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AUTOCRATIZATION WITHIN ETHNIC-POWER SHARING: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA BETWEEN FORMAL DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES

Nearly three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) continues to experience democratic stagnation, institutional dysfunction, and deepening autocratization. This paper examines how the post-war institutional design of BiH, anchored in rigid ethnic power sharing, has enabled authoritarian practices within a formally democratic framework. The aim is to trace the interplay between consociational arrangement, state weakness, and the strategies of ethnonational elites in fostering autocratization. Methodologically, the study combines theoretical insights from literature on autocratization and competitive authoritarianism with a qualitative within-case analysis of BiH, drawing on institutionalist perspectives, democracy indices (V-Dem, Freedom House, BTI), and empirical examples from 2006 onward. The findings show that mechanisms originally intended as safeguards for ethnic groups (such as extensive veto rights, decentralized authority, and segmented electoral arenas) have been systematically instrumentalized for patronage, obstruction, and the erosion of democratic norms. Consequently, autocratization in BiH does not manifest as a centralized authoritarian regime but rather as parallel subnational competitive authoritarianisms embedded within the consociational framework. These dynamics demonstrate that in weak post-conflict states, corporate power-sharing and ethno-territorial autonomy can invert their intended purpose, transforming safeguards into drivers of authoritarian entrenchment and thereby undermining both institutional functionality and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: autocratization; ethnic power-sharing; Bosnia and Herzegovina; competitive authoritarianism; consociational democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost three decades after the end of the war and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has fallen into chronic political stagnation, institutional dysfunction, and a worrisome erosion of democratic standards. Although the Dayton Agreement ended the war and established peace through a complex ethnic power-sharing arrangement — i.e., consociationalism — between the three constituent peoples and two entities, this institutional framework soon became the target of criticism for entrenching ethnic divisions and stalling democratization. BiH is often described as a dysfunctional and deeply divided state where entrenched ethnic cleavages are mirrored in the political institutions (Belloni 2007, 2009). The complex Dayton structure (multilayered territorial governance) formally prevented the dominance of a single group and shifted conflict from the military to the political sphere. However, the price of such an arrangement has been institutional inefficiency and the freezing of political divisions. Political elites, once wartime leaders, adapted to the new system by reproducing ethnic conflict through institutions, preserving the *status quo* instead of pursuing reform (Bose 2005). As a result, BiH remains burdened with nationalist rhetoric, recurrent institutional crises, and failed reforms, leading to a weak and fragmented state apparatus.

While consociationalism often stabilizes democracy where key scope conditions are met, in BiH it has instead tended to facilitate autocratization. Contributions to consociational theory stress a cluster of enabling conditions: (1) capable and impartial state institutions that can enforce shared-rule bargains; (2) elites with incentives to accommodate and accept repeated interactions under uncertainty; (3) cross-cutting social and economic linkages that moderate zero-sum identity claims; and (4) flexible institutional design, including procedural adaptability, calibrated vetoes, and problem-solving forums (Bogaards 1998; Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart 2019; Lijphart 1977; McCulloch 2014; McGarry 2019; O’Leary 2013). BiH departs from this constellation on four fronts: (1) consociation was sequenced before state consolidation, leaving the state-level weak; (2) the design is rigidly corporate¹ rather than integrative and adaptable; (3) extensive mutual vetoes and multilayered territoriality multiply points of obstruction; (4) elite incentives remain aligned with segmental monopolies rather than cross-segment accountability.

¹ BiH represents a case of so-called “corporate consociation”, in which power is distributed along predetermined identity lines, and constitutional provisions guarantee representation and veto rights for specific ethnic groups in both scope and structure (McCulloch 2014; Vukojević 2017a 2022).

Under these conditions, corporate power-sharing serves primarily to safeguard ethnonational principal-agent chains rather than ensuring political responsiveness and accountability to the citizenry, thereby fostering a process of segmented autocratization. Authoritarian practices become consolidated within each ethnonational arena while formal democratic procedures are maintained at the state level. Mechanisms originally designed as minority safeguards are routinely instrumentalized for blockade, patronage, and the erosion of democratic norms, turning protective devices into key pathways of autocratization.

International efforts to improve functionality — most notably the decisions imposed by the Office of the High Representative — had paradoxical consequences. In the first decade after Dayton, one important aspect of non-democratic rule in BiH was the heavy reliance on international intervention, as foreign actors repeatedly overruled democratically elected officials (Knaus and Martin 2003). Rather than alleviating nationalist conflict, these interventions often privileged certain groups and parties over others, while the dismissal of elected officials and the shaping of coalitions and government formation created what has been described as an international tutelary regime (Vladislavljević forthcoming). Instead of cultivating accountability, local elites relied on external authority (Bieber 2006; Juncos 2013).

When international involvement waned in 2006, domestic ethnonational elites used Dayton's institutional mechanisms to obstruct any meaningful progress that might jeopardize their entrenched positions, causing reform efforts to come to a halt. Contrary to expectations that BiH would gradually evolve into a functional multiethnic democracy integrated into the European Union, the post-war reality has been marked by stagnation and democratic backsliding. The political landscape continues to be dominated by hardline ethnic parties, institutions remain weak, and signs of autocratization have become increasingly visible — ranging from the suppression of judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society to the growing concentration of power in ethnonationalist elites (Ćosić and Huruz Memović 2025; Bieber 2020; Blagovčanin 2024; Vukojević 2023a).

