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Issue Brief

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Consociational Democracy and the 2026 General Elections

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Summary

The preliminary outcome of the 4 October elections for the entity and state parliaments, as well as the cantonal assemblies, reflects the persistence of ethno-national voting patterns, competing external influences and fractured domestic political alignments that could perpetuate the country's political deadlock over key strategic aspirations.

Three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to the most violent conflict in post-war Europe and laid the foundation of a consociational framework in the multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the country's complex democratic architecture is set to undergo progressive electoral modernisation through optimum deployment of Information and Communication technologies (ICT) in the conduct of the 2026 General elections. This moment of transition offers a timely opportunity to examine the implications of such a consequential change for the country's strategic orientation and the health of its electoral democracy. Further, an assessment of the historical affinity and contemporary ties between the two multicultural democracies—India and Bosnia and Herzegovina—could help identify avenues for contemporary bilateral engagement, particularly in the use of technology for electoral processes, and its implications for electoral transparency, integrity and democratic trust.

Consociational Electoral Democracy

Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia and its subsequent emergence as an independent nation-state in 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself, in its very nascent stage of statehood, engulfed in a brutal communal war among its three principal ethnic communities—the Bosniaks, the Serbs and the Croats. Their competing nationalist ambitions resulted in the devastating 1992–1995 Bosnian war, marked by widespread ethnic violence, mass displacement and the Srebrenica Genocide of 1995.[1]

Efforts to establish an institutional framework and foster inter-community trust and faith in the aftermath of such atrocities were plagued by deep-seated suspicion and apprehensions of discrimination and marginalisation. While the ethnic majority, i.e., the Bosniaks, feared that their interests would be jeopardised by local autonomies of the Serbs and the Croats, the Serbs and Croats remained sceptical of the potential systemic domination by the majority Bosniaks.[2]

Following the Peace Accords reached at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, on 21 November 1995, the signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace on 14 December 1995 (commonly known as the Dayton Peace Agreement) by the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia in Paris aimed to end the Bosnian War. Brokered by US peace negotiator Richard Holbrooke and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the Agreement sought to end the protracted violence

[1] Noel Malcolm, ***Bosnia: A Short History***, Papermac, London, 1996, pp. 27–28.

[2] Constantine Arvanitopoulos and Nikolaos Tzifakis, **"Implementing Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Challenge of the Constitutional Process,"** *European View*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2008, pp. 15–22.

and inter-communal hostilities by establishing a Consociational constitutional framework for a single, sovereign Bosnia and Herzegovina comprising two constituent entities—a decentralised Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shared by Bosniaks and Croats, and a highly centralised Republika Srpska, for the Bosnian Serbs, with Sarajevo as its undivided capital.[3] The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) also established the Office of the High Representative (OHR), an international body tasked with overseeing the implementation of the civilian aspects of the peace settlement.

Proponents of Consociationalism view it as a group-based approach to government formation that acknowledges the prevalence of ethnic differences and incorporates them into a state's institutional design to prevent the concentration of political power in any one community.[4] The country's electoral architecture reflects the same approach and includes the following elements.[5]

- A Tripartite Presidency consisting of three members (one Bosniak, one Serb and one Croat) representing the three communities, with the chairmanship of the presidency rotating every 8 months during the 4-year tenure.
- A bicameral Parliamentary Assembly consisting of a 42-member House of Representatives (two- thirds elected from the territory of the Federation, and one-third from the territory of the Republika Srpska); and a 15-member House of Peoples comprising 15 Delegates (two-thirds from the Federation and one-third from the Republika Srpska)
- The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is further divided into 10 cantons. Therefore, elections take place at the entity and cantonal levels, creating a multi-layered electoral system characterised by both ethnic and territorial representation.

Although this Dayton-consociational framework was designed to facilitate equitable distribution of power and fair representation of the 'constituent peoples' (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs), it has not been very effective in serving the purpose of promoting long-term cooperation and inter-ethnic harmony. Ethnicity-based representation reinforced identity-based cleavages, and the requirement for multi-ethnic consensus often resulted in fragmented political authority, complex decision-making and governance paralysis.[6]

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[3] Roberto Belloni, **"Peacebuilding and Consociational Electoral Engineering in Bosnia and Herzegovina"**, *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004, pp. 334–353.

