Identifying the Blockages in Peacebuilding and Democratization: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Elvir Šahić[1], Sead S. Fetahagić[2], Nebojša Šavija-Valha[3]

PhD Associate Professor[1], MSc[2], PhD[3]

[1]University of Sarajevo, School of Economics and Business, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, [2]Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo, [3]Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo

[1]elvir.sahic@efsa.unsa.ba [2]sead@ndcsarajevo.org [3]nsavijavalha@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the systemic blockages to peacebuilding and democratization processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), building upon previous research conducted between 2019 and 2021. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with six stakeholders (local scholars, activists, politicians, and international experts), we identify 40 interconnected factors that perpetuate a "frozen conflict" nearly three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). Our findings reveal that the DPA's structural flaws created a "formalized political unsettlement" that enables complete elite capture of peace and democratic processes. Political elites exploit war memories, control institutions, media, and education to maintain ethnoreligious divisions, while international actors contribute to blockages through culturally insensitive, fragmented interventions and overwhelming projectization of civil society. The research demonstrates strong institutional linkages between peace and democratization blockages, both reinforced by global geopolitical realignments. We propose solutions including constitutional reform, restructured funding mechanisms, bottom-up approaches, and increased international pressure on domestic elites and neighboring countries. This study contributes to understanding "counter-peace" dynamics and offers critical insights for peacebuilding interventions in post-conflict societies.

***Keywords*:** peacebuilding blockages, democratization, Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina, frozen conflict

I INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) [1] in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) remains trapped in what scholars characterize as a "frozen conflict" [2]. While the agreement successfully ended active warfare, it failed to resolve the fundamental disagreements between conflict parties, creating what Bell and Pospisil [3] term a "formalized political unsettlement." This paradoxical situation—where war has ceased but peace remains elusive—presents a critical case study for understanding systemic challenges to sustainable peace and democratic development.

The persistence of conflict dynamics in post-war BiH raises fundamental questions about the nature of peacebuilding interventions and their unintended consequences. Richard Holbrooke, the architect of the DPA, prophetically described the agreement as "a gigantic stalemate machine" [4], a characterization that has proven remarkably prescient. The country's trajectory since 1995 demonstrates how peace agreements, when structurally flawed and poorly implemented, can inadvertently create conditions for ongoing conflict rather than sustainable peace.

This article extends previous research conducted between 2019 and 2021, which identified key patterns of blockages including lack of trust among elites, opposing political visions, the ambiguous role of international actors, pragmatism among citizens, and the projectization of civil society. Rather than viewing these as isolated phenomena, we employ the concept of "counter-peace" [5] as a diagnostic framework to explore the systemic links between various challenges to peace.

The current research addresses three critical questions: First, which issues fuel new cycles of conflict and how have pathways to peace been blocked? Second, in what ways are blockages to peace and democratization linked? Third, how can these blockages be tackled or overcome? These questions are particularly urgent given the contemporary global context of democratic backsliding, geopolitical realignment, and the rise of illiberal movements that compound BiH's domestic challenges.

The significance of this study extends beyond the BiH context. As a case of liberal peacebuilding intervention following the post-Cold War paradigm established by the UN's "Agenda for Peace" [6], BiH's experience offers crucial lessons about the limitations and potential counterproductive effects of international peace architecture. Understanding why peacebuilding and democratization have been systematically blocked in BiH can inform more effective interventions in other post-conflict societies.

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodological approach employed in this research. Section 3 presents findings on the factors fueling conflict cycles and blocking peace pathways, distinguishing between internal and external factors. Section 4 examines the linkages between peace and democratization blockages. Section 5 explores potential solutions proposed by respondents. The conclusion synthesizes key findings and reflects on their broader implications for peacebuilding theory and practice.

II Methodology

This research was conducted by the Nansen Dialogue Centre (NDC) Sarajevo as part of a broader investigation into blockages in peacebuilding and democratization processes. The study employed a qualitative research design centered on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with carefully selected stakeholders.

