

*Stefan Vukojević\**

*Faculty of Philosophy, University of East Sarajevo*

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE PLURALITY SYSTEM IN THE ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA: POLITICAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES**

### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the political, institutional, and social consequences of applying the plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral system for the election of the President of the Republic of Srpska. The goal is to assess how well this electoral model meets the democratic needs of an ethnically divided, post-conflict society and to propose recommendations for potential reform to strengthen democratic legitimacy and political stability. The analysis relies on a comparative case study of presidential elections in the Republic of Srpska, drawing on theoretical literature on electoral systems in divided societies. The findings show that the plurality system undermines the legitimacy of the elected president, fuels political polarization, ethnic mobilization, and personalized leadership, while reducing incentives for political compromise. As alternatives, the paper considers a two-round majority system and preferential voting, which could encourage more moderate political discourse and broader social support. It concludes that changing the electoral model could enhance both legitimacy and political stability in the Republic of Srpska.

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\* E-mail: stefan.vukojevic@ff.ues.rs.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-9137-8003

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## INTRODUCTION

The President of the Republic of Srpska (RS), as a directly elected entity leader, symbolizes its political identity and plays a crucial role in the political dynamics within Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which is shaped by the complex constitutional arrangements of the Dayton Agreement and deep ethnic divisions (Bieber 2006; Belloni 2007; Keil 2013; Vukojević 2017a). Despite this importance, the first-past-the-post (plurality) system used to elect the RS president has rarely been the subject of systematic scholarly analysis, even though it carries significant consequences for legitimacy, political competition, and the broader political dynamics in both the RS and BiH.

The plurality system allows a candidate to win with the highest number of votes without crossing the 50% threshold. This feature can result in the election of a president with minority support in the electorate, thereby diminishing the perception of democratic legitimacy (Shugart and Taagepera 1994). In an ethnically fragmented, post-conflict society where parties often mobilize along ethnic lines (Horowitz 1985), such a system may exacerbate polarization, limit inclusiveness, and reduce incentives for inter-party cooperation and compromise. This raises the question of how well the plurality system aligns with the democratic needs and specific context of the RS and BiH.

Previous research on elections in BiH has primarily focused on parliamentary contests and the complex institutional design intended to preserve peace and balance among constituent peoples (Manning 2004; Kapidžić 2017; Vukojević 2016, 2022). Presidential elections in the RS have received less scholarly attention, despite the direct election of the executive having significant symbolic and political impacts on entity and state-level stability. This paper seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the limitations and consequences of the plurality system in this specific context.

The main aim of the paper is to identify and explain the political, institutional, and social consequences of using the plurality system to elect the president of the RS. It specifically addresses the following research question: What are the political, institutional, and social consequences

of the plurality system in electing the president of the RS, and how might changing the electoral model strengthen democratic legitimacy and political stability? The paper employs a comparative case study of presidential elections in the RS using the plurality system. Drawing on theoretical literature on electoral systems in divided societies, it analyzes the effects of plurality voting and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of alternative models of direct presidential election.

Based on the constitutional and legal framework regulating the position and election of the RS president, empirical data on past presidential election results in the RS, and comparative analysis of alternative electoral models, this paper offers a comprehensive and reasoned basis for evaluating the adequacy of the existing system and considering possible reforms. The structure of the paper is organized as follows. After the introduction, the second section presents the theoretical framework and relevant literature on the consequences of presidential elections under a plurality system, with a particular focus on its application in divided societies. The third section explains the institutional context of the president's position and the election process. The fourth section explores in detail the political, institutional, and social limitations of the plurality system in the RS. The fifth section offers comparative insights and considers alternative models for electing the RS president, while the sixth section provides concluding reflections and recommendations for possible electoral reform.

