Bypassing Political Stalemates in Post-War Societies: A Modular and Heuristic Approach to Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

The implementation of comprehensive structural reforms in complex post-conflict societies, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), is systematically impeded by chronic political stalemates and the historical failure of rigid, "all-or-nothing" statebuilding paradigms. Drawing directly from extensive professional field experience, semi-structured interviews with high-level experts, and a comparative analysis of European Union Progress Reports, this article presents a pragmatic, practitioner-oriented alternative: a novel modular approach combined with the strategic application of behavioral heuristics.

The modular model deconstructs overarching macro-reforms into functionally complete, manageable, and interconnected operational units. This structural compartmentalization ensures that localized vetoes or political deadlocks within highly sensitive areas - such as constitutional engineering - do not paralyze the country's entire developmental trajectory. While macro-political adjustments are gradually negotiated under international stewardship, parallel modules focusing on socioeconomic stabilization, human capital development, and public administration reform can advance independently, driving continuous progress.

Crucially, the framework integrates behavioral economics to mitigate the *status quo bias* and *loss aversion* that frequently fuel public cynicism and elite resistance. Rather than attempting immediate, zero-sum constitutional negotiations, the model utilizes strategic *framing* to shift political anchors toward depoliticized, material entry points of mutual survival. Specifically, the paper positions *environmental peace building* - such as collaborative transboundary river pollution management - and regional trade integration as vital cognitive catalysts. Drawing an instructive functional analogy from the historical gradualism of the Swiss federal cantonal model, the study demonstrates how localized, technical cooperation builds the incremental domestic trust necessary to support broader, civically oriented normative changes.

Ultimately, this paper argues that by replacing externally imported mandates with flexible, citizen-centric feedback loops, the modular, heuristics-informed framework establishes a resilient and self-correcting path that bypasses institutional deadlocks, fosters genuine local ownership, and accelerates BiH's integration into the European Union.

1. Introduction

This paper is grounded in extensive, field-based professional experience gained through restructuring and development projects within the Western Balkans. Moving away from rigid, theoretical hypothesis-testing, this practitioner-oriented study presents a pragmatic analysis of implemented reforms and synthesizes an expert consensus among diplomats, project directors, and local community representatives directly embedded in these stabilization processes. Specific conditions, wars, and large-scale conflicts transform peace processes into a decidedly dynamic activity, often characterized by unpredictable developments and paradoxical outcomes. In their short-term development and implementation, these processes no longer presuppose ultimate peace as the principal aim of efforts and work towards stability. Instead, greater importance is now attributed to individual procedures and implementation tasks intended to improve previous and existing crisis and war situations, and, crucially, to establish circumstances conducive to negotiations, the cessation of hostilities, and the improvement of conflictual environments.

In every peace intervention, a multitude of individual local factors directly influence its course. Consequently, the execution of every step requires a focused orientation toward the broader, intended objective. Acknowledging the particularities of individual settings simultaneously enables and demands the adaptation of peace processes, a necessity highlighted by Séverine Autesserre in her direct engagement in conflicted environments (Autesserre, 2021). The core objective of this paper is to demonstrate that a **Modular Method** offers a highly effective, functional framework for executing structural reforms for stability in such post-conflict societies. The modular approach systematically deconstructs complex, holistic reform agendas into smaller, manageable, and substantively complete operational units (modules), thereby preventing a political or administrative deadlock in one segment from paralyzing the broader stabilization effort.

In this article, we focus specifically on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This society emerged from a war of aggression less than three decades ago and continues to confront the tangible difficulties typical of post-war societies. A community such as BiH, burdened by the consequences of war and the post-war period, has been unable to establish conditions comparable to those found in similar societies featuring functioning state institutions, market-based economic arrangements, and an effective rule of law, respect for human rights, regulated legislation, and an extended period of peace. Practical observations indicate that political and economic elites often reject comprehensive institutional overhauls due to a pronounced *status quo bias* - a deeply rooted fear of loss or diminished influence - which leads to the systemic rejection of large-scale reforms. The modular framework bypasses this systemic resistance by facilitating the gradual, segmented implementation of crucial changes.

The Dayton-mandated solutions for establishing the prerequisites for a democratic society and non-conflictual relations encountered significant local specificities. The Dayton Peace Accords (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina) sought to anticipate and prescribe the social arrangements of the society down to the last detail. In doing so, it shaped a political architecture that led to the absolute bureaucratization of all mutual relations and established complex institutional structures and procedures wherein the acceptance of decisions crucial for the country's future is exceedingly difficult (Banning, 2014). Therefore, a realistic and objective approach to reforms is essential. In this proposed approach, we introduce and apply the modular method as part of a new, broader concept of institutional peace building and structural reforms for stability.

In the post-Dayton state arrangement, expectations of an immediate transition to established Western forms of parliamentary democracy proved to be overly optimistic. In practice, it became evident that the preparation of the peace agreement should have taken into account regional, social, economic, and socio-political conditions, as well as all relevant specificities of the community (Chandler, 2006). It is thus not surprising that the International Community's dissatisfaction with the concrete developments and processes in BiH was considerable, as the proposals and solutions within the peace agreement did not yield the desired or anticipated results. However, the period following the Dayton Accords is not understood as a complete failure. Nevertheless, after three decades, there is a growing realization and acknowledgment in BiH that the existing Dayton framework must be reformed and upgraded through manageable operational modules.

The causes of disagreements, disputes, and the emergence of conflicts include social and economic inequality, the social exclusion of a large segment of citizens - a consequence of historical development and further amplified in the last three decades - as well as concrete injustices experienced by individuals, groups, and communities representing important segments of society. Non-linearity is an inherent part of complex arrangements; however, a society can be considered successful when self-regulation and adaptation are part of the developmental process and enable innovation (Pospisil, Wise, Bell, 2020). The modular method of approach to formulating and implementing reforms allows for flexibility and a concrete, specific response to perceived (social) asymmetries, divisions, tensions, and conflicts, as well as more effective reactions to the discourse and actions of individual conflict perpetrators within the community. Such a model can contribute to finding local and specific answers to anomalies in the functioning of institutions and the system, as it enables the detection of concrete difficulties experienced by citizens and all residents in specific environments when asserting their rights, and addresses the social relations that cause friction, tension, and conflict in everyday life.

