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Illusory Disparities: Unravelling the Paradox of the Absence of Horizontal Inequalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina^{*,†}

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Abstract

The article investigates perceived and objective inequalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on Republika Srpska amid rising societal tensions, bolstering the secession narrative, and political mobilization. Aimed at identifying objective inequalities that might fuel grievances causing societal upheaval, the findings reveal no significant disparities between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the absence of objective economic, social, or political inequalities, a perception of disparity persists among Bosnian Serbs, driven by the nationalist rhetoric of local leaders. Hence, the research underscores the gap between perceived inequalities and objective disparities, challenging conventional beliefs about the causal chain from objective horizontal inequalities to social mobilization by demonstrating how unfounded grievances can still drive tensions and secessionist agendas.

Keywords: horizontal inequalities; grievance; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Republika Srpska; political mobilization

Introduction

In the Western Balkans, characterized by its nuanced political landscape and enduring ethnic divisions, the recent period has underscored the precarious nature of the region's stability. Yugoslavia's disintegration left unresolved issues, especially regarding national identity and statehood, and its legacy still affects the relationship between and within the successor states (Jović 2022). The debate on sovereignty and the potential for further disintegration or reintegration continues, and with the escalation of conflict in northern Kosovo since May 2023, has been accompanied by violent clashes, further highlighting the region's fragile peace (Vulović 2023a). This unrest, coupled with the ongoing crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH or Bosnia hereafter), takes place within a broader context of instability. Particularly in Bosnia, Republika Srpska's (RS) threats of secession echo the divisive nationalism that was a pivotal force in the Bosnian War during the 1990s, a sentiment that has gained fervor since 2021 (Kupchan 2021).

While the conflict in Ukraine has momentarily sidelined secessionist movements in the RS, it has proven the potential to deepen societal division and destabilize the region. This is exacerbated by

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influence operations conducted by external actors (Raducu and Hercigonja 2023), aimed at sowing discord (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023). Therefore, the enduring impasse in northern Kosovo not only epitomizes the regional challenges but also poses a significant risk for BiH, threatening its delicate equilibrium and, by extension, the entire Western Balkans (Vulović 2023a).

The political system of BiH, established in 1995 by the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA), was designed to ensure equal representation of its three constituent peoples and two entities in order to halt the civil war and mitigate the risk of future conflict (Latal 2015; Keil 2016; Merdzanovic 2017). However, BiH, close to the 30th anniversary of the peace resolution, faces its most significant existential threat of the post-war period (Gueudet 2024; TRT World 2024; OHR 2021). The ongoing tensions, marked by civil protests and isolated instances of violence against civilians (ACLED 2023), as highlighted in the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2021 report (OHR 2021) and subsequent reports (OHR 2023), raise concerns about deepening rifts and divisions within Bosnian society.

In recent years, growing tensions in Bosnia have been propelled by various factors initially driven by developments in the political landscape, notably the escalating secessionist rhetoric from Republika Srpska's leaders. Among the most prominent catalysts was a controversial law criminalizing genocide and war crimes denial and the glorifying of war criminals, which led to a deadlock in the Parliamentary Assembly from July 2021 to March 2022 (European Commission 2022; OHR 2021). Discord was further intensified by a political crisis resulting in the legal decision to withdraw RS from existing transfer agreements (Woelk 2021) and the proposal to reestablish its army and VAT collection. Such contentious political developments have fuelled growing inter-ethnic tensions and a decline in trust between the constituent peoples, leading to an increase in hate speech, civil protests, and violent events (ACLED 2023; OSCE 2024).

Despite efforts at resolution, the situation has not improved, with Milorad Dodik, the incumbent president of Republika Srpska and leader of the strongest party representing Bosnian Serbs — the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) — recently becoming even more vocal in its divisive rhetoric, epitomizing the greatest threat to the territorial integrity of BiH (Hajdari 2022; Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata 2022; UN 2021). The Office of the High Representative (OHR) has repeatedly accused (OHR 2023) Dodik of deliberate violations of the DPA and criticized his persistent secessionism. His nationalist and hostile rhetoric, primarily targeting the Bosniak population, constantly undermines the fragile peace and stability (K3 2023; Beglerović 2020).

Additionally, public opinion polls have revealed a considerable level of grievance, with 18% of respondents from Republika Srpska completely agreeing, and 29% somewhat agreeing, that their ethnic group is threatened in Bosnia today (NDI 2022). Meanwhile, the President of RS himself claims that the country has never been as divided as it is today (TRT World 2024). According to the latest OHR's report (OHR 2023) and observations from human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch 2023), ethno-nationalistic rhetoric significantly contributes to the ongoing escalation of tensions. Despite efforts at decentralization, intended to navigate ethnic divisions per the DPA, BiH remains ensnared by enduring social and political grievances, enhanced by a political system that makes cooperation beyond ethnic lines practically impossible (Bartlett et al. 2013).

In the context of BiH, these grievances are catalysts for political mobilization and secession narratives. The literature frequently describes this process as a causal chain initiated by horizontal objective inequalities between groups distinguished by identity — one group enjoying privileges, the other facing deprivation (Must 2016). Such disparity fosters perceptions of inequality and breeds grievances, leading to social mobilization in pursuit of autonomy or secession. This research delves into the inequalities that, as the literature suggests, lie at the core of perpetuating tensions between entities in BiH. As these inequalities — and perception of them — increase vulnerability and threaten regional instability, it is vital to understand them to address risks effectively.

To fully comprehend the situation in Bosnia, exploring the existing literature on the relationship between objective inequalities and grievances is essential, especially since the causal chain leading from inequalities and perceptions to grievance is often not clearly delineated. Indeed, the terms “grievance” and “objective inequalities” are frequently used interchangeably in the literature,

underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding. Following this exploration, we will outline the methods of analysis, data, and conceptualization employed in this research. This will set the stage for the analytical section, where we will discuss our findings in detail. The conclusion offers a summary of the insights and their potential implications for future studies.

The complex relationship between objective and perceived inequalities

Secession, often at issue in ethnically, culturally, or religiously diverse countries, is typically contentious, divisive, and rarely peaceful (Armitage 2010). A strong justification is needed for secession claims to be popularly accepted, especially in the absence of gross human rights violations warranting government replacement or changes to territorial integrity, as in the case of RS. Such a choice justification in the European context requires strong internal motivation (Coppieters 2010). Prominent theories highlight inequalities and grievances as critical factors for such motivation-linked political instability (Thomson 2016), often serving as catalysts for secessionist movements. Expanding on this, studies emphasize that political and economic grievances, intertwined with aspirations for a better future, can amplify these motivations, shaping the trajectory and intensity of secessionist claims (Huzska 2013, Elias and Franco-Guillén 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to examine grievances in RS that could cause social rifts and catalyze the motivation to secession.

Inequalities research, known for examining political instability and conflict escalation²⁶ has shifted towards the study of horizontal inequalities, exploring disparities between groups in multi-ethnic societies where access to resources and opportunities may vary by ethnicity and explain group-based conflict (Stewart 2008; Thomson 2016). Both political and economic dimensions of horizontal inequalities are consistently identified as strong predictors of secessionist movements and escalation of the situation (Brown 2010; Cederman et al. 2013; Buhaug et al. 2014). When coupled with ethnic diversity and group-level political exclusion, these disparities significantly heighten the risk of secessionist conflict (Brown 2010; Buhaug et al. 2014). Brown (2010) further underscores the critical role of ethnic diversity, highlighting its significant influence in shaping secession dynamics, which is particularly relevant in contexts like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.

The “greed vs. grievance” theory posits that population mobilization, and, eventually, conflict escalation are rooted in inequality and driven by the greed for power of a privileged group or the grievances of a deprived group. The literature directly links societal inequalities to feelings of greed or grievance, using these inequalities as indicators of the presence of either sentiment (Hillesund et al. 2018, Deiwiiks et al. 2012).

However, some criticize this approach. Siroky et al. (2020) argue that measures of inequalities are not suitable proxies for grievances. Must (2016) notes that the underlying causal chain has remained largely untested. The prevalent assumption is that groups develop grievances in response to inequalities, yet only a few studies have scrutinized the relationship between objective and perceived inequalities, the latter of which can evolve into grievances. These two concepts are not interchangeable (Siroky et al. 2020), but recent literature often omits the distinction and treats the process of objective inequalities translating into perceived injustice as inherent, assuming objective asymmetries generate grievances (Must 2016). For instance, Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch (2014) consider income inequality “the most obvious way to measure grievances.” Using objective inequalities as a substitute for grievances can lead to imprecise results, especially in studies examining individual or group mobilization, where people’s perceptions, rather than objective realities, drive action (Langer and Stewart 2013). Only a few authors (Rustad 2016; Must 2016; 2018; Must and Rustad 2019; Langer and Stewart 2013; Siroky et al. 2020; Miodownik and Nir 2016) have called attention to the fact that objective inequalities are used as manifestos of grievance, while there may be little correlation (Holmqvist 2012), severe discrepancies (Rustad 2016) or even a negative correlation (Langer and Stewart 2013) between the two. Building on these findings, Must and Rustad (Must 2016, 2018; Must and Rustad 2019) conducted several studies in the African context, employing surveys and semi-structured interviews to investigate the relationship between perceived

and objective inequalities. Their research consistently found discrepancies in all cases, challenging further the assumption that objective inequalities inherently translate into grievances or that objective measures can be used interchangeably with perceived inequalities.