## **SYSTEM OF PLURALITY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

Electoral systems are the foundation of any democracy's political architecture. They shape patterns of political competition, structure party systems, and influence the very nature of political representation (Norris 2004). Classical comparative literature distinguishes among majoritarian, proportional, and mixed systems, with majoritarian systems – including plurality (first-past-the-post) – emphasizing simplicity, stability, and clarity of electoral outcomes. This model allows a candidate to win with the most votes without needing an absolute majority, often prioritizing efficiency over inclusiveness (Lijphart 1999).

While the plurality system is seen as effective in producing stable, accountable governments in stable two-party democracies such as the United Kingdom, its weaknesses become apparent in societies marked by

deep ethnic divisions and post-conflict instability. Such contexts demand electoral mechanisms that do more than simply translate votes into seats – they must actively encourage interethnic cooperation and prevent exclusive mobilization along ethnic lines (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 2004; Reilly 2001).

The theoretical literature on elections in divided societies identifies two contrasting approaches. The consociational model, developed by Lijphart (1977, 2002), institutionalizes power sharing through principles of proportionality, joint decision-making, and segmental autonomy, ensuring representation of all significant groups. This approach recognizes and channels conflict institutionally, reducing the likelihood of violent confrontation. In contrast, the centripetal approach advocated by Horowitz (1985) and Reilly (2001) focuses on electoral system design that encourages political actors to compete for votes beyond their ethnic bases. Examples include two-round majority systems or preferential voting, where candidates must attract broader support to secure victory, creating incentives for moderation and compromise.

Empirical studies on the effects of plurality systems show that their impact depends heavily on context. In stable democracies without deep ethnic divisions, such systems can facilitate the formation of stable governments and apparent oppositions. However, the plurality system can produce exclusive outcomes and intensify identity-based mobilization in plural and fragmented societies. The classic Duvergerian hypothesis on the tendency toward a two-party system via psychological and mechanical effects of elections is well demonstrated in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States (Norris 2004). Yet, it does not automatically lead to moderation, primarily when voter preferences are structured along ethnic lines (Horowitz 1985).

Additionally, theoretical literature suggests that plurality systems often reward candidates with strong personal profiles who can dominate the campaign and political arena. This focus on the “strongest personality” can foster personalized forms of leadership, where success depends on charisma and control of resources rather than a willingness to compromise or build broad coalitions (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid 2020; Frantz *et al.* 2021). In post-conflict societies, this further complicates the consolidation of fragile democratic institutions, as political competition becomes personal and polarized.

Electing a president via a plurality system can have several negative consequences for the political system and society. First, the

president may be elected with a relatively small share of the total vote, lacking broad voter support and thus democratic legitimacy in the eyes of the public, which can undermine respect for human rights and democratic norms (Shugart and Taagepera 1994). Such a system also often encourages polarization and a “winner-takes-all” dynamic, increasing political tensions and reducing the scope for compromise, particularly in societies with deep divisions.

Moreover, plurality elections can destabilize the party system by complicating the formation of stable governments and predictable coalitions, as the president often lacks parliamentary majority support (Horowitz 2008; Bétoa and Weber 2024). In elections with many candidates, the winner can be elected with well below 50% of the vote, further reducing representativeness (Cheibub, Limongi, and Przeworski 2023). This system can also fragment the political space and increase the influence of extremist candidates, since no majority support is needed to win (Horowitz 2008). All these consequences suggest that electing a president via a simple plurality system can weaken democratic institutions and undermine political stability.

In the context of BiH and the election of the RS president, empirical data show that winners have often secured mandates with relative majorities below 50%, sometimes even below 40%, leaving a majority of the electorate without identification with the elected president (Vukojević 2024). Instead of fostering coalition-building or integrative rhetoric, political competition in the RS tends to follow ethnic and party lines, with an emphasis on mobilizing “safe” voter bases and provoking antagonisms.

