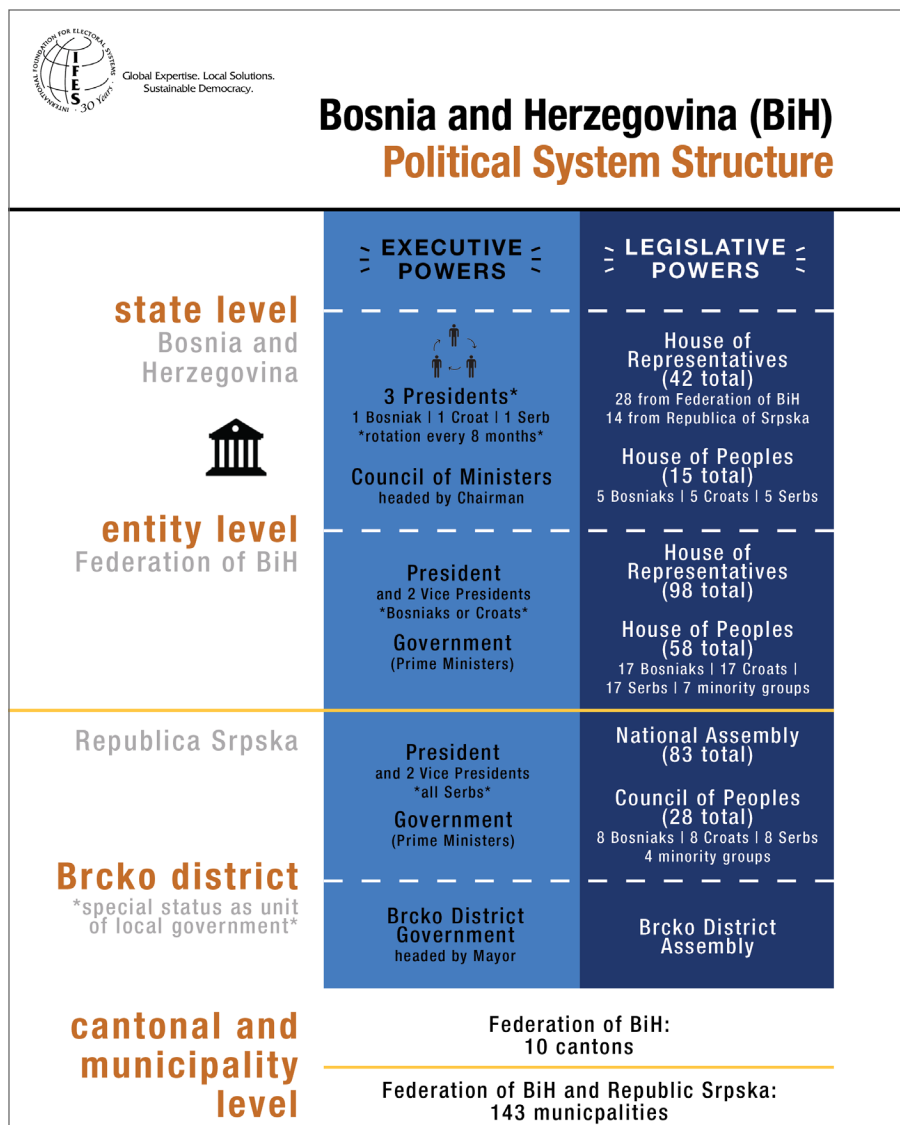
Bosnian citizens likely prioritize ethnic group membership over national citizenship because of the incentives and propaganda (often related to war atrocities) created to do so, thereby factionalizing political representation, degrading social cohesion, and weakening national governance. Younger generations have only been subject to the polarizing narratives and in most cases have no other understanding than fracture.³⁰ For instance, a day after he assumed the Bosnian presidency in 2019, Milorad Dodik proclaimed “I am a Serb... Bosnia is only my place of employment,” buttressing the intense ethnonationalist ferment in the country, particularly among the country's political class.³¹ While there may be pockets of the populace that reject the nationalist political rhetoric, they have no option but to play along as the only means to economically survive current conditions.

Persistent differences between these three consistent groups are entrenched in their immovable historical experiences with the war and propaganda exploiting their perceptions. Although belligerents routinely employ disinformation as well as subtle and overt threats to bolster their individual positions—like Croatia absorbing the Bosnian Croats and Serbia creating a breakaway province—the

reality is that Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat elites enjoy outsized influence in BiH through the Dayton Structure. Bosniaks may not enjoy similar options, but their majority status in Bosnia attracts support from outsiders like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Each of the constituent groups, and especially their ethnic political leaders, are unlikely to reap the benefits they current enjoy from any other kind of structure, even though all groups—and especially the general populace—would likely benefit from national cohesion and stability.

It must be noted that among the three constituent groups, the Bosniaks have the highest level of civic national identity and generally lean toward a more centralized state.³² The Bosniak majority/plurality status no doubt gives them a leading role and would be a good reason for their support of

unification. This does not mean that Bosniak elites are not as self-interested as elites from the other ethnic groups, but that they have demonstrated the most resolve to collaborate with the international community to establish unified nationhood. Efforts to heal the national political divide and forge a more cohesive state—given the longstanding differences among the three constituent peoples in the country, are incredibly difficult to overcome.³³ Thus, the increasing entrenchment of the three constituent peoples in parochial partisanship, bolstered by the woefully outdated tripartite system,³⁴ spectacularly demonstrates the governability crisis in the country. That crisis has elevated gridlock as national statecraft, has fueled the pervading ethnonationalism, and has prevented any meaningful progress, nationally and internationally.



Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 2018 General Elections

Source: <https://www.ifes.org/faqs/elections-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2018-general-elections>

FL2: Lingering War Echoes

BiH suffers from persistent war trauma; it seemingly cannot escape its war-scarred past. BiH has yet to recover from the distress of its most recent war, and reminders are a recurrent, emotional, and vexing national problem. Repeated exposure to the conflict trauma has created lingering war echoes manifesting as an open emotional wound. Thus, the aftermath is a haunting cascade of prolonged frustrations, endemic grievances, stultifying corruption, and ethnic cleavages—all of which continue to blight prospects for true national unification and progress.




BiH continues to relive the atrocities of the war with frequent court cases, memorials, and media stories related to the conflict. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has directly contributed to national war crime prosecutions, both in BiH and throughout the region.³⁵ Politicians encourage ethnonationalist politics, name buildings after figures openly considered war criminals by other ethnic groups, dispute rulings of the constitutional court related to ethnic strife, and propagate past ethnic conflicts across social media.³⁶ To make things worse, Bosnian media regularly wages information warfare intended to keep ethnic groups at odds with each other through propaganda that supports one group while attacking another. Simple internet searches reveal that most of the news produced about BiH is on war-related topics. Little time will pass without mention of a wartime incident, creating echoes of the war on a regular basis. As a result, the Bosnian people are ever present in the past—and consequently, thirty years after the start of fighting, this is still a highly charged and a disputed issue that is ripe for exploitation.

The three constituent peoples experienced the war differently; their unique experiences prevent them from forging any kind of consensus about the war and its effects, let alone cultivating national forgiveness. Sociologist Miograd Zivanovic explains there are not three understandings, but at least four—and even five different "truths" about the war as perceived by the Bosniaks, the Bosnian Serbs, the Bosnian Croats, the international community, and even those displaced by the war.³⁷ The perspective of the international community is especially relevant as BiH is still a virtual vassal state to the United Nations High Representative for the implementation of the peace agreement. The exploitable conditions contributing to this fault line are divided societies, mobilizing ideologies, and the technification of society.

Members of each constituent group tend to have conflicting viewpoints on the war based on deep-seeded ethnic biases connected to the horrific nature of many actions that occurred during the conflict. Any kind of consensus on such splintered understandings is highly unlikely. The "truths" for each group about the nature of the conflict lies somewhere between aggression and civil war.³⁸ Yet, despite their disagreements about the nature of their experiences, all groups agree the war was defensive, fought by each ethnic block to fend off attacks from the others. It is a delicate and difficult situation where ideas of forgiveness are equated with permissiveness for intolerable behavior. Failure to achieve public accord has hindered national healing, propagated mutual animosities and escalated into regular disagreements and clashes—often with the aid of manipulative rhetoric.³⁹ The instrumentation of ethnic hatred prevents ethnic scars formed by war actions from healing. It also serves to maintain the fragmentation of Bosnian society and reinforces the standoff.

The impact of the war continues to haunt BiH. One of the worst aspects of the war is the psychological trauma that many Bosnians continue to endure. Recent explanations regarding BiH's ability to heal can be theoretically explained by psychology. Traumatic experiences are often emotionally and cognitively triggered. A victim will inherently

CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES: ETHNIC TRUTHS

	BOSNIAKS	BOSNIAN CROATS	BOSNIAN SERBS
ETHNIC CREST			
WAR MOTIVATION	Bosniak motivation for war is tied initially to protection and revenge. Bosniaks suffer some of the worst human rights abuses in the history of the region at the hand of the Bosnian Serbs. After learning Bosnian Serbs are being supported by the Yugoslav Army as well as Serbian and Russian support, Bosniaks develop their own military with the Bosnian Croats. Both the Bosniaks and Croats hope to secure influence and defend their homelands and lives.	Feeling besieged by the initial attacks, Croats in BiH initially band with the Bosniaks out of solidarity and protection. The Croat-Bosniak alliance motivates these two groups collectively to fight the Bosnian Serbs. Each with militaries that work together for a short time, it ultimately breaks down due to competing interests and a lack of trust. Although the Bosniaks were initially allies, over time they become belligerents to one another too.	Bosnian Serbs, motivated by their fears of marginalization and repression, see war as inevitable. Independence means a Bosniak majority and a significant loss of control and influence. Bosnian Serbs are concerned about having their culture subjugated and losing sections of homeland. Anger, associated with fear, and backed by the Yugoslav Army, motivates them to secure and section areas of BiH by force.
POST-WAR MOTIVATION	Bosniaks see themselves as a victim of war atrocities by both ethnic groups. First, they suffer genocide at the hand of the Bosnian Serb attacks. Then, after the alliance breaks, they are subject to ethnic cleansing while serving with the Croatian military (that leads the two groups to the Croat-Bosniak War).	Bosnian Croats see themselves as a victim of war atrocities by both ethnic groups. Bosnian Croats saw their power threatened as the least sizable group of the three. After years of bloody battles, first side-by-side with the Bosniaks against the Serbs, and then against the Bosniaks during Croat-Bosniak War.	Bosnian Serbs see themselves as an isolated and vulnerable target of both belligerent groups. Bosnian Serbs perceive the other two groups as a united front against them. They also believe an expanding Muslim population will suppress their freedoms, which is supported by a military alliance formed between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks.