Therefore, in the case of the tense situation in Bosnia, we aim to delve into both objective inequalities and grievances. This approach is crucial to fully understand the complexities of societal grievances and their roots in objective inequalities. Recent studies have identified two conditions of interest: first, when objective inequalities exist but the relatively deprived group is not sufficiently aware of them to feel aggrieved; and second, when objective inequalities exist but the relatively privileged group feels threatened by the potential loss of privilege (Siroky et al. 2020).

Interestingly, BiH does not fit into any of the aforementioned categories. Grievances are present, manifesting in groups feeling relatively deprived. Langer and Smedts (2013) concluded that the objective situation significantly influences the perceptions of inequality. Individuals might overestimate or underestimate their group's relative position, yet it is improbable they will misjudge it severely. This suggests that the presence of grievances among deprived Serbs and privileged Bosniaks in the common state indicates underlying objective inequalities, emphasizing the need to examine both objective and perceived inequalities to understand the situation fully.

Despite the importance of this distinction, not many authors have explored this gap. Thus, our research can contribute to understanding the distinction between objective inequalities and grievances in societies like BiH and serve as a stepping stone in untangling the relationship and the real causal mechanism. We examine whether Republika Srpska is a case in which grievances are aligned with objective inequalities and to what extent — particularly when the mobilization of Bosnian Serbs, perpetuated by Milorad Dodik, is amplified by the sense of grievance.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Although we consider the distinction between objective and perceived horizontal inequalities (HI) to be crucial, most studies treat them interchangeably (Langer and Smedts 2013), which means there is limited framework for exploring them separately. Langer and co-authors employed multilevel analysis (Langer and Smedts 2013; Langer and Stewart 2013), integrating data from surveys on perceived socioeconomic conditions with objective measures of HI. Due to limitations in data availability, replicating this approach is not feasible in our study, but we nevertheless aim to investigate the alignment between objective (horizontal inequalities (HI)) and grievances.

Objective HIs are based on material factors distinct from perceived HIs rooted in psychological factors (Siroky et al. 2020). We utilize existing data and statistics to examine common objective inequalities (Côté 2015; Hillesund et al. 2018; Siroky et al. 2020) across three categories of HI: political, economic, and social.¹

Given the lack of direct measures of perceived inequalities and the unavailability of relevant surveys, we infer perceived inequalities from the presence of evidence in secondary literature. This approach allows us to examine both objective and perceived inequalities independently.

Perceived inequalities

The process of objective inequalities translating into perceived inequalities is complex and dynamic, and remains understudied. Focusing on perceptions, with only a limited framework for research suggested by prior studies, we must rely on secondary literature for guidance in assessing political discourse to confirm the presence of perceived inequalities. Unfortunately, there is not enough survey data available to assess perceptions within the population, as was done in studies by Rustad (2016), Langer and Smedts (2013) and Must (2016).

We used a variety of sources to assess perceived grievances, including both existing scholarship and primary sources. First, the public opinion poll by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) (2022) and USAID (2023) revealed people's perceptions of inequality. However, we were limited by the questions formulated by the NDI and the frequency of its polls.

Second, we looked at media coverage, primarily local press and video coverage of speeches and public events, to provide a better understanding of how the issue is framed and presented to the public. Finally, we considered election results as an indicator revealing support for narratives on the unequal treatment of Bosnian Serbs. Official statements by Milorad Dodik provided valuable indicators of perceived grievances.

This approach has been chosen largely due to the significant influence of political leaders in shaping public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Political elites play a pivotal role in perpetuating ethnic divisions and grievances in this post-conflict society, particularly ethno-nationalist leaders who have retained power since the war and opportunistically exploited ethnic divisions to maintain their hold on office (Kartsonaki 2016; Burianova and Hlousek 2022). Politically controlled media and an education system segmented along ethnic lines present one-sided, ethnonationalist perspectives that shape citizens' views, with each ethnic group exposed to different versions of history (USAID BiH 2023) and reinforce divisive historical and contemporary narratives. These separate education systems are decentralized — governed by entities or cantons — and highly politicized. This systematic manipulation by political leaders, exacerbated by efforts toward nationalization (Kartsonaki 2016; Touquet 2012), prevents constructive dialogue and deepens the ethnic divide.

The alignment of trusted religious leaders² with political figures accentuates religious differences; this and BiH's low media literacy (Lessenski 2023) further contribute to the persistence of grievances, leaving society vulnerable to political manipulation. These factors foster reluctance to overcome the ethnic divide, as feelings of insecurity and deeply rooted perceptions of inter-ethnic animosity continue to prevail.

Objective inequalities

Measuring objective inequalities is difficult due to the scarcity of data collected at the group level relevant to HI. Challenges surround not only the systematic collection of data but also the definition of groups. However, in BiH, a data-driven approach to measuring objective HIs is possible due to the wealth of statistical data specific to different ethnic groups in line with the division of the country into two entities. 92.14% of all Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina live in RS, while 88.29% of Bosniaks live in FBiH (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013).

Regarding the structure of the entities (see Figure 2), RS is ethnically composed of 81.51% Serbs and FBiH of 70.40% Bosniaks (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013).

While the overlap between ethnic and administrative divisions allows for a data-driven approach, it also presents limitations. There is no perfect alignment between ethnicity and administrative entities, so data cannot be solely attributed to Serbs or Bosniaks and Croats. However, we were primarily interested in identifying any potentially disadvantaged position of Serbs, who make up 81.51% of the population in Republika Srpska, where 92.14% of the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina reside. Therefore, we proceeded to use data from the Institute of Statistics of Republika Srpska (2021c; 2022b; 2021a; 2021b; 2022a) and the Federal Institute of Statistics of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020b; 2022a; 2019; 2022b; 2020a) and supplemented them with data from the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013) while considering the limitations of the available data. All the data preceded 2021, when tensions reescalated. Data from 2019 and 2020 allows us to scrutinize the milieu in which secessionist rhetoric, predicated on grievances, found a receptive audience among the population.³

Dealing with three general dimensions of horizontal inequality — economic, social, and political — we addressed key related concepts and operationalized them with regard to the available data. Where statistics were not sufficient for operationalization, we primarily gathered data by examining the constitutional, electoral, and legal frameworks and other legal documents, procedural rules of the central state-level institutions, secondary literature, and media coverage. The selected variables for this investigation, along with their respective operationalization, are detailed in Tables 1–3 below.

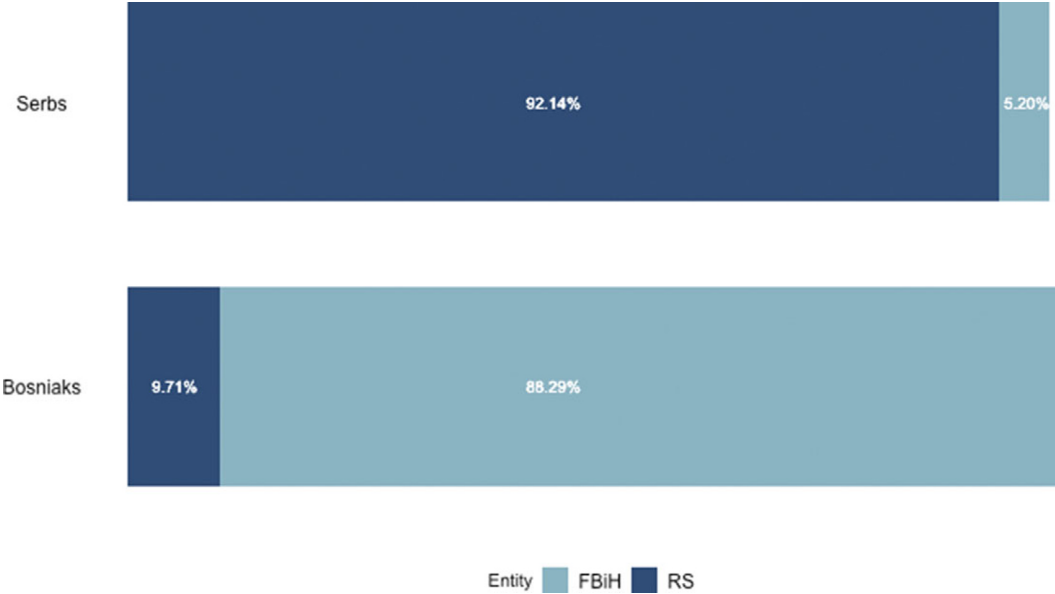


Figure 1. Population Distribution of Bosniaks and Serbs by Entities: Cenzus of Population 2013.

