

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Political parties

The intricate political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) reflects its multi-ethnic texture and complex history. Its entities' dominant ethnic composition and the established power-sharing mechanisms have so far fostered ethnic voting and left little chance for non-nationalist political parties. The result has been political instability and dysfunctional institutions in need of reform.

Background

BiH's multi-party political system was introduced in 1990, after the fall of communism, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the [collapse](#) of its League of Communists. The country's first democratic elections were a ['critical juncture'](#) in its history. In June 1990, the ban on ethnic parties was lifted, resulting in the creation of the Bosniak's Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ BiH) and the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), representing Bosniaks', Croats' and Serbs' interests, respectively. All three parties [triumphed in the elections](#). The [1992 referendum](#) on independence exacerbated the nationalist and separatist strifes in the ethnically heterogeneous BiH, and it ['broke up along ethnic and religious divides'](#) in the ensuing 1992-95 war. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) ended the conflict but [failed](#) to guarantee the ethnic groups' efficient cooperation, which led to a lasting political stalemate. Today, BiH's multi-party system is [more dynamic](#). New parties have emerged as a result of intra- and inter-party conflicts, but the major ethnic parties remain the key actors, as the most recent, 2014, elections show.

Political system: 'one state, two entities, three constituent peoples'

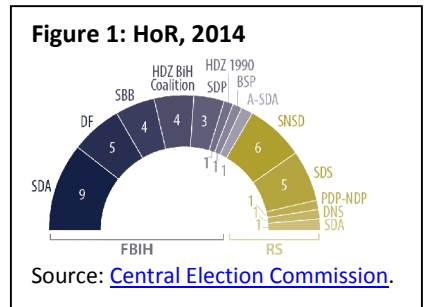
BiH is a federal republic with [multi-level governance](#), as stipulated in its Constitution (DPA's [Annex IV](#)). It comprises two entities: the Federation of BiH (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS), which have shared sovereignty over [Brčko District](#) (created by a 2009 constitutional [amendment](#)). Each entity has its own distinctive ethnic composition, political system, legislative, administrative and judicial bodies. FBiH is a federation of Bosniaks and Croats, split into ten relatively autonomous cantons. RS is a unitary federal entity of Serbs with seven regions and 64 municipalities. The state-level (joint) institutions function on the basis of [ethnic quotas](#) (2/3 for FBiH (1/3 Bosniaks, 1/3 Croats) and 1/3 for RS) and consensual decision-making. They include a collective [Presidency](#) (a Bosniak, Croat and Serb, with the chair rotating every eight months), a bicameral Parliament and a Constitutional Court. The Parliament comprises the House of Representatives (HoR), with 42 members (28 from FBiH and 14 from RS), and the House of Peoples (five Bosniak, five Croat and five Serb delegates). The [Council of Ministers](#) is the federal executive body, with [competences](#) in the area of foreign policy, national defence, foreign trade, customs and monetary policy, among others. The [Office of the High Representative](#), specific for BiH, has competences in law enforcement and in removing public officials from office (known as the ['Bonn Powers'](#)). BiH's complex state structure incurs high administrative costs, estimated at [50% of its GDP](#).

Electoral system

Elections are regulated via the Constitution, the [Election Law](#), DPA's [Annex III](#), the [Law on Financing Political Parties](#), the [Law on Citizenship](#), and the [Central Election Commission's](#) regulations. The legal framework [continues to place residency and ethnicity-based restrictions](#) on the right to vote and stand as a candidate (e.g. the European Court of Human Rights' [Sejdić-Finci Ruling](#)). Elections for all institutions take place every four years, with different rules applying for each level. At state level, BiH is split into eight electoral units: three in RS and five in FBiH. Members of Parliament are elected through open lists and via [proportional representation](#). The Presidency's members are elected separately by plurality, each voter choosing a Bosniak or a Croat (in FBiH), and a Serb (in RS). At entity level, the law guarantees minimum representation for the three constituent peoples, which, if not met, is supplemented through compensatory mandates.

Political parties in the House of Representatives

The [October 2014 elections](#) ushered ten parties and three coalitions into the HoR (see figure 1). All ten election platforms included a commitment to EU integration. Taking account of [citizens' protests](#) earlier that year, the electoral campaigns were [largely focused](#) on socio-economic, rather than ethno-nationalist issues. [BiH's structure and power-sharing features](#), however, again influenced the election results. Moderate, multi-ethnic parties got improved results, yet the three ethnic parties remained the strongest. The new government took [six months to form](#), unlike its predecessor's [15 months](#).