This alarming trajectory raises a fundamental question: why nearly thirty years after Dayton BiH is experiencing a decline in democratic institutions, and how do its institutional architecture and informal practices contribute to such outcomes? In other words, the aim of this paper is to examine how the post-war political order and institutions — shaped by the Dayton framework and the wartime legacy — have enabled a departure from democracy despite a formal peace and prolonged international assistance. The paper integrates a review of relevant literature and develops a theoretical

framework for understanding the contemporary dynamics of autocratization in BiH. The methodological approach is grounded in qualitative analysis of academic literature and comparative democracy indices, along with empirical examples of key political developments since 2006. The following section outlines the theoretical framework of autocratization and competitive authoritarianism, followed by an exploration of the political context of autocratization within ethnic power-sharing. The analysis then turns to the mechanisms and techniques employed by ethnonational elites to implement authoritarian political practices.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AUTOCRATIZATION AND COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

2.1. Autocratization: Theoretical Perspectives and Global Trends

In contemporary political science debates the concept of autocratization has become central to the analysis of regime transformation across the world. Autocratization refers to the gradual or abrupt erosion of essential democratic characteristics, that is, a significant degradation of the institutional pillars of democracy (Cassani and Tomini 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). It constitutes a regression of the political system, whereby the nominal democratic framework is preserved while its substance is systematically hollowed out. Unlike earlier forms of authoritarian takeover — such as military coups or revolutions — modern autocratization typically unfolds “from within” through legalistic and often barely perceptible institutional changes (Bermeo 2016; Schedler 2013). Empirical research indicates that today’s authoritarian shifts are primarily characterized by institutional manipulation rather than overt repression. Bermeo (2016) refers to this as “executive aggrandizement”, a process in which democratically elected leaders gradually dismantle checks on executive authority. Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg (2017) identify free media, civil society, and electoral administration as the primary targets of such erosion, while multiparty elections are formally retained. Coppedge (2017) likewise emphasizes that modern autocratization is driven by concentration of power, not classical repression. Theoretically, autocratization is treated as the inverse of democratization and can affect both democratic and semi-authoritarian regimes. According to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), autocratization may involve democratic backsliding (a decline without regime collapse), full democratic breakdown (transition to autocracy), or autocratic deepening (consolidation of already non-democratic regimes).

To assess the extent of autocratization in BiH, this paper draws on several comparative democracy indices, including the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index, Freedom House indicators (civil liberties and rule of law), and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) focused on political transformation. According to the 2024 V-Dem report, BiH scores only 0.35 on the Liberal Democracy Index (on a 0–1 scale), placing it in the so-called “grey zone” between democracy and autocracy (V-Dem Institute 2024). Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World 2024* report assigns BiH 51 out of 100 points, classifying it as “partly free”, a decline from the 52/100 score recorded a year earlier (Freedom House 2024a). Even more illustrative is the *Nations in Transit 2024* report which scores BiH at 3.18 out of 7 and labels it a “transitional or hybrid regime”, citing worsening media freedoms and mounting pressure on civil society (Freedom House 2024b). Similarly, BTI 2024 classifies BiH as a “defective democracy” assigning it a political transformation score of 5.55 out of 10 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024a).

Taken together, these indicators point to a steady decline in democratic performance and an ongoing process of autocratization. Democratic institutions formally exist but are substantively weakened and hollowed out. V-Dem no longer considers BiH a stable democracy, but rather a regime teetering on the edge of authoritarianism — comparable to regional peers also undergoing regression. Serbia, for example, has been reclassified as an “electoral autocracy” (V-Dem Institute 2021). Globally, BiH is far from an outlier. The world is currently in the midst of a new wave of autocratization, with nearly half the global population living in countries where democratic standards are in decline (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; V-Dem Institute 2023).

The autocratization process in BiH has unfolded gradually through phases in which democratic practices eroded, institutional accountability diminished, and political elites consolidated control over public resources. The formal structure of democracy has increasingly been transformed into an instrument of ethnonational domination and party self-preservation. From 2006 onward, as international interventionism declined, the political arena was filled with nationalist rhetoric, and leading parties began to systematically exploit ethnic instruments such as vetoes and blockade mechanisms as tools of governance. Instead of institutional stabilization, this ushered in a cycle of political crises, blockades, and open instrumentalization of institutions (Vukojević 2019, 2023a). Following the general elections in 2010 and 2014, the ruling coalition in RS, led by Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and Milorad Dodik, developed its own authoritarian practices through power concentration, patronage-based hiring, and delegitimization of state-level institutions.

Meanwhile, the Federation of BiH (FBiH) increasingly resembled a paralyzed political entity, hampered by power-sharing arrangements between Bosniaks and Croats. Deep fragmentation along cantonal and ethnic lines, coupled with persistent conflict between Bosniak and Croat political actors, resulted in chronic dysfunction. The period from 2018 onward has been marked by intense institutional crises, obstruction of state bodies, denial of constitutional jurisdictions, and growing authoritarian rhetoric and practices. At the same time, international actors have increasingly prioritized stability over democratization, enabling domestic elites to consolidate authoritarian practices while formally adhering to democratic procedures.

2.2. Competitive Authoritarianism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

One concept that helps explain this ambiguous terrain between democracy and autocracy is “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). It represents a narrower and more precise category than electoral autocracy which encompasses both hegemonic (non-competitive) and competitive forms of authoritarian regimes (Schedler 2006, 2013). In competitive authoritarian regimes, multi-party elections and some formal democratic institutions are retained, yet the playing field is systematically skewed in favor of incumbents through the abuse of state resources, media control, intimidation of the opposition, and other unfair practices. While opposition parties are allowed to participate in elections, the likelihood of genuine power alternation is greatly diminished by structural inequalities in political competition (Levitsky and Way 2010). Unlike in hegemonic authoritarian regimes, where the ruling party secures an overwhelming majority, in competitive authoritarian systems opposition parties win a significant share of votes, though rarely sufficient to threaten incumbents’ dominance. In recent years, scholars have applied the concept of competitive authoritarianism to the Western Balkans, including BiH, albeit with important contextual specificities (Bieber 2018, 2020).

The political system of BiH is marked by multilayered fragmentation and institutional complexity, which is especially evident in the structure of electoral competition. It is possible to identify three distinct electoral arenas corresponding to the three major ethnic party subsystems (Kapidžić 2017; Vukojević 2017b). While all political parties in BiH interact to some extent, they do not seek cross-ethnic votes. This segmentation of the party system functions as a further check against the dominance of any single party at the national level, while simultaneously enabling ethnic dominance at subnational levels (Kapidžić 2019). Thus, entities and cantons serve as institutional

frameworks for subnational competitive authoritarian regimes, where one ethnic party typically holds long-term structural advantages by controlling institutions and resources (Bieber 2018; Kapidžić 2019). In this regard, BiH can be seen as a combination of fragile democratic institutions at the state level (which does not exclude tendencies toward autocratization) and competitive authoritarianism at the subnational level.