Sampling Strategy

Following the guidelines outlined in the "EMBRACe WP6 Fieldwork Manual" [7], we conducted five interviews involving six participants in total (two persons were interviewed jointly on one occasion). The sampling was strategic and purposive, designed to capture diverse perspectives across different segments of the local population and international community (appendix).

Respondents were categorized as follows:

- Local respondents (3): Two scholars/peace and democratization activists and one politician
- International respondents (3): One scholar/political analyst from an internationally funded think tank and two political advisers/members of a major international organization operating in BiH

The selection criteria emphasized breadth of engagement and depth of experience. Each respondent possessed extensive involvement in BiH affairs through multiple roles (activist, academic, political, administrative), enabling them to navigate a wide spectrum of issues during interviews. International respondents were specifically chosen for having spent significant time in BiH in various capacities, ensuring contextual familiarity.

III Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in Sarajevo between January and February 2024. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent themes while maintaining focus on the three core research questions. This approach facilitated in-depth discussion of complex, interconnected issues while permitting respondents to introduce relevant topics not anticipated in the initial research design.

Data Analysis

We employed narrative analysis using Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis. The analytical process proceeded in several stages:

1. Individual interview analysis: Each interview was deeply analyzed and coded independently.
2. Comparative analysis: Coded interviews were systematically compared to identify patterns, categories, and themes.
3. Network analysis: Interconnections between identified factors, actors, and processes were mapped.
4. Grounded interpretation: Results were heavily grounded in obtained data, with findings emerging from systematic coding rather than predetermined theoretical frameworks.

This methodological approach ensures that findings reflect the lived experiences and expert assessments of those directly engaged with BiH's peacebuilding and democratization challenges, while analytical rigor is maintained through systematic coding and comparative analysis.

Limitations

Due to time constraints, the sample size was limited to six respondents. However, the strategic selection of participants with diverse roles and extensive experience partially mitigates this limitation. The research captures perspectives from Sarajevo-based stakeholders, which may not fully represent views from other regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly entity Republika Srpska. These limitations are acknowledged

while recognizing that the depth of engagement with selected respondents provides rich, contextually informed data.

IV Research Results

Which Issues Fuel New Cycles of Conflict? In Which Ways Have Pathways to Peace Been Blocked?

Through systematic analysis, we identified 40 interconnected factors (29 issues and 11 agencies) shaping BiH's political and social reality. For analytical purposes, these were differentiated into internal and external factors, though in practice, the distinction is often blurred in BiH's complex reality.

Internal Factors

The Dayton Peace Agreement as Structural Foundation

Almost all respondents agreed that the legacy of the DPA fundamentally determines BiH's political reality and creates conditions for ongoing cycles of blockages. As one respondent stated, the DPA made "Bosnia […] a frozen conflict" (5:1). Perry [8] argues that DPA "ended the war yet failed to either address the drivers of conflict, or to establish political and structural mechanisms that would help to mediate and govern the country."

As a power-sharing arrangement, the DPA's Annex 4 (Constitution of BiH) created a system that respondents characterize as designed "for the elite to maintain power… Elites profit by manipulating the peace agreement. It is a model of peace cartel" (5:1). From the elites' perspective, "DPA was a good deal, so why unfrozen it" (5:1). This arrangement benefits not only politicians but a broader spectrum of power holders—academic, religious, cultural, and economic elites—who collectively possess the capacity to influence public discourse and shape narratives.

War Memory and Divisive Rhetoric

The exploitation of war traumas and memories emerges as a central mechanism for spurring conflict cycles. Political elites manipulate what one respondent termed the "emotional culture" (4:7) of BiH—characterized by deep immersion in contradictory historical perceptions and strong collective bonds [9]. As a respondent explained, "they manage to control pain and mistrust of citizens... Citizens are bombarded with divisive rhetoric" (4:2).

The core message propagated is "that people can't live together" (5:2) and that ultimately "peace is not possible" (4:11). Tactics include permanent glorification of war criminals as heroes (4:16) and even criminalization of activism supporting war victims (2:8). Media—both traditional and social—are complicit in promoting divisive rhetoric, resulting in periodic outbursts of nationalistic and chauvinistic hate speech (1:11).

