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Occasional Paper Series

Number 61

# Sociolinguistic Policies and Their Contestation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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The Forum of Federations, the global network on federalism and multilevel governance, supports better governance through learning among practitioners and experts. Active on six continents, it runs programs in over 20 countries including established federations, as well as countries transitioning to devolved and decentralized governance options. The Forum publishes a range of information and educational materials. It is supported by the following partner countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and Switzerland.

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ISSN: 1922-558X (online ISSN 1922-5598)

Occasional Paper Series Number 61  
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This project has been implemented with the support of the following institutions:



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Suggested citation for this publication:

Jasmin Hasić and Maja Savić-Bojanić, *Sociolinguistic Policies and Their Contestation in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Forum of Federations, Occasional Paper Series Number 61, 2022).

## **LANGUAGE POLICY IN FEDERAL AND DEVOLVED COUNTRIES**

### **Project Overview**

Language is a highly significant marker of individual and collective identities. It often provides an impulse for national or community affirmation and claims to self-government. Provisions to recognize and accommodate linguistic differences can be particularly salient in federations, many of which have highly diverse populations. Indeed, in quite a few cases linguistic diversity was one of the key reasons why federalism was central to a country's founding framework or the result of its constitutional evolution.

Several federal countries have designated more than one language as official (or national) languages in the federal constitution and/or legislation. In turn, the constituent units (states, provinces, etc.) may accord a similar status to one or more languages. The different designations are not merely symbolic: they usually require or lead to policies, programs and other measures to govern language use. In some nonfederal states where more than one language is spoken, a measure of authority over language policy has sometimes been devolved to regional governments (or the equivalent).

Language rules, including for service provision, are frequently an important dimension of policy sectors that are exclusively or largely the responsibility of constituent unit governments. One such sector is education. In various countries, there are calls for teaching to be given not only in officially recognized languages but also in others that are spoken by minorities that are fearful about the future of their language. Indigenous peoples in particular have concerns about the viability of their languages, many of which have a long history of suppression.

In some countries, language policies are well established and are largely uncontested. In others, the policies and/or their application are controversial – even divisive. This may be true not only in newer federations and devolved systems but also in those with a longer history. Because of their links to identity and culture (among other factors), languages can be – indeed, quite often are – a potent basis for political mobilization.

Even when political dynamics are not highly charged, pressures to change or reform language policies and programs are not uncommon. Some demands are fundamental (e.g. additional or stronger constitutional protection), while others are more administrative or technical. In light of their salience to citizens and their relevance in a range of sectors, it is not surprising that language policies are debated, reviewed and (at least in certain cases) modified.

Although there are a number of individual case studies, particularly covering countries where language has been a flash point for political division, there is a lack of comparative research. Moreover, existing comparative studies often focus on western Europe and North America. As more countries have adopted federal or devolved structures in recent decades, there is a need to expand the scope of research on language policies in plurilingual contexts.

The focus of this project is on language policy (broadly interpreted) in a range of countries that are federations or have a significantly devolved structure of government. It aims to take a holistic perspective on language policy and its place within governance arrangements. In addition to providing an overview of the country's demography, constitutional recognitions and protections, and language laws and policies, in order to encourage comparison authors were asked to address a common set of questions:

- A. What potential changes to the regulation of language – constitutional, legislative, administrative – have been proposed or are currently being debated?
- B. What are the pressures and who are the main actors behind the proposed changes?
- C. Which have received the most attention and/or seem the most feasible?

We hope that the authors' responses to these questions will inform public discussion and understanding in their own countries as well as in others where similar issues are on the agenda.

This project was developed following an initial discussion with Felix Knüpling, Vice-President (Programs) of the Forum of Federations. To provide expert advice, we created an editorial team comprised of the following: Elisabeth Alber (Institute for Comparative Federalism, Eurac Research), Linda Cardinal (Université de l'Ontario français) and Asha Sarangi (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The editorial team commented on the initial outline of the program and provided suggestions for potential authors. We were fortunate to attract leading scholars from a range of disciplines. At least one member of the editorial team reviewed and provided comments on the initial version of each paper.

