Department of
Social Sciences

Faculty of Humanities,
Education and
Social Sciences

From Lived Experience to Constitutional Preferences: How Citizens Understand Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Lessons from interviews and focus groups

Ensar Muharemović, Mia Džepina, and Josip Glaurdić

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Executive Summary

This research note presents key findings from individual interviews and focus groups conducted in January and February of 2026 across Bosnia and Herzegovina by the team of researchers associated with the project "Constitutional Engagement for the Transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (CONSENT BiH), with the aim of informing the design of a nationally representative survey and a conjoint experiment on constitutional reform preferences. The findings suggest a significant gap between how constitutional politics is framed in elite discourse and how it is understood by citizens.

Several consistent patterns emerge:

- **The political system is primarily understood as complex and opaque, with patronage and clientelism emerging as key ways in which citizens make sense of how it operates.**
  Institutions are widely perceived as distant and alienated mechanisms for distributing jobs and resources through party networks, rather than as neutral frameworks of representation.
- **Institutional complexity is interpreted as enabling political control rather than accommodating diversity.**
  The multi-layered territorial organization is seen as a perplexing structure which obscures responsibility as well as a source of inefficiency and a vehicle for expanding patronage.
- **Citizens exhibit weak political agency.**
  Institutional fragmentation, along with the perceived clientelism, makes it difficult for citizens to identify where power resides or how it can be influenced, contributing to disengagement and fatalism.
- **Ethnic identity does not consistently structure constitutional reasoning.**
  While embedded in institutions, ethnic categories are not the primary lens through which citizens evaluate political arrangements in everyday discussions.
- **Institutional safeguards are supported in principle but rejected when used for obstruction.**
  Mechanisms such as veto powers are viewed pragmatically, with their legitimacy depending on whether they are seen as protective or as tools of political bargaining and blockage.
- **Dissatisfaction with the political system does not translate into coherent reform preferences.**
  Although negative evaluations of the system are widespread, they are rarely accompanied by clearly articulated or internally consistent proposals for constitutional change.

Introduction

Systematic inquiry into the constitutional preferences of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina has remained relatively limited and underutilized. Debates and reform initiatives concerning the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina have largely been shaped through elite-driven and institutional processes, with limited systematic attention to citizens' perspectives. Very little has been done in terms of developing bottom-up qualitative approaches to examine how citizens themselves understand, prioritize, and relate constitutional issues to their everyday lives. Much of the existing research on the topic has been dominated by elite framings of the issues that are central to constitutional reform. When citizens are consulted, these inquiries rarely move beyond survey instruments and predefined questions that translate and reiterate elite agendas into fixed response options. As a result, while we today possess considerable knowledge about how elites frame constitutional issues and what the dominant elite-defined markers of possibility in constitutional reform are, we know very little about what citizens themselves think and how they interpret the functioning of the political system in their everyday lives. This represents a serious shortcoming in the existing research on Bosnia and Herzegovina, its political system, and the possibilities for transforming the Dayton constitution.

While existing research reflects the elite-driven and ethnocentric nature of post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina itself, we argue that exploring citizens' attitudes offers multiple benefits. First, it can strengthen the democratic capacity of any comprehensive constitutional reform process. Second, knowledge of how citizens perceive, think about, and discuss systemic issues can be used to compare, evaluate, and potentially correct elite-centric discourses. Finally, the way citizens speak about these issues can differ substantially from the way elites do and consequently may lead to the identification of solutions that have previously been ignored or simply not recognized. Scholarship on Bosnia and Herzegovina has largely revolved around three dominant themes: ethnic conflict, consociational power-sharing, and post-war governance (e.g. Bose 2002; Chandler 2000; Bieber 2006). While we acknowledge the value of this literature, our research builds on earlier deliberative studies (Steiner et al. 2017; Dejaeghere and Vermeersch 2017; Gherghina et al. 2023) with the aim of expanding and extending them through structured cross-ethnic comparison.