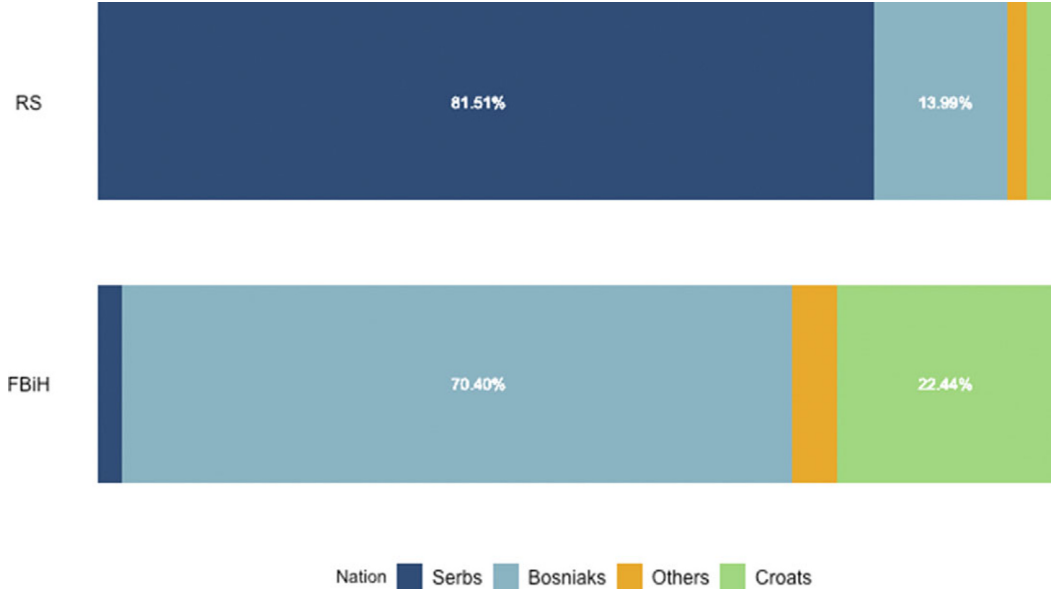


Figure 2. Population by Ethnicity in Entities: Cenzus of Population 2013.

Table 1. Conceptualization and operationalization of economic inequalities

Dimension of HI	Variable	Concept	Disparity addressed	Data source
<i>Economic inequalities</i>	Average monthly wage (net and gross)	The variable is an indication of income distribution across a population with respect to an entity.	Disparities in economic situation and well-being	Institute for Statistics of FBiH: Employment, unemployment and wage, 2020; Statistical Yearbook of Republika Srpska: Wages, Employment and Unemployment, thematic statistical bulletin, 2021
	Structure of employment across different sectors of the economy	Variable offers an understanding of employment distribution across sectors like scientific research, banking, insurance, and education, which are often associated with higher-paying and more prestigious jobs compared to the primary sector and can, therefore, expose disparities in economic opportunities.	Disparities in economic opportunities	
	Employment structure by occupation type	The distribution of employed individuals, namely employed, self-employed, and unpaid family workers, can provide a snapshot of the economic activities and industries that are prevalent in a region. Regions with a higher proportion of self-employed workers suggest an environment conducive to entrepreneurship and small business development, potentially leading to more innovation and economic growth in the long term. However, regions with a higher proportion of unpaid family workers could indicate limited job opportunities, possibly leading to lower productivity, economic stagnation or regression, and increased poverty.	Disparities in the sustainability of the economic situation	
	Type of employment contract	Variable is important to see whether part-time or full-time employment prevails, as it can reflect variations in job security and access to benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans. The implications of these variations are far-reaching, affecting not just the well-being of workers and their families but also the overall economic growth and development of a region.	Disparities in economic security	
	Rate of unemployed people in the age group 15–24	Variable is a significant consideration in the assessment of horizontal economic inequalities. The repercussions of high youth unemployment can span future employment and wages. A high rate of youth unemployment can indicate a lack of opportunities and training, potentially resulting in long-term economic disparities.	Disparities affecting future economic prospects	

Table 2. Conceptualization and operationalization of social inequalities

Dimension of HI	Variable	Concept	Disparity addressed	Data source
<i>Social inequalities</i>	Health expenditure	Variable encompasses the share of GDP, total value, and division by private and public expenditure; it has been widely recognized as a crucial measure for gauging access to healthcare. Higher health expenditure, especially as a share of GDP, often implies that a country is investing more in its healthcare system, potentially leading to better access to healthcare for its citizens. It is also used as a proxy for better health in studies that tie better health back to economic growth and better economic performance.	Disparities in access to healthcare	Institute for Statistics of FBiH: National Health Account Statistics in Federation of BiH, 2020; Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics: Health Expenditure 2020, Annual release 53/22
	Infant mortality; rates of stillbirths	Variables provide insights into the availability and quality of prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal care, and by extension, partially into broader socio-economic conditions and health behaviours.	Outcomes of disparities in healthcare accessibility	Institute for Statistics of FBiH: Demographics: Statistical bulletin 2020; Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics: Population: Statistical Yearbook of Republika Srpska 2021
	Average age of mother at the birth of her first child	Variables can shed light on reproductive health education and services, including access to contraception and family planning resources. A higher average age suggests that women have greater access to education and career opportunities, as well as reproductive health services.		
	Live births by mother's age	Variable recalculated as a share of total live births can provide additional insights into patterns of fertility and the use of reproductive healthcare services.		
	Number of schools within a given area	A fundamental measure of educational accessibility — more schools typically suggest that students have more opportunities to attend school within a reasonable distance from their home.	Disparities in access to education	Institute for Statistics of FBiH: Primary Education 2021, Statistical Bulletin; Institute for Statistics of FBiH: Secondary education in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2019, First release; Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics: Education: Statistical Yearbook of Republika Srpska 2021;
	Pupil enrolment figures	Variables can provide valuable insights into the proportion of children attending school,	Disparities in access to education	

Continued

Table 2 Continued

Dimension of HI	Variable	Concept	Disparity addressed	Data source
		thereby indicating the degree of educational participation.		Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census of Population,
	Number of teaching staff	The variable reflects the quality of education provided. A lower student-to-teacher ratio often suggests more individual attention and potentially better learning outcomes.		
	Ratio of those successfully completing primary education	The variable can indicate not only access but also the effectiveness of the education system in supporting students through to completion		
	The highest attained education level among the working-age population	Variable provides insights into the extent to which individuals within a society have been able to access and complete different levels of education – primary, secondary, and tertiary. Differences in the proportion of employed individuals holding primary, secondary, and tertiary education qualifications can reflect the quality and availability of education and training opportunities in a region.	Outcomes of disparities in education accessibility	Institute for Statistics of FBiH: Employment, unemployment, and wage, 2020; Statistical Yearbook of Republika Srpska: Wages, Employment and Unemployment, Thematic Statistical Bulletin 2021; Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013

Table 3. Conceptualization and operationalization of political inequalities

Dimension of HI	Variable	Concept	Disparity addressed	Data source
<i>Political inequalities</i>	National quotas on office distribution; real distribution in offices	Variable, in the specific case of BiH, represents the actual influence and participation (including exclusion) of constituent nations, specifically Bosnian Serbs, in central institutions. It will be examined based on the entity and national quotas on office distribution.	Disparities in the distribution of political power and the ability to control the central legislative, executive, and jurisdiction bodies	Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, institutions' websites, secondary literature, Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina
	Procedural rules	Formation of a majority regarding national participation and veto mechanisms is a crucial indicator of potential group exclusion from decision-making. This is significant as the veto mechanism can be used to halt legislation that threatens vital interests.	Disparities in the ability to participate in decision-making	
	Areas under state-level competence, latest annual budgets, sources of income specific to the level of governance	Inclusion assumes that the more centralized the power is, the more prone it is to grievances. Concentration of power in the centre may, through its non-entity-specific policies, cause marginalization of a particular group and create feelings of dissatisfaction. The measure analyses polity and competencies distributed across the levels of governance.	Disparities in power decentralization	
	Electoral laws (state and entity level)	Formulation and implementation of electoral law are critical indicators of potential discrimination or bias that might marginalize groups or render them underrepresented. They serve as a barometer in determining whether all citizen groups have equitable access to power through democratic elections.	Disparities in the distribution of political opportunities	

Economic inequalities

In academic research, economic horizontal inequalities have received much more attention than other forms of horizontal inequality among ethnic groups, and several methods of measuring economic disparities have been suggested (Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch 2011; Côté 2015). In this study, we used numerous statistics directly sourced from statistical offices rather than relying on (or constructing) an economic inequality index with the aim of addressing possible economic disparities.

Social inequalities

The literature identifies horizontal social inequalities — such as access to education and healthcare — across different ethnic groups (Hillesund et al. 2018). These social inequalities are inherently intertwined with economic factors (Østby 2008; Côté 2015), which can make analysis difficult. Also, the complex nature of social phenomena difficult to measure. Despite these challenges, we aimed to leverage detailed data from the statistical offices, presenting comprehensive general statistics describing social phenomena, to investigate economic and social disparities separately. While we concentrated on group inequalities across ethnic divisions, we acknowledge that these social dimensions should be evaluated within a broader economic framework.