FL2: Exploitable Conditions



Divided Societies



Mobilizing Ideologies



Technification of Society

combine each trigger with an emotion, a meaning, an interpretation, and an appraisal.⁴⁰ Essentially, when people are triggered, they are conditioned to re-live or re-experience the event(s) associated the trauma. This process will recur until the traumatic memory is reprocessed into a new construct.⁴¹

Social factors are especially recognized as playing a significant role in the development and maintenance of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many experts believe that PTSD is a socio-psychological construct rather than an illness or a disease, which can be mitigated with proper intervention.⁴² Thus, social interactions about the war and media accounts depicting the war serve to maintain the pain. Furthermore, these unresolved socio-psychological challenges are useful levers for political and social exploitation (e.g., war propaganda). Until BiH addresses this problem, memories of war will fuel internal and external exploitation and competition.

Lingering war effects are pervasive in BiH. It is not just the former fighters that are living with the psychological consequences of the war, but a significant part of the civilian population as well—many of whom are displaced persons, sexually abused men and women, and former camp detainees.⁴³ According to a 2012 study by the Ministry of Health, more than 60 percent of the Sarajevo population were suffering from PTSD symptoms, while 73 percent were experiencing stress-related problems.⁴⁴ Thus, BiH struggles with its deeply personal and difficult war distress. With nearly two-thirds of the population having experienced the bloody, violent, and confusing war, there is a tangible emotional and cognitive trigger. Continual reminders of the genocide, rapes, torture, and imprisonments committed by former fellow Yugoslav citizens and neighbors prompt a perpetual state of suffering and victimization. This highlights the psychosocial failure of post-war rehabilitation efforts; creates resounding, recurring war echoes^h and benefits a small group of political elites who receive legitimacy and insulation by keeping the country emotionally raw and polarized.

^h There was limited rehabilitation in the first post-war years (e.g., World Bank and some charities), but this support did not last long. Only recently has mental health reentered foreign aid agendas.

MAJORITY ETHNIC GROUPS, 1991-2013

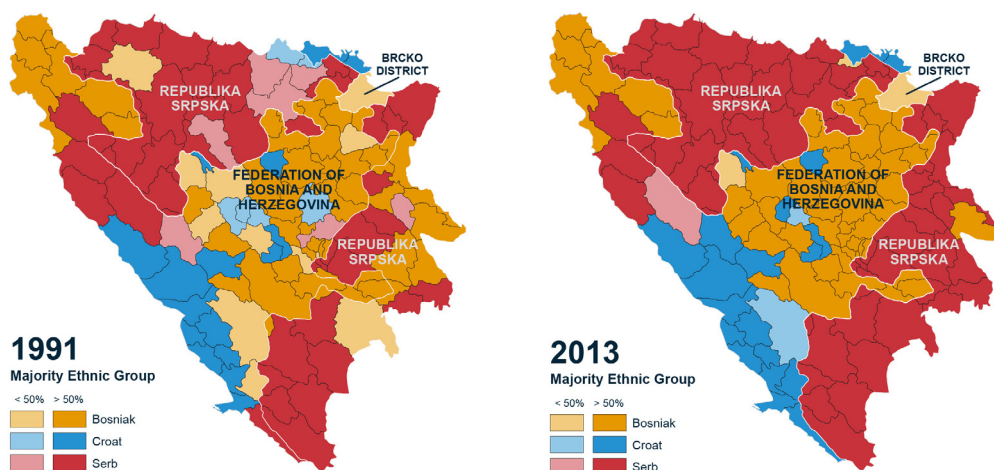


Figure 6. *Majority Ethnic Groups (1991-2013)*, GCKN.

FL3: A Defacto Three-Nation Society

BiH's constituent groups prioritize ethnoreligious identity over national identity. Although technically one state with two geographic areas (Bosnia occupying the north and central regions and Herzegovina the south and southwest regions) and three political entities (FBiH, RS, and Brcko), BiH more accurately functions as three separate ethnoreligious nations. The three main constituent groups are divided by real, perceived, and created differences in ethnicity, religion, history, and to some extent, geography. Each group has difficulty understanding the war from the other groups' points of view, due largely to their competing, uniquely different war experiences and exploited cultural differences. Notably, the population's ethnic distribution does not align with the geography provisions; from the perspective of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs received an outsized geographic allocation from Dayton. This makes the search for common ground—ultimately necessary to unify as a singular Bosnian nation—particularly challenging.⁴⁵ As a result, internal and external actors can propagate ethnonationalism and the fervor surrounding it in pursuit of their own interests.

Ethnoreligious communities define their ethnic identity by ancestral heritage, religious affiliation or, more often, a combination of both. The three main ethnic groups in BiH share the same South Slav heritage and are genetically similar.⁴⁶ Language differences are only regionally significant, and all variations spoken within the country are more like one another than they are to ethnic areas outside the county like Belgrade, Serbia, and Zagreb, Croatia. The major cultural difference between the ethnic groups is religious origin or affiliation—a difference that can be explained in part by the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which allowed autonomous religious communities to coexist under its rule.