The purpose of this research note is therefore not to offer a definitive interpretation of citizens' constitutional preferences, but to provide an empirically grounded basis for subsequent stages of the project (expert workshop and public opinion research) and to help structure the next stage of the project: the design of a nationally representative survey and a subsequent conjoint experiment on constitutional reform preferences in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that sense, the note is intended as a diagnostic and agenda-setting document, identifying the main patterns that emerged from the qualitative

material and translating them into questions for methodological and substantive refinement.

Data and Methods

Building on existing public opinion research (Irwin 2005; Ó Tuathail et al. 2006; Morgan-Jones et al. 2020; Pickering 2022), we combined semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups to study citizens' constitutional preferences. Through a mixed qualitative design, we were able to capture two different but complementary dimensions of citizen reasoning. While individual interviews helped us analyze the connection between the participants' political concerns and their personal experiences, focus groups allowed for an exploration of the impact of collective discussions on individual interpretations, as well as attitude formation through interaction.

Our research design was guided by two main principles: allowing citizens to speak in their own words and avoiding predefined directions of discussion. Questions were intentionally simple in construction and as neutral as possible in content, allowing maximum space for participants to express their views. At the same time, neutrality did not mean the absence of structure. Therefore, questions were designed to cover the following areas: everyday lives of citizens, their relationship to the state, perceptions of fairness and representation, governance and accountability, human rights, trust in institutions, participation, as well as imagined futures. These topics were then organized into ten thematic clusters. Discussions were approached with the goal of identifying and understanding the language citizens use when talking about constitutionally relevant issues. The discussion format enabled conversations to remain focused while avoiding direct prompting or priming of specific responses.

We conducted twelve semi-structured online individual interviews, and six in-person focus groups. Out of the selected interviewees, three belonged to each of the dominant ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats), and three identified as Others. The interviews provided in-depth insights into how citizens think about the political system, understand the country's institutional architecture, and rationalize power relations within society. During the interview process, similar themes began to appear repeatedly, and thematic saturation was reached after approximately seven to eight interviews.

In addition to interviews, we conducted six focus groups in three major cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Mostar, and Banja Luka. Each group consisted of six to eight participants. Sarajevo served as the main location, where four focus groups were held: a Bosniak monoethnic group, a group composed of participants identifying as Others, and two groups with participants of different ethnic backgrounds. The remaining groups were conducted in Mostar (Croat monoethnic group) and Banja Luka (Serb monoethnic group). It is important to note here that the focus group participants were recruited from

the broader regions surrounding the three cities, i.e. they were not all from Sarajevo, Mostar, or Banja Luka. This approach, combining mono-ethnic, mixed and Other configurations allowed the study to observe whether grievances and constitutional questions varied across distinct social settings.

Recruitment of participants was done by an external company specialized in public opinion research through a structured screening process. Participants were selected based on five key socio-demographic criteria: ethnicity, geography, age, gender, and education. They were also screened for political involvement and household ties to political parties, the media, public administration related to policymaking, NGOs or public opinion research. Those individuals who had any form of political engagement that would make them likely to be elite or elite-adjacent political actors were excluded. Both the interviews and focus groups were recorded. The recordings were used exclusively for the purpose of drafting reliable transcripts with no intention of being published. All participants were anonymized, and quotes used in publications will not contain identifying information.

At this stage, the analytical process consisted primarily of identifying recurring cognitive and semantic patterns that participants used when discussing constitutional issues and institutional mechanisms. All interviews and focus groups were followed by an intensive documentation process that served as the primary basis for early data structuring. During fieldwork, observer and orientation sheets were used, which scored each participant (and focus group), across the analytical clusters, on three criteria: salience, narrative intensity and discursive framing, while the orientation sheet was designed to capture the interviewee's position towards the clusters.

For post-fieldwork documentation, analytical memos were used, which systematized reflection immediately after each interview and focus group, detailing narrative style, interactions, emotional trajectories, contradictions, saliences and/or tensions, as applicable. Drawing on qualitative empirical findings, this note identifies several reoccurring patters in how respondents related to constitutionally relevant themes and issues.

From lived experience to constitutional reasoning

The central observation emerging from both interviews and focus groups was that citizens rarely approach constitutional questions in abstract or institutional terms. Instead, discussions were consistently anchored in everyday experiences – most notably employment opportunities, economic insecurity, public services, and perceptions of corruption. Constitutional arrangements and institutional mechanisms entered these discussions only indirectly, as participants attempted to explain the underlying causes of the problems they encounter in their daily lives. In this sense, constitutional reasoning

was not a starting point but an outcome of a broader interpretive process through which citizens connect lived experience to perceived structures of political authority.