Political inequalities

In HI theory, the political dimension concerns how certain social groups, usually culturally or ethnically defined, occupy an unequal position within the political system compared to others (Siroky et al. 2020). Given the unique political system of BiH, assessing political inequalities between constituent peoples, with a focus on Bosnian Serbs, is crucial. Although the operationalization of political HIs can be challenging, several denominators have been used in previous studies. They include the distribution of political opportunities and power, capabilities for participation and the control of central legislative and executive bodies and regional and local governments (Langer and Smedts 2013; Langer and Stewart 2013). Building on these, while considering the specific status of the constituent peoples, we constructed a set of indicators to examine the objective conditions that might create a space for the perception of being disadvantaged within the actual political set-up.

Analysis

Examining the presence of perceived inequalities

To better comprehend the perceived inequalities among Bosnian Serbs and to explore potential threats they might perceive, it is crucial to briefly outline the historical context of the shaping of their identity as a unified social and political community. Tracing back to the policy of national identity suppression in Tito's Yugoslavia and the subsequent fall of the one-party system, marginalizing non-ethnic parties, in the 1990s, Bosnian Serbs' discontent began to surface, together with the emergence of ethnonationalist parties. As political and social identity became salient, it is essential to acknowledge the pivotal role of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) led by Radovan Karadžić under Slobodan Milošević's vision of the Greater Serbia (Toal and Maksić 2014).

The SDS was the first agent to strive to unify Bosnian Serbs into a cohesive and self-aware political community. With slogans of reawakening, renewal, and unity, the party crafted a narrative about the attempt to create disunity among Bosnian Serbs through the territorial organization of municipalities and by highlighting the systematic economic, demographic, and political disadvantages imposed on Serbs within the shared state (Toal 2013). Amidst rising ethnonationalism, Bosnian Serbs rallied behind SDS, believing it advocated their interests and gradually aligned their views with those presented by the party's elites. The SDS not only garnered enough support to win

the following democratic elections but also secured the semi-independent territory of Republika Srpska, today characterized by nearly homogenous ethnic composition (Toal and Maksić 2014).

The current political arrangement of the country dates from the Dayton Peace Agreement, including its Annex IV. The DPA, which ended the civil war in BiH, left all parties dissatisfied, as it appeared to deny each group the full realization of its primary objective — in the case of Serbian representatives, unification with Serbia. However, the agreement did legitimize Republika Srpska to a significant extent by establishing two political entities and allowing it to retain the territories it had gained during the war (Toal 2013; Kartsonaki 2016). Despite the significant political gain that secured for Republika Srpska strong control over 49% of the country's territory through a highly decentralized political system, Bosnian Serb politicians have continued to advocate for the creation of an ethnically homogenous, independent state or the possibility of future reunification with Serbia.

As the reputation of SDS suffered significantly due to its involvement in the war, a decade later, Milorad Dodik, with his SNSD, took on patronage over the Bosnian Serbs, echoing grievances internalized since Karadžić's era. Given the crucial role of political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina in shaping public discourse, Milorad Dodik's long-standing position as a political leader in Republika Srpska, backed by significant public support, makes him a central figure in influencing narratives that shape the identity, priorities, and perceived inequalities of Bosnian Serbs. As noted in the 2023 USAID report, his considerable control over the media further extended this influence over public discourse. Dodik's rhetoric not only mirrors but actively shapes sentiments within Republika Srpska, underscoring the importance of scrutinizing his statements and their role in increasing ethnic divisions.

The push to further nationalize the entity to create a nation-state, along with demands for secession, intensified following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which is often cited as an example of international injustice and the unequal treatment of the Serbs. Independence became a prominent topic during the SNSD's 2006 campaign, leading to Milorad Dodik's victory and providing a clear direction for his upcoming political agenda, with the potential to solidify his hold on power (Touquet 2012; Kartsonaki 2016).

Rhetoric of division

Stepping into the patronage role, Dodik has become a key political figure who publicly expresses concerns about the unequal treatment of Bosnian Serbs in BiH. After 2001, he veered off his moderate, reconciliatory, and pro-Western political course and reshaped himself as a prominent nationalist protagonist and secessionist, who is seen as a major threat to BiH's political system, contributing to an overall tense atmosphere (Hasic and Savic-Bojanovic 2022). Paradoxically, while he has been taking over the defence of the Dayton constitutional system in its original form, he is the one constantly challenging this system, attempting to subvert it (Toal 2013).

Dodik openly advocates for RS interests and independence and frequently employs discursive constructions, such as “we/us,” to distinguish himself and the Serbs from “them,” typically referring to the Bosniaks or the international community. The linguistic strategy extends to possessive pronouns such as “our” and “their.” These linguistic tools are central to identity politics, emphasizing and creating divisions, thereby contributing to ethnic polarization. Beglerović (2020) and Barton Hronešová (2022) claim that Dodik extensively employs elements of divisive identity politics, including historical revisionism and collective memory, to portray Serbs as victims who are often silenced and disrespected (Dodik 2023). By accentuating divisive stereotypes (Dodik 2023; VoA 2023; FACE TV 2022; RTRS 2024), he radicalizes the political arena and society as a whole.⁴

By establishing close ties with external actors such as Russia, Serbia, and, more recently, Hungary, based on their mutual interests, Dodik has successfully legitimized the secessionist discourse on the international stage. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić advocates a moderate stance towards Dodik's ultranationalist and secessionist claims to an extent that allows for pursuing

his political goals in BiH while upholding amicable relations with the West. Conversely, Russia fully backs RS's discourse and secessionist agenda, endorsing any controversial action by Dodik that could disturb the status quo, threaten stability and territorial integrity, or challenge the role of the international community in BiH (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023; Vulović 2023b).

This enables Dodik to enhance the prominence and visibility of narratives concerning alleged discrimination against Bosnian Serbs in the common state. In return, these external actors find in Republika Srpska a reliable ally for advocating and pursuing their interests. Through this alliance, allegedly built mainly upon historical, cultural, and religious ties, all efficiently legitimize the authoritarian tendencies of their leaders, fuel polarization, and amplify their mutually recognized revisionist, nationalist, and anti-Western narratives. Together, they portray themselves as victims of unjust treatment by the international community, which they claim persistently threatens their sovereignty and the traditional values they strive to protect (Vulović 2023b; Bakrač, Dokić and Radeljić 2023). This rhetoric further resonates within society, as evidenced by the consistently low and declining support for EU integration among Bosnian Serbs. In 2023, only about 37% expressed approval, compared with over 80% support among both Bosniaks and Croats (USAID BiH 2023).

Similarly, Serbian representatives, led by Milorad Dodik, ignore the rulings of the Constitutional Court, criticizing the inclusion of foreign judges in its structure. However, it is worth noting that the Constitutional Court is the only institution capable of issuing decisions without the participation of Serbian judges. Whenever these institutions oppose SNSD's or Dodik's governance, he frequently leverages their actions as a narrative tool to portray Serbs as victims of unjust treatment (Radio Slobodna Europa 2023).

Dodik positions himself as a patron of all Serbs, often framing actions taken against him, such as US sanctions, as politically motivated attacks aimed at undermining the autonomy of Republika Srpska (RS) and punishing the Serb community as a whole (Jutarnji 2024). He holds extensive celebrations on 9 January each year to mark Republika Srpska Day, including a military parade. This event has been declared unconstitutional, as it is deemed discriminatory against other constituent peoples, given the historical context of RS's formation in 1992, which effectively marked the beginning of the armed conflict.

Shaping public opinion

While Dodik tends to speak on behalf of all Bosnian Serbs, data from polls do not demonstrate an unambiguous alignment of public opinion with his rhetoric. According to NDI (2022), the vast majority of respondents from RS prioritized maintaining peace and the economy over Serb unity, with 52% perceiving Serb unity as a political phrase used to distract the public's attention, and only 9% strongly supporting RS declaring independence, with 26% somewhat supporting it. Notably, a significant share of respondents remained undecided on both questions.

Nevertheless, public opinion polls reveal a notable level of grievance, with 18% of respondents from RS completely agreeing and 29% somewhat agreeing that their ethnic group was threatened in Bosnia and Herzegovina (NDI 2022). The report demonstrates that while slightly over half of Serbs in RS opposed Dodik's statements and actions, a considerable number of individuals at least partially identified with the narratives propagated by him or other political groups in RS regarding secession or the unequal treatment of Serbs within BiH. This cannot be disregarded. Moreover, according to a USAID report, approximately 20% of Bosnian Serbs continue to experience interethnic anxiety (USAID BiH 2023).

Due to the lack of recent independent polls, we have relied on election results to gauge the beliefs and opinions of Serbs in RS to determine the presence of grievances, assuming voters align, at least partly, with their chosen party's general attitudes. We acknowledge the limitations of using election results as an indicator, considering their unreliability for this purpose and particularly the concerns about the fairness of the 2022 general elections in RS and subsequent fraud allegations (Kurtić 2022; OSCE BiH 2023).