[4] Ibid.

[5] **"The General Framework Agreement: Annex 4"**, Office of the High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), 14 December 1995.

[6] Gabriele Fruscione, **"Three Decades after Dayton: Bosnia's Unfinished Peace and Fragile Sovereignty,"** Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 20 November 2025.

Electoral Modernisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The electoral system of BiH was established by the 1995 DPA, under which general elections are conducted and regulated by the BiH Constitution, the 2001 Election Law (last amended in 2024), and the 2012 Law on Financing of Political Parties (last amended in 2016). Although the legal framework includes adequate provisions to ensure democratic elections and power transfer, electoral administration in BiH has faced persistent and pressing challenges that have undermined the credibility, transparency, and integrity of the voting and counting process.[7]

In its Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions issued on 3 October 2022, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) identified the ethnocratic nature of BiH's constitutional framework as a critical impediment to the healthy functioning of democratic institutions. Ethnicity- and residency-based restrictions on the right to contest elections challenge the principle of universal and equal suffrage.[8] The lack of regular review of electoral constituency boundaries, procedural shortcomings in ensuring secrecy of the vote, and the lack of public debate and use of divisive rhetoric (reflected in biased media coverage) have diminished public trust in electoral institutions.[9]

In a consequential intervention to strengthen political accountability and institutional credibility, the OHR introduced extensive amendments to the electoral legal framework on 26 March.[10] The Central Election Commission (CEC) of BiH, technically assisted by the Agency for Identification Documents, Registers and Data Exchange (IDDEEA), and supported by the European Union and the OSCE, implemented four pilot projects in 24 constituencies across 456 polling stations to test various electoral technologies. These included Voter Authentication and Results Transmission, Optical Scanners and Ballot Counting, Biometric Identification and Voter Authentication, and Video Surveillance at Polling Stations.[11] While the ODIHR acknowledged partial success in strengthening electoral integrity, limited implementation time and inadequate resources hampered their effectiveness. Further, the CEC submitted an evaluation report and feasibility study to the Parliamentary Assembly in March 2025, paving the way for wider implementation.[12]

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[7] **"Bosnia and Herzegovina General Elections, 4 October 2026: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions"**, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 5 October 2026.

[8] **"Bosnia and Herzegovina: General Elections, 2 October 2022 — ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report"**, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2 February 2023.

[9] Ibid.

[10] **"The Feasibility Study For The Introduction Of Specific Electoral Technologies Into The Electoral Process In Bosnia And Herzegovina Submitted To The Bih Parliamentary Assembly"**, Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 March 2025.

[11] Ibid.

[12] **"Final Report On The Implemented Pilot Projects Of The Introduction Of New Technologies Into The Electoral Process In Bosnia And Herzegovina And The Feasibility Study For The**

The electoral modernisation initiative was put to test during the country's 11th general elections, held on 4 October 2026, which recorded a voter turnout of 42.02 per cent, indicative of relatively lower electoral participation as compared to the previous nationwide elections in 2022. Under the new arrangement, voters cast their votes on the ballot paper, but their identities were verified biometrically, and ballots were processed by optical scanners before being counted manually.

The first-time use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to address longstanding electoral integrity concerns came with its own set of challenges. The ODIHR reports limited time for testing, voter education, and training of election officials.[13] The CEC changed the ballot format without a legislative amendment, replacing candidates' names with numbers to comply with the scanning requirements. Further, the CEC did not promptly make relevant information on the integrity of the ICT systems publicly available, contrary to international recommendations. Close to three-quarters of polling stations reported delays due to problems with the new ICT devices. These involved unsuccessful fingerprint recognition, paper jamming, and ballots not being accepted by the scanners. For instance, in Republika Srpska, the entity's interior ministry reported delays at 201 of its 1,957 polling stations.[14]

Recruitment of the Polling Station Committee Staff and delivery of ICT devices were also delayed, which further postponed training before the elections.[15] Most importantly, introducing such novel electoral technology called for comprehensive voter education. The CEC information campaign, launched barely two months before the elections, was largely confined to broadcast media and social networks, limiting its scope and outreach to urban areas and leaving older and rural populations without adequate information.