These outbursts intensify during BiH's biennial election periods and during global disturbances such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza (2:5). Notably, respondents observed that current rhetoric is often harsher than during the immediate post-war period, suggesting an escalation rather than diminution of divisive discourse over time.

Education as Institutionalized Division

Education serves as a critical institution for embedding divisive narratives, particularly through history and religious education, as well as other "national group of subjects" including language and geography (4:5). The fragmentation of education into 12 separate curricula (10 cantonal, 1 for Republika Srpska, 1 for Brčko District) creates conditions facilitating political manipulation.

The infamous "two schools under one roof" system exemplifies how supposed solutions can exacerbate problems. Designed to provide returnee pupils access to education, it instead institutionalized ethnic segregation in schools and communities [10].

Religious Elites as Conflict Drivers

Religious leaders play a problematic role in perpetuating divisions. As respondents noted, "Political statements of religious leaders are problematic" (3:16), with religious elites characterized as "conflict drivers, not peace drivers. The top-level [religious leaders] are an extension of those preferring the status quo. Religious textbooks are terrible, including divisive hate rhetoric" (4:30).

While dynamics between religious and political elites vary across levels and between ethnoreligious groups, the overall contribution of religious elites reinforces the frozen conflict [11].

Ghettoization and Perpetual Conflict

The cumulative effect of these narrative politics is a deeply divided, "ghettoized" society consisting of antagonistic, ethnoreligiously segregated "sub-universes of meaning" [12]. Deep mistrust perpetuates ethnoreligious conflict, which becomes re-legitimized through elections (2:91; 1:17), closing a vicious circle that maintains elite power-sharing positions (4:1; 4:3; 4:6).

In this setting, as Močnik [12, p.84] suggests, "antagonism is the specific mode in which co-operation is performed"—the elites' focal point of cooperation is maintaining division.

Elite Capture: Political Economy and Corruption

Elite capture extends beyond political relations into economic spheres. "Political elites control the judiciary, public employment and media" (4:5). Hidden behind "vital national interests" and perpetual "existential threats," the economy becomes subject to criminalized business clans under patronage of corrupt politicians connected with ethnopolitical elites (3:6; 4:19).

One respondent provocatively suggested that "privatization was the goal of the war and after which the economic conditions have been worsened, people lost a lot and got little in return" (2:6). While this claim risks post hoc fallacy, substantial evidence indicates that war, frozen conflict, and privatization have proceeded simultaneously.

Criminal expropriation of common goods and ubiquitous corruption (2:6) are coupled with politically controlled (4:5) and highly inefficient judiciary (1:2; 3:6). As one respondent noted, "Our legislative framework is not bad, but the justice policy is" (1:15). A politician respondent considered inefficient judiciary the crucial problem: "Neither the prosecutor's office nor the courts use the provisions of the criminal law, they do not sanction people who break the law, which directly affects all of this. The biggest factor is that" (1:12). This network of political elites and criminal groups operating under an inefficient judiciary completely marginalizes state institutions, in which nobody trusts. In reality, "nothing can be achieved through regular means. Procedures are not respected, they are unclear, and semi-private relationships are behind everything. One must use private connections to achieve any goal" (3:6). Ultimately, "people are left to their own" (2:5).

Socioeconomic Devastation and Survival Mode

Nearly 30 years after DPA, socioeconomic impoverishment and social devastation have produced widespread apathy and disappointment (2:7; 3:9; 5:8). The population operates in "survival mode," where "everybody lives day by day," causing lack of future vision and contentment with status quo stability that benefits only ruling elites (2:10; 3:9; 3:13).

As one respondent concluded, "the most important factor fueling new cycles of conflict in BiH is that political elites want status quo" (4:1) because "status quo is profitable" both politically and economically (4:3). Complete elite capture of peace processes emerges as the key agency in peacebuilding blockages.