This empirical picture points to several key consequences: the plurality system reduces incentives for inter-party cooperation and consensus-building, favors large parties, and enables the victory of candidates representing only a limited segment of society, further diminishing the president’s representativeness and democratic legitimacy. In the divided and post-conflict context of BiH, this entrenches ethnic cleavages, limits the possibilities for inclusive governance, and undermines the long-term perception of democratic legitimacy. These weaknesses are recognized in comparative studies that warn simple majoritarian models rarely succeed in complex societies without additional corrective mechanisms (Reilly 2001; McGarry and O’Leary 2004; Reynolds 2005).

## **POLITICAL CONTEXT AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA**

The Republic of Srpska is one of two entities in BiH, created by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. The Dayton constitutional framework established a complex, multilayered state structure that combines centralized and decentralized elements to preserve peace and ensure reconciliation among constituent peoples (Bose 2002; Bieber 2006). Within this framework, the RS enjoys a high degree of autonomy, including its own constitution, legislative and executive branches, and a specific electoral system for electing the entity's president.

The political role of the RS president is significant and can vary from almost ceremonial to highly influential, depending on the political context and the balance of power in the National Assembly. The constitution stipulates that the president represents the entity, nominates the prime minister-designate, has the power to dissolve the National Assembly after consultations, proposes laws and general acts, and can initiate the dismissal of the prime minister on the proposal of at least 20 deputies even without the prime minister's resignation (Constitution of the Republic of Srpska, Arts. 80–85). This demonstrates that, although the RS is not a classic presidential system, it contains strong presidential elements in which the president can play a key political role. The real power of the president often depends on parliamentary majorities in both the executive and legislative branches, meaning the role can range from “super-presidential” to nearly ceremonial (Vukojević 2019, 2024).

The election for the RS president is held on the same day as the general elections in BiH. The president is elected via a simple or plurality system (first-past-the-post), while the RS National Assembly is elected using proportional party-list representation. This combination of two different electoral formulas reflects an attempt to balance executive stability with legislative proportionality. However, such a hybrid system has important implications for political dynamics and the quality of political representation.

Until 2002, elections were held every two years, after which constitutional changes extended the presidential term to four years. The plurality system for presidential elections has been used continuously since the first post-war elections, except in 2000, when an absolute majority system – alternative vote – was applied. The return to the plurality system reaffirmed the simplest model: the winner is the

candidate with the most votes, without needing an absolute majority of 50% + 1 vote. This allows candidates with relatively narrow support bases to win, which is particularly problematic in ethnically fragmented societies.

The 2002 constitutional amendments further defined the election of the president and two vice-presidents of the Republic of Srpska, who together must represent the three constituent peoples. According to the RS Constitution, the president and vice-presidents are elected from a single list of candidates, with the presidency going to the candidate with the most votes and the vice-presidencies assigned to the next highest-polling candidates from the other two constituent peoples (Constitution of the Republic of Srpska, Art. 83). While this provision aims to address ethnic representation symbolically, it does not change the fundamental logic of electing the president by plurality, which still favors the majority group and does not require broader support.

Nevertheless, the system has practical advantages. Plurality voting allows for straightforward ballots and rapid counting of results. The RS voters often know the new president's identity within hours of polls closing. Such efficiency and transparency are valuable democratic qualities, but do not eliminate the fundamental weakness of the model, which permits the election of a president without majority support and without incentives for broader political inclusion.

This institutional design is not explicitly adapted to the specific needs of a divided, post-conflict society. Although the RS Constitution introduces a symbolic element of ethnic representation by electing vice-presidents from other constituent peoples, the election of the president by plurality remains the central weakness, reproducing the dominance of the majority narrative and limiting opportunities for interethnic cooperation and compromise.

## **DRAWBACKS OF ELECTING THE PRESIDENT BY PLURALITY**

The plurality system is globally well-known and widely used for parliamentary elections, but it is much less popular for direct presidential elections. Globally, there was a significant shift in preferences for presidential electoral models during the 1990s. In the 1950s, only about 6% of countries with directly elected presidents used an absolute majority system, but that number rose to over 60% by the 1990s. This

trend was especially pronounced among new democracies in Eastern Europe and Africa, where the goal was to ensure broader popular support for elected presidents and thus strengthen the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Golder 2005).