Thus, religious identity and practices are important signifiers within the country. Ideas of nationalism based on ethnic Serb or Croat identities, wrapped into religious identities, began to surface during the 19th century. By the 20th century, a sense of nationalism developed among Bosnian Muslims and the label “Muslim” became an ethnic, not only religious, identifier; in the 1990s, “Bosniak” replaced “Muslim” as the ethnoreligious

ETHNORELIGIOUS IDENTITY



BOSNIACKS

*Gazi Husrev-beg mosque
Sarajevo*



BOSNIAN SERBS

*Cathedral of Christ the Saviour
Banja Luka*



BOSNIAN CROATS

*Sacred Heart Cathedral
Sarajevo*

FL3: Exploitable Conditions



Ineffective Government



Divided Societies



Multiple Sovereignties



Mobilizing Ideologies



Technification of Society

identifier. This unfolding of ethnic identities into religious identities has contributed to exploitable ethnic and religious practices and symbolic expressions. Empowered by their own ethnic media and differentiated by their religious practices, groups maintain stereotypes and mutual suspicions of the other groups that fuel antagonisms, limit cooperation and collaboration, prevent understanding and healing, handicap government, and work to undermine national cohesion and stability.⁴⁷ Although identity is a social construct, for the people of Bosnia it is a hardened structure working to deepen mistrust, personal dislike, and separatism among Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs that reinforces ethnonational ideals. Most Bosnian citizens will prioritize ethnic group membership over national citizenship, and this continuation of majority prioritization and fractured identity maintains factionalized political representation, degraded social cohesion, and certainly weakened national governance.⁴⁸ Unless mitigated, this type of identity clash will continue to erode society and prevent any kind of unification.

BiH battles long-standing, deeply entrenched views of the “other” (ethnoreligious groups), instrumentally leveraged by war atrocities, partisan media, and a factionalized government system and there is no real incentive or consequence to change the status quo. Ethnoreligious groups and their systems are insulated in their semi-autonomous organizational function, which demands larger scale intervention to provoke change. This factionalization satisfies the political leaders of the ethnoreligious groups in a way that is vulnerable to—or in some cases encourages—inter-ethnic armed conflict that President Tito’s authoritarian regime largely suppressed. This fault line fuels—and is fueled by—a confluence of five exploitable conditions: ineffective governance, divided societies, multiple sovereignty, mobilizing ideology, and technification of society.

Each BiH group is decidedly motivated to maintain its boundaries. Bosnian elites tout ethnic membership as incredibly important to economic survival, and therefore, separation from ‘others’ reinforces and maintains esteem and in-group status. Thus, the seeming xenophobia of other ethnoreligious groups perpetuates hyper-contagion, where fear or hatred of the ‘other’ is expressed in rash and, at times, untrue or unfounded perceptions. This legitimizes the elite’s position of influence within the group, which unlocks opportunities for their personal advancement.

Along with identity, intra-state conflicts are correlated with, but not limited to “antidemocratic systems of governance, corruption, poverty and unequal distribution of resources, often connected to a history of decolonization and inadequate state mechanisms.”⁴⁹ The conditions for conflict will differ according to case and context, but competition among groups is a necessary state. Hostility between groups is not only a matter of competing for resources like jobs, but also the result of competing identities and state power. The perpetuation of ethnic political competition will continue to influence social boundaries, making the prospects of long-term BiH stability bleak.

Exploitation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Fault Lines

Factionalized elites are the primary exploiters of the conditions and the fault lines in BiH. Each of the constituent groups understands that any change in the status quo can threaten its semi-autonomous status and equal share of the government pie. Thus, elites exploit the sociocultural conditions for their own personal gain in power and wealth by leveraging the segregated Dayton system, partisan media, and ethnonationalist politics while presenting their partisan positions as constituent rights. Notably, BiH's political and business elites, the main exploiters of these fault lines, continue to foment ethnonationalist fervor to build near-impermeable walls across the divisions to preserve their influence.⁵⁰

In late 2021, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, took center stage in deepening divisions. Dodik sparked fears of a secession bid when he said RS would pull out of three key BiH state institutions—the armed forces, the top judiciary body, and the tax agency. He publicly dismissed the role of the High Representative and also said the Bosnian intelligence and security agencies would be banned from operating in RS.⁵¹ While Dodik is not the only ethnic elite promoting ethnonationalism divisions, Bosniak leader Šefik Džaferović and Bosnian Croat leader Željko Komšić are viewed as less publicly divisive as of late.⁵²

The sociocultural fault lines identified in this report are mostly powered by radicalized political and media scenes. The messaging deployed by rival factions deepens the polarization, worsening schisms that started decades ago, and is exclusively for the benefit of those in power. This means that the population, whether as Bosnians or as ethnic clusters, are truly victims of the historical and cyclical struggle for political and economic dominance. Thus, ethnic hate and associated tensions are not only the result of war era atrocities, but are truly a tool of manipulation and control utilized by elites who have historically promoted division to reap political and economic gain. Their polarized political messaging is effective because it is rampant, often grounded in identifiable social truths that regularly reside in the mindset of the general population. This is a divided society's most vulnerable component and an exploiter's preferred weapon.

BiH's factionalized elites extensively use ethnopolitical brinksmanship to maintain influence and to benefit from the corruption they produce. These same elites understand the influence of the media and will sustain regular and repeated messaging to support their political agendas. If political warfare behavior continues and divisive narratives fill the airwaves, each of the fault lines will continue to fuel destabilization of the country. This will make it difficult, if not impossible, for BiH to fulfill the tasks the EU has outlined for membership.

Regional and global actors may benefit from exploiting these fault lines. Historically, BiH has been plagued by its porous borders, widespread corruption, ineffective government, underdeveloped society, and relatively lax security, making it an ideal operating zone for nefarious actors and activities.⁵³ Moreover, ethnonationalism and weak institutions in BiH remain enduring threats and provide abundant options for interested belligerents to exploit. Although Bosnian elites are the most significant beneficiaries of dysfunction and corruption, China, Russia, and other regional and global competitors to the United States and the West are also politically and economically capitalizing on the situation.

