

Bosnia & Herzegovina Program Summary

The development of a stable political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the overall democratization of the country continue to be hindered by a lack of political communication based on ideas and sound policies. Instead, political discourse continues to be ethnocentric, as major political parties have traditionally avoided addressing serious economic and social issues and resorted to messages designed to manipulate the three ethnic constituencies. A lack of transparency and responsiveness mars almost every major party and creates disconnects with local communities and civil society. Additionally, women remain a marginalized segment of society that demands greater political representation within the current system.

In this environment, the International Republican Institute (IRI) believes that parties are much more likely to understand the need for building consistent political ideologies and coherent policies if they recognize the importance of constituent engagement between election cycles. Similarly, parties better understand the needs of constituents if they improve communications at the grassroots level and with other policy stakeholders.

To accomplish these goals, IRI works in three key areas: supporting democratic reform and accountability within political parties, assisting local communities and civil society in improving advocacy efforts towards decision makers in political parties and fostering the inclusion of women and youth in the political process.

Democratic Governance

Partnering with local governments, IRI helps strengthen local government institutions so they are better able to deliver services and assists in constructing outreach strategies that engage citizens from various ethnic and political backgrounds in solving practical challenges. IRI believes that such work provides the basis for neighboring (but heterogeneous) communities to coordinate responses to matters of common interest and share best practices.

In addition, IRI is organizing a series of workshops on democratic governance practices for mayors and councilors. Promoting democratic accountability, transparency, efficiency and responsiveness, as well as enhancing cooperation between local authorities and constituents, is the main objective of this program.

Civil Society and Think Tank Support

Parties dominate political debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet centralized, personality-based parties have little incentive to introduce innovative policy solutions to the public. At the same time, there are few alternative institutions through which to inject fresh ideas into the public discourse. In such a situation, party leaders are often content with the status quo, reinforcing ethnic cleavages with rhetoric through which they are able to maintain a comfortable grip on power. To address this, IRI promotes independent, non-party voices that can produce sound, research-based policy proposals, communicate them to the public and organize citizens to encourage parties to embrace issue-based policies.

Improving Women's Political Participation

Politics is a male-dominated institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina; stereotypes regarding the traditional position of women – managing households, raising children and supporting husbands – are deeply rooted in society. Moreover, the October 2010 election results suggest that voters are guided by these perceptions and are less likely to vote for women, although it is worth noting that all parties respected the quotas for candidates defined in the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina (at least 30 percent women on the candidate list).

However, out of 488 elected officials only 17.01 percent are women. The House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina has 42 parliamentarians, out of which only eight are women. At the entity level, the percentage is almost the same, with 17 female parliamentarians in the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (out of 98) and 18 women parliamentarians in the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska (out of 83). As these numbers demonstrate, women remain underrepresented in public life and little progress has been made to achieve true gender balance in politics over the past several years. Beyond convincing a skeptical electorate that they are qualified to hold public office, women also face obstacles and internal difficulties in their respective parties, and their political participation is often limited due to gender prejudice.

To address the gender gap, IRI organizes programs in cooperation with the [Women's Democracy Network](#) that empower women in politics and prepare them for careers as political leaders. The Institute cooperates with female politicians in order to establish strong women's organizations within political parties, improve the leadership and communication skills of rising female politicians, and create a strong network of women that can promote greater political participation for women across the country.

IRI has established a three-year professional development program for 20 young women in politics called the Young Women's Leadership Academy (YWLA). The program combines a series of skills-based seminars and a mentorship program that develops an individual approach to the professional development of each academy member. Demonstrating the importance of such programs for young women entering politics, four YWLA participants were elected in the local elections in October 2012 to four-year terms as members of municipal councils.

IRI has also strongly supported the establishment of the first inter-party, inter-ethnic and interest-based parliamentary caucus in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The [first Women's Caucus](#) was formed in early 2013, and in April the House of Representatives of the Federation entity Parliament officially formed the caucus, making it the first insitutionalized women's caucus in the region.