This pattern has important analytical implications. It suggests that citizens' attitudes toward institutional design are shaped less by formal knowledge of constitutional arrangements and more by their perceived consequences. As a result, constitutional preferences are often expressed in simplified, instrumental, or outcome-oriented terms rather than through fully articulated models of institutional reform. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for interpreting the empirical material presented below and for designing the next stage of the project, where survey instruments and experimental designs will need to capture how citizens translate everyday experiences into preferences over institutional alternatives.

Lesson 1
Patronage and clientelism are dominant interpretative frames of the political system

Across both individual interviews and focus groups, participants consistently described the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina not in terms of formal institutional arrangements, but through the lens of corruption, clientelism, and informal networks of influence. While institutional complexity, territorial organization, and constitutional rules were frequently discussed, these were often interpreted as mechanisms that enable or sustain patterns of political favoritism rather than as neutral frameworks for representation and governance. This mode of interpretation was particularly pronounced in those cases where participants exhibited difficulty in identifying concrete power structures within the system.

Employment emerged as the most salient domain through which these perceptions were articulated. Participants repeatedly emphasized that access to jobs – particularly in the public sector – depends less on qualifications and more on party membership, personal connections, or informal ties. As one participant in Sarajevo noted, "*if you want to get a job…you need to be in a party, you need connections*." Similar formulations appeared across all groups, including Mostar and Banja Luka, suggesting a broadly shared understanding of how the system operates in practice.

Importantly, these perceptions extend beyond employment to encompass a broader understanding of the political system as a whole. Participants frequently described political parties as the primary actors shaping institutional outcomes, not through programmatic competition, but through control over administrative structures and public resources. The multiplication of levels of government and public offices was often interpreted not simply as a source of inefficiency, but as a deliberate mechanism for expanding opportunities for patronage. In this sense, institutional complexity itself is

reinterpreted by citizens as evidence of systemic corruption, overshadowing its role as a feature of constitutional compromise.

These dynamics also shape how citizens perceive ethnic representation within the political system. While participants did not reject the idea of group representation as such, they frequently interpreted existing quota-based arrangements as being embedded within the same networks of patronage. In practice, positions allocated along ethnic lines were often seen as being filled not on the basis of competence, but through party affiliation and personal connections. As a result, the principle of representation itself becomes conflated with clientelist distribution, undermining its perceived legitimacy. Rather than opposing representation, citizens implicitly call for its separation from party control and for a clearer distinction between political representation and administrative professionalism.

This points to a broader expectation that state institutions should be more autonomous from political parties. Across discussions, there is a recurring – though rarely explicitly theorized – demand for a form of institutional "emancipation," where public administration operates according to meritocratic and professional criteria rather than partisan loyalty. In this sense, dissatisfaction with the constitutional system is not only directed at its formal structure, but also at the way in which that structure enables the penetration of party networks into the functioning of the state.

Implications for constitutional reform: Citizens' attitudes toward constitutional arrangements are profoundly shaped by their perception that the political system functions as a deeply alienated structure, often operating through networks of patronage. Reforms that do not address corruption and clientelism are therefore unlikely to be perceived as meaningful, regardless of their formal institutional design. Conversely, proposals that reduce opportunities for discretionary control, strengthen meritocratic recruitment, simplify administrative structures, or increase institutional accountability may resonate more strongly, even when they involve trade-offs in terms of representation or decentralization.