External Factors

International Community and DPA Implementation

Beyond DPA's structural flaws, its implementation has been characterized as lacking systematic approach (2:16). "International community failed in long strategy for they are often fixed on quick wins, lacking long-term goals" (4:23). Some "quick solutions" proved counterproductive, further contributing to societal division. This lack of systematic approach is compensated by adherence to top-down intervention from the beginning of DPA implementation (2:1; 4:31). Carl Bildt described DPA as "'half-negotiated and half-imposed.' Partly because of the deep scars of war, and partly because of the tensions that stem from compromises within the agreement itself" [4].

Cultural Insensitivity and Ignoring Local Expertise

Respondents identified the "Anglo-Saxon" origin of DPA as problematic, emphasizing pragmatic solutions without incorporating local perspectives, particularly "emotional culture" (2:1; 4:31). This ignores BiH's cultural specificity and different emotional responses to dealing with past conflicts. "It is an objectively difficult topic… in Southern Europe, such as Spain and Bosnia, there are different emotional cultures to deal with peace, unlike some northern countries" (4:7).

During implementation, potential local expertise has been systematically ignored. "Results of social research made by local experts are neglected in favor of implementing ready-made models" (2:16), whether concerning DPA-mandated reforms or addressing emerging issues.

Projectization: The Overwhelming Problem

Respondents almost consensually identified total projectization of post-war transformation as a major problem imposed by the international community. A decade after DPA, an anonymous Sarajevan captured this reality: "we don't live in a country, we live in a project" [4], p.198.

Problems associated with this approach are numerous:

1. Bureaucratic burden: Governmentality ideology embedded in projectization favors administrative procedures over meaningful social processes (2:17)
2. Exclusionary criteria: Increasing "good governance" criteria make large corporate-like NGOs main beneficiaries, not necessarily corresponding to their peace contribution. "Smaller NGOs cannot sustain it… They are financially killed, and at the same time, they are asked both to respect the procedures and build democracy" (3:14)
3. Language barriers: Unfamiliarity with English has been a major disadvantage in participating in peace processes (2:1)
4. Short-termism: Singular short-term projects are supported instead of wider social movements that might initiate changes (5:15)
5. Competition over collaboration: Instead of creating networks and synergies within civil society, this approach creates fierce competition for funds structured to tackle only surface issues (2:16)
6. External agendas over local needs: Strategic preference for projects favored by international actors and agendas over local needs (3:13; 4:9)
7. Flawed theories of change: Major theories used in preferred projects were culturally and contextually uninformed, such as: "If people are capacitated in various democratic practices, they'll vote differently (not for nationalists)"; "If the new government in Sarajevo decreases corruption and makes life better for citizens, it will be an example for other parts of BiH" (5:7)
8. Inefficient channeling: Development funds channeled through inefficient state institutions instead of directly through civil society organizations (3:15)

The result is fragmented and weakened civil society unable to produce meaningful solutions to advance peace processes, thus contributing to maintaining status quo (4:9).

A local respondent suggested that "the international community is basically uninterested in real problem solving and there has never been real engagement, but just another project" (2:16). A foreign respondent explained the roots of such cynicism: "Fatigue is coming from 30 years of nothing changing. So, they [internationals] say, it is too complicated, let us keep it stable etc. Therefore, people feel cynical about EU, because they think it was never about democracy, but about expanding capitalism and corruption" (5:8).

This conformism of internationals, particularly from the EU, was identified by other respondents: "Unfortunately, over time, most EU officials began to adapt to the abnormal situation in BiH, so here they are proposing what would not pass in their countries" (1:13). For some internationals, BiH is perceived as "a center for building personal careers and CVs" (1:24; 2:19).

Overall, external factors in BiH are characterized as culturally insensitive, fragmented, disoriented, and indecisive (1:8). They appear as significant factors in peace process blockages by failing to prevent elite capture while simultaneously preventing development of genuine civil society capable of challenging the status quo. Instead, they push civil society to operate within the status quo.

Global Geopolitical Influences

The situation is further complicated by global influences on BiH domestic affairs. The geopolitical position of the Balkans is such that "interest of great powers has always been overlapped there" (3:4). All respondents observed negative influences from both Western and Eastern global powers, except one who thought foreign actors less prominent than domestic ones in blocking peace (4:22).

