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EASTERN EUROPE ECHOES: NARRATIVES,
CULTURES, AND MEMORIES FROM COLD
WAR TO DAYTON'S LEGACY (1946–2026)

Edited by

Vito Saracino, Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice



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7. ENGINEERING DEMOCRACY: CONSOCIATIONALISM IN POST-DAYTON BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

di Rebecca Bowen*

Abstract: This paper examines the implementation of the consociational power-sharing model in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the Dayton Peace Accords, analyzing its theoretical foundations, institutional features, and long-term challenges. It critiques how the pre-determination of ethnic segments, externally imposed elite cooperation, and persistent ethno-nationalist politics have hindered democratic consolidation, exacerbated divisions, and fostered dependency on international intervention. Drawing on Lijphart's framework, the study highlights ongoing crises, such as Republika Srpska's secessionist tendencies and calls for liberal reforms, transitional justice, and civic alternatives to transcend Dayton's paralyzing logic.

Keywords: Consociationalism, Dayton Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina, power-sharing, ethnic divisions, democratic transition.

Abstract: Questo contributo esamina l'attuazione del modello consociativo di condivisione del potere in Bosnia-Erzegovina attraverso gli Accordi di Dayton, analizzandone i fondamenti teorici, le caratteristiche istituzionali e le criticità di lungo periodo. Il saggio critica il modo in cui la pre-determinazione dei segmenti etnici, la cooperazione tra élite imposta dall'esterno e la persistente politica etnonazionalista abbiano ostacolato il consolidamento democratico, accentuato le divisioni e favorito una dipendenza dall'intervento internazionale. Muovendo dal quadro interpretativo di Lijphart, lo studio mette in evidenza le crisi tuttora in atto,

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come le tendenze secessioniste della Republika Srpska e le richieste di riforme liberali, di giustizia transizionale e di alternative civiche capaci di superare la logica paralizzante di Dayton.

Keywords: consociativismo, Accordi di Dayton, Bosnia-Erzegovina, power-sharing, divisioni etniche, transizione democratica.

1. The road to Dayton: a geopolitical analysis

The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be analysed without examining and reconstructing the broader political context in which it occurred, as the conflict was influenced by both the international community and actors originating from the neighbouring countries. One of the most common misconceptions regarding the three-year-long crisis, which will be subsequently explored throughout this chapter, is that it stemmed from ancient and unsurmountable animosity between the single ethnic groups within the country – a tension that could not have been overcome without the separation of the population in separate entities; however, prior to the fall of Tito's Yugoslavia, the people of Bosnia lived together in harmony. The country had always been multicultural and multiethnic and was, therefore, often hailed by Josip Broz Tito as the most successful example of his policy of *brotherhood and unity* within the Balkans. Although many date the dissolution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia to the ten-day-war that followed Slovenia's declaration of independence, the beginning of the end started with Tito's death in 1980 and Slobodan Milošević's rapid rise to power in Serbia, as he dictated the timing and rhythm of each conflict within the Balkans. The transition from a socialist economy and political structure to democracy and capitalism was characterized by rising inflation and discontent amongst citizens, making Milošević's new style of populist

nationalism an effective means of manifesting discontent. Additionally, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was initially perceived by the members of the European Community as a possibility to further promote the integration of new member states in the Balkans, riding the euphoria of the events of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall. This, however, led Europe to make several disastrous mistakes that hindered its efforts to solve the crisis, one of which was the sole reliance on diplomacy even when the situation rapidly spiraled out of control and required the sustenance of adequate military intervention. This, alongside the United States' initial refusal to get involved in the complex problem, pushed European states to heavily rely on the United Nations' help in managing the crisis despite it not having the necessary tools to do so (Jean 2002:112).

The negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement marked the final chapter in a prolonged and devastatingly violent war which had had a profound impact on post-Cold War Europe. Far from being a linear process, the road to Dayton was marked by repeated diplomatic failures, competing international interests and a rapidly shifting military balance on the ground. The diplomatic effort, as stated previously, stemmed from a fundamental misreading of the conflict itself, as it was based on an analysis which saw, as Noel Malcolm stated in his work *Bosnia – A short history*, 'ancient ethnic hatreds' as the origin of the conflict on behalf of Western diplomacy (Malcolm 1996:271). This interpretation reinforced the belief that a *de facto* ethnic separation of the state and its citizens represented the only viable solution to finally ending the bloodshed in the region. As a result, alternative political arrangements were largely dismissed. This became apparent from the start when, in September 1992, David Owen and Cyrus Vance emerged as the primary protagonists of the diplomatic negotiations concerning Bosnia's future. Lord Owen stood out due to his controversial stance regarding the essence of the conflict,