Lesson 2
Territorial organization is a key dimension of systemic complexity

The topic of Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal structure was raised in all interviews and focus groups. To a large extent, it determined how citizens viewed the country and its future. However, even when citizens explicitly considered issues of representation, autonomy or conflict management in the context of territorial organization, the element of political patronage was present. One participant from the Sarajevo mixed focus group expressed this frustration very directly: "*Nothing is organized here. We are structured like Switzerland…cantons, ministers, ministries everywhere. Of course that worries me. When*

my son sends a CV, it's not about whether he is qualified. It's about who his uncle is, which party he belongs to, whether he goes to the mosque or the church" (Mixed Focus Group, Sarajevo). A somewhat different interpretation appeared in the Serb mono-ethnic group in Banja Luka. Instead of arguing that the present territorial organization is good or even desired, the Banja Luka group emphasized that the current territorial division emerged from a devastating war and that altering it under present conditions could risk reopening the same conflict. "*Our lives are organized the way they are because the country is divided. I don't see how that could be changed… we all know how these entities came into being. Any attempt to change that would probably happen the same way*" (Serb Focus Group, Banja Luka).

Support for the cantonal organization of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) was strikingly low in all groups held in Sarajevo (Bosniak mono-ethnic, Others, and two mixed groups). During focus group discussions, citizens would quickly agree that the cantonal system in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was too complex, opaque, inefficient, and costly. In Mostar and Banja Luka groups, critique was more nuanced. One participant from the Banja Luka group captured this sentiment when he compared the situation in FBiH to the one in the Republic of Srpska. "*The Republic of Srpska functions as a single unit, which makes decision-making easier across the territory, but it also concentrates power in one place and increases the risk of abuse. The Federation, on the other hand, has the problem that the same issue is regulated differently across cantons, which complicates everyday life and business. In reality, both systems have advantages and disadvantages*" (Serb Focus Group, Banja Luka). Another participant from Široki Brijeg specifically singled out the middle levels of government as the main problem: "*The middle level of government is the problem in my view. If we had the state level and then counties or cantons below it, things would be much easier. The Federation as an additional layer creates complications. It feels like we simply have one level of government too many*" (Interview, Croat participant, Široki Brijeg).

Crucially, citizens rarely articulated strong attachments to specific territorial arrangements. Unlike elite discourse, which often frames territorial organization in terms of group protection and political balance, participants tended to approach these issues pragmatically, focusing on functionality and outcomes. Territorial structures were evaluated based on whether they facilitate or obstruct governance, economic activity, and access to services. In this sense, the legitimacy of territorial organization is not grounded in identity-based claims, but in its perceived performance.

What is equally important, respondents' critiques were not limited to questions of efficiency. Building on the broader perception of the political system as clientelist, participants frequently interpreted the territorial structure itself as serving the interests of political elites. The existence of multiple layers of government was often seen as enabling the creation of additional public positions, which in turn could be distributed

through party networks. As one participant in Sarajevo noted, "*we have 16 ministries in each entity…when this is reduced, they lose those positions. That is what they are protecting*," with another participant adding that political actors were effectively "*creating jobs for themselves*" (Bosniak Focus Group, Sarajevo).

Implications for constitutional reform: Citizens are likely to support reforms that simplify the territorial organization of the state, reduce the number of administrative layers, and clarify lines of authority. However, support for such reforms is closely tied to the expectation that simplification will also limit opportunities for patronage and improve institutional accountability. Proposals for territorial reorganization that do not address underlying patterns of political control may therefore be perceived as insufficient. At the same time, concerns about political stability – particularly in relation to the origins of existing territorial arrangements – suggest that support for change may be conditional and sensitive to perceived risks.

Lesson 3
Institutional complexity and perceived patronage dynamics produce weak agency

Building on the perceptions of institutional complexity and patronage dynamics, participants frequently expressed difficulty in identifying where political power is located and how it can be influenced. One of the main issues that we observed in both individual and group settings was how cognitively demanding it was for citizens to locate power within the political system. Instead of concrete examples, citizens often replaced them with very vague abstractions – politicians, elites, global actors. "*Political actors in Sarajevo often just follow the lead of foreign diplomats. They dance to whatever music the diplomats play, primarily the Americans*" (Interview, Serb participant, Banja Luka). This was especially evident during semi-structured individual interviews. The harder it was for participants to locate power within the political system, the more abstract their discourse became, and the horizon of reform gradually collapsed. On the other hand, those participants who demonstrated a clearer understanding of where power is located, who can wield it, and to whose benefit, often arrived at more concrete ideas about possible reforms by the end of the discussion. In a few cases, participants who showed a high level of understanding of political agency were still unable to formulate concrete reform ideas. However, the lack of reform imagination here may have been rooted in locating power primarily at lower levels of government or in short-term preferences regarding current political competition.