Felix and I are indebted to Elisabeth, Linda and Asha for their excellent cooperation throughout the process. I would also like to express my appreciation to the authors of the country papers for agreeing to join the project and for their responsiveness to comments on their draft papers. We are grateful to Francesca Worrall for copy editing this paper. Finally, a big "thank you" to the Forum of Federations staff who administered the project and prepared the papers for publication: Olakunle Adeniran, John Light, Deanna Senko, George Stairs, Jamie Thomas and Asma Zribi.

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# Sociolinguistic Policies and Their Contestation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Jasmin Hasić  
Maja Savić-Bojanić

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



## Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was considered to be the most ethnically diverse republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until the federation began its disintegration in 1991. Soon after, following the examples of Slovenia and Croatia, BiH authorities proclaimed country's independence. The country gained instant international recognition and simultaneously ended up in a violent international violent conflict, which lasted until mid-December of 1995.

The current constitutional system of BiH, established as an annex to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), is predominantly based on the principle of representational parity of the three constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – along with the "others" and citizens of BiH. BiH consists of two largely self-governing administrative units called "Entities": the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). A third administrative unit of local self-governance, called Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina, exists under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The FBiH Entity is divided into 10 administrative units called cantons: five cantons have a Bosniak majority, three have a Croat majority, and two have mixed populations. The RS Entity, a more centralized administrative unit within BiH, is populated predominantly by ethnic Serbs.

Although the everyday spoken and written language practices of citizens of BiH have not changed noticeably since the DPA, the official use of the languages in schools, administration and media have been perceptibly modified to fit the new political and legal structures. The country's official administrative languages are Bosnian, used primarily by Bosniaks (formerly recognized in Yugoslavia as "Muslims" with a capital "M"); Croatian, spoken primarily by ethnic Croats; and Serbian, spoken primarily by ethnic Serbs.

Over the past three decades, the regulatory provisions and norms related to the three official (and mutually intelligible) languages spoken in BiH have been shaped by ethnonationalist politics. This paper begins with an overview of the historical context, the constitutional structure, and the main linguistic provisions of the different orders of BiH governments. It then explores the ongoing debates about the existing language policies and regimes, as well as the ethnolinguistic mobilizations aimed at challenging the symbolic functions of language use in public spaces and educational systems.

## Historical and Legal Context

When the Republic of Croatia proclaimed its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and adopted a new constitution, "Serbo-Croat," formerly the official language spoken in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and later in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, was officially replaced with "Croatian." Similarly, in Serbia, the name of the language was substituted with "Serbian."

In 1993, the Constitution of the newly independent Republic of BiH prescribed that Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian languages all remain in official use. When Bosnian<sup>1</sup> was declared to be one of the official languages, many linguists called the process an engineered attempt to shape administrative and educational language policies with a language that lacked a distinctive historical tradition or linguistic standardization. Some even considered the measure to be "constitutional nationalism" (Hayden 1992). In BiH today, the legal and normative implications of Serbo-Croat language use and the re-emergence

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<sup>1</sup> Bosnian is spoken by Bosniaks in BiH and the region of Sandžak in Serbia and Montenegro. It is based on the western variant of the Sokavian dialect and uses the Latin script (Ljubešić, Mikelić, and Boras 2007). It had long been neglected institutionally and academically, and it was disregarded as a separate language during the Yugoslav period

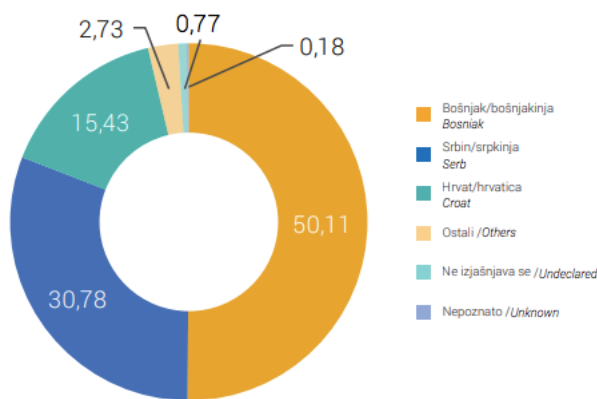


of Bosnian as one of the three official languages, as well as its official use, remain contested and disputed.