It is important to conceptually distinguish between autocratization and competitive authoritarianism. While autocratization primarily denotes the gradual erosion of the rule of law and institutional checks without necessarily altering the electoral arena, competitive authoritarianism refers more specifically to the manipulation of elections, media, and public resources that produces an uneven playing field (Levitsky and Way 2010). In the case of BiH, this distinction makes it clear that phenomena such as the erosion of judicial independence or the weakening of civil society represent processes of autocratization. By contrast, the systematic advantages that dominant ethnonational parties enjoy within their respective electoral arenas correspond to competitive authoritarian practices.

3. AUTOCRATIZATION AND COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM WITHIN A CONSOCIATIONAL SETTING

3.1. From Safeguards to Entrenchment: Consociational Design and Autocratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Consociationalism, as shaped by Lijphart (1977), has long been regarded as a mechanism for stabilizing deeply divided societies through the sharing of power among ethnic or segmental elites. In Western European cases (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland), this model has been associated with stability, compromise, and democratic resilience. However, the experience of BiH points to the opposite dynamic. The establishment of rigid consociation after the war led to ethnic outbidding, institutional capture, and processes of autocratization.

BiH's particular vulnerability to these dynamics stems from the sequencing of institutional choices made at Dayton. A consociational power-sharing model with ethno-territorial autonomy was introduced before the consolidation of core state capacities. Unlike in Western European cases where strong bureaucracies and state structures preceded power-sharing (Salloukh 2023), in BiH consociation became the very foun-

dation of the state. This meant that institutions were fragmented from the outset, with extensive veto rights, ethnic quotas, and multiple levels of territorial governance. Although intended as safeguards, these mechanisms created structural incentives for elites to entrench themselves in segmented arenas with minimal horizontal accountability. Thus, BiH was not simply transitioning from war to democracy but from war directly into a rigid consociational order without the stabilizing effects of state-building. This path dependency rendered the system particularly susceptible to autocratization.

In Switzerland and Belgium, consociation emerged after long processes of state-building, within adaptable agreements supported by functional institutions and dense interdependencies. Vetoes are costly and usually temporary, while loyalty to the state anchors inter-elite cooperation (De Briey and De Briey 2024; Deschouwer 2006; Vatter 2016). In BiH, consociation was embedded in the constitution through inflexible corporate provisions, adopted in a post-war climate of profound mistrust. This enabled political elites to turn what were meant to be protective mechanisms into lasting tools of obstruction and institutional capture. The comparison shows that sequencing, state capacity, and rule flexibility are decisive in determining whether consociation leads toward democratic stability or authoritarian entrenchment.

Comparative evidence demonstrates that BiH's experience is not exceptional but reflects a broader pattern in post-conflict contexts where consociational power-sharing precedes or supplants the consolidation of state authority. Lebanon and Iraq illustrate similar patterns, where consociational mechanisms originally designed to preserve peace and inclusion have instead entrenched sectarian elites, fostered patronage-based governance, and facilitated authoritarian practices (Dodge 2023; Salloukh 2023). By contrast, Western European consociations introduced after long processes of state formation did not produce comparable democratic erosion. The broader theoretical conclusion is that consociation interacts with state capacity and the sequencing of reforms in shaping regime trajectories. In weak institutional contexts, rigid consociational designs create fertile ground for segmented forms of autocratization.

The Dayton framework, grounded in the constitutional recognition of three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs), created the foundation for understanding autocratization. Although the model prevented the domination of a single group and preserved peace, in practice it enabled ethnonational parties to monopolize their respective ethnic domains, functioning as quasi-states within the state. All three ethnonational elites in BiH operate through patrimonial systems, relying on clientelism and ethnopopulist mobilization. This environment provides fertile ground for autoc-

ratization, as each elite governs its ethnic domain with minimal mutual accountability or institutional oversight. Moreover, coalition formation at different levels of government is rarely directed toward building ideologically coherent and functional cabinets. Instead, coalitions reflect the strategic interests of ethnic parties seeking to preserve control over their respective domains. This often produces incongruence between state and entity-level governments, leading to institutional deadlock and poor policy coordination, which further opens space for authoritarian governance patterns within entity and cantonal structures (Vukojević 2023b). Ethnonational rhetoric provides justification for undemocratic behavior: Dodik presents authoritarian actions as “defending RS from Sarajevo and foreigners”, Čović frames political blockades as “fighting for Croat equality,” while Bosniak leaders rationalize institutional monopolization as “protecting the state from secessionists”. In each case, autocratic practices are framed through defensive ethnic narratives that resonate strongly with domestic ethnic constituencies.

The rigid design of the Dayton Constitution benefits incumbents. The weak central state, combined with ethnic and entity veto mechanisms, enables elites to block any reform by framing it as a threat to vital national interests. The failure to implement the *Sejdić–Finci* ruling, which would have expanded the rights of minorities, illustrates how the system is used to preserve the ethnic *status quo*. At the same time, civic and cross-ethnic initiatives have virtually no realistic prospects, since all political positions are tied to ethnic quotas. This cements the dominance of ethnonational parties and suppresses alternatives, creating space for continuous democratic backsliding.

The case of BiH contributes to refining the scope conditions of consociational theory by demonstrating that rigid corporate power-sharing in a weak post-conflict state can redirect the very risks consociation is intended to mitigate. Rather than preventing inter-segment domination, it enables intra-segment authoritarian capture. Rather than fostering stable inclusion, the institutional design sustains parallel competitive authoritarian regimes at the substate level. This dynamic is driven by the ways in which ethnonational elites exploit multilayered institutional arrangements dominated by veto mechanisms to entrench segmental monopolies, a pattern clearly visible in RS and, in a more fragmented form, across the FBiH. BiH thus stands as a cautionary example that underscores the importance of sequencing, state capacity, and institutional flexibility in determining whether consociational arrangements succeed or fail.