The complexity of the institutional structure often made it difficult for citizens to understand how political authority is organized and exercised. "*Basically, there is no real organization here, it's a complete collapse in our country, starting from the entities onward. There are too many entities, too many parties, too many ethnic groups, everyone doing their own thing*" (Interview, Serb participant, Prijedor). The more their discourse was shaped by

perceived structural constraints, the less constructive their narratives became. In addition, this finding was supported by evidence from focus groups, where one or two highly pessimistic participants with strongly negative views could shape and direct the reasoning of the entire group, shifting discussions from constructive deliberation toward a more fatalistic tone that the group would then have to overcome.

Implications for constitutional reform: Citizens' ability to engage with and evaluate constitutional alternatives is closely tied to their perception of political agency. When power is perceived as opaque, dispersed, and embedded in patronage networks, support for reform may remain shallow or inconsistent, even in the presence of widespread dissatisfaction. Efforts to design and implement constitutional reforms must therefore take into account not only institutional preferences, but also the underlying conditions that shape citizens' sense of political efficacy. In this context, reforms that clarify lines of authority, reduce institutional opacity, and limit discretionary control may contribute not only to improved governance, but also to a stronger sense of citizen agency.

Lesson 4
Ethnic identity does not structure constitutional reasoning in the way elite discourse suggests

Contrary to dominant elite-centric theories of the constitutional system and reform possibilities, our discussions with the citizens showed that their thinking is far less structured by ethnic identity than expected. This does not imply that ethnic identity is absent from citizens' reasoning, but rather that it does not serve as the primary organizing frame in everyday discussions of constitutional issues. Citizens rarely referred to the collective interests of their own group or reproduced typical elite framings. Instead, they tended to frame their arguments in more general terms, often invoking fairness, functionality, or democratic principles. Ethnic identity was only occasionally noticeable in their constitutional reasoning. In some cases, participants described ethnic tensions as being created by those in power instead of being the result of everyday social relations: "*As others have already said, these tensions are created from above. It is that nationalist rhetoric that is constantly being pushed, while people themselves understand that they have to live together and in reality do not have a problem with that. I also personally have no problem with anyone in this country*" (Serb Focus Group, Banja Luka).

This is not to say that citizens did not acknowledge their identification markers, either implicitly or explicitly. However, self-identification rarely went beyond the need for transparency in discussions and dialogues. In mixed settings, when participants recognized that the group did not consist exclusively of their co-ethnics, this at times triggered moments of self-identification. One of the youngest participants from the mixed group in Sarajevo captured this contradiction: "*I'm probably the youngest person here, so this is a younger perspective. One of the worst things for young people in Sarajevo,*

and probably across Bosnia, is this constant labeling. For example, I might say I am Bosnian, Bosniak… but honestly, I am all of it. I really am everything" (Mixed Focus Group, Sarajevo). Yet, except for one single case, where the debate on dual citizenship led to a heated debate on the questions of ethnic and national identity in the second mixed group in Sarajevo, ethnic tensions did not surface in any significant capacity.

When it comes to war memories and the ways they shape perceptions of the political system and citizens' everyday lives, these were present in individual interviews but had limited and mostly anecdotal impact in group settings. In individual interviews, citizens were often prone to projecting responsibility for the dissemination of ethnic tensions, war memories, and general intolerance toward others onto abstract individuals or groups, most frequently onto younger generations present in their immediate environments. "*Of course, there are people like me who just want peace and normal relations. But in Bosnia and Herzegovina these divisions are still very strong, even more than thirty years after the war, especially among younger generations like mine*" (Interview, Croat participant, Mostar).

This suggests that while citizens position themselves above ethnic tensions and conflict in their own worldviews, they do not deny that war memories play an important role in everyday life. In this sense, ethnic identity remains socially and historically embedded, even when it does not dominate constitutional reasoning. Compared to the individual setting, participants were much less willing to project responsibility for ethnic tensions onto others in group settings. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between the role of ethnic identity in everyday reasoning and its institutional embeddedness. While participants did not strongly rely on ethnic frames in their discussions, they were aware that the political system itself is structured around ethnic categories. This creates a disconnect between how citizens reason about constitutional issues and how those issues are formally organized within the institutional framework.