In BiH, many processes have become complicated, and particularly, efforts have stalled in the area of institutional capacity building, through which residents can access the state and its services (Bojičić Dželilović, Čaušević, 2025). Given the unemployment rate, one could conclude that employment opportunities are generally scarce. Social and health protection systems are weak, and environmental policy is largely undefined; specifically, BiH effectively lacks a genuine environmental policy, even if some nascent attempts exist. People are prevented from developing their own creative potential in line with their expectations, leading them to leave the country.

There is a lack of political will for political and other urgent reforms, resulting in the failure of attempts. Among the economic and political elites, support is lacking for measures that could potentially rectify specific weaknesses and problems, while the segment of the public demanding such measures holds insufficient influence. The recipes, solutions, and implementation methods offered by the International Community, which are prepared elsewhere and/or imported, are often unsuccessful or less effective than anticipated because they fail to consider local circumstances and specificities.

In line with the concept of a self-learning society, the realization is confirmed that, even in stability and development processes, the most effective learning stems from one's own experiences and based on one's own mistakes. Practice in BiH has demonstrated that when local experiences and proven factors are taken into account, development processes can be successful (Šuljek-Shank, Perry, Monroy Santander, Parlevliet, 2025). In the past, international institutions and EU bodies frequently bypassed or even outright ignored representatives of civil society and specific state institutions that were most directly affected by a given issue. Dialogue and agreements were often conducted solely with political actors and government bodies. These factors are likely the fundamental causes of the poor execution and ineffectiveness of certain reforms, for which cooperation between the International Community, local authorities (Perry, 2015), and civil society would be crucial. For reforms that are ambitiously conceived but fail to take into account entire segments of society, it is difficult to achieve broader consensus and public support for their implementation.

Consequently, based on years of project implementation, this paper provides a functional, empirical narrative demonstrating how the modular approach presents a complex, dynamic, participatory, and gradual model of renewal that replaces classic large-scale reforms with a structured network of smaller, manageable, and interconnected projects (modules). This framework is operationally defined by five core dimensions:

- **Modular modelling:** This involves the division of processes (reforms) into smaller, manageable, and substantively complete units (modules). This prevents the failure of

the entire reform system due to difficulties in one segment, ensuring operational freedom and temporal flexibility for each module.

- **Synergy and complex planning:** This ensures that modules are interconnected and operate in synergy to achieve common, general solutions.
- **Participatory and inclusive planning:** This facilitates the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders and affected groups from the initial phase, empowering module participants to seek common solutions despite mutual opposition.
- **Flexible and dynamic management:** This allows for implementation adaptability within timeframes and the use of feedback for continuous adjustment and correction of measures.
- **Prioritization and evaluation:** This establishes the ability to make timely decisions on priorities based on consensus or urgency, utilizing pilot projects for testing and effective verification during the preparation phase to foster the broader community's acceptance.

2. The Modular Approach and Methodology: Rationale and Operational Mechanics

2.1 Sources, Field Experience, and Diversity of Expert Opinion

The structural formulation and pragmatic design of the modular framework presented in this study do not rely on detached, abstract theoretical models. Instead, they are directly derived from extensive, field-based professional experience gained over multiple project cycles within the post-conflict environments of the Western Balkans, supplemented by a comprehensive body of structured and semi-structured interviews. To ensure empirical validity and operational depth, these consultations were conducted with a highly specialized community of regional experts, prominent statesmen, and leading academics who have been intimately embedded in the stabilization and diplomatic architecture of the region.

This distinguished panel includes foremost academic authorities representing distinct strategic, economic, socio-legal, and constitutional fields. To capture direct institutional and macroeconomic insights, the source material incorporates the field experiences of senior reform advisors within the Office of the High Representative (OHR), European Union project directors, and high-level regional policymakers. Notably, this includes invaluable perspectives from the late Dr. Erhard Busek (former Vice-Chancellor of Austria and Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe), Prof. Dr. Mirko Pejanović (former Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Dr. Stjepan (Stipe) Mesić (former President of the Republic of Croatia), and Dr. Milica Uvalić (prominent economist and former Assistant Minister for European Integration in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Serbia).

The field data and qualitative insights synthesized from these practitioners revealed a fundamental consensus regarding the systemic stagnation and institutional deadlocks currently paralyzing Bosnia and Herzegovina under the un-upgraded Dayton framework. However, in accordance with the methodological necessity to reflect a genuine diversity of expert opinion, significant divergence emerged concerning the structural prioritization and operational sequencing of the necessary reform modules.

On one side of this professional spectrum, prominent international jurists and diplomats, such as Mr. Ambassador Murat Bilhan (TASAM Institute, Istanbul) and Dr. Joseph Marko (Professor at the University of Graz and former international judge of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina), strongly contend that comprehensive constitutional overhauls and normative adjustments must serve as the absolute, non-negotiable prerequisite for any sustainable societal progress. They argue that structural paralysis cannot be resolved without first rectifying the underlying constitutional anomalies.

