

## **‘You’re Gonna Need a Bigger Boat’: Assessing the Relationship Between Economic Performance and Ethno-nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2022)**

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### **Abstract**

It has been postulated that encouraging the financial recovery of Bosnia and Herzegovina will promote the easing of its ethnic polarization. However, when juxtaposing the results of Bosnian parliamentary elections from 2002 to 2022 with the country’s economic fluctuations in the same period, our longitudinal study shows that ethno-nationalist voting behavior correlates with unemployment levels especially in the Banja Luka and Prijedor areas of the Republika Srpska. In an effort to update Modernization Theory, the main finding of this paper is that an improving economy—as measured by unemployment—may be a factor in helping to ease ethnic tensions in certain subsets of BiH’s society. As the correlation cannot be shown with GDP, however, or in most individual voting districts in BiH, economic performance cannot be assumed to be the powerful influence on ethnic reconciliation that some had expected or assumed after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

**Keywords:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, economic performance, ethno-nationalism, elections and voting, Modernization Theory

## 1 Introduction

In October 2022, the elections for the renewal of the federal bodies in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) showed a polarized country.<sup>1</sup> Since the *Dayton Peace Agreement* (DPA) of November 1995, in fact, BiH oscillates from the voters' desire to overcome belligerent rhetoric to the relevant strength shown by ethno-nationalist elites.<sup>2</sup> The means and characteristics of ethno-nationalism in the country have been studied by scholars and international actors.<sup>3</sup> International institutions tried, for their part, to find grounds and methods to ensure the maintenance of peace within a dysfunctional system made of corruption and party patronage<sup>4</sup> and to guarantee a stable and democratic future for the country. Among the actions pursued, the investment of huge amounts of money has been one of the most prominent. This was motivated by the belief that economic improvement could be at least a partial solution to encourage reconciliation among the three 'constituent groups': Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks.<sup>5</sup>

Such a belief finds theoretical grounds in Modernization Theory (MT), which assumes that when the economy grows, the rationale for social conflict diminishes as a consequence.<sup>6</sup> With the precise aim of making a contribution to this theoretical approach, our 'longitudinal' work paper tries to extend an underdeveloped—because of the proliferation of 'cross-sectional' analyses—but promising research line: the correlation between ethno-nationalist voting patterns and economic welfare. As we will show, low unemployment levels are correlated with increases of support for civic, moderate parties overall, and in part of Republika Srpska in particular. However, there are still doubts about whether relative prosperity—as measured by unemployment rates outside the Banja Luka/Prijedor voting district, and by GDP generally—is a reliable factor in reducing ethnic tensions, if such tensions manifest themselves in electoral support for parties pushing a divisive nationalist agenda.

Our research question is whether, where, and to what degree, an easing of economic conditions in BiH over the last twenty years correlated with a decrease in ethnic tension, measured by electoral support for political parties aligned with an ethno-nationalist agenda. In order to pursue our objective, we ran a series of statistical regressions, testing for correlations between two economic indicators taken from the World Bank dataset—unemployment and Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—and ethno-nationalist parties' voting percentages in parliamentary elections from 2002 to 2022. Using the last population census of 2013, these results are also juxtaposed with an analysis of both ethnic- and socio-economic characteristics of each voting district. While we recognize that voting behavior is influenced by many factors unrelated to ethnic conflict, the electoral results appear to be the most

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<sup>1</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems. *IFES-elections in Bosnia & Herzegovina 2022* (accessed: 3 June 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Mochtak, Michal and Ensar Muharemović. 2022. The abyss of ethnic division: Two decades of discussing war in the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Ethnopolitics* 23(2), 127-151.

<sup>3</sup> Dyrstad, Karin. 2012. After ethnic civil war: Ethno-nationalism in the Western Balkans. *Journal of Peace Research* 49(6), 817-831.

<sup>4</sup> Kapidžić, Damir. 2020. Subnational competitive authoritarianism and power-sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20(1), 81-101.

<sup>5</sup> Belloni, Roberto. 2001. Civil society and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Peace Research* 38(2), 163-180.

<sup>6</sup> Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *American Political Science Review* 53(1), 69-105; Ciftci, Sabri. 2010. Modernization, Islam, or social capital: What explains attitudes toward democracy in the Muslim world?. *Comparative Political Studies* 43(11), 1442-1470; Chaudhary, Asha. 2013. Modernization: Impact, theory, advantages and disadvantages. *International Journal for Research in Education* 2(2), 34-38.

concrete, objective, and measurable metric that can be credibly linked to our research question.

Just like the shark in the 1975 movie *Jaws*, the specter of ethnic tensions *can* represent a ‘menace’ to our ‘pacified’ communities.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, both *ethnicity* and *conflict* do have a positive role for society. In fact, these two elements allow “the formation of an autonomous [and informed] volition” able to place itself in a critical/constructive way vis-à-vis the established *power*.<sup>8</sup> The menace to which we refer, rather, is the systematic “identitarian configuration of the enemy.”<sup>9</sup> This is why, like the ‘bigger boat’ in the movie, the assumption that a *bigger* economy may help to overcome that menace must be further investigated. The paper proceeds as follows: in sections 2 and 3, we will reconstruct the state-of-the-art and theoretical framework, the latter dealing with a specific examination of Modernization Theory and its ‘critical counterweights.’ Section 4 will provide a brief overview of the Bosnian party system, while Sections 5 and 6 will present a discussion on methodology and the empirical results. Finally, in Section 7 we will provide some interpretations of these results.

## 2. State-of-the-art

### 2.1 The political economy of post-Yugoslav Bosnia and Herzegovina

The impact of economics on the political discourse of BiH has been deeply studied throughout the years.<sup>10</sup> Džihic and Segert consider the economic crisis that Socialist Yugoslavia faced in the 1980s as one of the main causes of the collapse of the old system—a direct legacy of the war of resistance in 1943-45—based on *brotherhood and unity*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Tito’s regime used to have national quotas for governmental jobs. As affirmed by Woodward, in a period of time when the unemployment rate was around 20%—such as in 1984—this became an easy scapegoat useful for opportunistic politicians willing to play the ‘nationalist card’; “people hoping for white collar jobs in poorer, ethnically mixed areas were likely to see the quotas, rather than their own qualifications, as the cause of their unemployment or unmet expectations.”<sup>12</sup> Basically, the economy and its management became pivotal for the affirmation of ethno-nationalism. And even though it is clear that it was not the economic crisis itself that led the state to collapse, “leaders, [...] used [economic factors] to argue that their ethnic and/or political group was [unjustly] disadvantaged in Yugoslavia.”<sup>13</sup>

As one can easily guess, the economy remained entwined with politics—and ethno-nationalism—in the aftermath of the conflict of 1992-95, both from an internal and an external perspective. On the domestic side, the ethno-nationalist potentates who gained

<sup>7</sup> Montalvo, José G. and Marta Reynal-Querol. 2005. Ethnic polarization, potential conflict, and civil wars. *American Economic Review* 95(3), 796-816.

<sup>8</sup> Rivas-Drake, Deborah / Markstrom, Carol / Syed, Moin / Lee, Richard M. / Umaña-Taylor, Adriana J. / Yip, Tiffany / Seaton, Eleanor K. / Quintana, Stephen / Schwartz, Seth J. and Sabine French. 2014. Ethnic and racial identity in adolescence: Implications for psychosocial, academic, and health outcomes. *Child Development* 85(1), 40-57; Han, Byung-Chul and Simone Buttazzi. 2019. *Che cos'è il potere?*. Milan: Nottetempo, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Benasayag, Miguel and Angélique Del Rey. 2010. *Elogio del conflitto*. Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 194.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas, Peter. 2004. The clandestine political economy of war and peace in Bosnia. *International Studies Quarterly* 48(1), 29-51; Donais, Timothy. 2005. *The political economy of peacebuilding in post-Dayton Bosnia*. London & New York: Routledge; Divjak, Boris and Michael Pugh. 2008. The political economy of corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *International Peacekeeping* 15(3), 373-386.

<sup>11</sup> Džihic, Vedran and Dieter Segert. 2012. Lessons from ‘Post-Yugoslav’ democratization: Functional problems of stateness and the limits of democracy. *East European Politics and Societies* 26(2), 239-253, 240.