3.2. Parallel Competitive Authoritarianisms under Ethnic Power-Sharing

Since 2006, Milorad Dodik has consolidated his authority in RS, transforming it into a near-personalist authoritarian regime. RS institutions — including the presidency, government, and assembly — operate in high coordination under the domination of the SNSD and its leader. Core democratic principles such as separation of powers and rule of law have been seriously undermined. The authorities in RS routinely disregard the constitutional order of BiH and dismiss state-level decisions whenever these run counter to their political interests. The RS Council of Peoples, tasked with protecting the vital interests of constituent peoples within the entity, has been effectively neutralized by legal maneuvers that prevent Bosniak or Croat vetoes from obstructing decisions of the SNSD-dominated entity parliament. As a result, even the formal consociational element within RS has been eroded, turning the entity into an ethnically homogeneous and centralized space governed by a strongman model (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b).

While opposition parties [for example Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Party of Democratic Progress (PDP)] exist and win a notable share of votes, they face systematically adverse conditions — ranging from government control over media to financial pressures on municipalities controlled by the opposition. Dodik and his inner circle further consolidate power by leveraging ethnonational homogenization. Any opposition initiative or independent institution not under their control is branded as “treasonous”. This narrative of fear, combined with media and resource control has allowed Dodik to maintain significant popular support despite economic challenges and international sanctions. The United States sanctioned Dodik in 2017 and again in 2022 for corruption and undermining Dayton, but these measures have not eroded his popularity among voters who view him as a defender of RS.

In RS, the disregard for state-level decisions and the systematic weakening of the rule of law, as well as parliamentary and judicial checks, exemplify the process of autocratization. At the same time, the tight control of media outlets, the mobilization of state resources for partisan purposes, and the structural disadvantages imposed on opposition parties directly correspond to the conditions of competitive authoritarianism. RS thus represents not merely a case of democratic backsliding, but rather a consolidated form of subnational competitive authoritarianism within the broader consociational framework. All three dimensions of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010) are clearly observable. First, elections are not fair, as opposition parties face systematic disadvantages in media coverage, resource access, and insti-

tutional treatment. Second, civil liberties are curtailed through legal harassment of journalists, politicization of the judiciary, and intimidation of dissenting actors. Third, the playing field is persistently skewed in favor of the ruling SNSD, which uses state resources, patronage, and institutional capture to entrench its dominance. Although opposition parties exist and contest elections, their ability to compete on equal terms is severely undermined, rendering RS a paradigmatic subnational case of competitive authoritarianism rather than a merely defective democracy.

The recent conviction of Milorad Dodik, which imposed a six-year ban on holding political office for undermining state-level judicial authority and the Office of the High Representative, illustrates the inherent contradictions of Bosnia's trajectory. On one hand, the verdict suggests that BiH's judicial institutions are capable of imposing accountability on even the most powerful ethnonational leaders. This may be read as an encouraging sign of gradual institutional strengthening and the potential for the rule of law to be made more effective. On the other hand, Dodik's refusal to recognize the verdict and his continued dominance in RS politics reveal the limits of this institutional capacity. The verdict thus embodies both the promise and the fragility of legal accountability in BiH. It demonstrates that courts can act independently, but also that without effective enforcement mechanisms the practical impact of such rulings remains constrained by entrenched authoritarian power structures. Instead of representing a clear step forward for the rule of law, the Dodik case underlines the contested and uneven nature of institutional development in a fragmented consociational context.

In the FBiH, the picture is somewhat more complex, yet elements of competitive authoritarianism are equally present. These patterns correspond to at least two of Levitsky and Way's (2010) conditions of competitive authoritarianism: a persistently uneven playing field and selective restrictions on civil liberties through clientelism, nepotism, and politicized control over public institutions. Hence, despite formal pluralism, the Federation also exhibits competitive authoritarian tendencies, albeit more fragmented and internally contested than in RS.

The Croat political segment, although lacking a separate entity, has developed authoritarian tendencies in areas where Croats form a majority. The Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH), led by Dragan Čović, has established itself during the post-war period as the near-monopolistic representative of BiH Croats, marginalizing rival parties such as HDZ 1990. Through the mechanism of the Croatian National Assembly (HNS) — an informal coordinating body dominated by HDZ BiH — a kind of "subnational entity" has been created within the FBiH. HDZ BiH and its part-

ner parties govern in Croat-majority cantons (Herzegovina, Posavina), control large portions of the administrative and economic infrastructure and act in coordination at the entity and state levels to advance their ethnic political goals. BTI 2024 notes that these leading Croat parties, unified under HNS, have frequently obstructed decision-making at the entity level to pressure for political concessions (e.g., refusing to appoint judges to the FBiH Constitutional Court from 2019 to 2023, or conditioning the formation of the FBiH government after the 2018 elections on the passage of electoral reforms) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). HDZ BiH has publicly floated the option of creating a third entity if its demands are not met, maintaining constant pressure on BiH's institutional structure. Although formal territorial autonomy for Croats has not materialized, even the suggestion of such a possibility serves as a tool for disciplining both BiH institutions and the HDZ BiH electorate. In Croat-majority areas, HDZ BiH governance exhibits hallmarks of party hegemony — widespread nepotism and clientelism, control over local public enterprises and educational institutions, and influence over media outlets such as RTV Herceg-Bosna, which is under HDZ BiH control (Freedom House 2024c). Political pluralism among Croats is minimal and the few opposition initiatives that do emerge remain marginal. Thus, the Croat segment too exhibits an authoritarian logic: while elections are held the outcome is predictably in favor of one hegemonic actor thanks to a combination of institutional guarantees (ethnic veto, parity) and informal dominance over resources and media.