Conversely, a meaningful divergence in prioritization exists among other factions of the expert panel. Macroeconomic and structural functionality experts, including Prof. Dr. Franz-Lothar Altmann (Munich), Prof. Dr. Fikret Čaušević (Sarajevo), and Prof. Dr. Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović (London), emphasize that stabilization efforts must prioritize economic infrastructure, budgetary harmonization, and practical public service delivery to establish a functional material baseline from the bottom up. On the other hand, leading strategic, political, and socio-legal analysts—including Prof. Dr. Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna), Prof. Dr. Jacques Rupnik (Sciences Po, Paris), Prof. Dr. Nadezhda Arbatova (IMEMO Institute, Moscow), Prof. Dr. Erika Harris (University of Liverpool), Prof. Dr. Mitja Žagar (Institute for Ethnic Studies, Ljubljana), Prof. Dr. Bruce Hitchner (Tufts University, Boston; who was directly active in the architecture and negotiations of the Dayton Accords), Prof. Dr. Ioannis Armakolas (Athens), and Prof. Dr. Aydin Atilgan (Cyprus)—argue that top-down, high-level constitutional debates inherently aggravate ethnic polarization. They suggest that focus should instead shift toward strategic, non-zero-sum regional linkages, institutional capacity-building, and political stabilization mechanisms that mitigate security fears before forcing direct constitutional confrontation.

By decoupling rigid, linear sequencing, the modular method explicitly accommodates this diversity of professional perspectives. It provides an operational framework wherein both constitutional stabilization and socioeconomic advancement can function simultaneously and independently, transforming competing expert methodologies into parallel, non-exclusive paths toward European integration.

2.2 The Structural Failure of Radical Universal Reforms

In highly complex, post-conflict societies, radical and universal structural reforms - those designed to be implemented in a single, comprehensive sweep involving an array of deeply divided actors to fundamentally reshape the entire state architecture - are structurally prone to failure. When an "all-or-nothing" reform agenda encounters inevitable political friction, logistical resistance, or localized vetoes, the entire stabilization process stalls.

Crucially, the resulting failure of these over-ambitious reforms induces profound institutional fatigue, severely diminishes public trust, and generates a systemic lack of willingness to engage in future societal transformations (Sebastián, 2014). This dynamic frequently reinforces a destructive status quo, causing the broader socio-political situation to deteriorate further. The modular approaches directly mitigates this systemic risk by replacing massive, unmanageable macro-reforms with a structured network of smaller, autonomous, and functionally complete operational units (modules). This grants each individual module the necessary operational freedom and temporal flexibility, ensuring that a political deadlock in one specific sector does not paralyze the country's entire developmental trajectory.

2.3 Operationalization of Reform Modules: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The modular method divides the comprehensive stabilization and peace building process into logically complete, substantively defined units. Taking the highly fragmented administrative landscape of BiH as a primary example, the overarching reform process can be functionally organized into five interconnected content areas:

- **Module A: Constitutional Amendments and Normative Reform:** Addressing the structural inefficiencies of the state architecture to streamline legislative functions.
- **Module B: Institutional Capacity Building:** Establishing a functional, transparent, and depoliticized political and social architecture through which residents can effectively access state services.
- **Module C: Rule of Law and Human Rights:** Standardizing judicial independence, anti-corruption mechanisms, and equitable legal protections for all demographic groups.
- **Module D: Socioeconomic and Financial Stabilization:** Reforming the taxation apparatus, financial system, pension architecture, healthcare insurance, and physical infrastructure.
- **Module E: Human Capital, Education, and Innovation:** Reconfiguring formal and informal educational structures, lifelong learning, and professional re-qualification to enhance research, development, and workforce competitiveness.

Each of these modules possesses its own autonomous content, distinct timeline, specialized funding lines, and designated implementers. Rather than operating in isolation or competing for resources, these modules collectively form an integrated network where progress in one

unit creates positive cross-sectoral synergies, driving complex planning and universal institutional peace building.

2.4 De-escalation, Priority Setting, and Local Conflict Mitigation

From a strategic perspective, selecting a modular framework allows coordinators and third-party intermediaries to activate specific segments of the community immediately, slowing down the escalation of societal conflicts before they expand into uncontrollable threats. This methodology provides an effective mechanism for continuous, real-time priority setting. Instead of demanding an immediate, grand political consensus, planners can assess where a pragmatic potential for agreement exists, or which localized crisis is the most pressing and requires urgent resolution.

In scenarios marked by acute tension, establishing a truce is paramount, but such a truce must be reinforced by substantive content that transcends the mere cessation of military hostilities. As noted by John Paul Lederach, a sustainable peace culture requires dismantling the deeper, systemic oppositions that prevent structural agreements within a community (Lederach, 2005). Individual modules function as safe operational spaces for achieving these incremental, partial agreements. Furthermore, this modular framework serves as a vital tool for addressing collective emotions and historical traumas, which are frequently instrumentalized by political elites to preserve territorial and cultural dominance (Volkan, 2006). By breaking down structural reforms into smaller, functional components, the emotional and psychological intensity of zero-sum ethnic negotiations is significantly neutralized, making compromise easier to achieve without simulating a total narrative defeat for any individual participant.

2.5 Bypassing Institutional Deadlocks: The Swiss Model of Central Consensus and Functional Coexistence

The administrative complexity of Bosnia and Herzegovina presents an extraordinary structural barrier to traditional, top-down reform strategies. However, empirical evidence from the post-Dayton landscape demonstrates that the mere devolution of power to ethnically fragmented sub-national units—such as the entities and the cantons within the Federation of BiH—has frequently generated severe institutional dysfunction, systemic fragmentation, and administrative paralysis. Rather than fostering stability, uncoordinated decentralization has reinforced localized veto players and hindered the cohesion of the wider state.

To rectify this dysfunction, a highly instructive architectural analogy can be drawn from the historical evolution of the Swiss federal model. The enduring stability of Switzerland does not stem from blind decentralization or the fragmentation of sovereignty; rather, it is anchored in a profound central consensus regarding the fundamental, non-negotiable functions of the state. The Swiss cantonal system operates effectively only because there is an absolute

collective agreement on the primacy of centralized, unified mechanisms that guarantee the security, integrity, and international representation of the entire commonwealth.