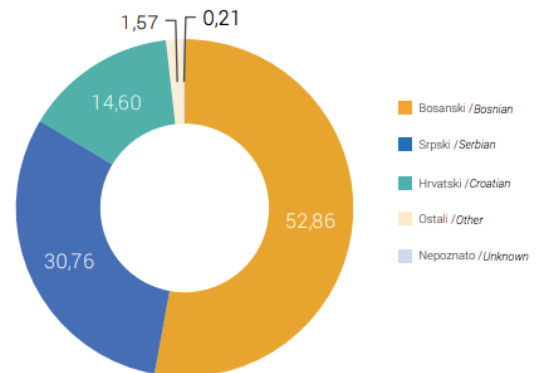
Following the Bosnian War of 1992-95, the DPA was signed in 1995 in Ohio, USA. Annex 4 of the Agreement was the BiH Constitution, which was drafted and signed in English. The BiH Constitution recognizes three official languages in BiH: Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. The DPA led to the establishment of complex geographic and administrative structures that largely reflect the overlapping ethnic and linguistic variances (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Ethnic affiliation and mother-tongue speakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**

Population by ethnicity/national affiliation in BiH



Population by mother tongue in BiH

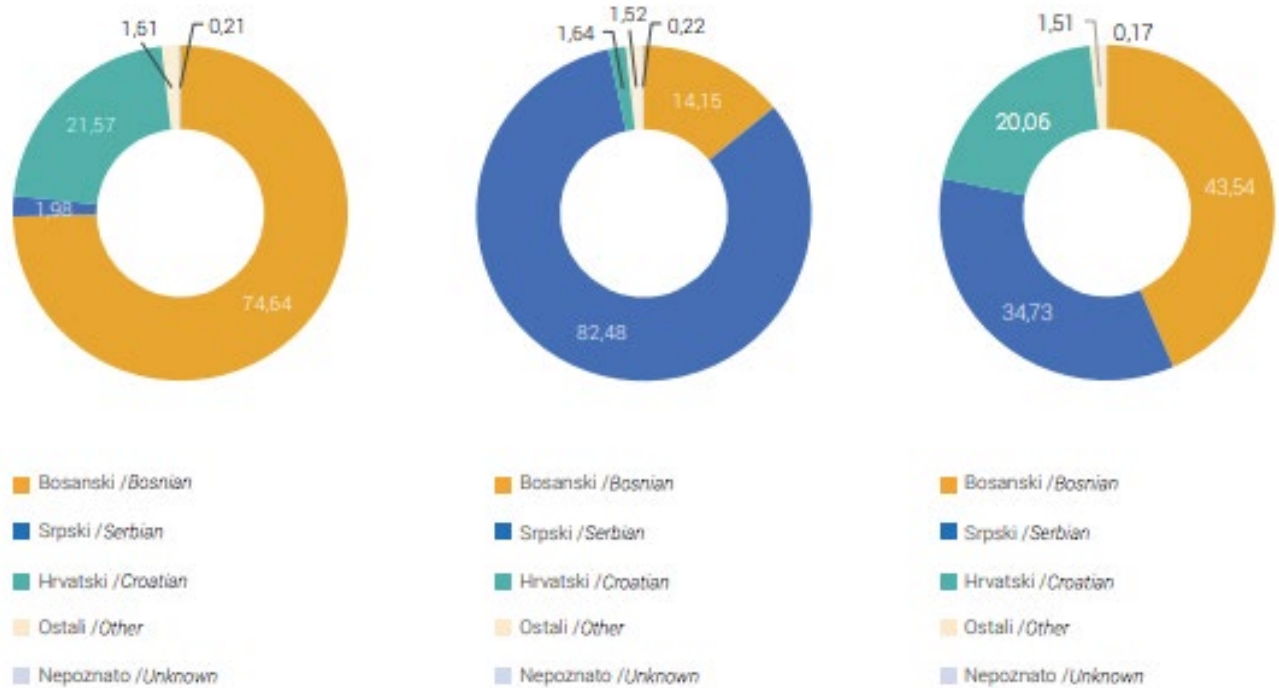


Source: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2019).