The Bosniak political space has nominally been the most pluralistic, thereby limiting the potential hegemony of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA). However, this segment has not been immune to authoritarian tendencies. As the oldest and most organized Bosniak party, SDA has built a vast patronage network within state institutions and public enterprises (Kapidžić 2019). The SDA leadership long reflected dynastic patterns. After founder Alija Izetbegović, the party was led by his son Bakir, while Bakir's wife, Sebiha Izetbegović, headed Sarajevo's largest hospital (KCUS) for years, prompting allegations of nepotism and conflicts of interest (Freedom House 2024c). Such intertwining of family and politics suggests that the Bosniak elite has not been significantly more democratic than their Croat and Serb counterparts in terms of institutional capture. Admittedly, political alternation has occurred more frequently among Bosniaks — for instance, with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) victory in 2010 and the opposition coalition (SDP, People and Justice (NiP), Our Party (NS)) displacing SDA after the 2022 elections. Yet, even these new actors have often replicated similar practices once in power. One example is Sarajevo's mayor, affiliated with a nominally civic party (SDP), who in 2021 made populist decisions

and dismissed criticism, demonstrating autocratic leadership tendencies (ibid.).

Beyond institutional effects, autocratization has also had profound consequences for citizens. A useful framework here is Thomas Carothers' (2002) concept of "feckless pluralism", which describes contexts in which democratic institutions formally exist and elections are competitive, yet citizens remain deeply disillusioned with political elites and disengaged from public life. In BiH, this manifests through persistently low levels of trust in institutions, widespread perceptions of corruption, and skepticism about the efficacy of political participation. Surveys conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council consistently show that citizens in BiH report some of the lowest levels of trust in parliaments, courts, and political parties in the Western Balkans. For example, the *Balkan Barometer 2024* (RCC 2024) indicates that 80% of BiH citizens express a lack of trust in political parties, 74% report distrust in the parliament, and 62% express skepticism toward the judiciary. These attitudes are not incidental but are directly shaped by the practices of clientelism, ethnic polarization, and authoritarian governance described above. As Džankić (2018) notes, ordinary citizens experience these dynamics as a cycle of disenchantment, where electoral outcomes do little to alter entrenched elites, thereby reinforcing apathy and cynicism. Thus, the consequences of autocratization extend beyond institutional weakness to encompass a broader societal crisis of legitimacy and political alienation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that BiH should not be approached merely as a defective democracy or a case of democratic backsliding. Rather, the entities constitute fragmented competitive authoritarian regimes embedded within a consociational framework. In RS, competitive authoritarianism is consolidated under a personalist leader, while in FBiH it is dispersed across ethnonational segments but nonetheless entrenched through patronage, clientelism, and resource capture. This conceptualization not only better aligns the empirical analysis with the theoretical framework presented earlier, but also highlights the fragmented nature of authoritarian practices in BiH. Instead of one centralizing autocracy, the country hosts parallel sub-national competitive authoritarian regimes operating under the guise of ethnic power-sharing.

4. MECHANISMS AND TECHNIQUES OF AUTOCRATIZATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

4.1. Mechanisms of Autocratization

By mechanisms of autocratization, we refer to general processes, strategies, and patterns of action through which political elites gradually dismantle democratic order and consolidate authoritarian control. Comparative research (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018) has identified several core mechanisms in this process. While not unique to BiH, these mechanisms acquire specific forms shaped by the local context. Below, we highlight some of the most significant.

Executive Aggrandizement. Democratically elected leaders or governments expand their authority at the expense of other branches of power, thereby undermining the system of checks and balances. This may be achieved through legal and constitutional amendments, or by disregarding existing constraints altogether (Bermeo 2016). Concrete manifestations include increased executive control over judicial appointments, appropriation of legislative functions, or rule by decree. In BiH, this mechanism is evident in the actions of RS authorities who have used entity legislation to usurp state-level competencies (e.g., in judiciary, taxation, and security), thereby extending executive powers beyond constitutional limits (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). In the FBiH, persistent reliance on interventions by the High Representative as a substitute for domestic decision-making has created a paradoxical situation: political leaders avoid compromise, leaning instead on external actors, thus retaining power without genuine political accountability.

Capture of Independent Institutions. This mechanism involves the systematic undermining or co-optation of institutions meant to serve as neutral oversight bodies, such as the judiciary, regulatory agencies, electoral commissions, police, central banks, and public broadcasters. The aim is to transform these entities into instruments of the ruling elite (Hellman et al. 2000; Grzymala-Busse 2008). In BiH, as elsewhere in the Balkans, key positions in courts and prosecutors' offices are often filled based on political loyalty rather than professional merit. The consequence is a weak rule of law. Despite widespread corruption, prosecutions of high-ranking officials are rare and highly selective. The same applies to electoral administration: although formally independent, the Central Election Commission (CIK) has been subjected to political attacks and pressure, particularly following the 2022 elections, from both ruling par-

ties and opposition in RS (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). Political parties also strive to control appointments in independent bodies. For example, the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) has long been staffed through political deals, indirectly shaping media and telecom sectors (Vučetić and Vukojević 2025).

Restrictions on Media and Civil Society. Nearly every autocratization process includes attacks on independent media, journalists, civil society organizations, and activists. Free flow of information and civic mobilization pose threats to authoritarian power, which seeks to silence dissent and narrow the space for resistance (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In BiH, media freedom has been steadily deteriorating in recent years. Physical attacks on journalists, threats, and an increasing number of SLAPP lawsuits — strategic lawsuits against public participation aimed at silencing critical reporting — have become more frequent (Freedom House 2023; Vučetić and Vukojević 2025). Authorities have also resorted to legislative repression. In 2023, the RS National Assembly amended the Criminal Code to recriminalize defamation, introducing draconian fines for journalists and citizens accused of “insult” or “slander” (RSE 2023). In 2025, a “foreign agents” law was also adopted, stigmatizing NGOs receiving foreign funding (RSE 2025). These measures mirror strategies used in consolidated autocracies such as Russia and Belarus, underscoring the transnational nature of authoritarian tactics.