<sup>12</sup> Woodward, Susan. 2003. The political economy of ethno-nationalism in Yugoslavia. *Socialist Register* 39, 73-92, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Jović, Dejan. 2001. The disintegration of Yugoslavia: A critical review of explanatory approaches. *European Journal of Social Theory* 4(1), 101-120.

power during the 1980s and the 1990s ‘captured’ the state by diverting funds for private and/or corporate interests.<sup>14</sup> On the ‘external side’, the international community invested significant amounts of energy to boost Bosnian recovery and integration within multilateral bodies. Within this background, Kostovicova and Bojičić-Dželilović point out that the post-Dayton order is precisely to blame, in that it has put at disposal of the new elites an unprecedented quantity of resources.<sup>15</sup> It is not by chance that scholars, such as Michael Pugh, continue to affirm that the distribution of wealth in Bosnia looks more like a spoils system among “the major political elements that took [the country] into war.”<sup>16</sup> Yet it is interesting to note how the critical/feminist reading of the phenomenon goes back to examining the negative influence that International Financial Institutions exert on the Bosnian “forms of socio-economic violence and injustice.”<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 Ethnic parties between control and façade competition

Before mentioning the existing literature on the role of the economy in ‘why people vote,’ it is important to underline that there are different elements impacting how voters in BiH make their political choices. For instance, with no intent to be exhaustive on the topic, Stojanović focuses on the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ that conditioned Bosnians immediately before the war, in the fall of 1990.<sup>18</sup> In short, the fear of suddenly being ‘worse off’ vis-à-vis other groups created a ‘rational-trap’ for each of the three constituent peoples, making them obliged to vote for “parties that appealed to [their] [...] national group.”<sup>19</sup> While the same argument is presented by Mujkić and Hulsey with regard to subsequent elections,<sup>20</sup> Hronesova emphasizes that members of one ethnic group who would like to vote for moderate, nationwide parties are probably discouraged by the fact that there is no ‘ideological map’ through which they can truly orient.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the choice for “the devil you know” denotes, besides a blatant *Stockholm syndrome*, the renunciation of making a step into the unknown.<sup>22</sup> This is when the *ad-hoc* adoption of policies oriented to the monopoly of memory appears to still be predominant.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on this kind of bewilderment, Haverić presents a thoughtful study in which she demonstrates the *consistency* of economic voting in a society like Bosnia’s.<sup>24</sup> In this way she

<sup>14</sup> Džihic and Segert, *Lessons from ‘Post-Yugoslav’ democratization*, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Kostovicova, Denisa and Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović. 2014. *Ethnicity pays: The political economy of postconflict nationalism in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in *After civil war: Division, reconstruction, and reconciliation in contemporary Europe. National and ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century*, edited by Kissane, Bill. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 187-212, 202; Dragović-Soso, Jasna. 2008. *Why did Yugoslavia disintegrate? An overview of contending explanations*, in *State collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New perspectives on Yugoslavia’s disintegration*, edited by Cohen, Lenard J. and Jasna Dragović-Soso. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1-39, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Pugh, Michael. 2002. Postwar political economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The spoils of peace. *Global Governance* 8(4), 467-482.

<sup>17</sup> Lai, Daniela. 2020. What has justice got to do with it? Gender and the political economy of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Review of International Political Economy* 27(6), 1257-1279.

<sup>18</sup> Stojanović, Nenad. 2014. When non-nationalist voters support ethno-nationalist parties: The 1990 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a prisoner’s dilemma game. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14(4), 607-625.

<sup>19</sup> Stojanović, *When non-nationalist voters*; Bieber, Florian. 2014. Undermining democratic transition: The case of the 1990 founding elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14(4), 548-555.

<sup>20</sup> Mujkić, Asim and John Hulsey. 2010. Explaining the success of nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Politička misao* 47(2), 143-158.

<sup>21</sup> Hronesova, Jessie. 2014. *Bosnia: Voting for the devil you know*. *LSE Blog*, 13 October 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Hronesova, *Bosnia*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> David, Lea. 2019. Policing memory in Bosnia: Ontological security and international administration of memorialization policies. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, 211-225; Friedman, Francine. 2019. *Re-inventing Yugoslavia: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in *Globalization and regime change: Lessons from the New Russia and the New Europe*, edited by Remington, Robin Alison and Robert K. Evanson. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 227-248.

<sup>24</sup> Haverić, Sabina. 2016. Divide and rule: Economic voting in ethnically divided societies. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Političke Perspektive: Časopis za Istraživanje Politike* 6(3), 49-70.

enriches Dyrstad, Ellingsen and Rød's work<sup>25</sup> when stressing that more than other explanatory variables, it is unemployment that with its wave of perceived outrage increases turnout in less heterogeneous areas.<sup>26</sup> For their part, Karić and Aydin underline that BiH's left-right ideological attitudes, together and perhaps more than moderate-radical ones, change depending on the urban/rural provenance of the voters.<sup>27</sup> Here is where another fundamental element of analysis enters into play, i.e., 'popularity.' Surprisingly enough, except for the work of some scholars,<sup>28</sup> post-Dayton Bosnia has never been the first subject of attention when analyzing forms of symbolic power, or personal appeal, exercised by politicians through the public *storytelling* of their—economic, but not only—supremacy. Such a focus, initiated by Belloni, postulates that the consociationalist structure of the country makes it easier for its 'ethno-populist' and charismatic figures to avoid compromise and present themselves as the paladins of their national group of belonging.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### 3.1 Lost in pragmatism: economy, democracy, and ethnicity in the modern world

From a purely theoretical perspective, the idea that economy and democracy are linked and that their relation is especially evident in the electoral process, has been deepened by a vast academic literature. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the electoral accountability theory, which is based on the reward-punishment hypothesis. According to this theory, there is a "powerful relationship between the economy and the electorate."<sup>30</sup> Citizens tend to support governments that perform well in handling the economy through re-elections, and to punish those that did not manage the economy well by not voting for them.<sup>31</sup> The relationship has been studied and proved to be reliable in many democracies, both in the so-called 'developed World' as well as in developing countries.<sup>32</sup> As noted by Anderson, the link between economy and electoral preferences is affected by other variables and can appear differently in different contexts.<sup>33</sup> The author underlines that, playing a role in shaping the correlation between the two variables are the institutional design and the political environment, operationalized in the three following elements: "formal institutional—clarity of responsibility, governing party target-size, and clarity of available alternatives."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Dyrstad, Karin / Ellingsen, Tanja and Jan Ketil Rød. 2015. Ethnonationalism in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. The effects of local violence and ethnic composition. *International Area Studies Review* 18(1), 4-25.

<sup>26</sup> Haverić, *Divide and rule*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Karić, Mirsad and Sejma Aydin. 2021. Urban and rural voting tendency: Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014 parliamentary elections. *Balkan Journal of Social Sciences/Balkan Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 10(19), 1-9.

<sup>28</sup> Belloni, Roberto. 2004. Peacebuilding and consociational electoral engineering in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *International Peacekeeping* 11(2), 334-353; Bojanić, Maja Savić. 2019. "How we understand populism?" Popular responses to populist politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Sociological Problems* 51(2), 291-311; Hasić, Jasmin. 2020. *Deviating party leadership strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A comparison of Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović*, in *Party leaders in Eastern Europe: Personality, behavior and consequences*, edited by Gherghina, Sergiu. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 17-41; Piacentini, Arianna. 2020. "Nonaligned citizens": Ethnic power-sharing and nonethnic identities in Bosnia Herzegovina. The case of Sarajevo. *Nationalities Papers* 48(4), 707-720; Turčilo Lejla. 2021. *Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Pluralism and professionalism between political influences and a divided society*, in *Three decades later: The media in South East Europe*, edited by Daskalova, Nikoleta and Hendrik Sittig. Bonn: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, 39-68.

<sup>29</sup> Belloni, *Peacebuilding*, 337.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis-Beck, Michael and Mary Stegmaier. 2000. Economic determinants of electoral outcomes. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 183-219, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Gélinau, François. 2013. Electoral accountability in the developing world. *Electoral Studies* 32, 418-424.

<sup>32</sup> Gélinau, *Electoral accountability*.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, Christopher J. 2000. Economic voting and political context: A comparative perspective. *Electoral Studies* 19(2-3), 151-170.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Economic voting*, 152.