characterized by significant prejudice towards Islam and a bias towards Serbia. In fact, he often referred to the warring parties with disparaging terms and maintained that the only solution to what was happening in the Balkans was to permanently divide the population which has been living together harmoniously during Tito's rule in the years prior. Furthermore, he believed that it was necessary to satisfy Milošević's demands as he was the strongest actor in the region (Dizdarević 2001:179). Similar views were echoed by other Western policymakers, including the British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, who was quick to frame the conflict as a civil war, thereby downplaying the role of external aggression (Malcolm 1996:239).

The decisive diplomatic effort through which Dayton came to be came at a time in which the Bosniak and Croat forces were at a clear advantage on the battlefield, a factor that significantly shaped the timing and the nature of the negotiations that followed. Quantitative research shows that conflicts ended through negotiations tend to recur more often than those conflicts ended with military victories, however difficult the latter are to achieve (Hartwell 2019:444). The solution implemented through Dayton left several unresolved questions regarding Bosnia's future regarding the country's transition towards peace and democracy, many of which remain unanswered to this day. This has led to uncertainty and increasing pressure on both the political and administrative institutions of the country.

2. The most ambitious peace agreement in modern history

The Dayton Agreement was described by Carl Bildt, the first High Representative in the newly-formed Bosnian state, as the most ambitious peace agreement in modern history. One might assume

that the Swedish diplomat was referring to the complex path international diplomacy had to undertake in order to reach the negotiating table; however, he was instead addressing the content of the Accords, as not only did it negotiate peace amongst the warring parties but it also sought to create a new political entity without the involvement of its people (Chandler 2000:43). Dayton's success led to it becoming a code word for a particular style of diplomacy known as the *Big Bang* approach to negotiation, in which each party is locked in until an agreement is officially reached (Fubini 1999:1).

Nevertheless, numerous scholars and practitioners have warned against attempts to replicate the Dayton model in different contexts, highlighting the structural difficulties inherent in such an approach. In particular, Richard Holbrooke, a key figure in the Dayton negotiations, argued that this strategy often lacked adequate security guarantees and that the prestige of intervening states was frequently at stake, rendering failure potentially disastrous (Fubini 1999:1). A key example is that of Europe's attempt to hold a conference similar to Dayton to solve the crisis in Kosovo; however, the European Community failed to take the context in which Dayton came to light into account – one of a rigorous month-long mediation process which aimed to persuade Russia to join the Implementation Force (IFOR) led by NATO (Fubini 1999:4). Russia's support towards reaching peace in Bosnia was crucial in pushing Milošević to accept an 'armored' peace. The lack of a systematic attempt to harmonize Washington and Moscow's diplomatic stances prior to the Lancaster House negotiations is one of the reasons why the Rambouillet negotiations did not result in an equivalent success (Fubini 1999:5).

Dayton also pioneered what are known as *transformative conflict settlements* which consist in institutional agreements supported by international security guarantees which allow the parties involved in the conflict to work towards progressively overcoming their animosity through peaceful, political and

increasingly democratic means (Weller and Wolff 2008:11). As a result, the international community has consolidated itself as a constitutive element of Bosnia's political and institutional order, its continued involvement becoming crucial to maintaining stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This raises questions about Dayton's long-term sustainability as it has blurred the line between post-conflict assistance and external governance.

The Dayton Accords avoid explicitly defining the political and institutional structure of the country. The previous designation, that of a Republic, was replaced with the current denomination which excludes any reference to the form of state. Florian Bieber defines Bosnia as an asymmetric and highly decentralized federation as it is composed of two entities and an autonomous province (Bieber 2006:61).

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was de facto established by the Washington agreement between Croatia and the Bosnian government in 1994, finally bringing the conflict between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks to an end and consolidating their alliance in the war against the Bosnian Serbs (Bose 2002:75). The Federation is made up of ten cantons and two dominant constituent nations. The creation of Republika Srpska, by contrast, constituted one of the direct causes of the 1992 war as its secessionist aims of separating from Bosnia to join either the former Yugoslavia or Serbia generated a profound dispute that ultimately escalated into armed conflict. Formally declared in February 1992 as a separate nation state with its own political system, the Republika Srpska now exists as a centralized entity within the unified Bosnian state, dominated by a single nation. Brčko was declared an autonomous district in 1999, and its status stands as clear evidence of the asymmetrical nature of the Bosnian state.