Federation of BiH: At FBiH and state level, the leading Bosniak Party, [SDA](#), came first and won the [Presidency](#) seat for its leader [Bakir Izetbegović](#). Founded in 1990 by Alija Izetbegović, SDA remains a powerful player. Its election [platform](#) focused on political stability and EU membership. Founded in 2009 by Fahrudin Radončić, the Union for a Better Future of BiH ([SBB](#)), the SDA's [main opponent](#) for the Bosniak vote, kept its previous levels of support. The BiH Patriotic Party ([BPS](#)), founded in 1996, won three seats, and the Party of Democratic Activity ([A-SDA](#)), founded in 2008, won one, as in 2010. The Croats' vote in FBiH is shared between two parties: [HDZ BiH](#), with links to HDZ in Croatia, and the Croatian Democratic Union 1990 ([HDZ 1990](#)). HDZ BiH competed in a four-party coalition, got the highest number of Croat votes and secured the Presidency seat for its leader [Dragan Čović](#). Its campaign featured issues such as the 'Croat Question' (calling for equal representation of Croats at state and entity level and for a new Croat electoral unit), EU integration, and economic development. In 2014, HDZ 1990 also presented a strong European vision for BiH and got one seat in the HoR. SDA, HDZ BiH and HDZ 1990 are all members of the [EPP](#). Changes in FBiH came from its two non-nationalist parties. The first, the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina ([SDP](#)), founded in 1999, relies on multi-ethnic support, opposes ethnic divisions and calls for a more centralised state. Compared to 2010, it [lost substantial support](#) in 2014. The second, the Democratic Front ([DF](#)) – a civic party, founded in 2013 by ex-SDP member Željko Komšić, with candidates from all ethnic groups – came second after SDA.

Republika Srpska: The 2014 elections saw [two important developments](#) in RS. First, the opposition parties formed the [Union for Change](#), a coalition between the Serb Democratic Party ([SDS](#)), the Party of Democratic Progress ([PDP](#)) and the Democratic People's Alliance ([NDP](#)). Second, most parties' campaigns, especially the opposition's, focused on economic and social issues. [Milorad Dodik's](#) Alliance of Independent Social Democrats ([SNSD](#)) won the highest number of seats in the federal and entity Parliaments, and Dodik himself remained the RS's President. In power since 2006, SNSD opposes stronger central institutions and favours devolving some competences to the entities. In 2015, it called for [a referendum](#) on the independence of the RS's judiciary. The SNSD kept the lead in 2014, but got nine seats less at RS level compared to 2010, and faced strong competition in the race for the RS Presidency and Parliament from centre-oriented nationalist party SDS, founded in 1992 by Radovan Karadžić. After having temporarily lagged behind SNSD, in 2014 SDS made a convincing comeback, increasing its seats in both the state and entity Parliaments. Other opposition parties, such as PDP and NDP, campaigning for political stability, economic development and faster EU accession, also made small but significant progress (PDP's Mladen Ivanić got the Serbs' Presidency seat). Another novelty on the political scene was the pro-Bosnian coalition '[Domovina](#)', comprising seven non-Serbian parties, including SDA and DF. Its aim was to take enough seats in RS to have a meaningful presence in the next government. Mobilising the Bosniaks in RS, SDA secured one seat in BiH's HoR, which it had lost in 2010. Overall, SNSD remains the leading party in RS, but with a weakened position.

Possible developments

Incompatible views on BiH's future remain a permanent [source of crisis](#): the Bosniaks aspire to a central government, the Serbs to greater autonomy for the entities, and the Croats to a third Croat entity. To move past ethnicity-related issues and address pressing needs for reform, BiH's political leaders signed a 2015 [written commitment](#), in response to the EU's [renewed approach](#) to BiH. Economic hardships and the required constitutional reform to end ethnic discrimination, however, will likely continue to pose problems.

In a 2015 [resolution](#), the EP welcomed the EU's renewed approach. BiH's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU [entered into force](#) on 1 July 2015. BiH is expected to formally apply for EU membership by end-2015. The EU's presence in BiH includes the combined [EU Special Representative](#) and the EU Delegation, and the [EUFOR ALTHEA](#) military operation. EUSR is [mandated by the Council](#) to reinforce the EU's policy objectives in BiH.