China. China's influence tends to target and exploit areas in need of economic assistance, especially regarding infrastructure and technology.⁵⁴ PRC (People's Republic of China) aid tends to create dependent partners reliant on Chinese investments.⁵⁵ Despite the complex issues that exist in the BiH institutional and political system, in 2020 China and BiH established a long-term partnership spanning several large infrastructure and

energy projects. These projects, mainly in RS, provide a platform to develop stronger relations.⁵⁶ As part of the “China+17” framework and the “Belt and Road” initiative, China is sourcing five major projects focused mainly on power plants and highway expansion. Notably, four of the five projects are tied directly to RS, indicating the RS is more successful with—and observably more focused on—establishing stronger relations (and potentially more projects) with China. The fifth project, in southwestern Bosnia (FBiH entity) is the largest windfarm in the Balkans and China’s first green energy investment in the country.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Chinese as a second language is being taught in the RS education system to encourage future, diverse RS-China businesses connections.⁵⁸ Recently, China, with its “mask diplomacy policy”, quickly jumped to BiH’s aid to provide health assistance and economic relief during the first COVID-19 wave. This was when NATO and the EU were overwhelmed with responding to their internal needs. China also provided vaccines to BiH when they were difficult to supply. Though China’s assistance (providing personal protective equipment as well as vaccines) was not shown to be highly effective and did not measure up to the EU’s overall economic contribution to BiH for COVID-19, its immediate assistance facilitated a strong, positive narrative. As a result, China garnered a great deal of good will and influence since it provided aid at a time when the West was unable to respond.⁵⁹

Russia. Russia’s exploitive interests differ from China’s and are rooted in actions that play to its strengths and assist its strategic interests. The Kremlin’s goal is to keep Sarajevo out of the EU and NATO at all costs, and is predicated on a simple idea—BiH instability. Russia advances this goal in several ways, most notably, by leveraging its ties to the Bosnian Serbs which include their shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage and their alliances during the First and Second World Wars. Russia could claim to use its power to protect the Bosnian Serbs, similar to how they have used this tactic to “protect” other Euro Slavs as a pretext for Russian interference and actions in the area.⁶⁰

The Kremlin views BiH as an ideal playground for its influence operations and political provocation. From the Russian perspective, BiH has many advantages: It is a relatively small country, it is already ethnically divided along three rather poor ethnicities, “is subject to the client-services of particular domestic political actors (primarily the dominant Serbs and Croat nationalist blocs in BiH) and, considering its recent history, is not that hard to disrupt

While Bosnian elites are the most significant beneficiaries of the dysfunction and corruption, regional actors may be economically and politically interested in capitalizing on the dysfunction."



The tripartite presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosnian Croat member, Zeljko Komsic, Bosnian Serb member, Milorad Dodik and Bosniak member, Sefik Dzaferovic (l. to r.)

Source: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1408271/world>, November 20, 2018.

and destabilize, especially with a robust array of soft power tactics, most importantly the media.⁶¹ Several of Moscow's favorite exploitable conditions exist in BiH including divided societies, ineffective governance, infrastructure deficits and economic inequalities. By regularly exploiting these conditions, stability is a challenge. Furthermore, they have mutually beneficial relations with other actors in the region (e.g., Serbia).

Russia views the country's divided population as an opportunity and its divisive political leaders as incredibly useful tools—a beneficial means to keep BiH from meeting the requirements for EU membership. In July 2021, the OHR passed a law banning the denial of genocide in Srebrenica—denials Dodik and his administration repeatedly pronounce. Russia, however, called the OHR's position on genocide denialism as “subjective and unbalanced.”⁶² Furthermore, in November 2021, when Dodik signaled his intent to secede, Russia declared support for the formation of an independent Bosnian Serb state.⁶³ Additionally, RS agreed to host Russian police trainers and intelligence officers, as well as establish a training center near Banja Luka, in order to train Bosnian Serb forces. Russia, often referring to Bosnian Serbs as “little Russians,” delivered 2,500 semi-automatic weapons to RS shortly before the opening of the training center and publicly expressed that “Russia stands behind” Bosnian Serb independence in BiH.⁶⁴

While Russia may view BiH's leaders, especially Dodik, as a useful tool for its strategic purposes, it appears as Dodik, in particular, is politically and personally benefiting from the Kremlin's actions. Although it appears Dodik is able to charge up his political base with the notion of breaking away, he would likely benefit less than he does now as a part of a tripartite system. Furthermore, RS's secession could backfire on Russia's strategic interests. Separating from BiH—either to join Serbia or create its own independent state—would mean RS would not be insulated by a federal system designed to protect it. Finally, such a move would allow the Bosniaks and Croats in BiH to reorganize, remove Dayton, and form a new government—one that might eventually join the EU and NATO. Much of Russia's and Dodik's public rhetoric benefits them in this time of uncertainty. Dodik's pandering to his nationalist base, and the Kremlin's goal (to maintain instability), both are centered on subverting and destabilizing the central state without completely destroying it—as it is a useful playground for both actors.