The Dayton Accords are comprised of eleven annexes. Annex four remains of significant importance as it contains the country's

Constitution, a document drafted and imposed by external actors and never formally voted on or approved by the Bosnian people. In order to fully comprehend the consequences of this peace agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war political and social reconstruction, it is necessary to consider the Constitution's preamble which affirms the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina in accordance with international law and defines the status of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats as 'constituent peoples (along with Others)' of the state (Dayton Peace Accords 1995:17).

The Dayton Accords have also sparked an extensive debate between integrationists and consociationalists concerning the country's political future. The former argued that institutional arrangements accommodating group divisions would ultimately reinforce and deepen existing ethnic cleavages, thereby undermining long-term social cohesion. The latter, by contrast, maintained that the recognition of ethnic communities through mechanisms of self-governance and political representation constituted the most viable means of ensuring stability in deeply divided societies. To all intents and purposes, Dayton can be understood as a consociational agreement, as it institutionalizes group representation and power-sharing along ethnic lines (Weller and Wolff 2008:13).

3. Consociationalism in post-war Bosnia

The theoretical foundations of the consociational model can be traced to the works of Arend Lijphart, who was among the first scholars to question whether a democratic political system could be effectively established in a plural society. In his volume *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, Lijphart draws on Harry Eckstein's definition of plural societies, describing them as

societies characterized by deep segmental cleavages that can be of a religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic nature (Lijphart 1977:1). Another characteristic that emerges from Eckstein's definition is the fact that political parties, interest groups, media of communication, schools and voluntary associations tend to be organized along the lines of said segmental cleavages. Thus, groups of the population are referred to as segments of the plural society (Lijphart 1977:3-4).

In conflict-ridden plural societies two potential solutions may be identified. The first is integration, which rejects the idea of basing political mobilization on ethnic, national, cultural or religious divisions. The second is accommodation, which rests on the assumption that identities are not malleable but rather fixed and inflexible and that, consequently, it is necessary to incorporate as many identities as possible into the political sphere. Lijphart argues that the latter option represents the most realistic approach for the establishment of a functional democratic regime in societies that appear to be deeply divided (Jarrett 2018:31). Accordingly, in his own words, « consociational democracy means government by an elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy » (Lijphart 2008:31).

In his definition of consociationalism, Arend Lijphart identified its five primary characteristics: Grand coalitions, proportional representation in parliament and public administration, the inclusion of all groups in government, veto rights and segmental autonomy. The defining feature of any consociational democracy is the existence of a grand coalition in which political elites cooperate in order to govern the nation. The presence of smaller coalitions not only allows for an effective democratic opposition but they are often easier to form due to the reduced number of competing viewpoints and interests. This element contrasts greatly with the British model of democracy,

where political leaders are divided between a government with minimal majority support and a sizeable opposition. Therefore, while leadership in the British model is competitive, leadership in the consociational model is coalescent (Lijphart 1977:25-26).

Proportionality in the consociational model allows all groups to influence a decision proportionally to their numerical strength and also removes a large number of potentially divisive problems from the decision-making process (Lijphart 1977:39).

Segmental autonomy, the final major deviation from majority rule, refers to the right of a minority to exercise control over matters of exclusive concern to that group. It allows each segment to make and implement decisions independently, while still cooperating with other segments on issues of shared interest (Lijphart 1977:41).

However, it is insufficient to merely follow an institutional blueprint for consociationalism to succeed. In this regard, Lijphart reflects on the role of political elites within such a system and highlights how it can influence the model's success. Leaders of the different rival subcultures can decide to behave in different ways, either adopting a competitive conduct (thereby accentuating mutual tensions and political instability) or cooperating in order to counteract the immobilizing effects of political and cultural fragmentation. Since fragmented societies are more prone to political deadlock, cooperation among political elites is necessary, as they must be capable of transcending existing cleavages and joining forces with their rivals in a common effort aimed at maintaining the system and improving its stability. This presupposes that elites recognize the dangers posed by political fragmentation. Moreover, such cooperation must not be carried out in a way that undermines the support of the political bases that the elites represent (Lijphart 1969:25-36). What makes Bosnia and interesting and unique case study within the framework of

consociationalism is that cooperation among elites did not emerge spontaneously as an internal pact, but was instead imposed from the outside through the Dayton Accords.