Empirical analysis in the late 1990s and early 2000s shows that among 91 countries with directly elected presidents, only 20 used a plurality system, while as many as 61 employed an absolute majority system (Blais, Massicotte, and Dobrzynska 1997). Particularly among democratic states – 32 with direct presidential elections – only 6 used a plurality system, while 19 used an absolute majority system (Blais and Massicotte 2002). These data indicate a global preference for models that secure broader legitimacy for elected presidents and promote political consensus-building.

When this global context is compared with elections in the RS, it becomes clear that the system belongs to a less common and less popular group of models. The biggest problem with electing the president by simple plurality is that it allows a candidate to win a majority of voter support, undermining perceptions of democratic legitimacy. This is especially problematic in post-conflict societies where political and ethnic divisions are already deep, and where the legitimacy of elected leaders is crucial for maintaining stability.

Across the Balkans and in states that emerged from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the use of absolute majority systems in presidential elections is widespread. Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia all use models that require majority support to ensure the president has broad popular legitimacy. In this sense, BiH departs from the regional pattern by maintaining the simple plurality model in the RS. This leaves the RS as an outlier in a region that, following the democratic transitions of the 1990s, adopted electoral rules designed to strengthen executive legitimacy.

This difference has important political consequences. In the RS, the plurality system allows a candidate to win with a narrowly defined partisan or ethnic base without needing to appeal broadly across society. This reduces incentives for political compromise and moderation in rhetoric and strategy, further entrenching ethnic and partisan divisions. Additionally, this system creates incentives for a personalized style of politics that emphasizes individual leadership and power, often at the expense of institutionalized party structures and democratic accountability (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid 2020; Frantz *et al.* 2021).



A candidate who can cultivate the image of the strongest personality can capitalize on opposition fragmentation and win power without broad support, creating space for authoritarian leadership patterns and the erosion of democratic norms. In the RS political practice, these patterns of personalized leadership are most evident in the rise and long-term dominance of Milorad Dodik and the SNSD. Dodik has built his political brand on a strong personal profile and a rhetoric emphasizing determination, confrontation, and the protection of Serb ethnic interests, often marginalizing the need for broader consensus or compromise. His election campaigns have relied on personalized mobilization of the party base, while control of public resources has enabled clientelist networks that further consolidate personal political power (Bieber 2020).

The plurality system facilitates this strategy because it does not require majority support – only the consolidation of a loyal base, eliminating the need for programmatic convergence or coalition-building with rival blocs. Such a pattern of personalized leadership reduces political pluralism and weakens institutions' capacity to provide checks and balances on executive power, creating conditions for the centralization of power in the hands of a single political leader.

A review of presidential election results from 1996 to 2022 shows that only three times has a candidate won with an absolute majority: Biljana Plavšić in 1996 (59.2%), Mirko Šarović in 2000 (50.1%), and Milorad Dodik in 2010 (50.52%). In all other election cycles, winners secured between 35% and 48% of the vote. Particularly striking is the 2002 election, when Dragan Čavić became president with only 35.9% of the vote, while the remainder was fragmented among multiple candidates.

Table 1. Elections for the President of the Republic of Srpska

1996	SDS	Biljana Plavšić	636654 (59.2%)
	SDA	Abid Đozić	197389 (18.3%)
	NSzSM	Živko Radišić	168024 (15.6%)
	Other candidates		6.9%
1998	SRS-SDS	Nikola Poplašen	322684 (43.9%)
	Koalicija „Sloga“	Biljana Plavšić	286606 (39.0%)
	Bosanska stranka	Zulfo Nišić	107036 (14.6%)
	Other candidates		2.6%