Serbia. In January 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic told the media he has no plans to join NATO and that Serbia's recent purchase of military vehicles, equipment,

weapons from Russia were for defensive purposes.⁶⁵ Serbia's refusal to join NATO aids Russian interests as well as influences Bosnian Serbs who often stand in allegiance with their ethnic neighbors. Furthermore, the Serbian government, while not publicly or even directly denying genocide, refuses to remove monuments and murals of war criminals responsible for the Srebrenica massacre of Bosniaks in 1995.⁶⁶ Public monuments and memorials are perceived by other ethnic groups as negating the recently passed BiH law, and also give the appearance that the Serbian government is pandering to the nationalist electorate while denying any responsibility for them. Serbia was also able to gain influence across the region, and certainly in BiH, by providing COVID-19 vaccines and allowing Bosnian Serbs to be vaccinated in Serbia. Serbia was able to secure these vaccines from China, Russia, and the West, but considering BiH lacked initial access to vaccines, this was an important influencer.⁶⁷

Hungary. Similarly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is supporting efforts to break up BiH by financially and politically backing Dodik's secessionist intents.⁶⁸ Along with his denials of Bosnian genocide and his support of Serbian expansionism, Orban's overt sponsorship of Dodik's secessionist regime provides additional shocks to the

Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain vulnerable to exploitation by actors with adversarial interests to the United States."

stability and sovereignty of BiH. Orban said he will veto EU-level sanctions and his “government would provide secessionist authorities in RS with a 100-million-euro life-line.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, tensions are inflamed when Orban's comments, in-line with the Western far right and the Serb ultra-nationalist establishment, suggest regional security is at risk when two million Muslims occupy a key state in the area.⁷⁰

Iran. Iran, even before the Bosnian War, views Bosnia as a useful environment for espionage and criminal traffic, and has especially sought to exploit this environment over the past three decades. Early on, Iran cultivated relationships with the Party of Democratic Action, the dominant political faction among the Bosnian Muslims. This alliance helped Iran gain influence with Bosniak communities and facilitated attempts to disrupt the area for its own gain.⁷¹ Bosnia in particular, has been a primary hub for Iran's espionage activities throughout the Balkans.⁷² Iran has regularly sought to embed a network of religious, cultural, educational, and

media organizations in the Balkans region as a whole.⁷³

Turkey. Turkey, a majority Muslim state, has provided economic, political and cultural support to BiH, including expressing support for the political unity and territorial integrity of BiH. This could be, in part, to underpin Turkey's "neo-Ottomanism" policy—intended to support former Ottoman Empire states—but also to strengthen Bosnia as an integral component of the region and to protect it against becoming a target for exploiters. Turkey's government believes that by creating inter- and intra-regional security umbrellas in these areas, it will serve to balance Russian influence in the region.⁷⁴ One way Turkey is pursuing this goal is by financing a regional trade route—the Sarajevo-Belgrade Highway project. This infrastructure venture should help increase economic development in the region, especially for Serbia as well as Bosnia, and offset other influencers in the area pursuing similar goals.⁷⁵

Vulnerability and Exploitation. Strong partners tend to seek out strong partners. However, strong partners may also see an opportunity to advance their interests and by partnering with-and exploiting-weak ones. If BiH is unable to meet the basic requirements for EU consideration, it cannot expect to attract foreign investors or anyone other than opportunistic belligerents.

The fault lines outlined in this report are ostensibly linked. They are mutually supporting and mutually reinforcing. If BiH remains (or can remain) institutionally weak and institutionally factionalized, it will consequentially remain a *socially* divided society and will not heal from its trauma. Inevitably, BiH must find common ground, develop common values, in order to establish collaborative functioning systems.

BiH's rotating presidency also creates continuity problems, mixed messaging, continued compartmentalization and regular opportunities for exploitation. This system is not integrative, and it fails to balance centralization and decentralization for effective governance. For example, decentralization could be necessary to facilitate faster decision-making processes at lower levels, yet centralization may be necessary to attract global investment, mitigate corruption, and inculcate an intolerance for divisive ethno-political narratives. Ethnic vetoes, requirements for collective decision making and stringent group-based rights only create stalemates stemming from social and political disdain rather than efficacy.

The Bosnian military may be a useful framework for ethnic integration. Over the last decade, it has implemented a collaborative and unifying system that has improved organizational function and reduced constituent friction.⁷⁶ Any

kind of movement toward increased political, economic, and social stability is nearly impossible without this kind of reform. Unless BiH perceives reform as consequentially imperative, it is unlikely to pursue the priorities needed for EU membership or for similar organizations that support national and international stability. There is not enough incentive nor consequence.

An unstable and fractured BiH only increases its internal and external vulnerability to ethno-religious elites, belligerent regional actors, and opportunistic global powers. Not only does this vulnerability present BiH as markedly less attractive to strong partners, but when coupled with continued ethnic tension—especially when leveraged for exploitation—it could spill over into ethnic fighting across the region. The real and potential concern for ethnic wars is a Western concern of Balkan conflicts and has led to the implementation of multiple containment strategies since the beginning of the 20th century. The strategies have had limited success and typically result in substantive internal challenges and the subsequent need for Western aid.



The Siege of Sarajevo in April 1992.
Source: en.wikipedia, photo by Mikhail Evstafiev.

Implications of the Fault Lines for the U.S. Army

The Balkans region provides generous options for U.S. adversaries and their interest in confrontation with the United States. Its enduring instability provides an opportunity for competitors to degrade U.S. regional influence in a chief crossroads area of the world. Furthermore, escalated instability could ignite larger regional conflicts that may summon additional resources and support from the United States and its partners. Most adversary actions will not involve direct conflict, but will fall largely in non-military domains. Notably, U.S. competitors will target areas where they can aptly leverage political and social rifts by exploiting ethnic and religious cleavages. In some instances, competitors may be able to capitalize on the country's economic insecurity; however, in most cases, the country's economic issues will be engaged via political channels.