When translating this architectural logic to the reform process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the modular approach must be reframed not as a tool for further segregation, but as a mechanism to reconstruct a functional central authority based on a comprehensive consensus across all strategic governance segments (Benz & Colino, 2011; Erk, 2007). The ultimate objective of the modular framework is to build cohesive, state-wide pillars that secure the functioning of BiH as an integrated sovereign entity. By breaking down the statebuilding architecture into distinct operational modules, the framework allows local and international actors to forge consensus incrementally across vital national sectors:

- **The Security and Defense Module:** Establishing an absolute, centralized consensus on state security, border control, and a unified defense architecture. This module ensures that national security assets remain under cohesive state-level command, neutralizing the risk of localized paramilitary fragmentation or entity-driven security dilemmas.
- **The Common Foreign Policy Module:** Structuring a unified diplomatic framework at the state level to articulate a coherent, single-voice foreign policy. This prevents sub-national entities from pursuing divergent, ethnically polarized geopolitical agendas, thereby safeguarding BiH's sovereignty and aligning its international stance with European integration standards.
- **The Political and Constitutional Module:** Establishing a unified state-level framework that guarantees equal civic and human rights for all citizens, moving past defensive ethnic vetoes toward a shared national identity and rule of law.
- **The Fiscal and Monetary Module:** Solidifying central budgetary coordination, tax harmonization, and macro-financial stability to ensure that localized corruption cannot jeopardize national economic survival.
- **The Infrastructure and Environmental Module:** Integrating state-wide transportation, energy grids, and transboundary natural resource management (such as the Sava, Drina, and Neretva river basins) to treat the country as a single, indivisible ecological and economic space.

THE CENTRAL CONSENSUS ARCHITECTURE			
▼	▼	▼	▼
Security & Defence Unified Command& State Borders	Common Foreign Policy Single-Voice Diplomacy	Fiscal, Legal& Tax Cohesion Harmonized Base& Civic Rights	Infrastructure& Eco-System Integrated Space & Grids
	▼		

INTEGRATED SOVEREIGN STATE Continuous Path toward EU Accession

By shifting the analytical focus toward building this centralized consensus, the modular model effectively bypasses the traps of sub-national paralysis. Instead of forcing an immediate, comprehensive political overhaul that triggers existential security fears, the model establishes parallel, sector-specific paths. Each module functions as an incremental stepping stone toward a stronger, more efficient central government.

As technical and administrative agreements are secured within the economic, infrastructural, and ecological sectors, they demonstrate the practical utility of a unified state apparatus. Concurrently, the solidification of unified defence and foreign policy architectures provides the overarching security guarantees necessary to lower ethnic anxieties. Ultimately, these functional successes dismantle public cynicism and reduce elite resistance, creating the cumulative political will required to adopt binding, state-wide constitutional updates that ensure the long-term integrity and European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2.6 Inclusive and Participatory Feedback Loops

A crucial operational requirement of the modular system is its deeply participatory and inclusive nature. Historically, international intervention strategies and EU bodies have frequently bypassed local civil society and ordinary citizens, choosing instead to negotiate exclusively with top-tier political elites - a major cause of reform failure (Perry, 2015). The modular method corrects this imbalance by engaging a wider circle of stakeholders right from the outset, including local authorities, technical experts, civil society organizations, and ordinary residents whose futures are directly dictated by territorial or resource-management agreements.

INDIVIDUAL REFORM MODULE OPERATIONAL DYNAMICS

Pilot Project Phase	—►	Field Evaluation Phase
▲		▼
Continuous Adjustment	◄—	Real-Time Feedback Loops

The democratic and operational necessity of this broader public inclusion is anchored in the positive, transformative effects of direct citizen participation on institutional legitimacy. When reform processes transcend elite backroom deals and incorporate the voices of ordinary citizens, they fundamentally alter the public's behavioral heuristics by dismantling prevailing

narratives of political apathy, systemic distrust, and cynicism. Active civic participation transforms passive inhabitants into active stakeholders who possess a shared responsibility for the preservation of the state apparatus.

Furthermore, for this participatory dynamic to yield sustainable stability, it must be embedded within resilient sub-national and municipal institutional structures. These local institutional frameworks function as critical conduits, translating raw public consensus, grassroots initiatives, and civic feedback into binding regulatory policies and structured public oversight. By institutionalizing civic engagement—through public forums, transparent consultative committees, and collaborative oversight boards—the reform process secures a powerful bottom-up mandate. This institutionalized public scrutiny places heavy moral and professional pressure on political decision-makers, compelling them to defend their policies publicly, promote ethical governance, and mitigate the risk of ethno-nationalist regression.

Even during the preparatory phase, this methodology allows practitioners - to test and evaluate specific initiatives through small-scale pilot projects. During the active implementation phase, the integration of real-time feedback loops ensures that coordinators can verify progress, measure local impact, and dynamically adjust subsequent policy measures based on actual field performance (Coning, 2018; Šuljek-Shank et al., 2025). By shifting the paradigm away from imported, rigid macro-mandates toward a flexible network of manageable, citizen-centric projects, the modular framework bridges macro-political disparities and establishes a resilient, self-correcting path toward long-term structural stability.

3. Regional Dynamics, EU Integration, and Localized Conflict Resolution

3.1 Bypassing High Politics Through Everyday Friction Points

Societal instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina is frequently analyzed through the macro-political prism of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and high-level constitutional deadlocks. However, field-based projects and practical consensus among stabilization experts indicate that the durability of institutional peace building is equally threatened by localized, everyday disputes. High-level political actors frequently instrumentalize macro-constitutional friction to preserve elite capture and nationalist dominance, leaving everyday public administration dysfunctional (Bose, 2002). The modular method bypasses these top-tier political impasses by redirecting stabilization efforts toward functional, localized entry points where cooperation is driven by mutual persistence and pragmatic necessity rather than existential zero-sum bargaining.

Rather than trying to immediately resolve grand constitutional dogmas, smaller operational modules can be designed around concrete, domestic, and regional infrastructure challenges.