2000	SDS	Mirko Šarović	313607 (50.1%)
	SNSD	Milorad Dodik	162154 (25.9%)
	PDP	Momčilo Tepić	54433 (8.7%)
	Other candidates		15.8%
2002	SDS	Dragan Čavić	183121 (35.9%)
	SNSD	Milan Jelić	112612 (22.1%)
	PDP	Dragan Mikerević	39978 (7.8%)
	SDA	Adil Osmanović	34123 (6.7%)
	Other candidates		27.1%
2006	SNSD	Milan Jelić	271022 (48.87%)
	SDS	Dragan Čavić	163041 (29.40%)
	SDA	Adil Osmanović	22444 (4.05%)
	Other candidates		17.7%
2007	SNSD	Rajko Kuzmanović	169863 (41.3%)
	SDS	Ognjen Tadić	142898 (34.8%)
	PDP	Mladen Ivanić	69522 (16.9%)
	Other candidates		7%
2010	SNSD-DNS-SP	Milorad Dodik	319618 (50.52%)
	Koalicija zajedno za Srpsku	Ognjen Tadić	227239 (35.92%)
	SDP	Enes Suljkanović	15425 (2.44%)
	Other candidates		11.12%
2014	SNSD-DNS-SP	Milorad Dodik	303496 (45.39%)
	Savez za promjene	Ognjen Tadić	296021 (44.28%)
	Domovina	Ramiz Salkić	24294 (3.6%)
	Other candidates		6.68%
2018	SNSD	Željka Cvijanović	319699 (47.04%)
	Savez za pobjedu	Vukota Govedarica	284195 (41.82%)
	Zajedno za BiH	Ramiz Salkić	21292 (3.13%)
	Other candidates		8.01%
2022	SNSD	Milorad Dodik	300180 (47.06%)
	PDP	Jelena Trivić	273245 (42.84%)
	Independent candidate	Čamil Duraković	13760 (2.16%)
	Other candidates		7.96%

Source: Institute of Statistics 2015, 39–58; CIK BiH n.d.

These data show that the plurality system in the RS has almost always resulted in the election of a president without an absolute majority. This pattern confirms Duverger's hypothesis about the tendency of simple plurality systems to produce two-party or two-bloc competition (Duverger 1954). In the RS, this manifests in a clear polarization between two blocs – parties allied with SNSD on one side and SDS and its opposition partners on the other (Vukojević 2017b, 2023). Such bipolar competition has a strong polarizing effect because the elected president typically represents only their own coalition or party base, leaving a large portion of the electorate excluded from the legitimization process.

During politically turbulent periods, tight races between two candidates can further intensify polarization and deepen divisions between party blocs. Examples include the presidential elections of 1998, 2014, and 2022.

The 1998 election saw Nikola Poplašen of the SRS-SDS coalition defeat Biljana Plavšić of the Sloga coalition (SNS-SP-SNSD) by around 5% – even though Sloga held a parliamentary majority. The political divide at that time was evident in their approaches to cooperation with the international community over Dayton implementation, with Sloga seen as the international community's preferred partner. The divide escalated when Poplašen repeatedly attempted to nominate a prime minister from outside the parliamentary majority, leading to an institutional crisis that was resolved only after the High Representative removed him from office. This crisis deepened the two-bloc polarization, prompting the international community to change the electoral system for the 2000 elections to the alternative vote system. The aim was to allow voters to rank candidates, enabling Bosniak and Croat second preferences to go to Biljana Plavšić, who could then have secured a majority and won.

The 2014 election occurred amid declining support for the ruling SNSD. Nonetheless, Milorad Dodik, representing the SNSD-DNS-SP coalition, narrowly defeated opposition candidate Ognjen Tadić of the Alliance for Change (SDS-PDP-NDP) by roughly 1% or around 7,000 votes. At the same time, in the election for the Serb member of the BiH Presidency, opposition candidate Mladen Ivanić narrowly defeated ruling coalition candidate Željka Cvijanović by fewer than 7,000 votes (Central Election Commission BiH [CIK BiH] 2014). These different outcomes at two levels of government can be explained by the candidates' appeal to different ethnic groups in the RS. For the Presidency, which elects only a Serb representative from the RS, Ivanić won partly thanks to strategic

support from Bosniak voters, who viewed him as more moderate. In the RS presidential election, however, Bosniaks had their own candidates for vice-presidency, and their votes did not transfer to Tadić, enabling Dodik's narrow victory. As a result, the SNSD-led coalition retained power in the RS, while the opposition formed a coalition government with Bosniak and Croat parties at the state level. The entire mandate was marked by mutual accusations and deepened polarization between the two blocs.