Instability within BiH contributes to the larger regional concerns. The intent of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement has expired and is interfering with forward movement. Today, the agreement is fueling political warfare and insulating government dysfunction. Further, it is not the Dayton Agreement, but the wider regional situation (i.e., Croatia's EU membership and Serbia's aspirations for membership) that is ostensibly deterring violent, widespread conflict in the near term.⁷⁷ However, even if reforms were enacted through the international community and with Western pressure, BiH would struggle to stop the negative inertia from its recent history of ethnic and partisan division to make any meaningful progress. Rather, it continues to remain vulnerable to exploitation—most frequently and directly by its own political elites—but also by a myriad of interested external actors, including Russia, Turkey, and China as well as non-state actors with oppositional interests to the United States. As indicated by the fault lines, the seeds of potential national destabilization are present and may possibly unravel regional stability, presenting a threat to U.S. interests.

On the ground, a strong understanding of the historical conflict and ethnic makeup of country will enable more effective engagements and actions. Notably, ethnic perceptions and tensions will vary from area to area and even from individual to individual. Cultural missteps or misinterpretations may rouse an emotional response and create difficulties in U.S. transactions. Furthermore, a proficient familiarity of Bosnia's government, especially its rotating presidency and the ethnic priorities within it, will help to aid in stability, development, and change efforts.

U.S. forces will also encounter signs of adversary support to one or more BiH factions. According to the State Department's recent assessment, there is a "lack of political will to implement U.S. initiatives."⁷⁸ This creates space for others to influence and U.S. adversaries are quick to intervene. Russia is likely to utilize its proxies—one of its preferred tactics—to exploit existing ethnic factions that keep the country divided, disinterested, and unable to meet membership requirements for joining multi-national organizations like the EU or NATO. Notably, Russia's actions are mainly indirect and tend to be relatively benign regarding U.S. interests, which in part is why few global powers see return benefits of large-scale involvement in the area—another key strategic play by U.S. adversaries. China is showing increasing interest in the Balkans. In addition to their infrastructure projects—mainly in RS, they are engaged in goodwill efforts and charity to Bosnia as well as the international community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Involvement in BiH by Serbia and Croatia are directed towards increasing social and political support for the ethnic enclaves, and notably Turkey, Hungary, as well as Iran keep BiH stability in their crosshairs. Any increases in foreign involvement, even initially small support, could lead to more powerful influence in the future.

Risk Assessment

Based on this analysis, we suggest several competitive scenarios that could impact regional stability:

Implication 1 | Reduced U.S. and Western Influence.

Reduced U.S., EU, and Western Influence allows increased maneuver space for Peer, Near-Peer, and Regional Competitors.

HIGH RISK
LIKELY and CRITICAL

Probability (expected likelihood)	4.1
Severity (expected consequences)	2.8

Implication 2 | Further delays for accession into NATO.

The country's inability to meet accession requirements keeps BiH in a continual state of instability—making BiH unattractive for healthy partnerships.

MODERATE RISK
FREQUENT and MODERATE

Probability (expected likelihood)	4.5
Severity (expected consequences)	2.4

Implication 3 | Return of interethnic and religious violence.

BiH contains a significant number of sources of conflict that, if unmitigated, could result in intergroup hostility—and even lead to a return of violence among its main three ethnic groups.

HIGH RISK
OCCASSIONAL and CATASTROPHIC

Probability (expected likelihood)	2.75
Severity (expected consequences)	3.6

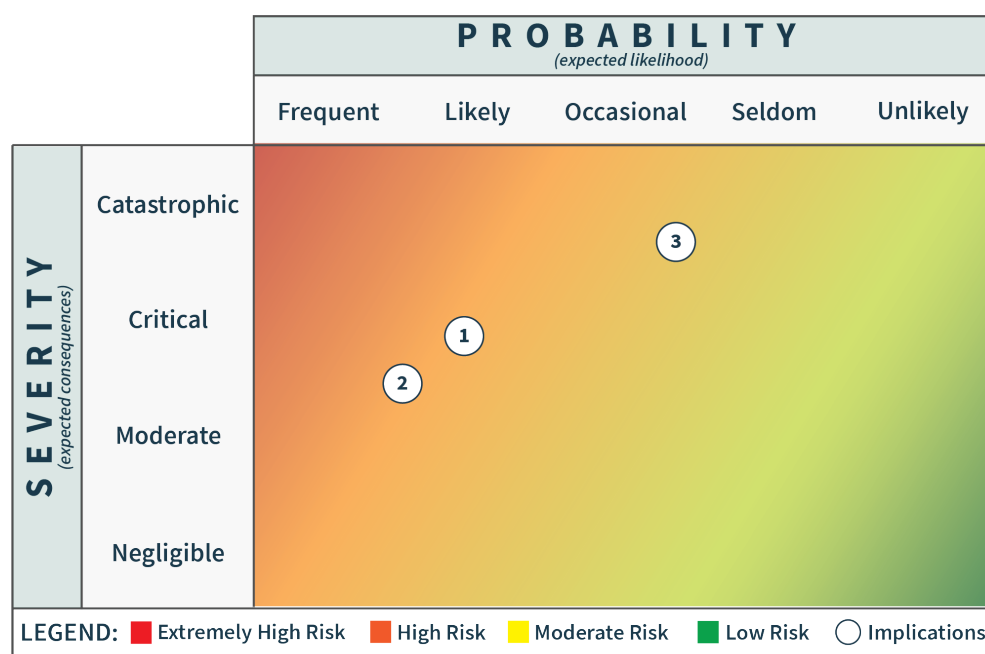


Figure 7. Probability/Severity Matrix, GCKN.