Implications for constitutional reform: While ethnic nationalism is often singled out as the main driver of political polarization, citizens in their deliberations did not reproduce these elite framings in a consistent or dominant way. This suggests that there may be greater space for discussing institutional reforms in non-ethnic terms than is typically assumed in elite discourse. At the same time, the continued institutionalization of ethnic categories means that any reform proposals must still engage with these structures, even if they are not central to citizens' everyday reasoning.

Lesson 5
Citizens support institutional safeguards but reject governance blockage

Following from the limited role of ethnic identity in structuring citizens' constitutional reasoning, discussions of institutional safeguards – particularly veto mechanisms –

revealed a similarly pragmatic and non-ideological orientation. Discussions of veto mechanisms rarely provoked strong reactions among participants in either interviews or focus groups. On the contrary, the question of vetoes was rarely polarizing. In this respect, the group setting proved particularly important. Even when some participants initially raised strong objections toward protective institutional procedures, the collective dynamics often disarmed these attitudes, and groups moved in the direction of more constructive debates about the nature and role of veto procedures.

In almost all group settings, citizens concluded that protection mechanisms were not only justifiable but also necessary to some extent. One participant in the Mostar group captured this reasoning: "*It depends on the situation and how serious it is. If the majority supports something, I think we should trust the majority in most cases. But if people in power use these mechanisms only for their own interests, then of course that is not useful*" (Croat Focus Group, Mostar). The remainder of the discussions typically revolved around how to define the scope of these mechanisms and how to limit the frequent use of vetoes, which many participants described as having become synonymous with Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system. "*The veto used in parliaments has become an instrument of political parties. It turns into political bargaining, I support you, you support me, and laws or budgets get blocked. Vital national interest should exist to help citizens, but it ends up serving party interests*" (Mixed Focus Group, Sarajevo). Particularly striking was the fact that ethnic identity played only a marginal role in determining veto perceptions or pro- and anti-positions among participants. Citizens grounded their reasoning primarily in legal and democratic considerations regarding political protection rather than ethnic ones.

Implications for constitutional reform: Citizens are likely to support institutional safeguards designed to protect group interests, but only where their scope is clearly defined and their use limited. Veto mechanisms are not rejected in principle, but their legitimacy depends on how they function in practice. When perceived as tools of political bargaining, obstruction, or party control, they quickly lose support. This suggests that reforms aimed at narrowing the scope of veto powers, increasing transparency, and limiting their discretionary use would likely resonate with citizens. More broadly, support for such safeguards appears to depend less on their formal design than on their perceived susceptibility to misuse.

Lesson 6
Dissatisfaction does not translate into coherent reform preferences

Across all twelve interviews and six focus groups, citizens widely expressed negative sentiment toward the existing political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, most often directed at political elites and corruption within institutions. However, this dissatisfaction was rarely accompanied by clearly articulated or internally consistent

proposals for systemic change. On the contrary, negative sentiment was often trapped within the inability to locate responsibility, and instead of becoming productive, emotionally charged deliberations frequently collapsed internally. In such cases, attention was diverted from domestic actors toward abstract entities or external actors, often with conspiratorial undertones. "*Real power? That depends. There are secret organizations that make certain moves… politicians and officials deal with the visible things. But if the constitution were to change, these international organizations would have to change it. Just like they arranged the system we have now, they could change it again*" (Interview, Bosniak participant, Poljice, Lukavac).

In other cases, participants often stressed the perceived failure of collective action as the reason for their individual lack of influence. As one participant from the Sarajevo Bosniak group explained: "*I agree that a lot depends on our leaders, but when I look at my generation, we are quite combative, we don't give up and we want something better. But at the same time, we see examples like the protests in Belgrade that lasted for so long, where people stood up against the government and still nothing changed. That makes me think that ordinary people actually have very little power or voice. We talk about democracy, but even when people unite their influence is small. In the end it all comes down to money. Whoever has money doesn't have to follow the law*" (Bosniak Focus Group, Sarajevo).