A particularly illustrative case confirming the structural weaknesses of the plurality system is the 2022 presidential election. In 2022, Milorad Dodik defeated Jelena Trivić of the PDP with 47.06% to 42.84% of the vote, while the remaining roughly 10% went to minor candidates and independents. The result was extremely close, with a margin of fewer than 30,000 votes out of more than 600,000 valid ballots. Immediately after the preliminary results were announced, the opposition accused the ruling party of electoral fraud, sparking days of protests in Banja Luka and other cities. The BiH Central Election Commission ordered a recount (Reuters 2022). Although the authorities ultimately confirmed Dodik's victory, the controversy further undermined perceptions of legitimacy and deepened the political polarization between the two major blocs. This case illustrates a typical weakness of the plurality system in a fragmented political and ethnic context: there is no institutional mechanism forcing candidates to seek a broad consensus or an absolute majority. Instead, victory is achievable through disciplined mobilization of one's own base. This dynamic favors the personalization of power and creates conditions for the centralization of political control in a single leader's hands, with long-term implications for the functionality of fragile institutions in the RS.

### **COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR ELECTING THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA**

The question of electoral system design for the RS presidency is not merely a technical matter but a profoundly political and normative one that concerns democratic legitimacy, political stability, and social cohesion. To understand potential solutions, it is useful to examine how different electoral models function in other countries, especially those

sharing characteristics with BiH, such as post-socialist transition, ethnic fragmentation, or polarized party competition.

A key argument for reforming the system in the RS is that a different electoral model could create different incentives for both presidential candidates and voters. The current plurality system directs candidates primarily toward mobilizing their most loyal voter base. This is especially evident among ruling party candidates who can focus almost exclusively on their core supporters without needing to win over broader segments beyond their party-coalition or ethnic constituency.

By contrast, absolute majority systems – such as the two-round majority (majority-runoff) or preferential voting (alternative vote) – are designed to encourage candidates to seek broader social support and political compromise. These systems require building more inclusive, moderate political platforms to attract votes beyond a candidate's primary electoral base, particularly in a second round or through preference transfers (Horowitz 1991; Reilly 2001).

The two-round majority system, used in France and most former Yugoslav republics (e.g., Serbia, Croatia), ensures that if no candidate secures an absolute majority in the first round, the top two candidates advance to a second round. This structure significantly alters the candidate's strategy. In the first round, candidates can rely on their primary base, freely articulate their ideological or ethnic messages, and test their appeal. However, in the second round, they are forced to broaden their appeal and become more acceptable to a wider spectrum of voters, including those who supported eliminated candidates in the first round (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2008). This dynamic necessitates more moderate rhetoric, readiness to negotiate, and the formation of informal alliances, reducing polarization and fostering political pluralism.

France is the classic example of a two-round presidential system. Candidates must secure popular support to win the second round, creating pressure for programmatic moderation and coalition-building. The French case demonstrates how the system can channel political competition toward the center, avoiding extremism and fragmentation. Although it has its own issues – such as potential personalization of power – the two-round model ensures that the elected president has a clear majority mandate.