The SNSD was again the outright election victor in 2022 and, as in the past, gained a significant share of the seats in all the central and entity institutions. An SNSD candidate won the presidency of BiH with 51.65% of the vote. In the House of Representatives, the SNSD gained 41.15% of the vote from RS, which translated into six seats, making SNSD the second strongest party in the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH after the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA). In RS, the party secured the position of president with 47.06% of the vote and won twenty-nine seats in the National Assembly with 34.64% of the vote (CIK 2022).

However, the presence of a grievance does not have to be reflected solely in support for the SNSD party. The second strongest party in RS, the SDS, presents similar or even more nationalist narratives than its counterparts. It should be noted that SDS has been under US sanctions since 2004 (Bahtanović 2023). Considering the election results of these two parties, we concluded that there is a notable preference among voters in Republika Srpska for nationalist parties and the narratives they promote (Maksić 2017).

A recent study (Becker 2023) focusing on the link between education and the building of civic identity in BiH has underlined the issue of cleavages among constituent peoples along ethnic lines. The study adds another piece to the puzzle by pointing out that the education system often promotes ethnic viewpoints at the expense of building civic society in BiH. The author found that there is still low interpersonal trust among students in the education system and society, “identity is viewed as a zero-sum game” (Becker 2023, 1242).

Segregated educational systems in BiH, with their mono-ethnic curricula, serve as a conduit for conveying ethnonationalist narratives, primarily focusing on unresolved disputes from the 1990s war and earlier historical conflicts. These curricula present a contentious view of events from the Ottoman period to World War II. Divisive issues that emerged after the war include debates on BiH’s state structure, election law, the Bosnian (vs. “Bosniak”) language, national holidays, and mutual accusations of extremism (USAID BiH 2023; Becker 2023). The notion of grievance and division along ethnic lines is not only reflected but also perpetuated within the education system, further embedding these notions in Bosnian Serb society.

The overall deterioration of the political situation, accompanied by hate speech and the radicalizing rhetoric of political leaders, has translated into social unrest (ACLED 2023) both in RS and the FBiH (OSCE BiH 2023). This is particularly evident in areas with ethnically mixed populations, manifested in recent attacks on returnees and several hate-motivated incidents reported by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) between 2021 and 2023 (OSCE BiH 2024; 2023).

These dynamics highlight how the political discourse of the elites, combined with the unique features of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political system (for example, divided school curricula and international presence), reinforces existing societal cleavages and deepens grievances among Bosnian Serbs. This interplay of factors not only shapes how inequalities are perceived but also actively influences social attitudes and behaviours, embedding grievances into public consciousness and creating a cyclical reinforcement of disparities that feel both pervasive and enduring. In the following sections, we delve into underlying objective inequalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a focus on those most relevant to the Bosnian Serb people, to unveil the basis for these perceptions and see how well the two are aligned.

Assessment of objective economic inequalities

In addressing the potential economic disparities between Bosniaks and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the analysis systematically focused on the variables outlined in Table 1 to assess different dimensions of horizontal inequalities (all data gathered for the outlined variables can be found in the Online Appendix).

Beginning with the average monthly net and gross wages — a key indicator of the economic situation and well-being — we observed consistent and gradual wage growth in both the Federation

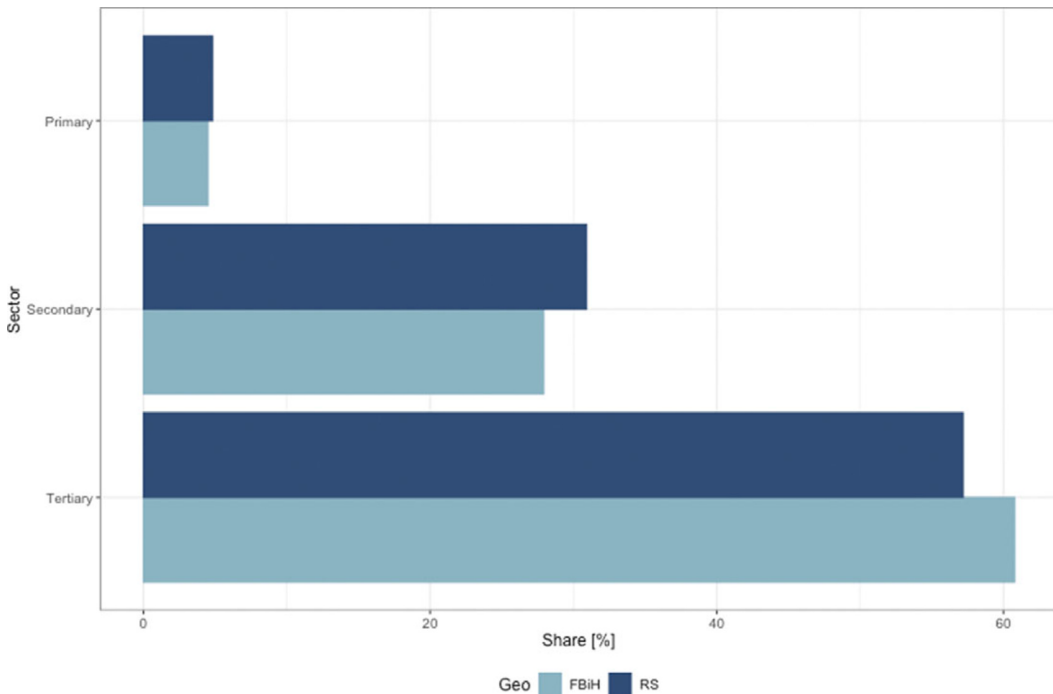


Figure 3. Shares of employed persons in FBIH and RS by main sectors of economic activity in 2020.

of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The peak difference in net monthly wages was minimal, reaching only KM32 (Bosnian convertible marks; code BAM), and this gap narrowed over time. Notably, RS reported higher gross wages in 2020, but residents were not economically disadvantaged because, in the BiH tax allocation system, revenues remain within the entity. Even in Kanton 10 of FBIH, which has a significant Serb population (12.96% of the 84,127 inhabitants were Serbs), wage levels were comparable to the averages in both entities, indicating no substantial disparities in economic well-being.

Despite observing only minor differences, we duly considered these distinctions and undertook a more comprehensive examination of employment patterns across diverse economic sectors to ascertain if the slight wage inequality was not fundamentally entrenched in more substantial forms of inequality in economic opportunity.

The data (see [Figure 3](#)) revealed distinct but balanced sectoral preferences: FBIH showed a slight emphasis on the service-oriented tertiary sector, implying a higher degree of economic diversification and possibly more robust growth prospects. RS had a marginally higher concentration in the manufacturing-focused secondary sector, suggesting opportunities for export-driven growth if industries are competitive.

Detailed sectoral analysis (see [Figure 4](#)) highlighted minor differences in four areas: agriculture; manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply; and administrative and support service activities. Over the period 2018–2020, RS had a higher proportion of its workforce in agriculture and manufacturing, and a lower proportion in administrative and support service activities. This suggests a higher concentration of the workforce in the tertiary sector. However, the lower share of employment in administrative and support service activities in RS may be influenced by varying degrees of administrative decentralization in both entities. FBIH, with its cantonal system, requires a larger administrative workforce to ensure effective management.