### 3.2 Modernization Theory and its Critics

Another theory worth mentioning that represents a cornerstone in theorizing the link between economy and democracy is Modernization Theory (MT). This theory assumes that better economies represent a more cosmopolitan, more democratic, and less ethnically oriented world. The pillar assumption of such a theory is that “it is the socio-economic conditions which create and maintain an environment for stable and enduring democracies.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, according to MT, socio-economic development fosters, as an *endogenous* consequence, the development of a more peaceful and democratic world.<sup>36</sup> But what is intended by socio-economic *development*? In Lipset’s account, such a concept is strictly connected to “industrialization, urbanization, [...] and education,” which represent the conditions, not necessarily *causes*, for democracy to develop.<sup>37</sup> Within Modernization Theory, hence, the identitarian sphere seems encompassed.

In fact, scholars who subscribe to MT assume that the identity of a people in a modernized society would be cosmopolitan and tolerant, abandoning, therefore, those *peripheral* “ethnic distinctions [that] will disappear as processes of modernization increase in scope and intensity.”<sup>38</sup> As stated by Dyrstad, “nationalism should vanish as rational values gain terrain.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, MT raises, or at least leaves unaddressed, some other questions: what about all those marginalized contexts, such as rural areas, where this ‘linearity’ is not so clear?<sup>40</sup> Or, again, what space do post-authoritarian and/or post-war countries have within this kind of discourse?<sup>41</sup> Modernization Theory has been repeatedly criticized along these lines by the Transitology literature for its pragmatic view, according to which the electorate should be aware of the fact that one day—we cannot know *when*—democracy will be realized in its most pure form despite voters’ acquiescence towards illiberal practices.<sup>42</sup>

Criticism of MT has raised some methodological doubts as well. In Bunce’s transitologist view, if we ever want to compare experiences of progress towards a more *pacified* society, we necessarily have to take into consideration *all* cases, with no exceptions.<sup>43</sup> For instance, Satta assumes that in the case of post-WWII Italy, the economic boom actually prepared the ground for the social mobilization and political terrorism of the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> And following the path marked by other comparative politics scholars, historians, and sociologists of the caliber of Anderson<sup>45</sup> and Gellner,<sup>46</sup> there is now a widespread consensus within the literature that

<sup>35</sup> Wucherpennig, Julian and Franziska Deutsch. 2009. Modernization and democracy: Theories and evidence revisited. *Living Reviews in Democracy* 1, 1-9, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Przeworski, Adam and Fernando Limongi. 1997. Modernization: Theories and facts. *World Politics* 49(2), 155-183.

<sup>37</sup> Lipset, *Some social requisites*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> Hannan, Michael T. 1979. *The dynamics of ethnic boundaries in modern states*, in *National development and the world System: Educational, economic, and political change, 1950-1970*, edited by Meyer, John W. and Michael T. Hannan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 253-275; Chaudhary, *Modernization*.

<sup>39</sup> Dyrstad, *After ethnic civil war*, 824.

<sup>40</sup> Gans-Morse, Jordan. 2004. Searching for transitologists: Contemporary theories of post-communist transitions and the myth of a dominant paradigm. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20(4), 320-349, 328.

<sup>41</sup> Chandra, Kanchan. 2006. What is ethnic identity and does it matter?. *Annual Review Political Science* 9, 397-424; Chandra, Kanchan. 2007. *Why ethnic parties succeed: Patronage and ethnic head counts in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Wiarda, Howard J. 2001. Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and comparative politics: ‘Transitology’ and the need for new theory. *East European Politics and Societies* 15(3), 485-501; Shevtsova, Lilia. 2007. *Russia: Lost in transition: The Yeltsin and Putin legacies*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment.

<sup>43</sup> Bunce, Valerie. 1995. Should transitologists be grounded?. *Slavic Review* 54(1), 111-127.

<sup>44</sup> Satta, Vladimiro. 2016. *I nemici della Repubblica*. Milan: Rizzoli.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, Benedict. 1998. *The spectre of comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the world*. London & New York: Verso.

<sup>46</sup> Gellner, Ernest. 2008. *Nations and nationalism*. New York: Cornell University Press.

“[ethnic] nationalism pre-exist[s] the transition to industrialism,” laying thus the foundations of the current socio-economic superstructures.<sup>47</sup> In this vein, Chandra underlines that within such a *milieu*, the ‘extrinsic variable’ that necessarily enters into play is represented by the territorial concentration of polities that—even in the ‘post-modern’ era—are *continuously* grouped on the basis of identity.<sup>48</sup>

All the mentioned theories draw a connection—more or less positive, depending on the theoretical approach—between politics and the economic fluctuation of a country. Such an approach does not only find grounds ‘on paper.’ When dealing with post-conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in fact, the pragmatic approach taken by the international community seemed to reproduce what was postulated by MT. Economic help represented a pivotal tool to ease not only the precarious living-conditions of a recovering country,<sup>49</sup> but also to influence and pacify the political sphere in the country. For this reason, we chose to investigate whether economic improvement actually contributed to easing ethno-political tensions, comparing the electoral results in recent years with economic improvement over the same period, as will be detailed in the next sections, after an analysis of the Bosnian party system.

#### 4 The Bosnian Party System

In order to better understand the voting behavior of Bosnians, one must take into consideration how the modern Bosnian party system emerged and how it evolved. BiH has the most complex constitutional system in the Western Balkan region. It is deeply rooted in the 1995 DPA that brought an end to the war and was supposed to establish a state in which the three ethnic communities—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs—could operate without fighting each other. The structures of this state include the three-member Presidency, with one member for each constitutional nation, the Parliament of BiH, two separate entities known as the *Republika Srpska*, where most Bosnian Serbs live, and the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, inhabited mainly by Bosniaks and Croats, and the self-governing district of Brčko. Each entity has its own president, parliament, and government. Above all these structures is the *Office of High Representative* (OHR), who is chosen by the *Peace Implementation Council* (PIC), a body of 55 countries and international organizations, and is supposed to oversee the democratization of BiH and dismiss any Bosnian officials or politicians who do not respect the DPA.<sup>50</sup> Despite its merit in ending the war, the treaty has been heavily criticized for not creating a functioning, peaceful and stable democratic polity. In particular, it has been said that it has, to some extent, exacerbated ethnic divisions, as is abundantly clear in the country’s political party system.<sup>51</sup>

Bosnia’s contemporary party system was already characterized by the presence and electoral success of ethno-nationalist parties ever since the first multi-party elections were held in 1990 when the country was still part of Yugoslavia. Although surveys carried out a year before showed that there was sweeping support for non-nationalist parties, the various

<sup>47</sup> Smith, Anthony D. 1998. *Nationalism and modernism*. London & New York: Routledge, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Chandra, *What is ethnic identity*, 421.

<sup>49</sup> Efendić, Adnan and Azra Hadžiahmetović. 2015. *Post-war economic transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A challenging transformation*, in *State-building and democratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, edited by Keil, Soeren and Valery Perry. London & New York: Routledge.

<sup>50</sup> Office of the High Representative. *Is Brčko district or condominium, an entity or municipality?* (accessed: 6 March 2023); Stanislawski, Wojciech. 2008. *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in *The Western Balkans and European integration: Perspectives and implications*, edited by Sadowski, Rafał and Jan Muś. Warsaw: Office of the Committee for European Integration, 43-52.