As for the political class's response to these breakthrough electoral reforms, established parties like the long-ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats have expressed reservations about the new voting system, accusing it of confusing the electorate. On the other hand, smaller parties hope such technologies will ensure fairer elections by eliminating the scope for vote-rigging and electoral manipulation.[16]

Introduction Of Specific Electoral Technologies Into The Electoral Process In Bosnia And Herzegovina", Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 March 2025.

[13] **"Bosnia and Herzegovina General Elections, 4 October 2026: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions"**, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 5 October 2026.

[14] **"Elections proceeding peacefully"**, News Agency of the Republic of Srpska (SRNA), 4 October 2026.

[15] **"Bosnia and Herzegovina General Elections, 4 October 2026: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions"**, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 5 October 2026.

[16] Armin Aljović, **"Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina: What New Technology Brings and What Voting Will Look Like,"** *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 1 October 2026.

In essence, while technological modernisation can address specific procedural vulnerabilities in the Bosnian electoral framework and enhance the country's democratic credentials, it cannot, by itself, confer legitimacy on the electoral process without eliminating identity-based political mobilisation and its consequent divisive politics.

Bosnia's Electoral Outcome and Strategic Orientation

The following political forces have always dominated the political landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- The Party of Democratic Action (SDA), led by Bakir Izetbegović, represents the Bosniak nationalist and conservative political tradition.
- The Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH), led by Nermin Nikšić, is representative of a social-democratic and multi-ethnic political tradition. Incumbent Denis Bećirović, who retained the Bosniak seat in the tripartite Presidency with a 26.78 per cent vote share in the 2026 elections, is affiliated with the SDP.[17]
- The Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), led by Dragan Čović, is the representative of the Croatian community in the country's power-sharing arrangement. Its newcomer candidate, Darijana Filipović, secured the Croat seat in the Presidency with 13.89 per cent of the votes.[18]
- The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) is the Serb and pro-Russian nationalist political force in Republika Srpska. Zeljka Cvijanovic retained her seat for the Serbs in the tripartite presidency by securing 55.41 per cent of the vote. Further, Savo Minić from the SNSD claimed victory in Republika Srpska's presidential race.[19]

The preliminary outcome of the 4 October elections for the entity and state parliaments, as well as the cantonal assemblies, reflects the persistence of ethno-national voting patterns. Analysts have attributed the lower voter turnout to political disillusionment and public frustration stemming from economic difficulties, political deadlocks and stalled progress towards European Union membership.[20] For a fragmented constitutional structure like that of Bosnia and

[17] Branko Filipovic and Fedja Grulovic, **"Bosnia Votes Sunday in Election That Could Affect EU Bid,"** *Reuters*, 4 October 2026.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Michał Kucharski, **"Bosnia and Herzegovina's Elections: Voter Apathy and Entrenched Ethnopolitical Divisions"**, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 9 October 2026.

Herzegovina, electoral outcomes and domestic political alignments have far-reaching implications for the country's strategic orientation and its relations with external actors.

Accession to the European Union

Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with other Western Balkans countries, was recognised as a potential candidate for EU membership at the Thessaloniki European Council summit held in June 2003.[21] On 15 February 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina formally applied for membership of the European Union.[22] The European Union (EU) granted Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status in December 2022. Subsequently, following the European Commission's recommendations, the European Council began accession negotiations with Sarajevo in March 2024.[23]

The EU continues to commit vital resources to Bosnia and Herzegovina through its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. Moreover, the EU-led military mission EUFOR Althea has maintained its presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2004 under an executive mandate of the UN Security Council to support the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina in maintaining a stable and secure environment.[24] While public perception is favourable towards the prospect of EU membership, the integration process has been plagued by internal political polarisation, secessionist rhetoric from leadership in the pro-Russia Republika Srpska entity, and unfulfilled judicial and constitutional reforms.[25]

BiH's EU accession is subject to the execution of robust and sustainable country-wide reforms concerning the rule of law, judicial institutions, democratic governance and effective functioning of state institutions, in accordance with the democratic standards and values of the European Union. However, the electoral consolidation of the pro-Moscow SNSD in Republika Srpska, as reflected in the 2026 poll outcome, and its leadership's close ties with Russia raise concerns about the prospect of achieving cross-constituent consensus on implementing such reforms.

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[21] **"Commission opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership of the European Union"**, European Commission, 29 May 2019.