There is no precise data on the language-use practices of BiH citizens who do not declare themselves as belonging to any of the three dominant ethnic groups. Communities from the 17 national minorities and the constitutional category of “others,” who are most commonly defined as people who do not express their ethnic belonging to one of the three constituent groups in BiH and/or do not wish to declare as members of either ethnic group, predominantly use the same language as the majority of residents of their towns or cities or opt to speak one of the three official languages. According to the 2013 population census in BiH (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2019), members of most national minorities and the “Others” declared that they speak either Bosnian or Croatian. There are only marginal differences in numbers between those who claim to be ethnically Serb and those who claim Serbian as their mother tongue (see figures 2 and 3).

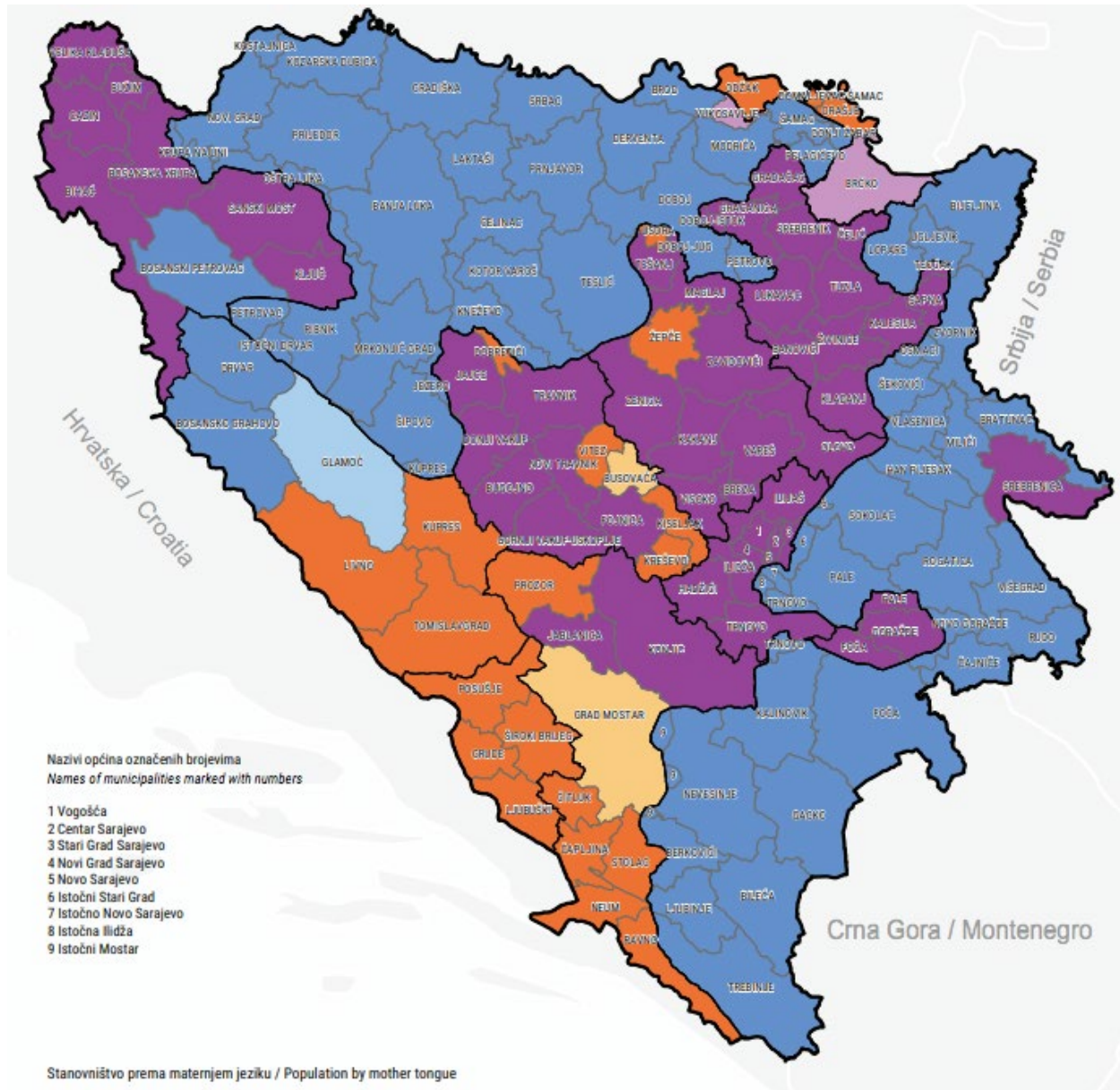
**Figure 2: Mother-tongue speakers in key administrative units of Bosnia and Herzegovina (percent)**