A similar logic applies in Serbia, where negotiations and alliances between the first and second rounds often decide the winner, compelling candidates to moderate their rhetoric and seek support from smaller

parties or ethnic minorities. This model has shown how electoral structure can reduce exclusivity and promote compromise, which was crucial for stabilizing the transitional political scene. Croatia also uses a two-round system for presidential elections, where candidates failing to secure an absolute majority in the first round must adjust their platforms and negotiate with eliminated rivals to attract their voters in the second round. Across multiple election cycles in Croatia, the second round has been decisive precisely because it forces candidates to move away from radical positions and seek consensus, fostering a political dynamic oriented toward compromise rather than polarization.

Therefore, the question for the RS is whether a different electoral system would create different incentives for presidential candidates and voters. Both empirical evidence and theory suggest that adopting an absolute majority system could indeed change the political dynamic. Both of its main variants – the two-round majority and alternative vote – would push candidates to seek broader social support. By design, an absolute majority system is more inclusive and moderate, redirecting political competition toward the center.

However, the two-round model also has challenges. Repeated voting can cause voter fatigue and lower turnout in the second round. This issue has been recognized in practice, leading some countries to adopt alternative solutions like preferential voting (alternative vote). This system functions as an “instant-runoff”, where voters rank candidates by preference, and vote transfers in successive counting rounds ensure the election of a candidate with an absolute majority without needing a separate second round. Although technically more complex to count, preferential voting retains the same institutional logic: candidates are compelled to seek support beyond their core base, encouraging them to broaden their platforms and bridge social and political divides (Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis 2008).

It is worth noting that the international community experimentally introduced the alternative vote system in the 2000 RS presidential election. The expectation was that Bosniak voters would give their lower-ranked preferences to more moderate Serb party candidates like SNSD or PDP, thereby reducing the dominance of the then-powerful SDS. However, the results showed the limits of this approach in the context of entrenched ethnic fragmentation. Already in the first preference-counting round, the SDS candidate Mirko Šarović had a clear lead, and the redistribution of lower preferences largely stayed within ethnic lines.

Following that election, the alternative vote was abandoned, with the assessment that prevailing social divisions overwhelmed incentives for cross-ethnic voting.

Nonetheless, this does not mean such a model lacks future potential, especially in the context of tight electoral races where even small preference transfers could determine the winner. The more competitive the political contest, the more important it becomes for candidates to build broad political platforms and negotiate support across different social groups. That is precisely what absolute majority systems systematically encourage.

If the RS considered moving to a two-round majority model, it could look to the examples of neighboring countries that have used it to reduce political polarization and ensure presidential legitimacy. Alternatively, it could consider the alternative vote as a solution that eliminates the need for organizing a second round while preserving the logic of assembling broader support. In both cases, candidates would no longer be able to rely solely on disciplined ethnic or party bases – they would be forced to appeal to the broader population, negotiate, and adapt their platforms. This would create an institutional framework that strengthens presidential legitimacy and rewards moderation, coalition-building, and inclusion instead of polarization and ethnic mobilization.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the plurality electoral system for electing the president of the Republic of Srpska reveals the complex relationship between institutional design and the political dynamics within the entity. A system that allows a candidate to win with the highest number of votes without an absolute majority shapes party competition and electoral strategies, directing them toward mobilizing one's own base and fostering bloc-based divisions in the political arena.

In the context of pronounced ethnic heterogeneity and post-conflict political realities, this model results in specific patterns of electoral competition and the legitimacy of elected candidates. Data on the past RS presidential elections confirm that winners often secure mandates with relatively low vote shares, reflecting a deeply divided political scene and strong partisan polarization. Presidential elections show a stable pattern of two-bloc competition, where ruling and opposition coalitions

typically run close races, and victory often depends on the disciplined mobilization of an ethnically or party-defined voter base.

Comparative insights from other countries demonstrate different institutional solutions to the challenges of directly electing a president. Examples from France, Serbia, and Croatia illustrate the use of two-round majority systems that introduce additional mechanisms for securing broader political support and encourage more moderate political discourse. These models show how electoral rules can shape the behavior of political actors and the structure of electoral competition, creating different patterns of executive legitimacy.