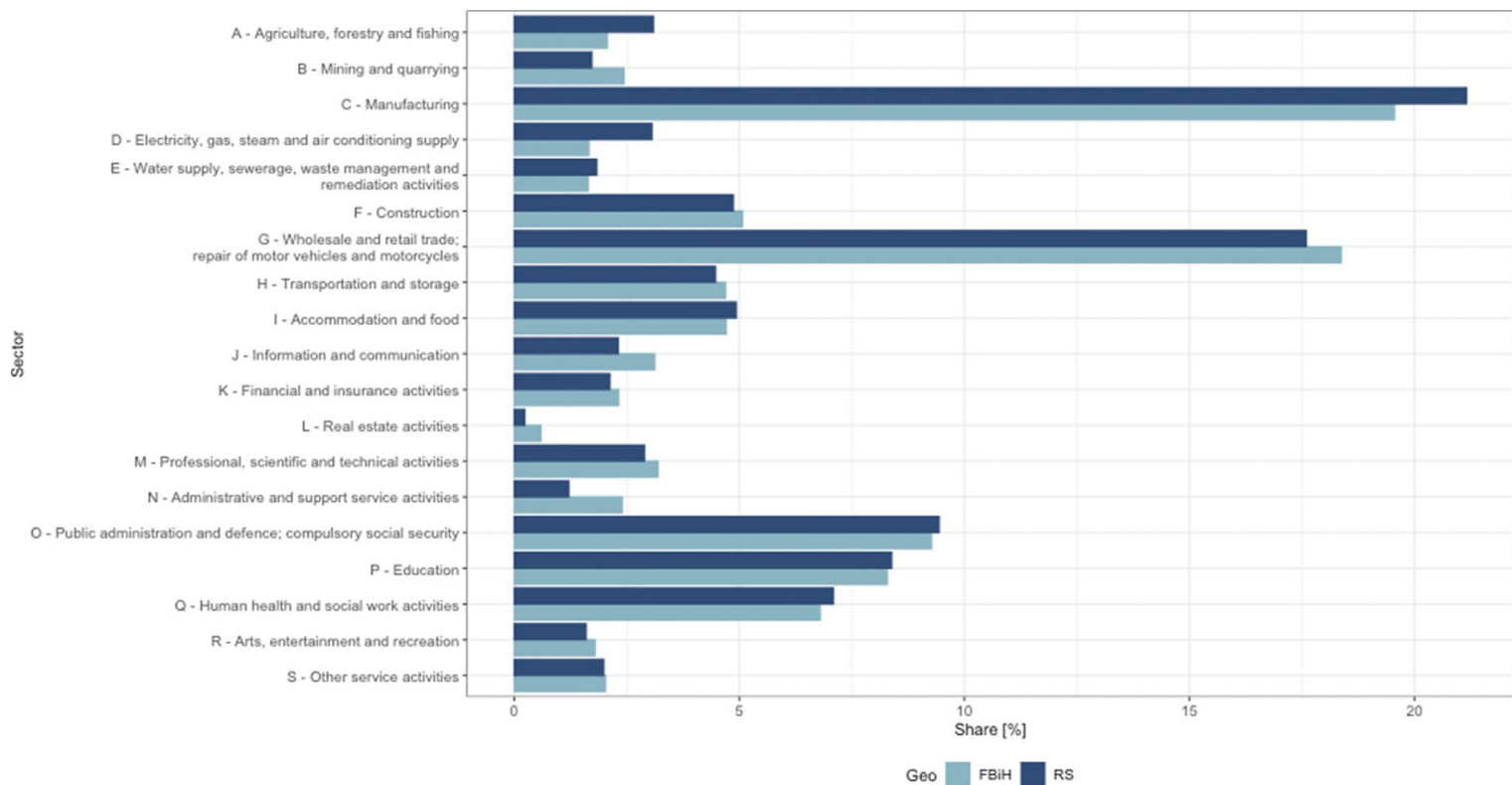


Figure 4. Shares of employed persons in FBIh and RS by detailed sectors of economic activity in 2020.

While the disparities in manufacturing, administrative, and support service activities in RS and FBiH were not significant, more apparent variances were detected in three other economic sectors. However, given their size, the observed differences, while relevant, do not alone serve as conclusive evidence of the existence of economic inequalities, warranting further examination of the employment structure in terms of occupation types and the nature of employment contracts to reveal potential disparities in the sustainability of the economic situation of entities.

Despite variations in employment structure, the sustainability of the economic situation in both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska remained comparable. FBiH had a higher proportion of people formally employed, while RS showed a greater ratio of self-employed and unpaid family workers. These differences reflect contrasting economic characteristics rather than significant economic inequalities. The higher proportion of self-employment in RS suggests an environment that fosters entrepreneurship and small business activity, contributing positively to economic sustainability. At the same time, RS showed a higher proportion of unpaid family workers, which may imply limited job opportunities in the formal economy. To shed more light on this potential disparity, we can turn to the structure of employment contracts, where both regions exhibited similar levels of full-time employment. Considering these factors collectively, there is no substantial difference between the two entities in the sustainability of their economic situation. Additionally, RS consistently reports lower youth unemployment rates for both genders, suggesting that future economic prospects and access to opportunities are at least on a par with, if not better than, those in FBiH. This finding further contextualizes the previous results and makes potential economic inequality disadvantaging RS even less evident.

Our findings of minimal disparities were further reinforced when we extended our comparison to include state-level data for Bosnia and Herzegovina and economic data from Serbia. Incorporating state data provides a more complex and comprehensive picture of the economic landscape across BiH, ensuring that regional analyses are contextualized within federal trends. This broader perspective confirms that disparities in economic situation, sustainability, security, and opportunities within the entities are comparable to the federal level. The statistics in the [Online Appendix](#) suggest that both entities align closely with federal averages, which also indirectly reinforces the reliability of the statistics.

Comparing RS data with that of Serbia might serve as a meaningful point of reference for the Serb population in RS. Beyond cultural and historical ties, this comparison is particularly relevant because political leaders in RS frequently emphasize that Serbs in BiH are disadvantaged under the common state. However, by including and assessing data from Serbia (see the [Online Appendix](#)), we demonstrate that, notwithstanding the narrative presented by political elites of significant inequality based on ethnicity, economic indicators such as wages, employment rates, and job security in RS are comparable to, and in some cases better than, those in Serbia. This finding, consistent with the rest of the comparison results, reinforces the argument that substantial economic disparities between Bosniaks and Serbs in BiH are not evident, and Serbs in Republika Srpska are not worse off in the common state of BiH.

In summary, our analysis shows that both entities exhibit comparable wage growth, entity-specific but overall balanced employment preferences, similar levels of job security and promising prospects for youth employment. Even when extending the comparison to federal-level data and including economic statistics from Serbia, the results remain consistent, showing alignment with national averages. This examination reveals that the perceived economic inequalities between Bosniaks and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not supported by statistical evidence, strongly suggesting that such narratives are not based on true inequalities.

Assessment of the social inequalities

Assessing access to healthcare in RS and FBiH, along with the analysis of social indicators, reveals a parity, further challenging assertions of significant social disparities based on ethnicity or regional

divisions. By examining key metrics in healthcare and education — as outlined in our conceptual framework (see [Table 2](#)) — we found that both entities provided comparable access to essential social services (all the underlying data can be found in the [Online Appendix](#)).

In the realm of healthcare, both FBiH and RS allocate very similar percentages of their GDP to health expenditures, demonstrating an equal commitment to the well-being of their populations. Interestingly, per capita health expenditure is slightly higher in RS, which could suggest better access to healthcare services. Both entities predominantly rely on public funding for healthcare, with RS showing only a slight edge. Residents in both regions benefit from similar levels of public support, limiting individual financial burdens for medical care.

While these data highlight the financial resources allocated to healthcare, they do not conclusively demonstrate inequality in healthcare access between FBiH and RS. Data on the impact of unequal access to healthcare, on the other hand, point to lower rates of infant mortality and stillbirths in RS than in FBiH. While this might imply better healthcare access or quality in RS, these differences are influenced by various factors — including population size, genetic factors, and maternal health behaviours — and therefore cannot conclusively indicate significant disparities. Moreover, the average age of mothers at the birth of their first child is slightly higher in RS, potentially reflecting better socioeconomic conditions like access to education and employment opportunities. Both entities have a negligible proportion of births to mothers under the age of fifteen. Taken collectively, these findings indicate no significant disadvantages for RS in healthcare access.

Both entities mandate compulsory primary education and have high enrolment and completion rates,⁵ indicating that children across Bosnia and Herzegovina have equitable access to basic education. The student-to-teacher ratios were also comparable, with RS showing a slightly better ratio, suggesting similar educational quality and learning environments. At the secondary level, completion rates and the transition from primary to secondary education were nearly identical, showing only a minor difference, further emphasizing the uniformity in educational opportunities.

Examining the highest level of education attained by the working-age population reveals only slight differences. In RS, a larger proportion of the working-age population attained only primary education or lower. This could demonstrate that access to higher education may be less prevalent in RS, potentially impacting the entity negatively. However, the gap is not substantial, and it is not accompanied by other signs that would indicate significant inequality. The percentage of people with secondary education and higher degrees is comparable between the entities, suggesting that access to advanced education and vocational training is similarly available in both regions.

This examination of social indicators demonstrates that the people of both FBiH and RS are provided with comparable healthcare and educational opportunities, highlighting a general parity in access to social services across entities. When extending the analysis to include Serbia, the comparison reveals that RS performs slightly better in several areas. For example, the rate of stillbirths in Serbia is higher than in RS, suggesting that access to healthcare is better in RS. Additionally, a higher proportion of people in Serbia had reached only the primary school level of education, suggesting that RS provides relatively better, relatively stronger opportunities for educational advancement. These findings suggest that the social conditions for Serbs in RS are not only comparable to those in FBiH and the federal average for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but, according to some social indicators, are superior to the Republic of Serbia.

Collectively, these findings illustrate that social conditions in FBiH and RS are largely equivalent. The minor variations observed in health expenditure, outcomes, and educational attainment reflect regional nuances rather than systemic disparities. This parity aligns with our earlier analysis of economic indicators, reinforcing the overarching conclusion that significant horizontal inequalities between Bosniaks and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not evident.

By highlighting the absence of substantial objective social disparities, we further challenge narratives that suggest deep-rooted inequalities based on ethnicity or regional divisions. Recognizing that these perceived inequalities are not supported by statistical evidence, our analysis

underscores the importance of referring to objective data when inequality is used as a basis for discussions about secession.

Assessment of political inequalities

The complex political structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, defined by a delicate balance of ethnic parity, power-sharing mechanisms, and decentralization principles aimed at preserving equality among constituent nations, embodies the federal nature of BiH's political system (Kapidžić 2019). Bosnia and Herzegovina has five central state institutions: the three-member Presidency, the bicameral Parliamentary Assembly (PA) with chambers of equal standing, the Council of Ministers (CoM), the Constitutional Court, and the Central Bank. However, the exclusive competencies and partial responsibilities of these central bodies are limited compared to those governed by the entities or lower levels of administration⁶ (Ustavni sud 2009).