This perception is closely linked to earlier findings on institutional opacity and patronage, which together contribute to the belief that political outcomes are not responsive to citizen input. On the other hand, citizens who demonstrated a clearer understanding of who holds political power also expressed more coherent ideas about how the system could be changed. This dynamic was particularly evident in group settings, where collective discussion could neutralize the most exaggerated cases of pessimism. Compared to individual interviews, where such processes could not develop due to the nature of the format, group discussions proved beneficial for collective reasoning and cooperation.

Implications for constitutional reform: the possibility of democratic reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on the capacity of citizens to identify where political power is located and understand how that power is exercised. When citizens perceive power as opaque, dispersed, and embedded in patronage networks, dissatisfaction is more likely to result in disengagement or externally oriented explanations than in coherent reform demands. This suggests that the design of reform proposals – and the instruments used to measure citizen preferences – must take into account the limited extent to which dissatisfaction alone structures constitutional thinking.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this research note point to a consistent pattern in how citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina understand and evaluate the constitutional system. Across interviews and focus groups, constitutional reasoning does not begin with institutional principles or identity-based claims, but with lived experience – most notably perceptions of economic insecurity, corruption, and limited opportunities. From this starting point, institutions are interpreted less as formal arrangements of representation and more as mechanisms through which power is exercised, often in ways that are seen as opaque, unaccountable, and embedded in networks of patronage.

This perspective has several important implications. First, institutional complexity is not primarily evaluated in terms of its role in accommodating diversity, but as a source of inefficiency and a vehicle for the distribution of political and administrative positions. Second, the combination of perceived clientelism and fragmented authority contributes to a broader sense of weak political agency, in which citizens struggle to identify where power resides and how it can be influenced. Third, while ethnic identity remains embedded in the institutional structure, it does not consistently serve as the primary lens through which citizens reason about constitutional issues. Instead, even highly politicized institutional features – such as veto mechanisms – are evaluated in pragmatic terms, based on their perceived effects on governance and their susceptibility to misuse. Finally, although dissatisfaction with the political system is widespread, it rarely translates into clearly articulated or internally consistent proposals for systemic reform.

Taken together, these findings suggest that there is a significant gap between the way constitutional politics is typically framed in elite discourse and the way it is understood by citizens. While political debates often emphasize identity, representation, and institutional balance, citizens tend to focus on outcomes, functionality, and accountability. This disconnect has important consequences for both the substance of potential reforms and the way in which citizen preferences should be measured.

For the next stage of the CONSENT BiH project, this implies that the design of the nationally representative survey – and particularly the conjoint experiment – should not rely on abstract or purely institutional formulations of constitutional alternatives. Instead, survey instruments should also aim to reflect the way in which citizens themselves approach these questions. This includes presenting institutional choices in concrete and simplified terms and avoiding overly technical or legalistic language. It also highlights the importance of explicitly incorporating dimensions related to political control and accountability, including the extent to which institutions are insulated from party influence or subject to discretionary use.

More broadly, the results underscore the need to move beyond treating constitutional preferences as fixed or fully articulated attitudes. Instead, the survey design should recognize that such preferences are often constructed in context and shaped by how institutional alternatives are presented. In this respect, the conjoint experiment offers a particularly suitable approach, as it will allow for the systematic variation of institutional features while capturing how citizens evaluate trade-offs between them.

Dr. Ensar MUHAREMOVIĆ is a Research Fellow at the European Strategy Institute Luxembourg (ESILUX) and Senior Researcher on the CONSENT BiH team. He earned his PhD in political science from the University of Luxembourg in 2024.

Mia DŽEPINA is a doctoral researcher at the University of Luxembourg. She earned her master's degree in European governance from the University of Luxembourg in 2022.

Prof. Josip GLAURDIĆ is a Full Professor in Political Science at the University of Luxembourg and the Principal Investigator of CONSENT BiH. He earned his PhD in political science from Yale University in 2009.

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Faculty of Humanities,
Education and
Social Sciences

Campus de Belval
Maison des Sciences Humaines
11, porte des Sciences
L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette
(+352) 46 66 44 4030
consentbih.uni.lu