<sup>51</sup> Zdeb, Aleksandra. 2019. *Ethno-nationalism and political conflict in Bosnia (Europe)*, in *The Palgrave handbook of ethnicity*, edited by Ratuva, Steven. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 595-612, 601-604.

political factions that represented each ethnic community in BiH won a majority.<sup>52</sup> In the aftermath of the war, ethno-nationalist fear and hate-mongering rhetoric continued to prevail at every electoral round, allowing the nationalist political leadership of each ethnic group to galvanize their base of support. Consequently, ethnic competition developed within shared schemes based on the idea that tensions between the different communities should be maintained so that ethno-nationalist establishments could portray themselves as the resolution to problems they created themselves, thus freezing the political status quo.<sup>53</sup>

This state of affairs provides a partial explanation as to why the strongest parties in Bosnian elections are always those that represent one of the country's 'constituent peoples,' despite their poor performance in government.<sup>54</sup> This system has been described as 'ethnocracy' or 'ethnopolitics' because the Bosnian political classes focus solely on safeguarding their ethno-national interests and use fear to maximize their power and ignore the interests of the public.<sup>55</sup> The pursuit of such interests has also been facilitated by the Dayton constitutional mechanisms, such as the entity veto right.<sup>56</sup>

Ethno-nationalist parties dominated almost every aspect of society during and after the war, but their monopoly over voters diminished in the period between 2004 and 2006. This is partly due to alterations in their leaderships and policies and partly because of pressure and control from abroad. This allowed new ethno-nationalist parties to emerge and become the predominant forces representing their communities. Among Bosniaks, the main expounder of their ethnic interests is the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), followed by the Party for BiH (SBiH), which also has a strong ethno-nationalist agenda. In the Serb camp, the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) was prevalent until 2006 when its position as the ruling nationalist party was supplanted by the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). In contrast, the Croats have been a more unified community especially because their population is smaller than those of the other ethnicities. Even though some parties have been formed in order to challenge the dominant HDZ-BiH, all these political groupings have tried to make agreements as a means of limiting intra-ethnic rivalries.<sup>57</sup>

Against this background, there are also multi-ethnic or non-national parties, the most important being the Social Democratic Party of BiH (SDP), which combines electoral triumphs with candidates from every ethnicity.<sup>58</sup> It is one of the few political forces that manages to attract voters across each community, although most of its support comes from the Bosniaks. There have been other parties with a multi-ethnic program and membership, but generally, multi-ethnic parties in BiH are constrained by an electoral system in which most ballots are in constituencies inhabited only by one ethnic group or are meant to provide political mandates that are specific for Serbs, Bosniaks, or Croats.<sup>59</sup> A list of political parties as of 2017 is provided *infra* in Table 1 (see 5.1).

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<sup>52</sup> Mujkić and Hulsey, *Explaining the success*, 154-155.

<sup>53</sup> Belloni, Roberto. 2020. *The rise and fall of peacebuilding in the Balkans*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 57-58.

<sup>54</sup> Mujkić and Hulsey, *Explaining the success*, 144.

<sup>55</sup> Džihčić, Vedran and Angela Wieser. 2013. *Incentives for democratisation? Effects of EU conditionality on democracy in Bosnia & Hercegovina*, in *EU conditionality in the Western Balkans*, edited by Bieber, Florian. London & New York: Routledge, 29-51.

<sup>56</sup> Džihčić and Wieser, *Incentives for democratisation*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Zdeb, *Ethno-nationalism*, 606-607.

<sup>58</sup> Zdeb, *Ethno-Nationalism*, 607.

<sup>59</sup> Mujkić and Hulsey, *Explaining the success*, 154.



## 5 Methodology

Measuring ethnic tension is a difficult enterprise in any case, but the problem of ethnic division in BiH goes on full display every election cycle. The rhetoric of the various political parties draws on, and feeds, ethnic resentment. Politicians clearly believe they can mobilize voters by appealing to ethnic resentment. Against this backdrop, we determined that one potentially meaningful measure of ethnic tension in BiH is the degree of support for the parties that rely and subsist on that type of messaging.

For our inquiry, we acquired economic data from the World Bank dataset. Voting behavior, in turn, was drawn from the election results in each of the last six nation-wide parliamentary elections in BiH: 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022. To test our main hypothesis, i.e., that ethnic tension—as measured by the performance of ethno-nationalist parties in the elections—is negatively correlated with indicators of economic performance, it is necessary to categorize the parties and identify those that are associated with divisive ethnic platforms and rhetoric.

### 5.1 Measuring the Ethno-Nationalist Vote

As suggested in Section 4 above, labeling the parties as ethno-nationalist, on the one hand, and multi-ethnic or post-ethno-nationalist, or ‘reformist’, on the other is a nuanced exercise. In fact, while some parties define themselves in ethnically divisive terms, and other parties are founded on a unifying, multi-ethnic agenda, many parties lean less heavily into one of these polarizing positions. Ultimately, we determined that we could not separate the parties meaningfully into binary categories, i.e., ethno-nationalist and multi-ethnic reformist, and our problem became a more challenging one.

For this reason, to measure the ethno-nationalist vote in BiH, we used the political party dataset conceived by Szöcsik and Zuber,<sup>60</sup> as updated for 2016-17. To compile their dataset, Szöcsik and Zuber asked twelve experts to rate the various political parties in BiH according to a number of criteria, including the party position on ethnonationalism. The measure was defined as follows:

At one end of the spectrum (0), majority nationalists seek hegemony within the current state they define as their nation-state. At the other end of the spectrum (10), minority nationalists seek to become the hegemonic majority in a new nation-state. Moderate parties of the middle ground (5) seek a common state in which no single ethno-national group dominates over another.

Because both ends of the spectrum reflect a commitment to ethnic hegemony, both very high and very low ratings are associated with divisive, ‘hegemonic’ and ethno-nationalistic positions. We assigned a new number to each of the parties, taking the rating, subtracting 5 from it, and squaring the result. This ensures that all values are positive. The multi-ethnic parties, which should get a score close to 5, would get a rating close to 0:  $(5-5)^2 = 0$ . Parties that take extreme positions in favor of ethnic hegemony get similarly high scores:  $(10-5)^2 = (0-5)^2 = 25$ . Taking the average of the twelve ratings given for each party by the twelve experts, we were able to generate a number that reflects how extreme a version of ethno-nationalism the party embraced. The result is a number between 0 and 25, with the high

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<sup>60</sup> Szöcsik, Edina and Christina Zuber. 2015. EPAC: A new dataset on ethnonationalism in party competition in 22 European democracies. *Party Politics* 21(1), 153-160; Szöcsik, Edina and Christina Zuber. 2017. *Codebook for EPAC summary: Summary version of the EPAC dataset editions 2011 and 2017 mean party positions across experts* (accessed: 3 June 2024).

number reflecting an extreme position on ethno-nationalism, and a low number reflecting a more multi-ethnic vision for the country. To avoid overweighting this measure, we divide it by 2.5, so the resulting range is 0 to 10.

The experts were also asked to rate, for each party, the ‘salience of ethnonationalism for the party’ with “[s]cale ranges from 0 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important).”<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, a vote for an ethno-nationalist party is more likely to reflect commitment to ethno-nationalism if the salience of this position is high (close to 10) for that party. If the party does not deem its ethno-nationalist orientation as important, voters supporting that party are presumably motivated by its positions in other areas, and not by its ethno-nationalist agenda.

To generate one meaningful metric, we multiplied the first number (0-10) by the second number (0-10), to get a metric between 0 and 100. This makes sense because the number will be close to zero if either figure is close to zero—either the party takes a more multi-ethnic position, or the party places little importance on the issue—so a low value for this metric suggests that this party is not driving, or reflecting, ethnic tension with divisive positions and rhetoric. A high number is associated with a party that takes an extreme position in favor of ethno-nationalism, or ethnic hegemony, and places a very high importance on this issue. Applying these formulae to the 19 parties that Zuber and Szöcsik’s experts rated, only 3 parties generated numbers below 10, and the remaining parties spanned a spectrum, suggesting the presence of parties that are more moderate on these issues and/or choose to emphasize other issues. Not surprisingly, some of the strongest parties—SDA, SNSD, and HDZ-BiH—are at the high end of the spectrum, reflecting the widely-perceived polarization of the country along ethnic lines. Table 1 below displays the list of political parties, as of 2017, together with the indexes described so far:

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<sup>61</sup> Szöcsik and Zuber, *EPAC*, 153-160.