The distribution of political power and control across the central legislative, executive, and judicial bodies in BiH respects both the multi-ethnic nature of the state and its administrative structure (Siroky et al. 2020). While the constitution envisions equal status, rights, and representation for all three constituent nations at the central level of governance, in practice, disparities and inefficiencies persist within these central institutions. That hinders effective governance and creates conditions that enable certain groups to exert disproportionate influence through procedural mechanisms, such as veto powers and entity-based voting.

As Table 4 shows, each central institutional body adheres to either territorial or national formulas to promote equality. Institutions that employ ethnic quotas serve as platforms for articulating and safeguarding the national interests of all constituent peoples, represented by an equal number of representatives. This approach favors Bosnian Croats and Serbs, given the disparity in population representation (see Figure 5).

In contrast, institutions based on a territorial formula are intended to represent rather state interests and reflect the priorities of elected political parties, which act on behalf of their electorate regardless of ethnic background. However, these intentions are often not fulfilled in reality. For instance, while the absence of national quotas suggests that the CoM should represent the state's interests, scholars argue (Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021; Koseva 2019) that it remains highly fragmented along national lines and prioritizes national interests, resulting in low productivity and unfavorable outcomes (Koseva 2019).

Although Serb representatives criticize the composition of the Constitutional Court and persistently refuse to recognize or implement its rulings due to the presence of foreign judges, from a legal perspective, the court's composition, while unusual, is balanced and does not disadvantage any constituent nation or entity.

The capacity to participate in decision-making is shaped by numerous procedural rules and veto mechanisms that allow objectionable decisions to be reversed, preserving the equal involvement of constituent peoples and entities in decision-making processes.

Table 4 shows that veto mechanisms are predominantly embedded in institutional bodies that adhere to ethnic parity. However, in practice, the procedural rules allow potential political obstruction and hinder decision-making through absenteeism. For instance, in the House of Representatives (HoR), the "entity voting" provision requires that the majority include at least one-third of members from each entity, effectively allowing absenteeism to function as a veto against unfavorable decisions. The SNSD frequently employs this tactic to obstruct the functioning of state institutions (Bahtić-Kunrath 2011; Hasic and Savic-Bojanovic 2022; Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021). These rules particularly benefit representatives of Republika Srpska due to their mostly homogenous political representation. Paradoxically, while "ethnic vetoes" are rare, territorial vetoes occur frequently (Hasic and Savic-Bojanovic 2022).

The prevalence of consociational power-sharing elements leads to frequent obstructions in parliamentary proceedings, often resulting in legislative gridlock (Keil 2016; Banović, Gavrić and

Table 4. Distribution of political power in BiH and participation of entities/constituent peoples in decision-making

Institution	Number of Representatives	Appointment of Representatives	Term in Office	Distribution of Seats	Ethnic Quotas	Procedural Rules	Veto Mechanisms
Presidency	3	Direct Election - majority voting	4 years (rotating leadership every 8 months)	National Formula	Yes	Consensus	Yes (each president; veto must be confirmed in the entities' parliaments)
Council of Ministers (CoM)	9	Appointed by the ruling coalition from the House of Representatives	4 years	Territorial Formula ($\frac{2}{3}$ FBiH, $\frac{1}{3}$ RS)	Yes (for chairperson and deputies)	Not relevant	Not relevant
House of Representatives (HoR)	98	Election results – proportional representation	4 years	Territorial Formula ($\frac{2}{3}$ FBiH, $\frac{1}{3}$ RS)	No	Entity voting – simple majority must include at least $\frac{1}{3}$ MPs from each entity	No
House of Peoples (HoP)	15	Appointed by national delegates in entities' parliamentary bodies	4 years	National Formula	Yes	Ethnic voting — requires at least 3 representatives from each constituent nation	Yes (majority of delegates from any constituent nation)
Constitutional Court	9	4 appointed by FBiH's HoR, 2 by National Assembly, 3 by ECHR	Life tenure (until age limit or resignation)	Territorial formula and international presence	Yes	The majority of all judges	No

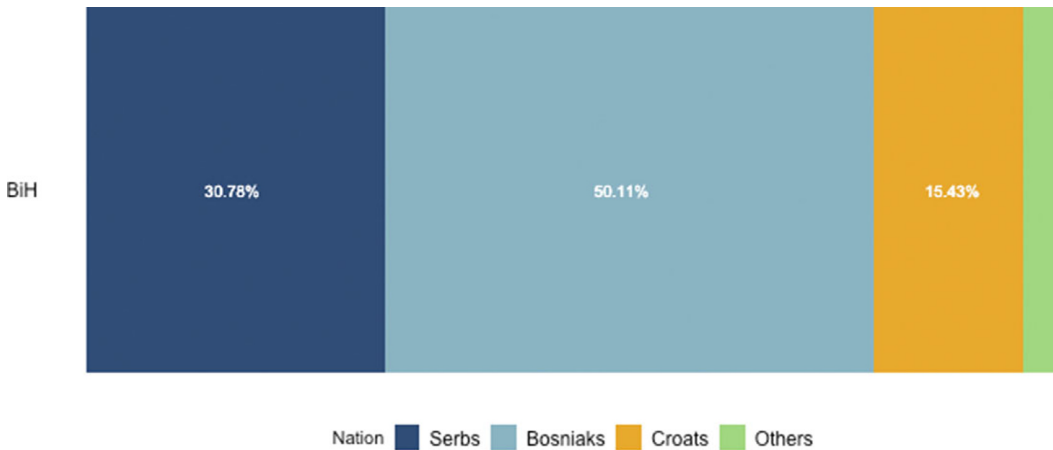


Figure 5. Population by Ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census of Population 2013.

Barreiro Mariño 2021; Burianová and Hloušek 2022). Consequently, the bicameral Parliamentary Assembly of BiH reflects the overall weakness of state-level institutions due to its slow and inefficient legislative processes. As argued by Bahtić-Kunrath (2011, 918), “the institutional design of the Parliamentary Assembly discourages inter-ethnic cooperation between the veto players.” Therefore, it is often marginalized and does not function as a central hub for discussing important political issues (Hasic and Savic-Bojanovic 2022; Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021). Critical debates then occur outside the institutional framework, potentially excluding relevant stakeholders and thereby jeopardizing equal representation of all constituent peoples.

While an assessment of the parliamentary processes suggests no disadvantages for Serb representatives regarding participation in decision-making, in fact, the system gives them an upper hand in this matter, privileging them over other constituent peoples, as they can apply entity-voting unconditionally at every legislative stage (Bahtić-Kunrath 2011).

Similarly, the system provides an advantage to members of the presidency with significant political backing within their respective parliamentary bodies since they can exercise veto rights for harming vital interests. Such a decision is immediately referred to the concerned entity’s parliamentary body for further consideration. If two-thirds of MPs from a parliamentary body agree that a decision harms vital interests, the decision cannot be enacted. Notably, since 2010, this veto power has been exclusively exercised by Milorad Dodik, who, through his association with the dominant coalition party, secured enough votes to prevent the enactment of presidential decisions (Ustavni sud 2009; Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021).

Conversely, the Constitutional Court is the only institution that follows majority-based decisions while not considering the judges’ nationality or territorial origin in its procedural rules. Decisions are made by a quorum, requiring the presence of at least five out of nine judges, and are adopted by a simple majority. Hence, it is the only institution capable of reaching decisions without the need for representation from all the constituent nations, thereby making it widely viewed as the most effective institution capable of mitigating the effects of ethnonationalist governance (Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021; Ustavni sud 2023).

Disparities in the decentralization of political power continue to be a contentious topic for the constituent peoples. The constitution only briefly delineates the areas of state-level competence while adhering to the principle of subsidiarity (Woelk 2021). This reflects divergent interests, with each constituent nation seeking to consolidate a different level of political power. Yet, the centralization of the system does not necessarily indicate inequality in access to power. RS strives for more autonomy within the already decentralized Bosnia, while simultaneously strengthening

centralization within RS. We argue that a greater degree of centralization in RS facilitates more efficient administration, decision-making, and agenda-setting and, finally, better advocacy for its interests throughout the whole system. Overall, this suggests that Bosnian Serbs benefit more from the current level of decentralization in BiH than do the other constituent peoples.

The central government has only limited fiscal competencies, operating with a considerably smaller budget than the entity governments. This is predominantly to cover the costs of the state institutions and Bosnia and Herzegovina's international obligations. A budget of KM1.8 billion was approved for 2022 (Bosna i Hercegovina 2022). According to the constitution, the FBiH provides two-thirds of the revenue and Republika Srpska one-third, a level of contribution that benefits RS when considering the population sizes of the entities. Tax authority lies with the entities and lower administrative levels, such as cantons and municipalities. Entities control the most significant share of financial resources; while about KM3.3 billion was approved for 2022 in Republika Srpska (NSRS 2022), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted a budget of KM4.4 billion (FBiH 2022), approximately corresponding to the demographic structure.