Western Powers (EU, USA, UK) are generally seen as interested in reforming BiH toward peace and democratization but unable to effectively implement any agenda due to indecisiveness and orientation toward quick solutions through short-term projects. Political elites instrumentalize external factors for their interests. Eastern Powers (Russia, China, Turkey) support non-democratic political practices through "soft power," promoting divisive rhetoric or financing nationalistic parties (4:24). This is facilitated by global trends of illiberal, non-democratic movements.

Serbia and Croatia are singled out as particularly important external actors. As DPA signatories, they are simultaneously internal actors in BiH (1:20; 3:11; 5:5). "Both countries have territorial pretensions over BiH," claiming ethnic unity with parts of BiH's population, and "they have never developed non-nationalistic democratic options" (5:16). Examples exist of local positive peacebuilding achievements subsequently obstructed by these neighboring countries without proper international response (3:11).
Serbia's alignment with Russia spreads Russian interest in BiH, particularly through Republika Srpska (1:22; 2:7; 4:24; 5:5). Croatia, together with Hungary (which has shown increasing interest in BiH, 1:22), although EU member states, often support non-democratic projects in Balkans regional affairs aligned with Eastern Powers, making them also blockage actors. This demonstrates that BiH's position remains volatile and subject to great power interests, as historically has often been the case.
Significantly, no respondent mentioned the Office of the High Representative (OHR), an international body also acting as a domestic political factor.

V Linkages Between Peace and Democratization Blockages

There is consensus among all respondents that blockages to peace and democratization are deeply connected.

Institutional Linkage Through the Dayton Peace Agreement

A specific trait of BiH, as one respondent reminded us (2:12), is that although democratization processes started in the late 1980s, they were reintroduced by DPA provisions. The Constitution of BiH, as an annex to the peace agreement, contains a provision that BiH "shall be a democratic state, which shall operate under the rule of law and with free and democratic elections."
Through DPA—simultaneously a peace agreement and constitutional act of a democratic state—peacebuilding in BiH is directly linked to development of democratic institutions and practices. Links between peacebuilding and democratization are legalized and institutionalized.
From this perspective, BiH represents a textbook example of peace processes built within the framework of International Peace Architecture as prescribed by the 1992 "Agenda for Peace, Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping." Post-war peacebuilding is not only about "restoring order" but also rebuilding the state based on (neo)liberal norms and liberal understandings of peacebuilding.

Parallel Blockages

Given these strong institutional links, democratization processes suffer from the same problems as peacebuilding. Complete elite capture of both peace and democratization processes is at work. Political elites use DPA and war memories to ghettoize society by raising tensions, thus recreating non-democratic social and political culture that blocks both positive peacebuilding and democratization.
Even when positive peacebuilding results are achieved at individual or local levels, there is a lack of democratic institutions to sustain and multiply them to wider populations (3:10). Development and functioning of state institutions are blocked—most prominently through inefficient judicial systems and corruption—forcing the population to circumvent institutions and, in the political arena, to opt for the only stability offered by elites: perpetually re-electing them.
Thus, blockages to peace reinforce blockages to democratization and vice versa, closing pathways to viable alternatives and enabling stalemate.

Global Context and Democratic Backsliding

Beyond internal factors, BiH is subjected to global interest influences, particularly during this moment of significant global realignments. One respondent elaborated on noticeable imbalance between economic and political liberalism globally: following the 2008 financial crisis, "liberalization of economy sped up, but political liberalism slowed down. The globalization of capitalism brought us here. There is a lack of solidarity, the rise of racism..." (5:14).
As she continued, values-based alliances between countries reduce war possibilities (at least in liberal peace theory), "so, the return of geopolitical thesis is worrisome for democratic peace. Long-term implication of geopolitical multipolarity is problematic in terms of economy, social security, rights and values" (5:12). Although peace without democracy is possible, it is only short-term (5:13).
These trends are particularly problematic since they increase the influence of non-liberal democratic actors not only globally but also on local and regional ruling elites, contributing to their even more entrenched stalemate position.