Another aspect that deserves closer attention is the distinction between self-determination and pre-determination of population segments within consociational democracy. Lijphart defines self-determination as the method or process through which rights are granted to groups within an already existing state, allowing them to emerge or reveal themselves rather than having their identities decided in advance. Pre-determination, by contrast, refers to an internal process through which the groups that will share power or receive specific rights are defined beforehand. Lijphart considers the former approach to be more functional, as it offers a number of advantages that pre-determination does not provide. First and foremost, self-determination prevents potentially discriminatory comparisons between groups. Deciding in advance which groups will be recognized as segments within a power-sharing system necessarily implies deciding which groups will not be recognized. Pre-determination can therefore lead not only to discrimination among segments of the population, but also to the (almost forced) assignment of individuals to specific groups. Self-determination thus offers equal opportunities not only to all population segments but also to those who reject the idea that their society should be organized along segmental lines (Lijphart 1991:66-74).

The Dayton framework is centered on the pre-determination of population segments through the Constitution's preamble, thus creating a number of problems for those who do not identify with the three constituent nations. A prime example of the difficulties implicit in pre-determination is provided by the Sejdić-Finci case of 2009. The two applicants, of Jewish and Roma origin respectively, were prevented from running for the House of Peoples and the

Presidency. The reasons for this prohibition were found in Articles IV and V of the Constitution, as well as in the 2001 Election Act which required candidates to declare their affiliation with one of the constituent peoples in order to be eligible. Sejdić and Finci, however, fell into the category of 'Others', and were thus segregated from the majority of the population. Claiming that they had been discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic origin, the two brought their case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Court ruled that these provisions were not only discriminatory but also lacked the proportionality necessary to render them justifiable; however, it did not rule on whether the exclusion of ethnic minorities from high political office served a legitimate aim (Wakelin 2012). Although the case played an essential role in exposing the problems inherent in Dayton's rigid conception of ethnicity and set an important precedent for the European Court of Human Rights, Bosnia still appears to be in a state of deadlock with regard to constitutional reforms that would address these issues (Bonifatti 2019).

The Sejdić-Finci case illustrates Asim Mujkić's contention that a Bosnian citizen derives value primarily through their belonging to an ethnic group rather than through individual citizenship (Finlay 2011:37). One of the main criticisms of consociationalism is precisely that, rather than promoting social cohesion, it tends to reinforce the very divisions that laid the foundations for fragmentation and, in some cases, violent conflict. The underlying assumption behind partition or territorial division is that ethnic conflict will be reduced as a result of the creation of geographically homogeneous ethnic areas (Horowitz 2000:589). According to this logic, separating groups spatially should minimize interaction and therefore decrease the likelihood of confrontation. However, this solution often produces the opposite effect and instead contributes to the exacerbation of ethno-national tensions.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fact that the population of Republika Sprska is predominantly Serb is not the outcome of a natural or voluntary demographic process, but rather the direct consequence of ethnic cleansing operations and forced population displacements carried out during the conflict of the 1990s. The creation of ethnically homogeneous territories thus reflects wartime violence rather than peaceful coexistence, and risks legitimizing its outcomes within the post-conflict political order. Furthermore, despite the explicit commitment enshrined in the Dayton Peace Accords to guarantee the right of return for refugees and internally displaced persons to their pre-war homes, the implementation of this principle has faced significant obstacles. These difficulties have been linked, first and foremost, to concerns regarding the physical security of those wishing to return, particularly in areas where they would once again constitute an ethnic minority. In addition to security concerns, property rights (including disputes over ownership, the occupation of homes by new residents and the complex legal processes involved in restoring property to its pre-conflict owners) have also represented a substantial challenge. As a result, the right of return, while formally recognized, has often remained only partially realized in practice, further entrenching ethnic separation and undermining prospects for long-term social integration (Bieber 2009:111).