Beyond formal restrictions, subtler methods are also employed, including financial starvation of independent media (e.g., withdrawal of public advertising or funding), public vilification of journalists (labeling them as “traitors” or “foreign mercenaries”), and misuse of public broadcasters for propaganda. In RS, the entity public broadcaster RTRS has become a *de facto* mouthpiece for the ruling party, while in the FBiH, political actors also seek to influence editorial policies of federal and cantonal outlets. The suppression of media freedom and civil society eliminates essential democratic checks. Without critical journalism and civic activism, abuse of power remains hidden, and citizens are left uninformed and disorganized.

Manipulation of Electoral Processes. Authoritarian-minded governments rarely abolish elections altogether. Instead, they modify electoral rules to reduce the risk of losing power. Rather than engaging in blatant fraud, modern autocrats employ subtler tactics: changing rules mid-game, *gerrymandering*, raising barriers for party or candidate registration, abusing public resources for campaigns, controlling media narratives, and selectively intimidating certain voter groups (Schedler 2002; Norris 2014). BiH’s electoral system is already complex and ethnically segmented (e.g., only constituent peoples may run for the BiH Presidency effectively excluding others). How-

ever, ruling parties have pushed to further tailor the system to their advantage: HDZ BiH, for instance, blocked government formation for years demanding electoral law changes to ensure that its candidate would always be elected as the Croat member of the Presidency. In RS, the opposition accused the SNSD of manipulating vote counts in the 2022 presidential race. Although a recount was held under pressure, the SNSD candidate was confirmed as the winner, which Dodik leveraged to delegitimize the CIK and frame himself as the victim of conspiracy, thereby reinforcing his base (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). Additionally, misuse of public funds during campaigns is common. Governing parties deploy state resources to create jobs, provide benefits, or fund infrastructure in targeted areas ahead of elections, essentially buying votes with taxpayer money. Public and entity media overwhelmingly favor incumbents, leaving minimal space for opposition. Thus, elections in BiH are “competitive but unfair”—not equal, nor fully free.

Polarization and Fear Politics. Another potent mechanism of autocratization is the creation of fear or a perpetual crisis atmosphere to justify undemocratic actions and rally loyalist support. Authoritarian leaders deliberately fuel division and promote fear-based narratives, targeting both internal and external enemies, to portray themselves as indispensable protectors of the nation (Arapović 2024; Mujkić 2013). In BiH, persistent ethnonational tensions provide fertile ground for this strategy. Ruling elites regularly invoke the specter of war and ethnic endangerment. Dodik’s regime in RS consistently claims the SNSD is the sole defender of RS’s “vital interests” against alleged threats from Sarajevo. Bosniak parties present themselves as bulwarks against RS separatism and Croat federalism. HDZ BiH stokes fears of “unitarism” undermining Croat equality. These narratives homogenize voters within ethnic blocs and deflect attention from authoritarian governance and poor performance.

At the same time, authorities intimidate dissenters directly. The “Justice for David” movement in Banja Luka in 2018 was first vilified by pro-government media as “traitorous” and “violent”, then suppressed by police. Participants in the 2014 FBiH-wide protests were similarly labeled by some media and politicians as “foreign agents” and “state enemies”. Through such stigmatization, opposition voices are delegitimized, silencing normal democratic debate. A culture of fear cultivated by propaganda enables autocrats to justify repressive policies. If citizens believe regime change will lead to chaos or threaten national interests, many will accept authoritarian rule rather than risk instability.

In sum, the mechanisms of autocratization in BiH mirror global patterns but are shaped by the specific ethno-national context and the rigid structure of the Dayton

system. Democracy is eroded from within, step by step, from institutional colonization to legal manipulation and narrative control. These processes are often simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. When governments capture media and intimidate the public, it becomes easier to change laws in their favor or disregard court decisions without resistance. When ethnonational propaganda divides citizens, building a unified pro-democracy front becomes more difficult. International actors sometimes inadvertently facilitate these mechanisms. Key Western powers, prioritizing stability, have long tolerated “stabilocrats” in the region (Kmezić and Bieber 2017), providing time and space for the consolidation of domestic authoritarianism. Simultaneously, regional autocrats draw support from external authoritarian powers. Dodik, for instance, relies on political backing from Russia, which emboldens his defiance of Western institutions and values. Therefore, the mechanisms of autocratization in BiH must be understood as a product of both internal practices and external geopolitical dynamics.

4.2. Techniques of Autocratization

By techniques of autocratization, we refer to the concrete practices through which ruling elites operationalize the broader mechanisms described above. These are the tactical moves by which democratic institutions and procedures are incrementally eroded often under a veil of legality and legitimacy. Contemporary autocrats increasingly favor this “legalist” approach, using laws, rules, and institutional procedures to advance undemocratic objectives, thereby making authoritarian consolidation appear as part of the normal political process (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). In BiH, several such techniques can be identified.

Legislative Engineering in Favor of Incumbents. Ruling coalitions frequently use legislative power to adopt provisions that entrench their dominance or restrict the functioning of the opposition. In RS, the clearest example is the package of laws adopted in 2023 and 2025, through which RS authorities attempted to establish a parallel legal system. Decisions of the High Representative and the Constitutional Court of BiH were declared null and void within RS territory (Freedom House 2024c). Although these laws were legally annulled by the High Representative and the Constitutional Court, the political message was clear: RS authorities no longer recognize the supremacy of state-level institutions. In 2023, RS passed the aforementioned defamation law and considered legislation targeting NGOs, formally within entity competence, but functionally designed to suppress fundamental freedoms. In the

FBiH, legislative engineering occurs less frequently through domestic parliamentary processes (often deadlocked) and more often via international intervention. For example, the 2022 imposition of changes to electoral legislation primarily benefited ruling parties, especially HDZ BiH. The essence of this technique lies in changing the rules of the game during the game to favor those in power presenting such changes as technical adjustments or necessary reforms. Whether involving electoral laws, constitutional competencies, or parliamentary procedures, these reforms are typically driven by short-term interests of political elites.