VI Tackling the Blockages: Proposed Solutions

General Observations on Proposed Solutions

In representing respondents' suggestions, ideas, and opinions, we first share impressions from the interviews. A general lack of enthusiasm in answering this question is strikingly evident among all respondents. Given that all have wide and long experience dealing with BiH reality, their answers bear a significant dose of "disappointment"—similar to what they identified among the population. This indicates that frozen conflict in BiH is likely to continue for an unseen period due to systemic blockages.

Additionally, this attitude appears to constrain their imagination, which becomes limited by the complexity they face when attempting to think about implementing ideas. Another phenomenon discerned from interviews with local respondents (non-foreigners) is their frequent avoidance of mentioning subjects or actors of proposed actions—essentially avoiding identification of who would be carriers and responsible for implementing changes.

Constitutional Reform and New Social Contract

One major way to overcome blockages would be creating a new social contract, entailing reform of BiH's Constitution on a more democratic basis, unlike the DPA which suffers from demonstrated democratic deficit (5:9; 3:9). However, respondents are aware this is an epic undertaking. The international community's role would mean putting higher pressure on domestic political elites (3:8). It should be the West's job since "it is the elite project, so the elites deal with the elites" (5:5).

Judicial Reform and Anti-Corruption

Another proposal at a similar feasibility level is putting higher pressure on the judicial system for more efficient crime and corruption fighting. Although we can assume internationals are tacitly seen as responsible for this action, it is uncertain from interviews who is supposed to exert such pressure (1:15; 3:7).

Education Reform

Education is another domain requiring restructuring to include civic and peace education programs leading toward common understanding of the past (5:4).

Regional Pressure and Support

International actors are expected to put more pressure on official politics in Belgrade and Zagreb to change attitudes toward BiH while giving more support to non-hegemonic (in terms of ethnicity) countries in the region such as BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo (5:10).

Restructuring Projectization and Funding

In more realistic terms, respondents offered several recommendations addressing projectization problems:

1. Strategic approach: Creating feasible strategy by EU and other funding agencies to replace reactive approaches and quick fixes (4:23)
2. Trust-based financing: "A change towards trust-based financing of civil society and peacebuilding organizations" (5:17)
3. Decentralization: "Decentralization of funding" enabling more organizations to be involved in processes (5:17)
4. Dedicated peacebuilding fund: "Creation of a peacebuilding fund" (5:17) not sensitive to "funding trends" and ever-changing individual agency agendas but focused on actual needs (3:13; 3:15)

Bottom-Up Approach and Local Focus

Following funding restructuring, almost all respondents pointed out the necessity for major funders to focus on bottom-up approaches that can make "the only possible changes at the micro-level" (3:17). These include:

- Financing small actions in local communities based on local needs, away from main cities (4:15, 4:27; 4:29)
- Using local culture, economy, and tourism to contribute to social cohesion (2:20; 4:27)
- Supporting experimental deliberative democracy projects such as the Citizens' Assembly of BiH, already supported by EU (4:20)

Such projects should transcend "project reality" and be built and funded as movements (5:15). Another potential bottom-up idea is municipalization, which should also be supported as a movement (5:9).

Bosnia and Herzegovina as Instructive Case

As an inverted suggestion, one respondent sees BiH as an important and instructive example of negative peacebuilding impact that should act as a lesson for all (5:11).

Synthesis: The Central Role of International Community

From all these suggestions, it is obvious that the international community—and for the most part the EU—is perceived by all respondents as the key decisive factor in deblocking peace and democratization processes. This is highly consistent with perceptions of structural issues built into DPA and its poorly performed implementation under international community leadership. In the overall stalemate situation to which they have significantly contributed, they are expected to create conditions for civil society and the population to act as agents of change toward peace and democracy.

VII CONCLUSION

This research reveals that nearly three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of "frozen conflict" characterized by systemic blockages to both peacebuilding and democratization. The findings confirm Richard Holbrooke's prescient characterization of the DPA as "a gigantic stalemate machine," demonstrating how peace agreements can inadvertently create conditions for ongoing conflict rather than sustainable peace.