Discussion

More than twenty-five years after Dayton, BiH is relatively peaceful, but remains unstable. Some experts surmise that it has been embroiled in a deeply political crisis since 2009, roughly three years after Paddy Ashdown stepped down as High Representative.⁷⁹ Ashdown's departure prompted each of BiH's constituent groups to effectively boost command and control of their own areas—even at the cost of state unity.⁸⁰ Today's leaders, those charged with stabilizing the country for possible EU or NATO membership, are ironically the political elite who are also benefiting from the country's instability.⁸¹ Thus, there is no personal or political incentive to change the status quo. Nationalist rhetoric, fear, and painful memories fuel the political elites' ability to leverage continual and substantial support from their own ethnic groups in line with their own personal goals.

BiH's system of rotating presidents puts additional stressors on leadership including a lack of continuity, a lack of consistent messaging, and an inability to create a unified national identity, which opens the government up to potential for abuse and corruption with layers and compartmentalization.⁸² Unfortunately, simple reforms, applied within the parameters of the present tripartite agreement, will not mitigate BiH's deeply entrenched political, economic and social dysfunction. Furthermore, disruption to the status quo may transform latent conflict into something more significant and less manageable. Although some progress has occurred—mainly the result of international pressure and United States-led initiatives⁸³—BiH regularly fails to meet the key priorities for EU consideration. In addition, EU's criticisms and sanctions imposed on BiH are often too light to imbue consequential weight.⁸⁴ Rather, they allow opportunity for competitors to counter Western narratives. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to maintain political power will almost certainly prompt him to exploit EU penalties or failed Western support either directly or via its Serbian proxies in Belgrade (Capital of Serbia) and Banja Luka (city in Republika Srpska, Bosnia). The country's inability to meet the EU's basic requirements only makes BiH more vulnerable, and more attractive to exploitation.

As outlined by the 2014 European Commission's Report,⁸⁵ the country would need to build functional state institutions, reform the economy and the judiciary and combat corruption in order to even be considered for EU membership. However, various political elites in BiH benefit generously from the political and economic shortcomings that prevent membership, so establishing a cause for change and garnering support among BiH leadership will continue to be challenging. Therefore, the prospect of BiH joining

EU remains unlikely under current conditions.

BiH is not in immediate danger of collapse, however, it is continually unstable and latently explosive. The country contains an alarming number of sources that feed instability. Under its current political system the three main constituent groups receive the same level of political power despite their disproportionate population representation. They remain politically separated under the structure and are also physically divided geographically. These divisions further isolate and separate constituent groups making common ground increasingly difficult to achieve. Equity issues, even if just perceptions—because they can be easily exploited—could lead to increased grievances which could spark higher levels of instability. These sources keep Bosnia from achieving a more stable state. They are the same sources that could trigger intergroup hostility, possibly leading to renewed violence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine Bosnia and Herzegovina's exploitable sources of instability, identify its fault lines, and make an assessment on its future stability. Analysis suggests that BiH is not in immediate danger of collapse. It remains peaceful, despite the number of challenges it faces. The country contains a number of alarming sources of instability that comprise the paper's outlined fault lines; however, many of the potential flames of conflict are mitigated by international actors and local elites benefiting from the status quo. BiH's current structure facilitates continued exploitation of its conditions, and its fault lines continue to harden and burrow into the fabric of the country. Economically and politically, the country shows no signs of improvement. Furthermore, political conflicts and structural problems continue to impede progress that could otherwise facilitate more international support from organizations like the EU or NATO.

BiH political and business elites, as well as opportunist regional and global actors, will continue to exploit the country's vulnerabilities. Recent evidence suggests it is not in their interest to support political unification, territorial integration, or even necessary structural changes, because this challenges and even threatens their power. BiH's main exploiters will continue to render the government minimally functional in order to reap personal and political benefits. Consequently, the stability of BiH's political, social, economic, and security environments will remain fragile and erosive without significant intervention.



Research Methodology

Modified Grounded Theory

Analytic judgements in this Fault Line series are grounded in select social science research techniques comprising a specific methodology developed by GCKN social scientists. This process occurs in phases, relying on GCKN's Exploitable Conditions Framework, open-source research, scholarly literature, and vetted subject matter experts in the region of study. The methodology is a combination of multiple data analysis procedures fused with a rigorous co-creation process.

At GCKN, this co-creation involves leveraging expertise from social scientists, defense community researchers, geographic information system specialists, intelligence analysts and, most importantly, GCKN's Subject Matter Expertise (SME) network—the cornerstone of the GCKN's methodology. Many of these SMEs contribute under condition of anonymity to preserve working relationships in the region of interest, and so are listed in the notes by assigned numbers, rather than by name. While GCKN conducts the bulk of the research and writing, the methodology systematically guides input from regional experts to ensure maximum validity of the judgments. The final product provides a fault lines assessment grounded in a defensible methodology, able to withstand critical scrutiny.

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Figure 3. Susan Littleton and Keith French, *Bosnia and Herzegovina Ethnic Populations, (1991-2021)*, March 2021, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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