[22] Ibid.

[23] **"Report on Progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina – March 2024"**, European Commission, 12 March 2024.

[24] **"Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2025,"** European Commission, 2025.

[25] **"Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Membership Rises to 74.4%,"** Directorate for European Integration, 2026; **"Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2025,"** European Commission, 2025.

Russia's Influence

Bosnian Serbs have shared historical affinity with Russia in their common Slavic and Christian Orthodox identities, and long-time Russian support for Serbia.[26] The bonhomie continues to be reflected in contemporary political ties. SNSD leader Milorad Dodik has consistently maintained close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. At the same time, his party has obstructed Sarajevo's adoption of EU sanctions against Russia following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.[27]

Dodik has also voiced secessionist aspirations regarding Republika Srpska's independence from Bosnia. On 26 February 2025, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina convicted him of defying the decisions and authority of Bosnia's international overseer (OHR). He was initially sentenced to one year in prison and a six-year ban from holding office, thereby escalating the country's worst political crisis in years.[28]

The 2026 electoral outcome has been quite favourable to SNSD in Republika Srpska despite Dodik's exclusion from public office. Further, its retention of the Serb seat in the Tripartite presidency is expected to continue to complicate accession to the EU, impede initiatives to forge euro-Atlantic cooperation, and challenge the cohesive functioning of the Dayton constitutional framework.

US Interests

The United States occupies a key position not only in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina's emergence as an independent nation-state but also in shaping its contemporary strategic environment. Brokered by Washington, the 1995 DPA ended the most violent war in post-war Europe (Bosnian War 1992–95) and established Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional framework. The United States also supports Bosnia's aspirations for NATO and EU membership. Thus, American engagement has historically remained central to Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war settlement and its pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration.[29]

Recent developments, particularly under Trump's Presidency, however, reflect discrepancies in Washington's approach towards Sarajevo. In 2025, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) lifted sanctions imposed on Dodik, members of his family, and close associates that the Biden administration

[26] James McBride, **"Russia's Influence in the Balkans"**, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 21 November 2023.

[27] Jo Harper, **"Bosnia Supports EU Sanctions on Russia, Says Foreign Minister,"** *Anadolu Agency*, 5 November 2025.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Sarah E. Garding, **"Bosnia and Herzegovina: Background and U.S. Policy"**, Congressional Research Service, 15 April 2019.

had previously imposed for defying Bosnia's Constitutional Court and obstructing the Dayton peace agreement.[30] In the immediate aftermath of the 2026 elections, Dodik publicly thanked the Trump administration for a changed political environment in the United States that apparently helped his party survive and win.[31]

It would be premature to equate these developments with a concrete reversal of US policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. Washington's strategic interests in BiH are not limited to individual political ties or maintaining the Dayton constitutional order but also to developing energy infrastructure. US-linked energy initiatives, including proposals for liquefied natural gas infrastructure, aim to promote Bosnia's energy diversification and reduce dependence on Russian gas imports.[32] Energy security concerns thus appear to constitute the economic and strategic dimension of US engagement in the region beyond the political considerations of expanding influence in the Western Balkans.

Therefore, it would be overly simplistic to assess Bosnia and Herzegovina's strategic orientation by juxtaposing a pro-Euro-Atlantic position with Russian influence; however, the 2026 electoral outcome risks turning the country into a theatre for future geopolitical contestations.

India–Bosnia Relations

Rooted in the shared legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement, where India and Yugoslavia emerged as pioneering advocates of sovereignty and strategic autonomy for newly decolonised states, India shares ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina that predate formal diplomatic relations. After Yugoslavia's dissolution, India extended formal recognition to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 1992, laying the foundation for diplomatic relations in 1995.[33]

In the aftermath of the conflict, India deployed approximately 100 police observers to the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) as part of post-war stabilisation efforts, underscoring its tangible contribution to the country's recovery.[34] 2025 marked three decades of diplomatic ties between the two multi-

[30] Rabia İclal Turan, **"Trump administration lifts sanctions on Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik"**, *Anadolu Agency*, 30 October 2025.

[31] Azem Kurtic, **"Bosnian Election Sees Record Low Turnout, Dodik Triumphant, Presidency Reshaped"**, *Balkan Insight*, 5 October 2026.