Another issue of considerable importance that must be highlighted when discussing consociationalism in Bosnia concerns the rise and consolidation of ethno-nationalist parties within the country. The first experience of political pluralism in the early 1990s saw the emergence of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ), the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), and the Party of Democratic Action (SDA). These parties did not reflect the traditional left-right political dichotomy, as the main axis of political competition was instead based on the promotion and protection of

national and social interests tied to specific ethnic communities. The historical contest which saw the emergence of such parties was one of great political and economic instability. The nationalist rhetoric which developed in the early nineties was reinforced by distorted interpretations and reinterpretations of historical events to create the fear of the other and the distrust in the other nations. Thus, political mobilization was largely driven by the perceived need for the ethnic homogenization of the population within the country's territory. Civic identity was essentially reduced to national identity and the basis of representation within politics was not the citizen organized under the supervision of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The international community decided to introduce shorter terms of office for parliamentary bodies within cantons, entities and at the state level with the aim of ensuring that those who had gained power during the war would not monopolize it in the post-war period. This, however, did not reach the desired outcome as the three main ethnic parties consolidated their power through a landslide victory, winning 86% of the parliamentary seats in the Parliamentary Assembly. Alija Izetbegović of the SDA party was re-elected as one of the three members of the presidency (Pejanović 2023:98).

A more significant shift occurred with the third parliamentary elections of 2000 when the three main ethnic parties were replaced by parties belonging to the civic bloc, whose political agenda focused on facilitating a smoother transition to democracy and promoting Bosnia and Herzegovina's political and economic integration into the European Union. During their time in office, the civic parties achieved some notable results, including the country's accession to the Council of Europe, the establishment of the State Border Service to strengthen border control, and the abolition of ethnic-based discrimination through a significant constitutional amendment reaffirming the constitutiveness of each nation within

both the Federation and the Republika Sprska. Despite these achievements, the civic bloc failed to deliver the economic changes it had promised to the Bosnian population, which continued to face rising unemployment and increasingly difficult living conditions during the two-year mandate granted to them. As a result, ethnic pluralism was once again reaffirmed in the 2002 elections. This outcome highlighted the resilience of ethno-nationalist political structures and underscored the persistent difficulty of consolidating non-ethnic alternatives within the Bosnian political system (Pejanović 2023:99-101).

While conflict and competition are essential elements of political life within any democratic system, the persistent inability of the various ethno-nationalist parties to reach the necessary consensus to promote meaningful reforms represents a clear symptom of political deadlock. The institutional and political paralysis has significantly hindered the socio-economic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and has obstructed its transition toward an efficient and fully functional democratic model. Rather than facilitating cooperation and long-term stability, the dominance of ethnically based parties has entrenched divisions and perpetuated a system in which governance is subordinated to ethnic interests, thereby limiting the capacity of the state to address broader societal and economic challenges.

As stated previously, Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by the continued and pervasive presence of international intervention long after the end of the conflict. Annex 10 of the Dayton Peace Agreement established the position of the High Representative, entrusted with a broad range of responsibilities. These include the continuation of humanitarian assistance for as long as necessary, the reconstruction of the economy and infrastructure destroyed during the war, the development of a stable political and constitutional framework

within Bosnia and Herzegovina, the promotion and protection of human rights, the guarantee of the right of return for all refugees and displaced persons, and, finally, the organization and implementation of free and fair elections (Dayton Peace Accords 1995:51). In 1997, the High Representative acquired the so-called Bonn Powers, which resulted in the adoption of numerous legislative acts and hundreds of binding decisions, as well as in the dismissal of public officials and the imposition of sanctions on political parties. While the Office of the High Representative is generally regarded as having had a positive impact on the political and institutional development of the state through its interventions, many criticize its expansion of authority, believing it has significantly slowed the development of Bosnia's power-sharing system. On the one hand, the ethno-nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina have benefited from the presence of the High Representative, who has often relieved them of the responsibility for adopting particularly difficult political decisions; on the other hand, these parties do not appear to have been inclined to form strong political coalitions even before the expansion of the High Representative's powers (Bieber 2009:84).

At this point, it is useful to return to the study by Natalija Savić on the role of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Savić draws on Robert Dahl's concept of power to conduct an empirical analysis of three instances in which this office intervened at the height of the Bonn Powers: the so-called 'transmitter war', the removal of public officials from office, and the reform of the police sector. She concludes that the High Representative has effectively deprived elected officials of their governing authority, thereby hindering the development of democracy and domestic self-government (Savić 2019:40). It appears that the High Representative has acted, whenever deemed necessary, with little hesitation, determining unilaterally what

constituted a violation of the Dayton Accords and imposing solutions with immediate effect. In doing so, the office often failed to give the political parties involved sufficient time to participate in the process or to reach a point of convergence on the issues at stake. As a result, elected representatives seem to depend heavily on this authority, aware that their jobs depend on their compliance with the policies and reforms put forth by the High Representative (Savić 2019:40).