From left to right: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republica Srpska, Brčko District



Source: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2019).

Figure 3: Linguistic distribution in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2019).

*Legal provisions for language recognition*

BiH consists of several layers of political and administrative structures. The Entities and cantons have their own constitutions, as well as their own legislative, executive, and judicial bodies. Brčko District is considered to be a condominium of the Entities, but it is under the sovereignty and administration of the Bosnia and Herzegovina and the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Constitution of BiH states that "'Bosnia and Herzegovina' shall continue its legal existence under international law as a state...with its present internationally recognized borders" (article 1, *Constitution of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina*). The BiH Entities do not have any form of sovereignty or the right to secession or independent self-organization, based on the idea of territorial division. Only BiH, as a state, is subject to international law and has internationally recognized borders. The Entities are demarcated by an inter-Entity line, which does not have the quality of a state border.

The Entities participate in governance at the BiH state-level; for example, they elect delegates to the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH and judges to the BiH Constitutional Court; they also have the right to block certain decisions of the BiH government institutions. The Constitution of FBiH combines principles of territorial federalism and ethnonational representation. Each of the 10 cantons within FBiH has its own constitution, government and parliament, but some of their policies are subject to laws adopted by the FBiH Parliament. Some cantons are ethnically mixed and have special laws to ensure the equality and parity of the ethnic communities (Hasić 2015).

The BiH Parliament has never ratified the BiH Constitution adopted in Dayton; it has not been published in the official gazette or officially translated into the official languages of BiH.<sup>2</sup> Instead, unofficial translations of all three local languages provided by the BiH Office of High Representative (OHR) are used in practice, including the work of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition to the BiH Constitution, several laws and legal acts at the BiH level, international agreements, publications in the *BiH Official Gazette*, government websites, and TV and radio programs of the BHRT (the BiH public broadcasting service) prescribe the official use of the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian languages and the Latin and Cyrillic script.<sup>3</sup> Thus, active administrative multilingualism is applied in most BiH institutions, and those deemed to be underperforming can be asked to take corrective measures.

All civil servants employed in BiH government institutions are required to produce documents in their own languages. However, they must be able to read and understand documents in the other two languages. Standardized documents (such as ID cards, passports, certificates and application forms), official institutional seals, government institutional nameplates, road signs, and vehicle licence plates (the last use only letters that are common to both Latin and Cyrillic scripts), among others, are or can be issued in all three languages.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The only part of the Constitution published in the *Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina* relates to the Amendment 1 on the status of Brčko District (*Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, n. 25/09).