Table 1: List of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017)

Party	Party Full Name	Ethno-nat'l	Salience	Composite
NSRZB	Narodna Stranka Radom za Boljitak	5.09	5.75	0.02
SDP	Socijaldemokratska Partija Bosne i Hercegovine	3.91	4.50	2.14
DF	Demokratska Fronta	3.82	5.00	2.79
PDP	Partija Demokratskog Progresa	7.00	7.64	12.22
SPS	Socijalistička Partija	7.18	8.36	15.93
NDP	Narodni Demokratski Pokret	7.44	8.30	19.84
SBIH	Stranka za Bosnu i Hercegovinu	2.55	8.42	20.28
HDZ 1990	Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica 1990	7.40	9.25	21.31
DNS	Demokratski Narodni Savez	7.88	8.56	28.29
A-SDA	Stranka Demokratske Aktivnosti	2.13	8.63	28.52
SDS	Srpska Demokratska Stranka	7.82	9.50	30.18
HDZ-BiH	Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica BiH	7.83	9.42	30.24
SBB	Savez za Bolju Budućnost	2.00	8.50	30.60
HSP-BiH	Hrvatska Stranka Prava Bosne i Hercegovine	7.91	9.50	32.16
SNSD	Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata	8.17	9.67	38.77
DNZ-BIH	Demokratska Narodna Zajednica	1.44	7.78	39.33
BPS	Bosanskohercegovačka Patriotska Stranka	1.44	8.20	41.47
SDA	Stranka Demokratske Akcije	1.42	9.08	46.65
SRS RS	Srpska Radikalna Stranka RS	8.80	9.36	54.08

Source: Szöcsik, Edina and Christina Zuber. 2015. EPAC: A new dataset on ethnonationalism in party competition in 22 European democracies. *Party Politics* 21(1), 153-160.

Of course, Szöcsik and Zuber's dataset does not include some new parties that have emerged in the two elections of 2018 and 2022. Accordingly, we include in our analysis another party whose rise to significance post-dates Szöcsik and Zuber's; Our Party (Naša Stranka, or NS). Its significance as one of the multi-ethnic parties in BiH is underscored by Kapidžić and Komar's recent work, in which they discuss only the 11 parties they deemed most worthy of attention and identified Naša Stranka as one of only 3—with SDP and DF—under the heading of 'multi-ethnic' parties.<sup>62</sup> Other parties have emerged in BiH since Szöcsik and Zuber's dataset was compiled of course, but none of them have captured significant measures of the vote, none can be said to have achieved anything near the significance of Naša Stranka in recent elections, and none were deemed worthy of mention or analysis by Kapidžić and Komar.<sup>63</sup>

## 5.2 Aggregating Voting Data

To analyze the degree of ethnic tension and division in Bosnia, we looked at the performance of these various parties, multiplying the vote they garnered in recent elections by their composite from the table above—including an estimate for Naša Stranka of 2, consistent with

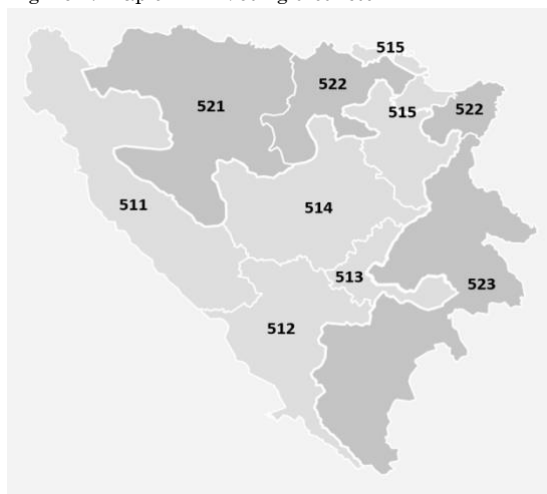
<sup>62</sup> Kapidžić, Damir and Olivera, Komar. 2022. Segmental volatility in ethnically divided societies: (Re)assessing party system stability in Southeast Europe. *Nationalities Papers* 50(3), 535-553; Touquet, Heleen. 2011. Multi-ethnic parties in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Naša Stranka and the paradoxes of postethnic politics. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11(3), 451-467.

<sup>63</sup> Kapidžić and Olivera. *Segmental volatility*, 535-553.

the numbers on the other explicitly multi-ethnic parties—by the proportion of the vote each party attracted in each election. This generates a metric for ethnic division in BiH as expressed with voting behavior, something we call the *Ethnic Division Voting Index* (EDVI). We would expect that easing of ethnic tensions would result in shifts of voting behavior away from the most virulent ethno-nationalist parties in favor of parties that are more moderate on these issues. So, the EDVI, i.e. composite  $x$  vote percentage, should be declining over time if the ethnic tensions are easing, and *vice versa*. Similarly, if ethnic tension is on the rise, we would expect voters to express their feelings by voting for the parties that embrace ethno-nationalist ideology and appeal to voters' ethno-nationalist sympathies.

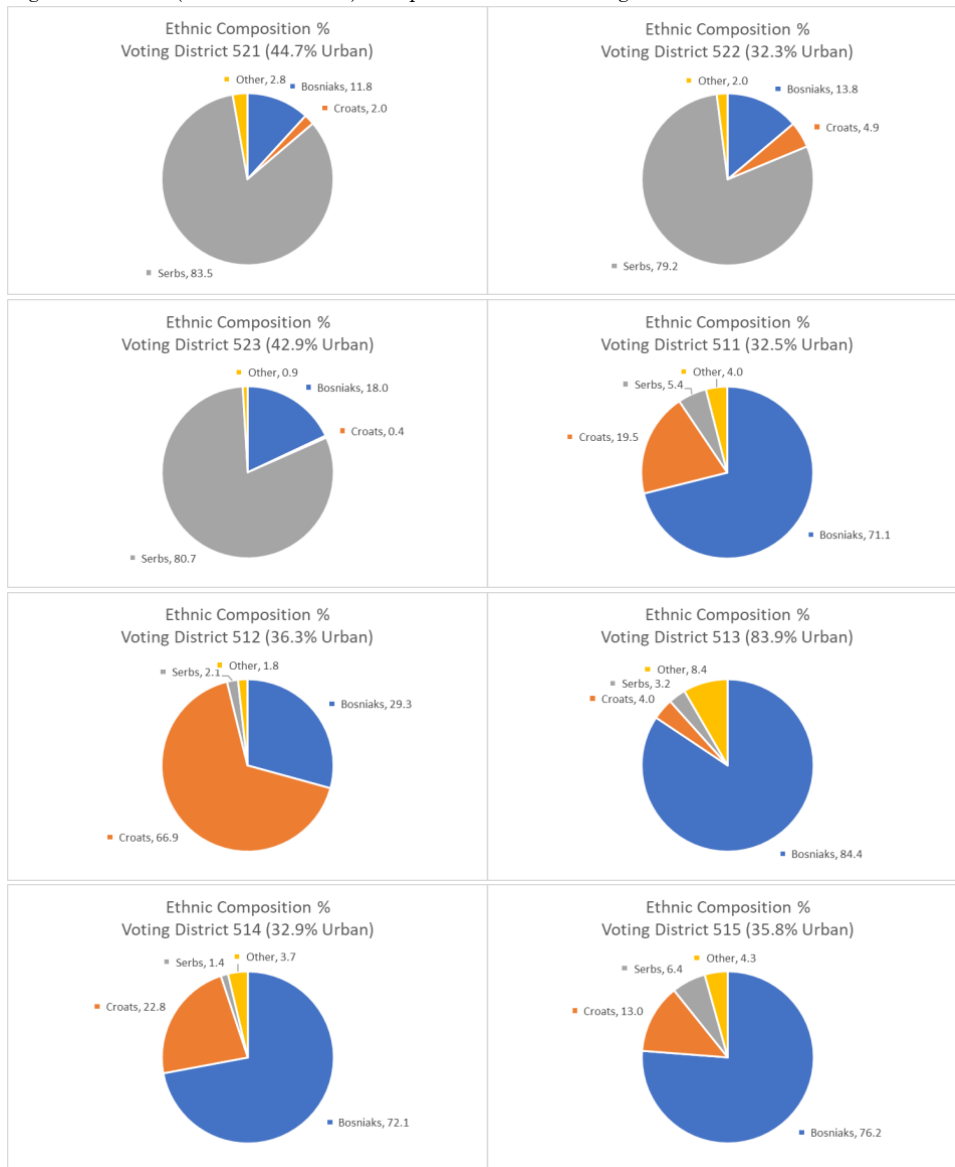
Recognizing that there are profound regional differences within BiH, we compiled the voting data separately for each of the eight voting districts, three in the RS and five in the Federation. Whereas Figure 1 here below represents the map of the above-mentioned districts, Figure 2 shows their ethnic composition, taking also into consideration the percentage of population living in urban areas. We accounted for regional variation in each of our regression models as detailed in Section 6.

Figure 1: Map of BiH Voting districts



Source: Izbora.ba. *Opći izbori 2018. Godine: Potvrđeni rezultati* (accessed: 26 June 2024).