Lastly, none of the constituent peoples holds demographic or electoral dominance. All formally enjoy their group rights throughout the entire territory (meaning all constituent nations have reserved mandates in both entities' institutions); however, the real impact of this unique political feature is limited. Since the turn of the millennium, the ethnoreligious principle has been extended to lower levels of governance (Stojanović and Hodžić 2015; Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021). However, despite provisions ensuring the participation of less-represented constituent peoples in the respective entity's institutions, their actual powers are severely limited.

Paradoxically, a ubiquitous ethnic criterion for running for office leads to discrimination against constituent nations, particularly those representing a minority in their respective territories. For instance, the presidential election denies passive electoral rights to citizens who don't belong to a dominant constituent nation at the entity level, violating the European Convention on Human Rights. Additionally, scholars argue that the current electoral law is unfavorable for numerically disadvantaged constituent peoples in a given entity, as territorial affiliation takes precedence over the ethnic principle (Ustavni sud 2009; Banović, Gavrić and Barreiro Mariño 2021). Nevertheless, discrimination occurs equally in both entities; considering the fact that 92.14% of Serbs (see Figure 1) live in RS, they are not systematically affected by this, which makes it of little relevance to our analysis.

Drawing from the political dimension of HI theory, we assessed four key potential objective disparities that might cause grievance: distribution of political power, political opportunities, capabilities for participation, and the decentralization of power (see Table 4). Our analysis found no significant objective discrepancies that could disadvantage RS against FBiH or Bosnian Serbs against other constituent peoples. On the contrary, we suggest that Republika Srpska may benefit from the current system due to its mono-national nature and high level of centralization, allowing for a more efficient exercise of power and public affairs management. Despite formal guarantees of equal representation, these rules often lead to inefficiencies and marginalize the central institutions, with roughly 40% of Serbs favouring the status quo (USAID BiH 2023, 27) – likely recognizing the advantage it provides them – while most Bosniaks and Croats are in favour of state-level decision making. The decentralized arrangement — placing significant power in entities and cantons — allows Serb representatives to leverage procedural mechanisms like entity-based voting and vetoes, facilitating political obstruction and enhancing their influence over state institutions.

Discussion

The presence of ethno-nationalist grievances is a well-documented precursor to secessionist claims, while horizontal inequalities — rooted in ethnic, regional, or religious divisions — are critical drivers of identity-based mobilization and secessionist tendencies (Østby 2008; Stewart 2008). Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex political system with highly decentralized governance,

deepening societal divisions along ethnic lines. This structure appears to align with the risk factor, particularly in Republika Srpska, where political elites frequently adopt narratives of inequality and unfair treatment of their constituent nation.

Our findings partially challenge the assumption that inequalities are the primary drivers of secessionist rhetoric in RS. While the literature highlights political and economic inequalities as strong predictors of secession (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013; Buhaug et al. 2014), our data reveal only minimal objective disparities between the two entities. This suggests that while grievances may indeed be driving secessionist rhetoric, they are not rooted in measurable inequalities. Instead, they appear to stem from perceptions of marginalization, which are likely constructed and amplified by political discourse rather than grounded in substantial economic or political disparities.

By highlighting this, our findings contribute to the ongoing debate on the relationship between objective inequalities and perceived grievances, aligning with the critiques raised by Siroky et al. (2020), Must (2016), and others that objective inequalities are not always suitable proxies for grievances. As these scholars argue, the process by which objective disparities translate into perceptions of injustice — and eventually into grievances — is neither inherent nor uniform. Recent literature shows that perceptions, rather than objective realities, drive group mobilization and political action (Langer and Stewart 2013). This resonates with our findings in Republika Srpska, where grievances among Bosnian Serbs are prominent despite a lack of significant objective inequalities compared to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Economic indicators such as wages, employment structures, and healthcare access reveal parity between the two entities, yet grievances persist, driven by political rhetoric and identity-based narratives rather than measurable differences.

While our research reinforces the position that grievances cannot be used interchangeably with inequalities (Holmqvist 2012; Langer and Stewart 2013; Rustad 2016; Must 2018; Must and Rustad 2019), it also extends the discussion by showing that grievances can emerge even in the absence of objective inequalities. Must and Rustad (Must and Rustad 2019; Must 2018) reported a case in southern Tanzania where, despite the region's long-standing marginalization, feelings of being wronged by the government and subsequent grievances were not seen until expectations of improvement arose, but were not fulfilled. In the case of RS, the feeling of grievance appears, but it is not based on underlying conditions; it is constructed and amplified through political discourse, where identity-based narratives frame the group as marginalized or threatened, even when empirical evidence does not support such claims. This also challenges, to some extent, the framework proposed by Siroky et al. (2020), which links grievances to either unrecognized inequalities or fears of losing privilege, and highlights a third pathway: grievances as a rhetorical construction. The narratives promoted by the political elites of RS, who intentionally spread fear about threats to Serbs within the common state, appear to be a tactic to maintain power, as evidenced by the significant electoral successes of SNSD.

In their recent work on the Catalan case, Elias and Franco-Guillén (2021) report that, even as the reasons for secession have evolved over time, the perception of economic exploitation or fiscal imbalance remains a significant driver of secessionist sentiment. This narrative, tied to the promise of independence as a means to create a better future, finds parallels in the Balkans of the early 1990s, when Slovenia and Montenegro argued that political centralization was stifling their economic potential and preventing progress towards a better future (Huszka 2013). While Elias and Franco-Guillén (2021) suggest that resolving economic grievances could reduce support for secession, in the contemporary case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, even with parallels and conclusions drawn from other cases, this is not a suitable approach, as there are no tangible economic disparities to address.

The argument for a better future also appears unwarranted in this context, as data comparing Republika Srpska and Serbia — a state where Serbs are independent of others — shows that Serbs in Republika Srpska under BiH perform better on economic and social indicators than their counterparts in Serbia. While the political elites of RS actively mobilize society and advocate for

secession, they often avoid addressing the potential challenge of international isolation, which could have direct implications for the economic and social conditions of any newly formed country.

Politically and legally, we found no objective inequalities disadvantaging Republika Srpska or Bosnian Serbs relative to the other two constituent peoples. On the contrary, the mono-national nature and high level of centralization in RS may give it a relatively privileged position. While the system provides a wide array of mechanisms to create deadlocks or impede political processes, such actions may ultimately disadvantage one of the constituent nations or entities. However, all three groups face the same challenges within the consociational institutional and political framework, with equal access to these instruments. This only underscores the shared structural difficulties, rather than a targeted disadvantage for RS or its population.

Our findings show the critical role of perception and narrative, suggesting that grievances can thrive independently of actual disparities and if there is a rationale for a drive to secession, it might be aligned with the theories of Stephen (2000) and Brown (2010), who emphasize the spatial concentration of ethnic groups as a key driver of secessionist movements. Stephen (2000) argues that geographic concentration is more critical than factors like relative size, economic differences, or regime type in fostering secessionist tendencies. Similarly, Brown (2010) finds that the impact of ethnic diversity on secession depends on whether groups are geographically concentrated. In RS, the near-homogeneity of the Bosnian Serb population strengthens group identity and facilitates the development of secessionist narratives, even in the absence of significant economic or political disadvantages. This spatial dynamic makes secession a viable goal, underscoring the importance of territorial identity and narrative framing over objective inequalities.

Conclusion

Although our analysis strongly suggests the absence of objective inequalities in all three examined areas, there is still a significant perception of disparity among Bosnian Serbs in RS. Our research indicates that, without underlying objective differences, the narrative of marginalization is largely constructed, stimulated by persistent nationalist rhetoric amplified by political leaders. These findings align with established theories on grievances as the main drivers of mobilization towards secession, but they strongly underscore the critical need to address the issue of narratively constructed grievances that cannot be resolved through remedies targeting objective inequalities. Unresolved perceived grievance fuelled by the divisive secessionist rhetoric emanating from RS continues to deepen societal fractures and, still, thirty years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, undermines prospects for lasting peace and hinders stability.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2025.36>.

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Notes

- 1 The inclusion of cultural inequalities remains a topic of debate, as they are complex and lack a coherent definition, resulting in some authors, such as Hillesund (2018), excluding them from their complex reviews.
- 2 Data from USAID (2023) show that, among ethnic groups, Croats were the most likely to trust religious institutions (58%), followed by Serbs (51%) and Bosniaks (41%).
- 3 Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e) and the World Bank’s database (2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d) were included to support further and complement the analysis.

- 4 For example, citizen satisfaction with the country's overall security situation declined significantly in 2023 across Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Republika Srpska, only 43% of citizens reported being satisfied with the security situation over the past year, compared to 58% in the previous year (USAID 2023).
- 5 Primary education in both entities is compulsory and spans nine years, typically starting at the age of six. In RS, detailed age group data for pupils aged 5–14 are available (Institute of Statistics Republika Srpska 2021a), but in FBiH, only an approximation through comparing the proportion of pupils aged 0–14 is available. We also apply the more general age group comparison also for RS.
- 6 Cantons in the case of FBiH.

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