<sup>3</sup> Article 5 of the *Law on Administration of BiH* stipulates that all administrative bodies in BiH will equally use Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian as official languages in their procedures; article 1 of the *Law on the Procedure for Concluding and Executing International Agreements* regulates the procedure for concluding and executing international agreements concluded by BiH. All international agreements concluded by BiH according to the provisions of article 10 of the *Law on Administration of BiH* are concluded in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian.

<sup>4</sup> In 2014, the *Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (no. 58/14) published an amendment to the Rules of Procedure for the development of legal provisions in institutions in BiH that stated that all laws and documents must be respectful of gender equality and use gender-neutral terminology and/or both genders.

The constitutions of the Entities are quite similar. That of FBiH declares Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian as the official languages.<sup>5</sup> The most prominent language policy contestations within the cantons' institutions relate to the use of the term "Bosniak language." The Constitutional Court of FBiH ruled on three occasions<sup>6</sup> that use of this term is unconstitutional, yet the constitutions of three cantons (those with predominantly ethnic Croat inhabitants) – Posavina Canton, West Herzegovina Canton, and Canton 10 – still use that term (or "language of Bosniaks") instead of "Bosnian language." In those three cantons, the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), a Croat-dominated centre-right political party, is in the majority, and it, together with its coalition partners from RS, actively and openly contests the term "Bosnian language." In Herzegovina-Neretva canton, there are two versions of the constitution, and they use different language names to denote the officially recognized Bosnian language. According to one version, the language spoken by Bosniaks is "Bosnian," while the other, written in Croatian, employs the term "Bosniak" language.

In the RS Entity, the official languages are "the language of Serb people, the language of Bosniak people, and the language of Croat people" (RS Constitution, article 8).<sup>7</sup> The RS Constitution guarantees citizens the freedom to express their nationality, ethnicity and the right to use their language and script, as well as to use their language in court and administrative proceedings (article 34).

In 2021, the RS National Assembly passed a law on the protection, preservation and modalities of using the Serbian language and the Cyrillic alphabet in RS to denote a cultural heritage of exceptional importance. The law provides for the mandatory use of the Cyrillic alphabet in all institutions, companies, organizations, and electronic and print media that are financed from RS's budget and other public funds. It also contains measures such as tax deductions and other benefits for stimulating business owners to use the Cyrillic alphabet in their work.

The use of the term "language of Bosniak people" has also created numerous controversies across RS, most notably in the educational systems of several areas inhabited by people who were expelled during the war or left (returnee areas), many of whom are ethnic Bosniaks. These controversies have resulted in seven Constitutional Court rulings, all of which have stipulated that the term "Bosniak language" is unconstitutional. The following section reviews the relevant legal provisions in more detail.

### *Linguistic divisions and politics*

Language is a part of political identity in BiH. As all three official languages spoken are mutually intelligible<sup>8</sup> by the three constituent peoples and the national minority communities, there is a widespread belief that the existence of three official languages in BiH feeds the interests of members of the political elite who employ linguistic variances and language regime divisions to underline the differences among the constituent peoples.

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<sup>5</sup> Amendment XXIX to the Constitution of FBiH stipulates that both the Serbian language and the Cyrillic alphabet are to be in the official languages and scripts of FBiH.

<sup>6</sup> BiH Constitutional Court Rulings U-12/97 (November 19, 1997, and February 20, 1998), U-7/98 (July 07, 1998), and U-24/98 (November 10, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Amendment LXXI to the Constitution of RS states that the official languages of the Republika Srpska are the language of the Serb people, the language of the Bosniak people and the language of the Croat people. The official letters are Cyrillic and Latin. This amendment replaces paragraph 1 of article 7 of the Constitution (High Representative's Decision no. 150/02).

<sup>8</sup> The Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin languages belong to one standard-linguistic system. There is a high degree of uniformity in their orthography, grammar, morphology, syntax, phonology, and semantics.