These practical points of friction serve as ideal candidates for the modular methodology because they directly affect the daily welfare of ordinary citizens across internal and international borders. Key entry-level modules include:

- **Transboundary Water Management and Resource Allocation:** Managing shared agricultural and hydrological assets.
- **River Pollution Mitigation:** Addressing chronic environmental degradation in shared river basins like the Sava, Drina and Neretva rivers.
- **Zone Infrastructure Disputes:** Resolving micro-level economic blockages that hinder cross-community trade.

By focusing on these depoliticized, functional areas, third-party intermediaries and regional coordinators can foster organic communication and cooperative networks. This confirms the value of resolving practical, localized disparities before attempting broader political or constitutional reforms (Lederach, 2005).

3.2 Environmental Peace building as a Regional Connector

Ecology offers a natural baseline for structural cooperation because environmental threats do not respect ethnic or administrative demarcations. Environmental peace building provides a highly functional framework for the modular method, as ecological degradation creates an undeniable mutual dependency between adversarial groups. In the Western Balkans, shared ecological crises - ranging from transboundary river pollution to deforested border zones - compel divided municipal and entity authorities to engage in technical dialogue.

ENVIRONMENTAL PEACE BUILDING		
▼	▼	▼
Functional Trust Building via Technical Task Confrontation	Depoliticized Entry Points for Civil Society & Local Experts	Cross-Entity Municipal Collaborative Networks

Diagram of an Environmental Peace building Framework displaying how shared ecological issues lead to technical trust, depoliticized entry points, and cross-entity municipal collaboration

When a module focuses on a concrete ecological issue, such as the pollution of the Neretva, Drina or Sava river basins, it requires a multidisciplinary assembly of professionals. The planning phase must bring together regional environmental engineers, municipal waste management experts, and local agricultural representatives, alongside international technical

advisors. This collaborative dynamic relies on joint technical problem-solving rather than historical or political debates. Experiential data from past environmental projects show that when cross-entity actors confront a shared material threat, they build functional trust. This trust can gradually be scaled up to support more complex institutional reforms. Furthermore, ecological modules create accessible platforms for civil society organizations and ordinary citizens to actively shape policy, directly countering the elitist, top-down negotiations those have historically hindered regional stability (Perry, 2015).

3.3 Economic Interdependence, Trade, and Investment

Parallel to ecological cooperation, economic interdependence serves as an essential regional connector that drives systemic stabilization. The expansion of regional trade networks, shared investment corridors, and harmonized commercial regulations creates a tangible material incentive for political and economic elites to avoid destabilizing activities. When the cost of political obstruction includes losing international investment or disrupting regional supply chains, the incentive structure shifts toward functional pragmatism.

Applying the modular approach to economic development involves setting up distinct, operational units centred on cross-border economic zones, integrated transportation infrastructure, and shared industrial development. These modules are designed to clearly show local communities the economic benefits of cooperation. By demonstrating how targeted structural adjustments attract foreign direct investment, create jobs, and open access to broader European markets, the modular framework helps defuse politically motivated opposition. Economic integration can alter the balance of political power within post-conflict societies, elevating the influence of productivity-oriented business networks over exclusionary, nationalist factions (Domljan & Domljan, 2020).

3.4 Comparative Regional Progress: Lessons from EU Progress Reports

To motivate domestic actors within Bosnia and Herzegovina to overcome institutional stagnation, the modular model incorporates a comparative analysis based on European Union Progress Reports. A side-by-side evaluation of Public Administration Reform (PAR) and institutional capacity among Western Balkan nations highlights the cost of political deadlocks in BiH compared to its regional neighbors:

Country	EU Accession Status	Key Public Administration Reform (PAR) Dynamics	Primary Institutional Blockages

Slovenia / Croatia	EU Member States	Fully harmonized public administration frameworks; integrated regional structural funding	Institutional optimization and localized bureaucratic efficiency adjustments.
Albania/ Montenegro	Negotiating Candidate Status	Progressing through targeted acquis chapters; merit-based civil service restructuring.	Judicial independence adjustments and cross-border anti-corruption enforcement.
North Macedonia / Serbia	Candidate Status / Negotiating	Phased integration into the EU Single Market; structural alignment of transport and energy networks.,	Regional diplomatic disputes and structural foreign policy alignment challenges.
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Candidate Status	Fragmented administrative structures across entities and cantons; persistent stagnation in PAR.	Overly broad veto mechanisms; systemic elite capture; high political interference in civil service

This comparative baseline demonstrates to both local authorities and the broader public in BiH that their neighbors are moving forward by adopting functional, phased reforms. While countries like Albania and Montenegro utilize targeted EU technical assistance - such as the TAIEX instrument - to modernize public services and unlock development funding, BiH remains vulnerable to institutional paralysis due to its fragmented cantonal structure (Benz & Colino, 2011).

By using the EU accession framework as a shared objective, the modular method frames necessary constitutional and administrative changes as technical requirements for European integration rather than zero-sum ethnic losses. Linking measurable progress in individual modules directly to increased EU financial assistance and integration opportunities encourages domestic actors to take responsibility for reforms, steering the country away from stagnation toward sustainable stability (Coning, 2018; Šuljek-Shank et al., 2025).

4. Behavioral Heuristics in Peace Processes: Cognitive Framings, Environmental Syntheses, and the Swiss Federal Analogy

4.1 The Theoretical Foundations of Heuristic Decision-Making under Uncertainty

The utilization of cognitive heuristics represents a vital methodological mechanism for rationalizing decision-making and problem-solving within the highly complex, volatile, and deeply polarized environments characteristic of post-conflict societies. Unlike formal algorithms, which dictate rigid, computationally exhaustive processing steps to guarantee a mathematically optimal solution, heuristics function as mental shortcuts or behavioral "rules of thumb." These cognitive mechanisms simplify dense informational landscapes, enabling rapid, adaptive decision-making under conditions of acute structural uncertainty (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

The systematic study of these cognitive mechanisms, pioneered by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, demonstrated that human agents operating within high-stakes environments rarely conform to classic rational-choice models; instead, their choices are consistently guided by bounded rationality and predictable cognitive biases (Kahneman, 2011). Within post-conflict reconstructions, where the existential stakes are high and the structural penalties for administrative missteps are severe, these behavioral shortcuts frequently manifest as systematic pathologies.