[32] Daria Sito-sucic, **"Bosnia Selects US Investor for Gas Link with Croatia to Cut Reliance on Russia"**, *Reuters*, 15 April 2026.

[33] **"India–Bosnia and Herzegovina relations"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, July 2021.

[34] Ibid.

ethnic democracies. While the bilateral relationship has been characterised by historical goodwill, substantial scope remains to deepen its strategic dimension.

Institutional engagement has continued through periodic ministerial visits and Foreign Office Consultations (FOCs)—the last round held in Sarajevo in November 2024 reviewed political relations, trade and investment, science and technology, cultural exchanges, tourism, and people-to-people contacts.[35] However, the absence of a resident Indian diplomatic mission in Sarajevo makes for a critical limitation to sustained political, diplomatic, and cultural engagement.

In this regard, a positive development came in June 2026, when the country's Foreign Minister Elmedin Konaković met India's Ambassador, Anshuman Gaur, in Sarajevo.[36] During the meeting, the Bosnian side reiterated its support for India's stated intention to open an embassy in Sarajevo. Establishment of a resident embassy could strengthen strategic ties by improving consular outreach, facilitating regular diplomatic discussions, and providing greater impetus to commercial and cultural engagements.

Beyond the conventional arenas of cooperation, India and Bosnia and Herzegovina also share an established mechanism of bilateral cooperation in electoral management—a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of elections signed between the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Bosnia and Herzegovina in January 2017.[37] The agreement seeks to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, technical expertise, and professional information; provide for training of personnel; enhance cooperation in electoral management and administration; enable the sharing of materials relating to voting technology; promote voter education and the participation of women and minorities; and ensure electoral inclusion.

This institutional framework of cooperation has renewed relevance in the context of the recently concluded General Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which marked the country's maiden attempt to modernise its electoral processes through the extensive deployment of technology, including biometric voter identification, ballot scanners, and electronic transmission of results.

India, with its experience as the world's largest democracy administering elections across an electorate of unprecedented scale and socio-economic diversity, could offer conducive grounds for exchanging knowledge and expertise with the Bosnian state

[35] Ibid.

[36] **"Minister Elmedin Konaković Met with the Ambassador of the Republic of India to BiH, Based in Budapest, Anshuman Gaur"**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 29 June 2026.

[37] **"Memorandum Of Mutual Understanding And Cooperation In The Field Of Election Between The Election Commission Of India And The Central Election Commission Of Bosnia & Herzegovina"**, Election Commission of India, 24 January 2017.

in areas such as voter enrolment and identification, electoral logistics, personnel training, and election data management. The ECI's system of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter-verifiable paper audit trails (VVPAT) could offer critical insights into the relationship between technological efficiency and electoral legitimacy.

Conversely, observations and inferences from Bosnia and Herzegovina's experience with biometric authentication and optical scanning could offer ideas for refining and upgrading India's voter verification and counting processes to enhance electoral credibility and outcome accuracy. However, such cooperation should promote mutual, context-specific learning rather than emulation of each other's electoral models, since both countries differ substantially in their constitutional frameworks, institutional mechanisms, electoral legislation, and socio-political contexts.

The existing MoU could be complemented by initiatives such as periodic exchange programmes for electoral officials, joint technical workshops, and conferences of both election management bodies on the adoption, management, and auditability of new electoral technologies. For India, such unique engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina could strengthen its footprint in the Western Balkans through a relationship grounded in a shared commitment to democratic governance that extends beyond conventional diplomatic interactions, economic cooperation, and institutional exchange.

Conclusion

The electoral architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established under the Dayton constitutional order, underwent a transformative change during the 2026 general elections. The technology-led electoral modernisation appears to have curbed electoral manipulation while enhancing electoral transparency and integrity. However, technological reforms must be paired with genuine political intent and strong institutional measures to address identity-based political fragmentation and ensure democratic legitimacy.

The 2026 electoral outcome reflects competing external influences and fractured domestic political alignments that could perpetuate the country's political deadlock over key strategic aspirations. At the confluence of the electoral modernisation drive and the three-decade diplomatic anniversary of India and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political leadership of the two multi-ethnic democracies could seek to expand the existing framework of electoral cooperation to deepen bilateral engagement beyond conventional diplomatic and economic cooperation.

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