Figure 2: Ethnic (and Urban/Rural) Composition of BiH Voting districts<sup>64</sup>



Source: Statistika.ba. [Statistika.ba](http://Statistika.ba) (26 June 2024).

### 5.3 Economic Performance Data

For the purposes of our study, it was important to select economic indicators that reflect aspects of the BiH economy that are apparent and meaningful to the voters. Unemployment rates are an obvious choice. Indeed, the ‘Misery Index’ concept introduced by Arthur Okun in 1972 included unemployment as one of two factors contributing to a consumer’s sense of economic well-being.<sup>65</sup> The other factor in Okun’s Misery Index—inflation—we chose to omit from our study as it was both stable and low over the entire period of study. This indicator, as compiled by the International Labour Organization and reported by the World Bank, has fluctuated significantly over the relevant time period, dropping by half—from 30.4% to 15.2%—between 2005 and 2021 and presenting a promising opportunity to measure its

<sup>64</sup> Districts 521-523 are in the RS, districts 511-515 are in the FBiH.

<sup>65</sup> Nissen, Ron. 2008. *The brookings institution’s Arthur Okun: Father of the ‘misery index’*. *Brookings*, 17 December 2008.

potential impact.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, we used unemployment data from the year prior to the election and ran regressions against the voting data in each of the voting districts, to see if trends in unemployment were correlated with voting behavior in favor of parties that prioritize an ethno-nationalist agenda. At the same time, we consciously decided not to include inflation persistence, since this indicator can “present [a] [...] low correlation with economic development” *per se*.<sup>67</sup>

We are mindful of the fact that the reliability of the unemployment data is in question. The problem stems from the perceived high rate of emigration for BiH over those same years. Emigration out of BiH reached a rate of 1.45% in 2013, the highest since the war years of 1990-1996, although by 2021, the net migration figures had returned to close to zero.<sup>68</sup> If unemployed people leave the country in search of work elsewhere, the unemployment rates go down, but not necessarily because of an improving economy. The decrease may be, at least in part, attributable to a decreasing number of job seekers, not an increase in employment. On the other hand, an easing of unemployment for any reason—including emigration—may have also eased, to some degree, the economic hardships on those who stayed behind.

Nonetheless, our concern for the reliability of the unemployment figures prompted us to run the regressions again, using Gross Domestic Product, controlled for inflation, as measured by the World Bank.<sup>69</sup> As discussed in Section 7.1 below, economists have long recognized GDP as an element of various ‘misery indexes,’ because it is perceived to be highly correlated with the economic woes of people on the ground. While GDP per capita might be expected to go up with high levels of emigration, GDP overall should be a fairly robust measure of the size and vibrancy of the BiH economy overall. If anything, high emigration rates should be expected to depress GDP rather than artificially inflate it. In fact, GDP increased more than four-fold from 2001 to 2021, up from 5.8 billion to 23.4 billion. That said, the numbers appeared to plateau between 2008 and 2017, changing very little either way, before resuming their climb, but the overall increase is dramatic by any measure and certainly consistent with that of a growing, strengthening economy.

## 6 Statistical Results

Early in our analysis, we expected to find little, if *any* correlation between economic performance and voting for ethno-nationalist parties. Votes for hardline Croat nationalist party HDZ have not fluctuated in any significant way over the years, despite significant swings in BiH’s economic performance numbers over the same period. From the graph below (Fig. 3), however, it is easy to see that in all eight voting districts, the EDVI fluctuations tracked fluctuations in unemployment overall, with a few exceptions. Four districts—half of them—saw modest declines in ethno-nationalist voting in the 2002-2010 period, despite rising unemployment; three districts saw modest rises in ethno-nationalist voting in the 2014-2018 period despite a dramatic decline in unemployment over the same period:

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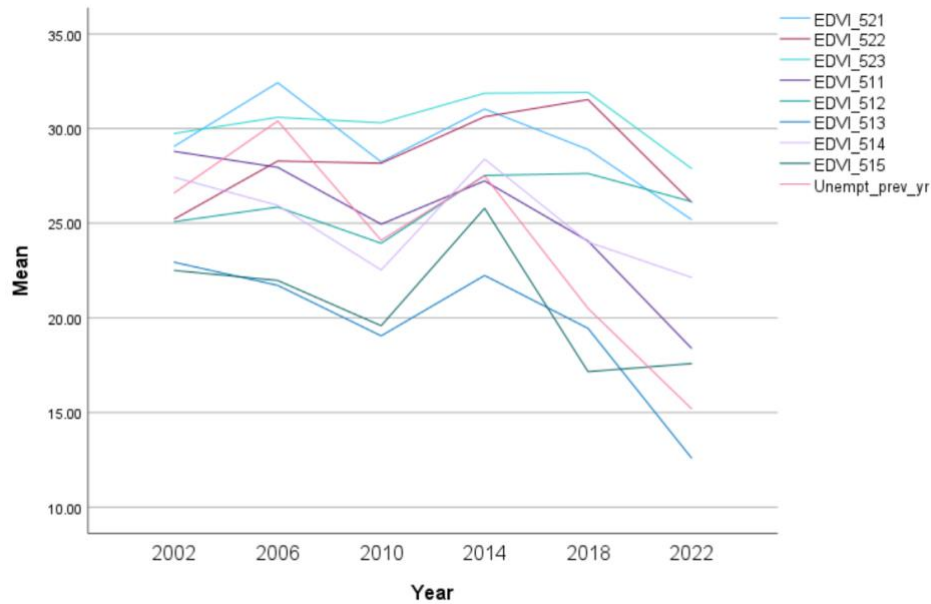
<sup>66</sup> International Labour Organization. *ILOSTAT-ILO Modelled estimates and projections database* (accessed: 3 June 2024).

<sup>67</sup> Roncaglia de Carvalho / André, Ribeiro / Rafael S. and André M. Marques. 2018. Economic development and inflation: A theoretical and empirical analysis. *International Review of Applied Economics* 32(4), 546-565, 546.

<sup>68</sup> Macrotrends. *Bosnia and Herzegovina net migration rate 1950-2024* (accessed: 3 June 2024).

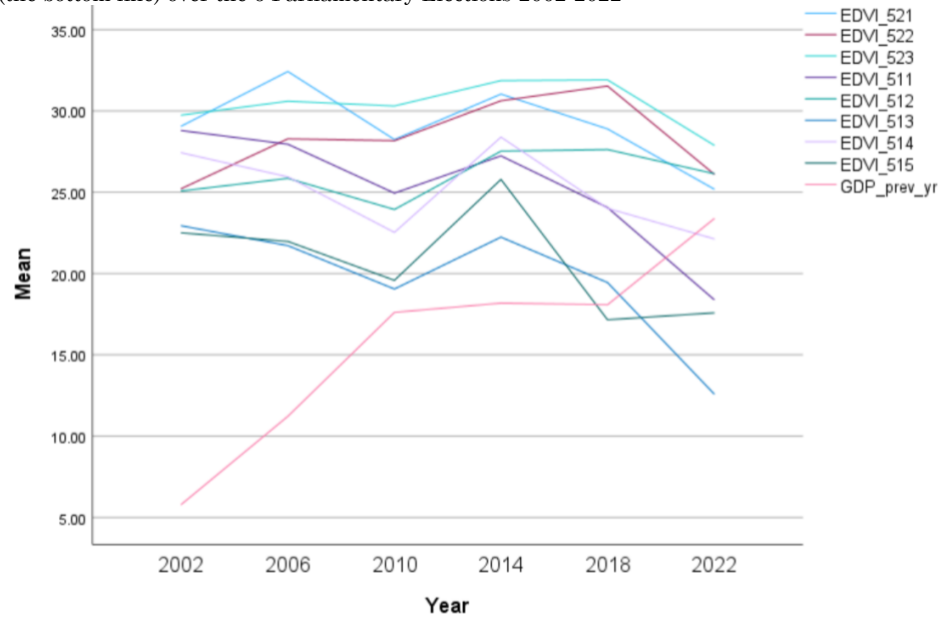
<sup>69</sup> World Bank. *National accounts data and OECD national accounts data files* (accessed: 3 June 2024).