Interventions often stall because local actors default to the *availability heuristic*, overestimating the likelihood of renewed hostilities based on the psychological accessibility of past traumatic events, or the *representativeness heuristic*, judging contemporary institutional adjustments through historical stereotypes rather than logical utility (Mitchell, 2000).

However, as Gerd Gigerenzer contends, heuristics should not be dismissed merely as systematic sources of cognitive error. In highly uncertain, fast-moving environments where comprehensive data is unavailable or deliberately obscured by competing political factions, simple, "fast-and-frugal" heuristics that focus on one or two critical pieces of environmental information can outperform complex analytical models (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). The

operational challenge within a modular peace process is not to completely eliminate these psychological shortcuts, but to understand their internal mechanics. By doing so, third-party intermediaries and local reformers can deploy strategic behavioral interventions to align cognitive shortcuts with progressive institutional stabilization.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">COGNITIVE HEURISTICS IN CONFLICT</td></tr>
<tr><td>▼</td><td></td><td>▼</td></tr>
<tr><td>Availability Bias
Overestimating risk via psychological mass of historical traumas</td><td></td><td>Status Quo Bias Systemic resistance to structural change driven by loss aversion</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>▼</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">STRATEGIC REFOCUSED FRAMING</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Shifting zero-sum constitutional terms into positive technical objectives</td></tr>
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Flowchart illustrating how Availability Bias and Status Quo Bias feed into conflict dynamics, and how Strategic Refocused Framing converts these biases into technical, non-zero-sum operational goals

4.2 Cognitive Biases and Constitutional Reform: The Status Quo and Loss Aversion

When attempting to execute structural or constitutional updates in post-war landscapes like Bosnia and Herzegovina, the primary psychological barrier encountered is the *status quo bias*. This behavioral phenomenon dictates that individuals and entrenched interest groups disproportionately prefer an existing state of affairs - even one that is manifestly dysfunctional, corrupt, or economically stagnant - over the perceived uncertainty of institutional reform (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Rooted deeply in heuristics prospect theory, this bias is driven by an asymmetric cognitive architecture where the psychological pain of a perceived loss is felt twice as intensely as the pleasure of an equivalent gain. Consequently, ethno-nationalist political elites and localized veto-holders systematically reject comprehensive institutional overhauls because they fear an immediate loss of political hegemony, resources, or group security, while discounting the long-term, distributed gains of a functional state.

To bypass this psychological resistance, the modular method applies the heuristic concept of *framing*. The language, presentation, and context used to articulate structural alterations are strategically calibrated. If constitutional modifications are framed as macro-political negotiations that alter the balance of ethnic power, they immediately trigger defensive cognitive anchors and veto mechanisms.

Conversely, when structural updates are decoupled from zero-sum terms and framed as practical guarantees of equal civic opportunity, public service efficiency, and personal security, the perceived threat profile is neutralized. Overcoming the *status quo* bias requires constructing a clear sense of administrative urgency (Sunstein, 2020). This is achieved by shifting information disclosure away from dense, inaccessible legal jargon toward *smart disclosure* - utilizing clear summaries, intuitive data visualizations, and transparent online comparative tools. This ensures ordinary citizens can easily evaluate the concrete costs of maintaining the current stagnation versus the practical benefits of modular modernization.

4.3 Applying Heuristics to the Swiss Federal Model: Gradualism and Cantonal Identity

To operationalize these behavioral insights within a fragmented constitutional architecture, a highly instructive functional analogy can be drawn from the historical evolution of the Swiss federal system post-Westphalia. Switzerland successfully navigated intense ethnic, linguistic, and religious fragmentation across its 26 cantons to establish one of the world's most stable and functional state apparatuses. The psychological and structural success of the Swiss model lies in its intuitive reliance on localized, bottom-up gradualism and modular decentralization.

From a heuristic perspective, the Swiss architecture successfully defanged the *status quo* bias and loss aversion by ensuring that macro-political, federal integration was never presented to the cantons as a sudden, top-down existential choice. Instead, the Swiss system anchored cantonal security through strong local autonomy, while utilizing simple, transparent behavioral frameworks that incentivized inter-cantonal cooperation on precise, technical issues.

By keeping the primary unit of civic identity and political accountability close to the local citizen, the Swiss model reduced the cognitive distance between decision-makers and their constituents. This decentralized accountability prevented the rise of distant, captured state institutions that often fuel public cynicism and systemic corruption in post-war environments (Benz & Colino, 2011; Erk, 2007).

Replicating this dynamic in the Western Balkans requires shifting the cognitive anchor away from the centralized state apparatus. Instead, focus should be placed on decentralized,

cantonal, or municipal modules where local actors can negotiate concrete administrative parameters within a manageable, psychologically non-threatening framework.

4.4 Environmental Peace building as a Cognitive Catalyst for Constitutional Alignment

Ecology and environmental resource management serve as the ideal psychological and functional connectors for executing modular constitutional adjustments. Because environmental crises - such as trans boundary river pollution in the Neretva, Sava and Drina basins, or shared flooding risks - do not respect internal entity borders or ethnic divisions, they create an undeniable material interdependence. This material reality can be leveraged to alter existing cognitive biases.