It appears that Bosnia and Herzegovina remains caught in a self-reinforcing cycle of dependence on international intervention. Continued engagement by external actors is still widely seen as necessary to preserve the fragile stability achieved after the war and to prevent renewed political or ethnic tensions from escalating into conflict. Yet this very involvement, while intended as a safeguard, also limits the space for domestic institutions to exercise genuine authority. As long as key decisions are shaped or enforced from the outside, state structures struggle to develop the independence, accountability, and political confidence required for effective governance. In turn, this constrains the country's broader institutional maturation and delays the emergence of a fully self-sustaining democratic system, creating a paradox in which the mechanisms designed to secure peace simultaneously complicate the transition to durable democratic ownership.

Conclusions

In March 2025, the attention of the international community once again turned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a new institutional confrontation unfolded between state authorities and the leadership of Republika Sprska. After openly defying the decisions of the international High Representative, Milorad Dodik promoted

legislation designed to exclude state-level judicial and law enforcement bodies from operating within the entity's territory, effectively challenging the constitutional provisions established with Dayton (Sito-Sucic 2025). These measures were adopted in the immediate aftermath of a court verdict sentencing Dodik to one year in prison and banning him from holding public office for six years for failing to implement the High Representative's binding decisions (Raabe 2025:1). The confrontation rapidly escalated into a wider political crisis when authorities in Republika Sprska passed acts prohibiting cooperation with state institutions and even amended criminal legislation to penalize officials who continued working at the national level, steps widely interpreted as an attempt to usurp state competences and advance a long-standing autonomist agenda (Kanlić and Petrić 2025). This sense of insecurity extended beyond the institutional circle, especially after the Srebrenica memorial was temporarily closed because of security concerns amid rising tensions. This episode, however, was not without precedent, considering that Dodik had already previously been sanctioned in 2022 both by the United States and by the United Kingdom; this, however, was not good enough of a deterrent considering that Dodik has continuously advocated for the secession of the Republika Sprska from Bosnia, endangering the precarious peace and the illusory stability of the past thirty years (Buljan 2025). Another example of Dodik's controversial conduct were his continuous statements regarding how Bosnia and Herzegovina had 'ceased to exist', reminiscent of the Republika Sprska's previous secessionist tendencies (Borger 2025).

These events have, once again, demonstrated the Balkan's strategic significance to global geopolitics, as these events have led to escalating tensions between Dodik's allies, Russia and Serbia, on the one hand, and the European Union and the United States on the other. Laris Gaiser points out that «The frozen conflicts of the former

Yugoslavia remain stable because they diabolically vent their tensions by passing through a system of communicating vessels that connect them and allows, at least for now, the rebalancing of the general threat» (Gaiser 2025:316).

Therefore, it seems as though strengthening one's fortifications is the Balkan way to prevent conflict. Indeed, this is the situation in Dodik's Republika Sprska where the Serb populace isolates itself while also attempting to undermine state institutions. Gaiser poignantly states that

The Balkans are full of leaders who would like to lead sovereign states forgetting the rules of international law, especially that of non-intervention in the affairs of others. Only through continuous mutual delegitimization by making fun of an institutional reality considered temporary can one hope for a revision of the status quo, which no local political class considers fair and legitimate (Gaiser 2025:316).

It is clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina's prospects as an independent and sovereign state were fundamentally compromised from the outset as the Dayton Accords served simultaneously as a treaty and the foundation of the country's constitutional framework. Consequently, any attempt to reform the system toward greater functionality requires revisiting the very agreement that ended the conflict. Constitutional reform has been extremely difficult not only because it is a symbolically and politically sensitive matter, but also because it requires consensus amongst deeply divided political actors. The Dayton Peace Agreement itself has cemented these ethno-political divisions through its consociational structure.