Figure 3: Depiction of Ethnic Division Voting Index in the 8 Voting districts in BiH and Unemployment (orange) over the 6 Parliamentary Elections 2002-2022



The graph of EDVI against Gross Domestic Product similarly reveals *some* apparent correlation. While GDP has increased dramatically over the period, it is worth noting that when it appeared to level off between 2010 and 2014, ethno-nationalist voting in all eight voting districts spiked upward in a dramatic reversal from the downward trend they had all exhibited over the prior 4-year period. That said, when GDP remained stagnant over the next cycle—2014-2018, the trend shifted back downward in five districts, and the upward trend eased noticeably in the other three, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Depiction of Ethnic Division Voting Index in the 8 Voting districts in BiH and Gross Domestic Product (the bottom line) over the 6 Parliamentary Elections 2002-2022



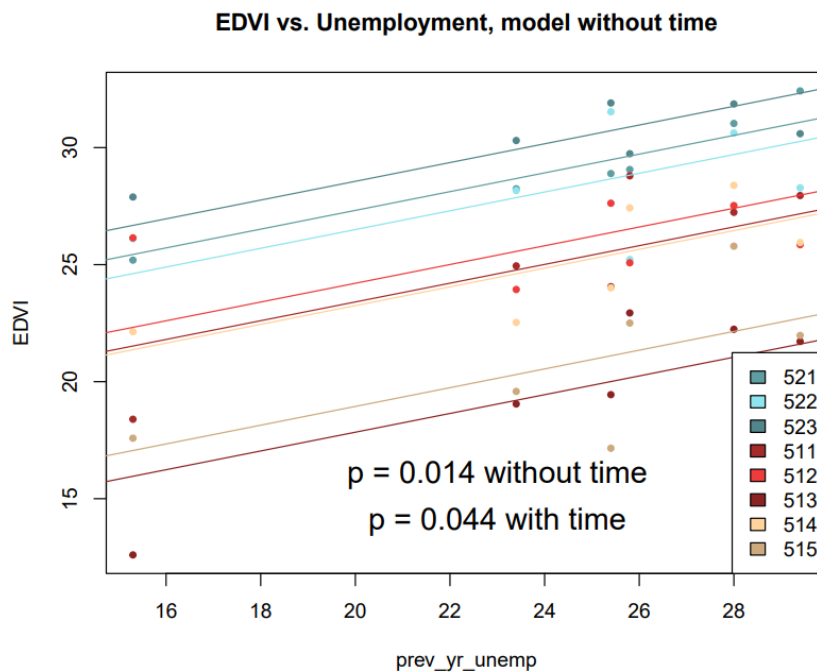
Successively, we ran regressions to test the correlation between ethno-nationalist voting—as measured by EDVI—and each of these two economic indicators. We note that although our voting data is aggregated separately within each voting district, economic data is measured

only at the national level. As such, the primary unit of analysis in our regression analysis is not a specific district at a specific time, but rather the entire nation at a specific time. However, since we have access to the district-specific voting totals, we are able to use region in our analysis to explain variation in voting behavior, much as individual-level variables can be used to improve precision in studies with clustered exposures.<sup>70</sup>

### 6.1 Statistical Correlation with Unemployment

Using unemployment rates the year before the election as our independent variable—and the EDVI in each voting district as a dependent variable—we got results suggesting a statistically significant correlation across the various voting districts. We also ran the regressions using a linear time trend as an additional independent variable, to account for the possibility that an easing of ethnic tension was connected to the passage of time, rather than to the steadily decreasing unemployment rates over the same period. In both cases, we got statistically significant correlations—p values of 0.014 without time as a variable, and 0.044 when time was taken into account, both under 0.05—as shown below. Due to the relatively small sample size, p-values were calculated using a clustered permutation procedure—permuting economic indicators across timepoints—rather than a normal approximation.

Figure 5. Correlation between the Ethnic Division Voting Index in the 8 Voting districts in BiH and Unemployment in BiH over the 6 Parliamentary Elections 2002-2022



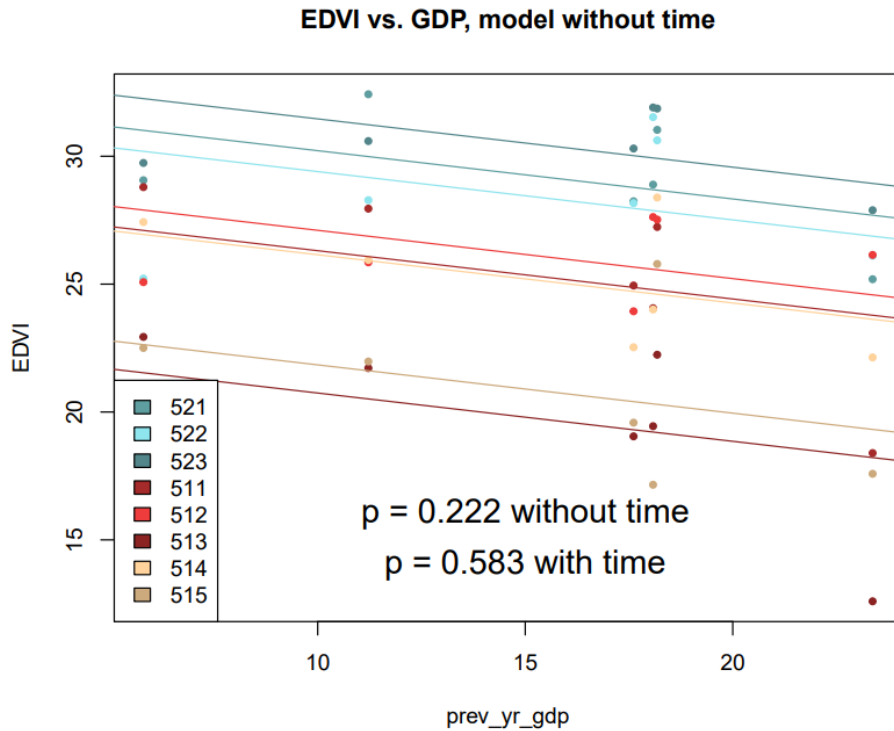
### 6.2 Statistical Correlation with GDP

We ran a similar regression across all eight voting districts, testing EDVI against BiH's Gross Domestic Product, but could not find a statistically significant correlation there, as the regressions generated p values of 0.222 without time as a variable, and 0.583 when time was taken into account, both substantially exceeding the 0.05 p value threshold for significance.

<sup>70</sup> Abadie, Alberto / Athey, Susan / Imbens, Guido W. and Jeffrey Wooldridge. 2023. When should you adjust standard errors for clustering?. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 138(1), 1-35.



Figure 6: Correlation between the Ethnic Division Voting Index in the 8 Voting districts in BiH and Gross Domestic Product in BiH over the 6 Parliamentary Elections 2002-2022



### 6.3 Separate Analysis of Individual Voting Districts

Not content to assess these relationships nationwide, we compared each fitted model to an enriched model that allowed for different coefficients of unemployment or GDP in each region, using a permutation F-test. For both unemployment ( $p=0.033$ ) and GDP ( $p=0.033$ ), the test found that the model with different slopes fit significantly better. Although this model explained the data better, our sample size was too small to establish significance of the region-specific slopes for the large majority of regions and indicators—after a multiple testing correction was made to the p-values. In fact, only the relationship between EDVI and unemployment in Banja Luka/Prijedor was reliably significant (see Tables 2 and 3 below).

Table 2: Unemployment results by region, for model with separate slopes by region

Region	Coefficient	R-squared	P-value (raw)	P-value (corrected)
521	0.479	0.928	0.003	0.022
522	0.219	0.197	0.389	1
523	0.239	0.636	0.119	0.956
511	0.699	0.843	0.053	0.422
512	0.047	0.027	0.739	1
513	0.713	0.88	0.047	0.378
514	0.384	0.547	0.047	0.378
515	0.426	0.417	0.117	0.933

Note: P-values are calculated via clustered permutation tests and adjusted using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons (over all tests in the table).