Diagram tracking the progression of an ecological crisis from reframing to cross-entity technical platforms, leading to incremental constitutional trust

By framing a structural reform module around an environmental crisis, third-party intermediaries can bypass deeply rooted political stereotypes. Environmental peace building transforms a highly polarized political debate into a technical exercise in mutual survival. When localized experts, civil society organizations, and municipal directors from adversarial communities are brought together to manage a shared watershed or coordinate pollution control, they are forced to operate outside of standard ethno-nationalist scripts. This technical collaboration triggers what Gigerenzer terms adaptive decision-making: actors focus on

immediate, verifiable pieces of information - such as water toxicity levels or infrastructure funding - rather than historical grievances.

Crucially, these environmental modules generate an iterative series of small, positive cooperative experiences that dismantle prevailing narratives of public cynicism and apathy. Once a localized, cross-entity consensus is reached on an environmental or economic issue, that technical agreement can be used as a psychological stepping stone. The shared administrative structures built to manage that ecological resource can be progressively formalized into binding, normative legal frameworks. This demonstrates how targeted, ecologically driven interventions can gradually build the cross-community trust required to support broader, civically oriented constitutional updates (Coning, 2018; Lederach, 2005).

4.5 International Coordination, Civil Society, and Reciprocity Frameworks

The integration of international actors and local civil society within this heuristic framework requires a fundamental shift away from patronizing, top-down mandates. Historically, international institutions and EU bodies have reinforced local cognitive biases by communicating almost exclusively with top-tier political elites, which effectively validates the captured status quo and alienates the broader public. To correct this structural imbalance, international engagement can be organized under a centralized coordination body, such as a dedicated "Working Group." This body functions as an international catalyst to align external technical assistance with genuine domestic initiatives.

Instead of continuously litigating past geopolitical disagreements, international actors can strategically frame their interventions around shared interests, including regional stability, economic integration, and environmental protection. This positions structural modernization as an essential component of broader European security.

Furthermore, by organizing expert academic networks and multidisciplinary research forums - such as the regional development models pioneered by experts like Professor Vjekoslav Domljan - the international community can inject credible, independent data into the public sphere (Domljan & Domljan, 2020). This expert validation leverages the psychological principle of authority, making proposed reforms more trustworthy to the lay public.

INTERNATIONAL RECIPIORITY MATRIX	
▼	▼
Technical Assistance Synthesized expert data and TAIEX frameworks	Measurable PAR Progress Transformed institutions and conditional funding

Matrix diagram of the International Reciprocity Matrix demonstrating the exchange between international technical assistance and local public administration reform

To ensure accountability, international funding for public administration reform (PAR) must be linked to measurable progress within individual modules, utilizing the EU's technical assistance instruments (such as TAIEX) to build internal capacity. This structured exchange triggers the behavioral *principle of reciprocity*: by providing high-quality, synthesized data and developmental resources directly to local communities, the international community encourages local actors to take personal and institutional responsibility for the reform process (Šuljek-Shank et al., 2025).

Concurrently, civil society organizations can use this transparency to demand that national elites publicly justify their legislative choices. Bringing backroom political negotiations into the sphere of public scrutiny encourages ethical behavior among decision-makers. By combining fast, reliable local heuristics with rigorous international guarantees, the modular framework transforms post-conflict governance into an inclusive, self-correcting process that responds directly to the civic and material needs of the population.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Constitutional Reform as the Ultimate Institutional Friction Point

The empirical synthesis and behavioral analysis articulated throughout this study demonstrate that constitutional reform represents the most formidable and complex dimension of post-conflict societal transformation. In fractured landscapes such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, constitutional architecture is not merely a technical legal framework; it is the ultimate friction point where historical traumas, institutional path-dependencies, and ethno-nationalist security dilemmas intersect. Overhauling the legacy of the Dayton Accords to build a functional, civically oriented state requires an extraordinary level of coordinated engagement from all segments of society, spanning state-level institutional bodies, entity-level political apparatuses, regional municipal networks, and local civil society organizations.

Because macro-political actors frequently utilize institutional veto mechanisms to safeguard elite capture and exploit public loss aversion, these macro-reforms are structurally prone to paralysis when pursued through traditional, universal "all-or-nothing" mandates. It is precisely within this high-stakes deadlock that the intervention of the international community, coordinated through unified bodies such as a dedicated Working Group on BiH and empowered instruments like the Office of the High Representative (OHR), becomes methodologically indispensable. Rather than acting as a patronizing external authority, the international community must function as a structural guarantor and technical catalyst. By deploying targeted resources, providing objective expertise, and enforcing rigorous anti-

corruption and public administration reform (PAR) conditionalities linked to the EU accession process, external actors can create the necessary structural pressure and security guarantees to incentivize local elites and empower domestic civil society to undertake deep normative adjustments.

5.2 The Systemic Merits of the Modular Peace Architecture

In contrast to traditional, rigid statebuilding paradigms that attempt to resolve all systemic disparities simultaneously, the modular model validated in this paper offers a dynamic, flexible, and resilient operational architecture. By systematically partitioning comprehensive societal restructuring into logically contained, substantively distinct operational modules - ranging from rule of law enforcement to socioeconomic stabilization - the framework grants each sector independent timelines, distinct funding streams, and specialized professional task forces. The primary systemic advantage of this modularity is its capacity to prevent cross-sectoral contamination: a political impasse or a localized veto within a highly contentious module (such as constitutional engineering) does not cause the systemic collapse of the country's entire developmental trajectory.

While the deeply polarized constitutional module is gradually negotiated under international stewardship, other vital operational dimensions can advance independently. This study has shown that the remaining pillars of the modular model for BiH - specifically socioeconomic stabilization (Module D) and human capital, education, and innovation (Module E) - serve as essential engines for generating positive societal momentum. When administrative efforts focus on building regional trade networks, optimizing public service delivery through instruments like TAIEX, and advancing technological innovation, they alter the material incentive structure on the ground. Pragmatic economic progress and shared infrastructural benefits cultivate cross-entity dependencies that gradually erode politically manufactured barriers, proving that complex state transformation is successfully achieved by demonstrating practical utility to the population before attempting macro-political overhauls.