Key Findings

Our analysis identified 40 interconnected factors that fuel conflict cycles and block peace pathways, revealing a complex web of internal and external influences. Internally, the DPA's structural flaws created a "formalized political unsettlement" that enables complete elite capture of peace and democratic processes. Political elites exploit war memories, control institutions, media, and education to maintain ethnoreligious divisions, while simultaneously enriching themselves through corruption and semi-legal economic practices. The population, impoverished and operating in "survival mode," becomes complicit in maintaining the status quo through electoral legitimization of these same elites—closing a vicious circle of blockages.

Externally, the international community—despite ostensible commitment to peace and democracy—has contributed significantly to blockages through culturally insensitive, fragmented, and indecisive interventions. The overwhelming projectization of civil society has created fierce competition for funds rather than collaborative networks, weakened genuine grassroots movements, and imposed external agendas over local needs. Flawed theories of change and bureaucratic burdens have further marginalized smaller, potentially more effective civil society actors.

The research demonstrates strong institutional linkages between peace and democratization blockages. Through DPA's constitutional provisions, peacebuilding and democratization are legally and institutionally connected, meaning that blockages to one necessarily reinforce blockages to the other. This is further compounded by global geopolitical realignments, particularly the rise of illiberal movements and the influence of non-democratic actors both globally and regionally, which entrench elite positions and contribute to stalemate.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to understanding "counter-peace" dynamics [5] by demonstrating how isolated blockages form systemic patterns that perpetuate conflict. The BiH case illustrates limitations of liberal peacebuilding paradigms, particularly when imposed through top-down interventions without adequate consideration of local context, emotional culture, and power dynamics. The concept of "peace cartel"—where elites across ethnoreligious divides cooperate to maintain division as their mode of cooperation—offers important insights into how power-sharing arrangements can be captured and perverted.

The research also highlights the problematic nature of "formalised political unsettlement" [3] as a peace strategy. While such arrangements may successfully end active warfare, they can institutionalize conflict dynamics, creating stable but deeply problematic equilibria resistant to transformation.

Practical Implications

The proposed solutions reflect both the depth of the stalemate and the complexity of overcoming it. The lack of enthusiasm among respondents—all experienced practitioners and scholars—in discussing solutions is itself a significant finding, indicating the extent to which the system has become entrenched and resistant to change.

Nevertheless, several pathways emerge from the analysis:

- Constitutional reform creating a new social contract on more democratic foundations, though this requires unprecedented political will and international pressure

- Judicial reform with more efficient anti-corruption mechanisms and rule of law enforcement
- Education reform toward common curricula and civic/peace education
- Restructured funding mechanisms emphasizing trust-based financing, decentralization, and support for movements rather than projects
- Bottom-up approaches focusing on local needs, micro-level changes, and community-based initiatives
- Regional pressure on Serbia and Croatia to change attitudes toward BiH while supporting ethnically diverse countries in the region
- Long-term strategic approach by international actors replacing reactive, quick-fix interventions

Critically, the international community—particularly the EU—emerges as the key decisive factor in deblocking processes, not because local actors lack agency, but because international actors created and maintain the structural conditions enabling elite capture. They are therefore responsible for creating conditions under which civil society and the population can act as genuine agents of change.

Broader Lessons

The BiH case offers crucial lessons for peacebuilding interventions globally:

- Structural design matters: Peace agreements with structural flaws and democratic deficits can create conditions for ongoing conflict rather than sustainable peace
- Cultural sensitivity is essential: Ignoring local context, emotional culture, and expertise in favor of ready-made models undermines effectiveness
- Projectization has limits: Overwhelming bureaucratization and short-term project logic can fragment and weaken civil society rather than strengthen it
- Elite capture is predictable: Power-sharing arrangements without robust accountability mechanisms are vulnerable to complete elite capture
- Top-down approaches have limitations: Without genuine bottom-up engagement and local ownership, imposed reforms are unlikely to succeed
- Patience is required: Quick fixes and reactive approaches cannot address deep-seated structural problems requiring long-term strategic engagement
- Global context matters: Peacebuilding efforts are not insulated from global geopolitical dynamics, which can reinforce or undermine local progress

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its sample size and geographic focus on Sarajevo-based stakeholders. Future research should expand to include perspectives from Republika Srpska and rural areas, as well as comparative analysis with other cases of "frozen conflict" and "formalized political unsettlement." Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of blockages and attempted solutions over time would provide valuable insights into dynamics of change and resistance.