The politization of language use in BiH stems primarily from the perception that the Bosnian language does not conform with the “Eine Sprache, ein Volk, ein Staat (one language, one people, one state) principle. That is, the name of ethnic native speakers of Bosnian, “Bosniaks,” does not correspond with the name of state they live in, “Bosnia and Herzegovina,” and neither name corresponds with the national language name. Identity pluralism serves as a distinctive marker of “being Bosnian,” and it works against the imposition of standard language forms strictly defined as belonging to “one nation” (Swagman 2011).

To illustrate this point, at the beginning of their mandates, elected members of all BiH government bodies are invited to declare their language affiliations or preferences. In practice, this means that they will receive documents in any of the three languages of their choice in either script. The same goes for institutional websites – users can choose from among the three language versions of the websites. This might be considered as a marginal choice, given that all three languages are mutually intelligible, but in reality, failure to opt for or provide text variants in all three languages and in both scripts have led to the occasional deadlock in debates over legal regulations. For example, in July 2021, a Draft Law on the Protection from Domestic Abuse in FBiH was withdrawn because it was not available in all three official languages.

One of the most interesting proposals aimed at bridging the political and linguistic divides came in March 2017, drafted by a group of linguists from across the former Yugoslavia in the form of a Declaration on the Common Language (Declaration 2017). It states that Serbo-Croatian is a polycentric language – one language with different variants. It says that even though everyone speaks a common language, this does not prevent any individual from calling it what they want; nor does it impede their right to express their affiliation to any ethnic group or country. Its proponents believe that the pressure to keep three versions of documents, separate school curricula and separate television channels is embedded in nationalism and not linguistics. Despite being signed by thousands of intellectuals, artists and public figures, the Declaration is strongly opposed by several powerful stakeholder groups from all sides in the various former Yugoslav republics.

### **Key Current Issues in BiH**

The linguistic policies in BiH have had an impact on the development of educational policies and have created additional administrative burdens in the education sector. It is one of the key domains where language policy implementation is challenged. In this paper, we will focus on two of the most debated challenges due to their impact on people’s lives and their potential political implications:

- the use of the term “Bosnian language” in schools across the country, with a special focus on returnee communities in the Republika Srpska Entity;
- contestation of the term “Bosnian” language in specific policies on the production of official textbooks and materials for language instruction to be used schools attended on a voluntary basis by children in Bosnian diaspora communities, usually so they can learn the host country language and culture (supplementary schools).

The language-policy inconsistencies are primarily reflected in the language of instruction and the contestation of use of the term “Bosnian” language in schools. While these issues are present in both FBiH and RS, they are especially salient in the Bosniak returnee communities in RS. The official use and teaching of the Bosnian language in schools is termed the “language of the Bosniak people.” This is because the politicians and government officials in RS consider the term “Bosnian language” to be

an attempt by Bosniak political elites to impose their language on the entire country at the expense of the two other ethnic groups. In RS, Bosniak children have the right to attend classes in Bosnian. However, the official school certificates listing “Bosnian” as the official language of instruction do not reflect this, as the RS authorities insist it be called “Bosniak.”

These language policies in RS violate two basic principles. The first is that of administrative equality, which fully applies to educational opportunities in RS. In other words, Bosniak students in some returnee communities do not have the right to receive first-language instruction certificates in their language as guaranteed by the BiH Constitution, whereas the majority student population in RS studying in Serbian has this right. The second principle being violated is freedom of choice: some returnees are denied the opportunity to maintain and preserve their linguistic identity and knowledge of their mother tongue.

A concrete example illustrates this point. Two Bosniak returnee communities in RS, Konjević Polje and Vrbanjaci, have fairly large groups of Bosniak children who are allowed to study the “Bosnian language” in schools administered by the RS government and Ministry of Education. However, the school certificates in these two communities do not reflect this, because the RS Entity government does not recognize the term and will not issue any certificates or other documents that contain the term “Bosnian language.” Students must choose “Serbian” or “Bosniak” language in their certificates. To avoid this dilemma, some parents have enrolled their children in “Bosnian language” classes organized by the Islamic Community of BiH.