5.3 Behavioral Syntheses: Neutralizing Biases through Pragmatic Connectors

A critical contribution of this framework is its explicit integration of behavioral psychology and cognitive heuristics into the practical mechanics of peace building. As demonstrated by the pioneering insights of Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Gerd Gigerenzer, human agency under conditions of acute existential uncertainty is consistently driven by predictable cognitive biases rather than pure rational-choice calculations. In post-conflict societies, deep-seated collective traumas, negative ethnic stereotypes, and a profound status quo bias mean that citizens and leaders alike naturally overestimate the risks of institutional change and experience intense loss aversion. Traditional, purely legalistic stabilization strategies consistently fail because they ignore these psychological currents.

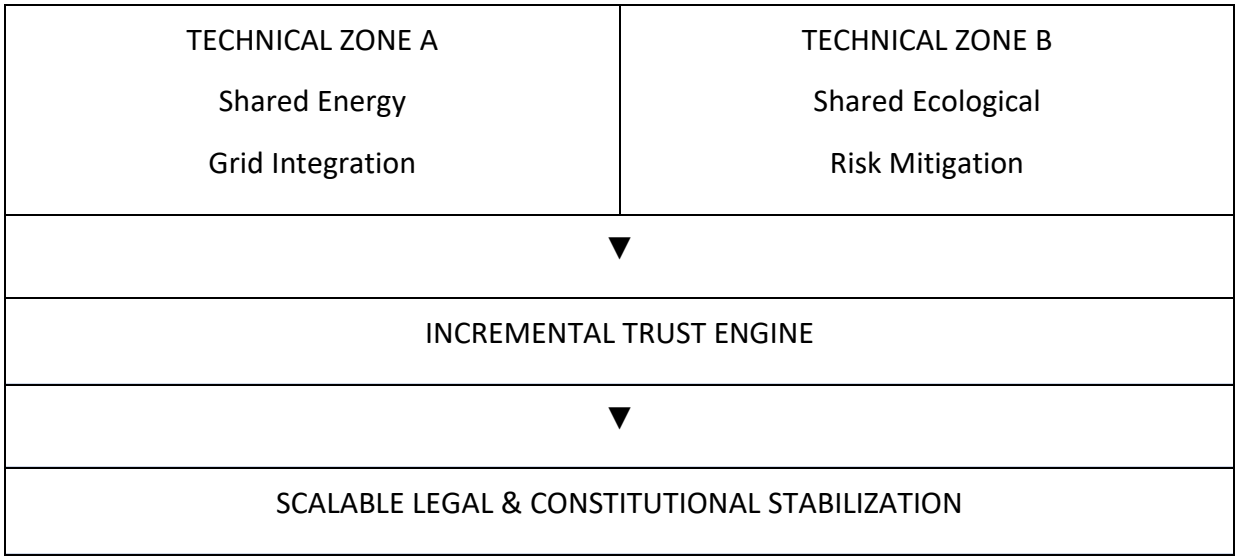
The modular model actively neutralizes these biases by shifting the cognitive anchor away from zero-sum political dogmas and utilizing strategic framing to redefine necessary reforms. This cognitive reframing is most elegantly operationalized through the deployment of depoliticized regional connectors, with environmental peace building serving as the primary catalyst. By framing localized operational modules around shared, material ecological threats - such as transboundary river pollution in the Neretva, Sava and Drina basins or joint water resource management - the model bypasses entrenched nationalist narratives. Environmental crises compel cross-entity authorities, technical experts, and ordinary citizens to interact within a "fast-and-frugal" adaptive decision-making framework focused on mutual survival. These iterative, small-scale ecological collaborations generate a series of tangible, positive cooperative experiences that dismantle public cynicism, establish functional trust, and provide the psychological foundation required to support subsequent, civically oriented constitutional changes.

5.4 A Universal Paradigm for Contemporary Geopolitical Conflicts

Beyond its direct application to the administrative complexities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the modular framework combined with behavioral heuristics offers a highly valuable, transferable paradigm for the resolution of broader, systemic conflicts currently escalating across Europe and its immediate periphery. The contemporary global security landscape is increasingly characterized by deeply rooted, identity-driven asymmetric conflicts and geopolitical stalemates where conventional, holistic diplomatic negotiations have proven entirely ineffective. Whether addressing the protracted frozen conflicts in the Eastern European neighborhood or navigating the highly volatile stabilization requirements of post-war borders, the enforcement of top-down, externally imposed macro-treaties frequently results in prolonged paralysis, public alienation, and a reinforcement of the hostile status quo.

The modular method provides international mediators and regional strategists with a rigorous, non-linear alternative to these diplomatic failures. By shifting the focus of international intervention away from immediate, unattainable macro-political consensus toward the execution of manageable, parallel functional units, the model allows adversaries to build operational trust through low-stakes technical sectors - such as shared energy grid integration, environmental resource allocation, public health coordination, and localized trade corridors.

COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL STALEMATE / CONFLICT ZONE	
▼	▼



Flowchart representing the Transferable Modular Peace Paradigm, illustrating how technical zones like energy grid integration and ecological risk mitigation feed into an incremental trust engine, leading to scalable legal and constitutional stabilization in wider conflict zones

As these micro-level modules demonstrate concrete material benefits and alter local behavioral heuristics, the resulting functional trust can be progressively scaled upward into broader legal, normative, and constitutional frameworks.

Ultimately, this study reinforces a foundational axiom of sustainable peace building: the most resilient, legitimate, and durable institutional reform is one that cannot be simulated through elite-level backroom deals or imported via rigid external mandates. True structural stability is generated from the bottom up, achieved when diverse local actors, civil society networks, and ordinary citizens actively participate in and assume genuine domestic ownership over the gradual, modular reconfiguration of their shared societal future.

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