Table 3: GDP results by region, for model with separate slopes by region

Region	Coefficient	R-squared	P-value (raw)	P-value (corrected)
521	-0.217	0.295	0.264	1
522	0.14	0.126	0.503	1
523	-0.034	0.02	0.822	1
511	-0.511	0.694	0.011	0.089
512	0.076	0.11	0.525	1
513	-0.474	0.6	0.047	0.378
514	-0.254	0.371	0.206	1
515	-0.236	0.198	0.383	1

Note: *P-values are calculated via clustered permutation tests and adjusted using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons (over all tests in the table).*

We are mindful of the fact that we are working with a small sample, only six election years over a 20-year period. If we had more data points from more than six elections, it would be possible to reach more definitive conclusions. As it stands, we do see a correlation, particularly with respect to unemployment, nationwide, and most pronounced in the Banja Luka/Prijedor voting district, between the performance of the Bosnian economy and voters' choice to support, with their votes, an ethno-nationalist agenda. This association does not necessarily demonstrate a causal link between unemployment and polarization. Since economic conditions are not randomly assigned prior to elections, the association may be the result of a third, unmeasured confounding variable. We note, however, that a time trend, the most obvious candidate confounder, does not appear to explain the association—although we could not test fixed effects of time since economic indicators were measured only for the entire country in each year. We also note that unobserved confounding would need to be substantial to account for the observed effect; sensitivity analysis shows that omitted variables would need to explain over 60% of the remaining variation in both unemployment and EDVI to shift the observed coefficient back to zero.<sup>71</sup>

## 7 Interpretation and Analysis

Although the regressions do not give us definitive answers, it is worth noting that the data does show correlation with unemployment, despite the comparatively small sample size we were working with. In making sense of the conclusions of this statistical study, it is worth exploring a couple of issues: (1) why the unemployment data gives different results than the GDP data, and (2) why the ethnic tensions may not be fully reflected in voting behavior. Each of these concerns are addressed in turn.

### 7.1 Why Does Unemployment Appear More Strongly Correlated with Voting Behavior than GDP Does?

On some level, we should expect GDP and unemployment to correlate closely, albeit inversely with each other, and therefore to show similar correlations with outside factors—in this case, the EDVI data. Ever since Arthur Okun connected the two measures,<sup>72</sup> it has been widely accepted that an increase in GDP is accompanied by a corresponding decrease in

<sup>71</sup> Ciftci, Sabri. 2010. Modernization, Islam, or social capital: What explains attitudes toward democracy in the Muslim world?. *Comparative Political Studies* 43(11), 1442-1470; Cinelli, Carlos and Chad Hazlett. 2020. Making sense of sensitivity: Extending omitted variable bias. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series B: Statistical Methodology* 82(1), 39-67.

<sup>72</sup> Okun, Arthur M. 1963. *Potential GNP: Its measurement and significance*. Yale University: Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics.

unemployment, even if the exact ratio has been the subject of dispute.<sup>73</sup> So why should voting behavior be more closely tied to unemployment than to GDP?

One possible answer is that unemployment is more immediately perceivable by the typical voter. Surely, the individual voter is aware of his or her own employment situation, as well as that of family and close friends. Knowing that one's loved one is out of work and unable to find work would undoubtedly breed frustration and discontent with the state of society. The logic follows that such discontent may be easily exploited by opportunistic politicians who can make scapegoats of rival ethnic groups and harness the ethno-nationalistic resentment to further their own political prospects.

In contrast, a voter will not *typically* be aware of the country's GDP figures. Only if a decline in GDP manifests itself in something like a local plant closure will the average Bosnian be aware of, much less react to, the economic downturn. As suggested by Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi, GDP may not be an ideal measure of well-being.<sup>74</sup> For these reasons, one might expect some measure of disconnect between fluctuations in GDP and individuals' sense of economic well-being.

Another factor that may be at play here is that GDP may go up but not enhance the well-being of the ordinary voter, as noted by Kapoor and Debroy.<sup>75</sup> GDP similarly fails to account for distribution issues. That is because rising GDP may reflect vastly increasing fortunes for the wealthy, while corresponding with stagnating, or even declining outcomes for the poorer—and much larger—portions of the populace, including the typical BiH voter.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, a future study might make use of the Gini index to account for distribution effects. Regrettably, there was insufficient Gini index data available for BiH to permit us to do this analysis at this time.

## 7.2 The Effect of Patronage Systems

One potential problem with our analysis is the concern that voters may have motives for supporting particular political parties that have little or nothing to do with the parties' ethno-nationalist agenda—or lack thereof. In BiH, the establishment parties—particularly the ethno-nationalist ones—operate patronage systems in which assets, resources, services and public goods are assigned based on the identity of the recipients and their respective connections. Such structures persuade many citizens to join these networks in the hope of receiving some rewards. Accordingly, voter support for ethno-nationalist parties may have more to do with loyalty to these groups that provide these benefits than with ethnic division.<sup>77</sup> However, such an enterprise is outside the scope of our inquiry. Due to the fact that the subject deserves serious academic attention, we hope that future studies will engage in further investigation on the impact of patronage systems on national and regional voting behavior.

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<sup>73</sup> Prachowny, Martin F. J. 1993. Okun's law: Theoretical foundations and revised estimates. *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 75(2), 331-336.

<sup>74</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph / Sen, Amartya and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. 2010. Mismeasuring our lives: Why GDP doesn't add up. *The New Press*, 1-69.

<sup>75</sup> Kapoor, Amit and Bibek Debroy. 2019. GDP is not a measure of human well-being. *Harvard Business Review*, 4 October 2019 (accessed: 3 June 2024).

<sup>76</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph. 2011. Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%. *Vanity Fair*, 31 March 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Belloni, *The rise and fall*, 57-59.

## 8 Conclusions

In both international and domestic circles, it has been postulated that improving economic conditions in BiH would promote the easing of the ethnic polarization that has characterized the entire post-Dayton process. This is somehow the pragmatic translation of what MT has been saying for more than six decades about the pace of development in the Western bloc after 1945. Yet in the framework of its traumatic transition from dictatorship, to war, and to post-war recovery, BiH represents a case where people's voting preferences are not so clearly and predictably affected by the economy.

Indeed, there are other valid reasons to doubt that a better economy provides the electorate with more democratic 'antibodies' against ethnic strife and the accompanying political extremism. And BiH, trapped as it is in the logic of party patronage, may be a particularly conspicuous example of that. As we have seen, the vast majority of authors who tried to scrutinize the issue keep wondering why chauvinist-like actors enjoy support *despite* "hav[ing] presided over more than a decade of [...] stagnation and [...] disaster."<sup>78</sup> From the point of view of academic contribution, the novelty of this paper lies in the fact that it tries to investigate whether it is possible to replace that 'despite' with other interpretations. For instance, when reading the literature on comparative politics, it seems that the more voters desire growth, the greater is their nationalist mobilization.

Our regressions nonetheless looked for correlations between (1) two key economic indicators, i.e., unemployment and GDP, with (2) ethno-nationalist political parties' election results in Bosnian parliamentary elections from 2002 to 2022. Recognizing that many other factors may affect voting behavior, we hypothesized that voting behavior would reflect, at least in part, the degree to which ethnic tension persists; indeed, the candidates for office in BiH appear to believe that, given the ethnic appeals in their campaign messaging. Our initial expectation, that there would be no correlation, was betrayed by the statistical results which found a statistically significant correlation nationwide between unemployment and declines in support for the more virulent ethno-nationalist parties. This result seems to give an—at least partially—affirmative answer to our research question, proving, as postulated by scholars such as Dyrstad in the elaboration of the MT,<sup>79</sup> that there is some kind of correlation between economic development and voting behavior. Given the small sample size, however, we were unable to establish such a correlation—or, for that matter, the lack of one—in any voting district outside of the Banja Luka/Prijedor district, or with GDP anywhere.

Further study in the future, when larger sample sizes are available, may be able to establish clearer correlations with GDP and with unemployment in individual voting districts outside of the Banja Luka/Prijedor voting district. But for now, in much of BiH, the connection between economic performance and ethnic conflict—as reflected in voting behavior—is difficult to show. Accordingly, while it appears that lower unemployment may help generally, and particularly in one region of the RS, it cannot presently be shown that a 'bigger boat' is a sufficient condition to resolve the lamentable yet persistent ethnic polarization of BiH. The demonstrable connection between declining unemployment and the fading influence of virulently ethno-nationalist parties in the political area, however, suggests that expanding employment opportunities may be a positive factor in the larger effort to ease ethnic tensions in BiH.

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<sup>78</sup> Mujkić and Hulsey, *Explaining the success*, 144.

<sup>79</sup> Dyrstad, *After ethnic civil war*, 824.

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