Abuse of the Veto and Vital National Interest. The Dayton system introduced entity voting and the vital national interest mechanism to guarantee equality among constituent peoples. However, these tools are frequently instrumentalized by ethnonational leaders not to protect group rights, but to obstruct institutions where they are out of power or to extract concessions. Declarations of vital interest or use of the veto most often occur not out of genuine concern for group rights, but to paralyze decision-making and pressure opponents. This abuse undermines the spirit of democratic compromise and increases institutional gridlock. Over time, repeated misuse of the veto exacerbates mistrust and entrenches ethnopolitical divisions, holding the state hostage to narrow party interests (Bahtić-Kunrath 2011).

Obstruction and Delay (Institutional Sabotage). In addition to active blocking, ruling elites often rely on strategic stalling and refusal to implement key decisions in order to preserve a *status quo* favorable to them. A prime example is the years-long refusal to appoint missing judges to the Constitutional Court of the FBiH (2019–2023), where the HDZ BiH-affiliated FBiH president conditioned appointments on political bargaining. This left the Court without a quorum and unable to rule on vital national interest cases, effectively facilitating HDZ BiH’s broader obstruction. Similarly, the BiH Presidency failed for years to nominate a judge to the European Court of Human Rights, violating international obligations without consequence (BTI 2024; Freedom House 2024). In the BiH House of Peoples, SNSD delegates repeatedly boycotted sessions in 2025 to prevent votes on dismissing their party’s officials. By walking out and breaking quorum, delegates blocked debate and legislative processes, prolonging institutional paralysis. This passive obstruction reinforces dysfunction, which ruling elites then cynically exploit as “evidence” that the system itself is broken. Meanwhile, citizens grow disillusioned with institutions that continuously fail, leading to political apathy which in turn benefits parties with disciplined patronage-based electorates.

Selective Repression of the Opposition. One of the most dangerous techniques of autocratization is the instrumentalization of the judiciary and law enforcement to target political opponents while shielding loyalists. This is especially evident in RS, where opposition leaders and activists are regularly subjected to investigations, indictments, or tax audits once they become politically threatening. Protesters have been arrested on charges of “inciting unrest” while threats and violence from regime supporters are largely tolerated (Majstorović 2023). While not every indictment is politically motivated, the overall pattern of selectivity is clear: high-ranking officials from ruling parties are rarely prosecuted for corruption (except in cases of internal power struggles), whereas opposition figures are routinely scrutinized. These double standards undermine the rule of law and equality before the law. The implicit message is that the law serves as a weapon against opponents and a shield for the ruling elite. This discourages potential critics inside the system, such as bureaucrats or junior politicians, from challenging leadership, as they see what happens to those who do. In essence, the judiciary and police become extensions of party power: instead of protecting constitutional order and citizens’ rights, they protect the regime from accountability.

Narrative Control and Disinformation. Beyond direct censorship, modern autocrats have refined techniques of media manipulation to shape public opinion in their favor. This includes dissemination of disinformation, conspiracy theories, coordinated propaganda campaigns, and media “spin” (Guriev and Treisman 2023). In BiH, ethnic segmentation of the media landscape facilitates such manipulation. Media often present entirely divergent narratives. In RS, pro-government outlets (RTRS, SRNA, regime-linked portals) promote themes of Western conspiracies against Serbs, brand the opposition as “traitors and foreign agents”, downplay corruption scandals, and amplify identity-based topics. Among Bosniaks, party-affiliated media attack rivals (e.g., pro-SDA media targeting NiP/SDP, and vice versa), diverting attention from substantive issues to personal feuds and national identity themes (Vučetić and Vukojević 2025). Social media platforms are flooded with “bot networks” — fake profiles amplifying government narratives and discrediting critics. The goal of narrative control is not merely persuasion, but confusion: to blur truth and foster cynicism (Mandić and Klarić 2023). When citizens believe “everyone is the same” and politics is inherently corrupt, they are less likely to engage or resist — ideal conditions for authoritarian consolidation. In such an atmosphere of relativism and apathy, autocrats face little organized resistance to their actions.

Economic Pressure and Patronage. Authoritarian techniques also involve instrumentalizing state economic levers for political control (Weiss 2016). In BiH, party-based hiring and clientelism in the public sector are notoriously widespread. Access to jobs in government, state agencies, schools, and hospitals often depends on party loyalty, creating widespread social dependency. Those who gain employment through party channels feel indebted and refrain from criticizing the government. Conversely, those outside the patronage network face unemployment or marginalization, prompting many, especially young professionals to emigrate, weakening societal pressure for reform (Džankić 2018). Authorities also use financial flows to reward allies. Pro-government media and NGOs receive grants and contracts while critical ones are excluded. In election periods, vote-buying practices are rampant. One-time payments to pensioners, public sector wage increases, new social benefits, and rushed infrastructure projects in targeted areas, all serve as tools for political gain using public resources. These economic pressures create an environment in which citizens' livelihoods are conditional on political loyalty, undermining democratic choice. Such practices are rooted not only in elite behavior but also in political culture that has tolerated or even encouraged them (Bliznakovski 2024; Piacentini 2019, 2021). Many vote not out of conviction but out of fear of losing benefits or gratitude for state favors. As a result, political competition devolves into a market of transactional exchanges rather than a contest of ideas and programs.

The techniques outlined above constitute a toolkit through which BiH's ethnonational elites have entrenched their positions and obstructed democratic transition. These techniques are interlinked and often applied in tandem. For example, in seeking to silence a critical journalist, authorities may first initiate a smear campaign (narrative control), followed by defamation suits or tax investigations (judicial pressure), and economic retaliation through withdrawal of advertising or subsidies (economic coercion). When ruling parties seek to remain in power without majority support, they resort to institutional blockades under the guise of protecting national interests. Importantly, many of these techniques are now globally recognized and studied, and awareness is growing about their corrosive effects on democracy.

5. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of BiH since Dayton reveals the paradox of consociationalism in weak post-conflict settings. While the 1995 framework succeeded in halting the war and embedding peace through ethnic power-sharing, it simultaneously locked the country into a rigid institutional design that has undermined democratic development. This

paper has shown that the very mechanisms intended to safeguard pluralism (veto rights, ethnic quotas, territorial fragmentation) were sequenced before state consolidation and gradually transformed into instruments of authoritarian entrenchment. Rather than facilitating cooperation across segments, the consociational framework created insulated ethnopolitical arenas in which elites could monopolize power with little accountability.

The process of autocratization in BiH is best described as segmented. It does not resemble a centralized authoritarian project but instead manifests through three parallel regimes, each dominated by entrenched ethnonational elites. In RS, Milorad Dodik and the SNSD have built a personalist regime marked by institutional capture, clientelism, and systematic suppression of opposition. In Croat-majority areas, HDZ BiH has entrenched hegemonic control, patronage over public institutions, and obstructionist bargaining at higher levels of government. Within the Bosniak sphere, the SDA and later opposition successors have relied on expansive patronage networks reproducing similar authoritarian practices despite greater nominal pluralism. What unites these cases is the use of consociational devices not as protections of group rights but as tools of obstruction, blackmail, and exclusion.

The decline of international intervention after 2006 accelerated this trajectory. When external actors stepped back, expecting domestic elites to assume responsibility, the opposite occurred. Elites exploited systemic vulnerabilities to entrench their dominance. Earlier international tutelage, while effective in imposing reforms, failed to cultivate local ownership or a democratic political culture. Later, the international community increasingly prioritized stability over democracy, tolerating authoritarian practices so long as they did not threaten peace. This ambivalence provided space for the consolidation of domestic authoritarianism under the guise of formal democratic procedures.

Empirical evidence from democracy indices reinforces this diagnosis. V-Dem, Freedom House, and BTI consistently classify BiH as a “hybrid regime”, “partly free”, or “defective democracy”. These classifications capture a reality in which democratic institutions formally exist but are substantively hollowed out. Media freedoms are under constant pressure, judicial independence is weak, and civil society is increasingly marginalized. Citizens themselves perceive politics as a closed arena of ethnonational elites. Surveys show pervasive distrust in parliaments, parties, and courts. Political apathy and disillusionment, combined with economic dependency created by clientelism and patronage, reinforce the durability of authoritarian practices.

Theoretically, the case of BiH refines the scope conditions of consociational democracy. It highlights that consociation cannot be understood solely as a mechanism of peace management but must also be analyzed in terms of its long-term impact on democratic governance. Where state capacity is weak and elites have no incentives to cooperate beyond their ethnic constituencies, consociationalism risks institutionalizing dysfunction rather than managing diversity. Comparative analysis strengthens this claim. While Switzerland and Belgium embedded consociationalism after long state-building processes, enabling compromise within robust institutions, BiH, like Lebanon and Iraq, illustrates how premature power-sharing in post-conflict contexts entrenches division and facilitates authoritarian capture.

The central contribution of this study is to demonstrate that autocratization in BiH is endogenous to its consociational order. It is not the product of a single leader, a sudden breakdown, or purely external shocks, but the outcome of structural dysfunction that allows elites to reproduce power with minimal accountability. As long as international actors continue to prioritize stability over democratic transformation, and as long as domestic institutions remain rigidly segmented along ethnic lines, BiH will remain trapped in a condition of suspended democratization. It is formally a democracy, yet functionally fragmented into parallel competitive authoritarian regimes. This analysis not only highlights the democratic weaknesses of BiH but also provides a cautionary lesson for the broader study of post-conflict power-sharing. Without state consolidation and institutional adaptability, consociationalism may preserve peace, but it will do so at the price of democracy.

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AUTOKRATIZACIJA UNUTAR ETNIČKI DIJELJENE VLASTI: BOSNA I HERCEGOVINA IZMEĐU FORMALNE DEMOKRATIJE I AUTORITARNIH PRAKSI

Sažetak

Skoro tri decenije nakon Dejtonskog mirovnog sporazuma Bosna i Hercegovina (BiH) i dalje prolazi kroz demokratsku stagnaciju, institucionalnu disfunkcionalnost i produbljenu autokratizaciju. Ovaj rad ispituje kako je poslijeratni institucionalni dizajn BiH, zasnovan na rigidnoj etnički dijeljenoj vlasti, omogućio autoritarne prakse unutar formalno demokratskog okvira. Cilj je da se prikaže međudnos između konsocijacijskog aranžmana, slabosti države i strategija etnonacionalnih elita u podsticanju autokratizacije. Metodološki, studija kombinuje teorijske uvide iz literature o autokratizaciji i kompetitivnom autoritarizmu sa kvalitativnom analizom slučaja BiH, oslonjenom na institucionalističke perspektive, indekse demokratije (V-Dem, Freedom House, BTI) i empirijske primjere od 2006. godine naovamo. Nalazi pokazuju da su mehanizmi prvobitno zamišljeni kao zaštita etničkih grupa (poput širokih prava veta, decentralizovane vlasti i segmentiranih izbornih arena) sistematski instrumentalizovani za patronažu, opstrukciju i eroziju demokratskih normi. Kao rezultat toga autokratizacija u BiH ne poprima oblik centralizovanog autoritarnog režima, već se ispoljava kroz paralelne subnacionalne kompetitivne autoritarizme ugrađene u konsocijacijski okvir. Ova dinamika ilustruje da u slabim postkonfliktnim državama korporativna dijeljena vlast i etno-teritorijalna autonomija mogu izopačiti svoju prvobitnu svrhu, pretvarajući zaštitne mehanizme u pokretače autoritarne konsolidacije i time podrivajući kako institucionalnu funkcionalnost, tako i demokratski legitimitet.

Ključne riječi: autokratizacija; etnička dijeljena vlast; Bosna i Hercegovina; kompetitivni autoritarizam; konsocijacijska demokratija

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