Veto and consensus politics, designed to secure peace, have since been weaponized by nationalist elites like Dodik. Indeed, the changes in law necessary for Bosnia's integration in the European union were halted by Serb representatives in state institutions at the end of 2024, despite the progress that had previously been made

in this regard (Reuters 2024). Although it is a relatively small nation it is extremely important to Europe as a whole today, serving as a major migration route to the EU and contributing significantly to the national security goals of its member states. This is because the Western Balkans are crucial in preventing the smuggling of weapons, illegal goods, foreign fighters, far-right extremists, and criminal organizations into the region. Therefore, 'the real choice is not whether to stay engaged but which framework of engagement to choose' (Ruge 2020:6). The United States also has high stakes in Bosnia, particularly in relation to the issues of Islamist radicalization and the expansion of Russia's military, economic and media influence in the region. Each administration has tried to prevent further divisions of Bosnia into areas dominated by one ethnic group, each of which then gravitates toward their respective international allies (Ruge 2020:6). According to Germany's previous foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, Bosnia's accession to the European Union and the latter's expansion in the Western Balkans is, now more than ever, a geopolitical necessity, particularly in light of Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine (AP world news, 2024). However, the Western Balkans appear to be the only area where the US continuously submits to the leadership of the EU, which has frequently placed a higher priority on the EU's expansion than on strong deterrence and democratic consolidation (Bassuener 2024).

Consociationalism is an elite-oriented top-down model of democracy applied in those areas of the world in which divisions amongst the various segments of the population are difficult to deal with otherwise. At first glance, it seems that a war-torn country such as Bosnia and Herzegovina necessitates such a democratic model in order to function within the international relations system. However, the situation remains tricky as external influence on the nation is, at times, overpowering, preventing Bosnia from affirming itself independently. The consociational model is not necessarily the

cause of these problems, but it is clear that the ethnopolitics embedded in this system reinforce the divisiveness within this fractured society.

Despite this, Adis Merdzanovic expresses cautious optimism about the prospects for consociationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while at the same time underlining a number of international factors that have hindered the development of this particular democratic arrangement. He argues that international actors should intervene early on to prevent that the political elites who held power during the conflict remain in office, as they often continue to pursue the same objectives they sought during the war and retain a comparable wartime mindset. He also points to the problematic nature of peace agreements that simultaneously function as a country's constitution. When constitutional provisions are embedded in externally negotiated settlements, citizens are effectively deprived of the opportunity to debate their content or to participate in shaping the foundational legal framework of their own state. Furthermore, Merdzanovic stresses that the first post-conflict elections must not be rushed as, if they are organised too quickly, they risk reinforcing and deepening the very cleavages that the peace process is meant to moderate. Another crucial priority, in his view, is the fight against corruption, as the latter represents one of the most significant obstacles to the consolidation of a stable democratic order. Establishing credible mechanisms of justice and accountability should therefore precede any substantial transfer of authority to local political actors. Finally, he maintains that a consociational system should evolve along liberal lines. Rather than imposing rigid structures, external actors ought to encourage domestic groups to create and accept informal political practices and cooperative habits, enabling the population to gradually overcome the mistrust that continues to shape relations with the perceived 'other' (Steiner 2016:318).

The power-sharing model implemented in Bosnia would have been much more functional had it been combined with other conflict resolution methods in its conception, such as those in the realm of transitional justice and peace reconciliation. There is a strong connection between democratic consolidation and peacebuilding and, although there have been several social and judicial initiatives to ensure the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton framework represents an obstacle for the country's political and institutional evolution. The depth of the conflict and the way it forged the country's post-socialist and pluralist transition required a more incisive intervention in this regard.

Is it possible to reach consensus when community building and pacification have been relegated to the sidelines? The consociational model introduced by the Dayton Peace Accords has ossified into a structure that hinders democratic consolidation whilst also encouraging political clientelism and stalling any necessary institutional evolution. It is as though Bosnia were a testing ground for the international community to see whether it is possible to impose a certain democratic model on a country in similar difficult circumstances. Bosnia's ability to transcend the Dayton logic without rekindling the very conflicts which necessitated its implementation is ultimately what will determine the country's future as a democratic state. This requires that both local and international actors focus on rethinking citizenship, political representation and the role of foreign actors in addition to constitutional reform. Bosnia and Herzegovina's story is a reminder of how democratic transition is not merely a matter of institutional design, as it requires political will, cultural reconciliation and, most importantly, faith in a common future. It is of the utmost importance that the West develops sustainable connections with the Mediterranean and the Adriatic, considering the countries within

these areas as their equals in order to avoid reinforcing subaltern relationships. As Laris Gaiser stated in his article titled 'Entropie Balcaniche', «The Balkans are stable bearers of instability, but because no one seems seriously inclined to understand them, Italy first and foremost» (Gaiser 2025:313).

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