The analysis of the RS institutional framework and political context reveals specific characteristics of its semi-presidential system, where the president holds significant constitutional powers, but whose actual political influence depends on relations with the parliamentary majority. In this context, the plurality system shapes relations between the president and parliament, influencing opportunities for coalition cooperation and the potential for political crises. Understanding these institutional and political dynamics offers a clearer perspective on the role of the electoral system in shaping political stability, party competition, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy in the Republic of Srpska. Such analysis can also provide a relevant framework for further research on the relationship between electoral design and political dynamics in divided societies, particularly in complex post-conflict arrangements such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Стефан Вукојевић\*

*Филозофски факултет, Универзитет у Источном Сарајеву*

## **ОГРАНИЧЕЊА СИСТЕМА ПРОСТЕ ВЕЋИНЕ У ИЗБОРУ ПРЕДСЈЕДНИКА РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРПСКЕ: ПОЛИТИЧКЕ, ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛНЕ И ДРУШТВЕНЕ ПОСЉЕДИЦЕ**

### **Резиме**

Овај рад анализира политичке, институционалне и друштвене посљедице кориштења система просте (релативне) већине за избор председника Републике Српске (РС). Председник РС има важну политичку и симболичку улогу у сложенем и етнички фрагментираном институционалном оквиру БиХ који је обликован Дејтонским споразумом. Аутор користи компаративни приступ и теоријску литературу о изборним системима у етнички подијељеним и постконфликтним друштвима, како би процијенио у којој мјери систем релативне већине одговара демократским потребама РС. Рад показује да систем релативне већине има неколико кључних слабости у контексту РС. Прво, омогућава избор председника са подршком мањине бирачког тијела – неријетко испод 50%, па чак и испод 40%, што подрива његов демократски легитимитет. Друго, овакав систем подстиче етничку мобилизацију и поларизацију јер кандидатима није потребна шира међуетничка подршка. Кампање се фокусирају на мобилизацију „сигурне” страначке и етничке базе, што учвршћује друштвене подјеле. Треће, систем просте већине награђује персонализовано вођство и јачање личног профила кандидата, што може утицати на јачање клијентелизма и ауторитарних тенденција. Примјери из Републике Српске – посебно дуготрајна доминација Милорада Додика и СНСД-а – показују како овакав систем утиче на консолидацију моћи око једног лидера. Само у три случаја председник је изабран натполовичном већином, док су остали избори завршавали с тијесним резултатима и често

\* Имејл: stefan.vukojevic@ff.ues.rs.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-9137-8003

продубљеном политичком поларизацијом. Посебно илустративни примјери укључују изборе 1998, када је избор председника из супротног политичког блока од парламентарне већине довео до институционалне кризе и интервенције високог представника, те изборе 2022. које су обиљежиле оптужбе за изборну крађу и масовне протесте. Рад такође наглашава институционалне посљедице система просте већине. Председник РС, иако формално ограничен парламентарном већином, има значајна уставна овлашћења. Несклад између председника из једног блока и парламента из другог може довести до институционалних блокада и политичких криза. Уз то, двоблоковски образац конкуренције (коалиције окупљене око СНСД и СДС) који се стабилно понавља од 2000-их година сужава политички простор за треће опције, ограничава програмску конкуренцију и фаворизује негативну и поларизујућу кампању. Као алтернативу, рад разматра двокружни већински систем и преференцијално гласање (алтернативни глас). Ови модели захтијевају да кандидат освоји натполовичну подршку, било кроз други круг или кроз трансфер преференција, чиме се кандидати подстичу да шире свој политички апел, ублаже реторику и преговарају о подршци са другим групама. Компаративна искуства Француске, Србије и Хрватске показују да овакви системи могу помоћи у смањењу поларизације и јачању демократског легитимитета председника. Закључно, рад сматра да би промјена изборног модела могла допринијети јачању демократске легитимности и политичке стабилности РС.

**Кључне ријечи:** Република Српска, избори, председник Републике Српске, политичка стабилност, изборна реформа

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