In 2017, a municipal court in Srebrenica ruled that all children have a right to education in their mother tongue, which they call “Bosnian,” and to use books in the same language. The case ended up before the Supreme Court of RS where, on October 30, 2018, the motion for review was rejected as unfounded. The case then went before the Constitutional Court of BiH, which revoked the judgments of the RS Supreme Court. The case has been returned to the RS Supreme Court, which is obliged to review it and take a new decision in accordance with the BiH constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Another challenge in consolidating language policies in BiH is the state-level institutions’ inability to agree on the outline of language instruction for supplementary schools abroad, and on the contents of “mother tongue” language textbooks for diaspora learners. Currently, approximately two million people of BiH origin live across the globe. Many of them belong to younger generations and have acquired education in the official languages of their host countries, but they have limited competence in their mother tongues. A small percentage of children are in supplementary classes, most of which were hosted by self-organized diaspora organizations abroad, with some symbolic encouragement from BiH institutions (Halilovich *et al.* 2018).

After the BiH Council of Ministers adopted a state-level policy for cooperation with the diaspora in 2017 (BiH Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina), the need to develop teaching programs and language textbooks promoting intercultural dialogue among diaspora communities has resurfaced. The policy envisages setting up a legal basis and conditions for establishing, strengthening and preserving BiH’s relations with its emigrants, especially the preservation of the mother tongues, cultures and identities of its peoples living abroad. It states that BiH institutions support the preservation of national identity in emigration, and it also provides for limited support to organizations and individuals in the diaspora to promote the learning of mother tongues spoken in BiH as well as educational, scientific, economic, and other types of cooperation.

Goal 2.3 of the policy (“Preserve mother tongue, culture and identity”) provides for support of BiH institutions to establish a system of organizing the teaching of supplemental education of children living abroad (online learning, summer schools for learning mother tongues and culture in BiH for children and young people from the diaspora). Goal 2.6 (“Support civil sector activities of diaspora and BiH, which contribute to the strengthening of BiH and diaspora ties”) also contributes to these aims. Institutions at all levels in BiH are to support the activities of civil society organizations in the diaspora. However, there are several socio-political issues related to the implementation of these language policies in diaspora communities. These issues include the presence of all three ethnic groups in classrooms and disagreement among diaspora members about unified language programs, as Croat and Serb diaspora communities originating from BiH tend to associate themselves with Croatian and Serbian diaspora educational programs that are officially sponsored and administered by the Croatian or Serbian governments.

## **Conclusion**

Disagreements about the conception of language and regulatory norms related to the three official languages (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) spoken in BiH have been fuelled in part by the divisive ethnonationalist politics of the past 25 and more years. The period has, nevertheless, seen the adoption of official language policies that are normatively inclusive, characterized mostly by administrative multilingualism. As such, these policies are not contested publicly. The mutual intelligibility of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages allows government bodies to sustain open communication channels and citizens to access services in their own mother tongues. Language policies are also relatively flexible for those who work for public institutions, as they are allowed to prepare documents in their own languages.

The policies on the use and standardization of the Bosnian language since the Dayton Accord have never been fully operationalized and recognized by all administrative units in the country. According to the 1995 BiH Constitution, the name of one of the official languages in use is “Bosnian.” However, some linguistic and political circles that wish to underline the linguistic differences between their languages and the language spoken by Bosniaks still use the term “Bosniak language.” This is done systematically in schools, public discourse, the media, and in documents and policies issued by institutions of RS and some cantons in FBiH. This has fed politically induced sociolinguistic disputes and is used as a tool for diverging nation-building initiatives. In this context, language is an important identity creator – one that is essential for group recognition and political decentralization, but also remains a source of division.



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Cover design by Olakunle Adeniran

ISSN: 1922-558X (online ISSN 1922-5598)

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The Occasional Paper Series is financed in part by the following countries: Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, India, and Switzerland