Additionally, research exploring the role of the Office of the High Representative—notably absent from respondent discussions—could illuminate important dynamics. Investigation of successful micro-level peacebuilding initiatives that have managed to circumvent systemic blockages could identify replicable strategies.

Final Reflection

Bosnia and Herzegovina stands as a sobering reminder that ending war is not equivalent to building peace. The country's experience demonstrates how well-intentioned international interventions, when structurally flawed and poorly implemented, can inadvertently create self-perpetuating systems of conflict. Nearly three decades after Dayton, BiH remains a "gigantic stalemate machine"—a testament to the complexity of peacebuilding and the dangers of ignoring local context, elite capture, and the need for long-term strategic engagement.

Yet within this sobering analysis lies a critical lesson: recognizing systemic blockages is the first step toward overcoming them. By understanding how peace and democratization have been blocked—and how these blockages are interconnected—we can begin to imagine pathways toward genuine transformation. The challenge is not lack of knowledge about what needs to change, but rather the political will to implement necessary changes and the patience to support long-term processes rather than quick fixes.

The international community, having played a significant role in creating and maintaining the stalemate, bears particular responsibility for creating conditions under which BiH's population can become genuine agents of their own peace and democratic development. This requires humility, cultural sensitivity, long-term commitment, and willingness to support bottom-up processes rather than imposing top-down solutions. Whether such transformation is possible remains an open question—but the alternative is indefinite perpetuation of frozen conflict, an outcome serving no one except those who profit from the status quo.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is based on research conducted by the Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo as part of the EMBRACe project investigating blockages in peacebuilding and democratization processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are grateful for the financial support received from the University of Manchester for this project.

APPENDIX

Interviews

1: politician, local respondent
2: scholar/peace and democratization activist, local respondent
3: scholar/peace and democratization activist, local respondent
4: two political advisers/members of a major international organization operating in BiH, international respondents
5: scholar/political analyst from an internationally funded think tank, international respondent

REFERENCES

[1] The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/0/126173.pdf

[2] Perry, V. Frozen, „Stalled, stuck, or just muddling through: the post-Dayton frozen conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.“ Asia Europe Journal, 17, pp. 107-127, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-018-0525-6

[3] Bell, C. and Pospisil, J. „Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: The formalised political unsettlement.“ Journal of International Development, 29 (5), pp. 576-593, 2017.

[4] Chollet, D. The road to the Dayton accords: a study of american statecraft. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p.45

[5] Pogodda, S., Richmond, O. and Visoka, G. „Counter-peace: From Isolated Blockages in Peace Processes to Systemic Patterns.“ Review of International Studies, 48(3), pp. 494-514, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000377

[6] United Nations „An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping.“ UN Doc. A/47/277, 1992.

[7] University of Manchester „EMBRACe WP6 Fieldwork Manual.“ 2023.

[8] Perry, V. (2019). The Dayton Peace Agreement: Flawed but fundamentally effective. In M. Bieber & S. Keil (Eds.), *The Dayton Peace Agreement: Assessing the Successes and Failures of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Constitutional Framework* (pp. 23-46). Routledge.

[9] Vlaisavljević, U. [War as the Greatest Cultural Value] Rat kao najveća kulturna vrednost, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 2002.

[10] OSCE „Two Schools Under One Roof - The Most Visible Example of Discrimination in Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina.“ 2018.

[11] Fetahagić, S. S. and Šavija-Valha, N. Between cooperation and antagonism – the dynamics between religion and politics in sensitive political contexts, case: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nansen Dialogue Centre, Sarajevo, 2014.

[12] Močnik, R. „The Balkans as an Element in Ideological Mechanisms.“ In: D. I. Bijelić & O. Savić (Eds.), Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 79-115.

[13] Berger, P. L. and Luckmann T, The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge, Penguin Books, 1991. p.102.