



Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

RETHINKING POWER-SHARING: THE LIMITS OF CONSOCIATIONALISM IN THE FACE OF SECESSIONIST ELITES

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Abstract

Power-sharing has emerged as a prevalent approach in post-conflict state-building efforts in divided societies. Arend Lijphart, who introduced the concept of consociational democracy as a form of power-sharing, argues that it offers the most viable path to achieving peace and stable democracy in deeply divided societies. He suggests that consociational democracy ensures representation for all groups, provides elite cooperation, and provides mechanisms like proportional representation and veto power to maintain stability and peace. However, this study critically examines the assumptions of the power-sharing model regarding elite cooperation. The power-sharing model assumes elites will be content with the gains from sharing power and act cooperatively, but it doesn't account for how secessionist leaders might exploit these arrangements to advance their agendas. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the post-war political settlement is predicated on power-sharing arrangements. However, the gains of the Dayton system proved ineffective in mitigating the secessionist tendencies of the Bosnian Serb elites. Despite the power-sharing arrangements, the Republika Srpska administration led by Milorad Dodik continues to push for independence. Findings from an in-depth analysis of Bosnia show that the power-sharing approach needs to be refined in line with empirical evidence on the attitudes and policies of secessionist elites.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Power-sharing, Political elites; Republika Srpska, Secessionism

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GÜÇ PAYLAŞIMINI YENİDEN DÜŞÜNMEK: AYRILIKÇI ELİTLER KARŞISINDA OYDAŞMACILIĞIN SINIRLARI

Öz

Güç paylaşımı, bölünmüş toplumlarda çatışma sonrası devlet inşası süreçlerinde etkili bulunan bir yaklaşım olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Arend Lijphart, güç paylaşımının bir türü olarak geliştirdiği oydaşmacı demokrasi modelinin derin bölünmelere sahip toplumlarda barış ve istikrarlı demokrasi tesisi için en uygun seçenek olduğunu savunmaktadır. Lijphart, oydaşmacı demokrasinin tüm grupların temsiline olanak tanıdığını, siyasi elitler arasında işbirliği zemini oluşturduğunu ve orantılı temsil, veto hakkı gibi mekanizmalarla istikrar ve barışı sağlayabildiğini öne sürmüştür. Bu çalışmada, güç paylaşımı modelinin siyasi elitler arasında iş birliğini öngören varsayımları eleştirel biçimde ele alınmıştır. Güç paylaşımı yaklaşımı, siyasi, askeri ve ekonomik kazançlar elde eden siyasi elitlerin iş birliğine yöneleceğini öngörse de güç paylaşımının sunduğu kazanımların ayrılıkçı elitler tarafından kötüye kullanılabileceği ihtimali yeterince hesaba katılmamıştır. Savaş sonrasında güç paylaşımına dayalı bir siyasi yapının oluşturulduğu Bosna Hersek örneği incelendiğinde, Dayton sistemi ile elde edilen kazanımların Bosnalı Sırp elitleri ayrılıkçı eğilimlerden vazgeçirmekte etkili olmadığı görülmektedir. Güç paylaşımı düzenlemelerine rağmen, Milorad Dodik liderliğindeki Sırp Cumhuriyeti yönetimi tarafından bağımsızlık yönünde bir söylem ve politika takip edilmeye devam etmektedir. Bosna örneğinin derinlemesine incelenmesiyle elde edilen bulgular, güç paylaşımı yaklaşımının ayrılıkçı elitlerin tutum ve politikalarına dair ampirik veriler ışığında yeniden gözden geçirilmesi gerektiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bosna-Hersek, Güç Paylaşımı, Siyasi elitler, Sırp Cumhuriyeti, Ayrılıkçılık

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Introduction

Reconstructing political order in the aftermath of violent conflict is one of the most challenging tasks in post-conflict settings, particularly in societies fractured by deep identity-based divisions. Such divisions—rooted in ethnic, religious, national, or racial identities—are often seen as significant drivers of internal armed conflict, making deeply divided societies especially vulnerable to violence. They face considerable difficulties in holding democratic elections, maintaining political stability, and reconciling rival communities. In these contexts, the international community frequently turns to power-sharing arrangements as a strategy to prevent renewed violence, end hostilities, and initiate peacebuilding and state-building efforts. These arrangements aim to create a political framework where previously opposing groups can coexist within a shared state structure. Yet, despite their promise, power-sharing initiatives often struggle to deliver the desired outcomes of lasting peace and stability, raising questions about their effectiveness in addressing the complexities of divided societies.

The power-sharing approach is based on the idea that in divided societies along linguistic, religious, or national lines, political stability can be achieved by ensuring that the political representatives of different groups have a guaranteed role in the democratic process. This inclusion is expected to promote a stable political environment. It can be said that this approach is founded on two key principles. First, it assumes that identity differences are central to both the conflict and its resolution, and without acknowledging and addressing these differences, achieving a solution is highly challenging. Second, it is based on the premise that sharing power and fostering collaboration among the political elites representing these identity groups can lead to a stable political system and effective peacebuilding. Thus, the model argues that the most realistic and effective way to manage the problems posed by identity divisions is not to attempt to eliminate these differences but to establish elite-level cooperation to accommodate them (Cohen, 1997, p. 612; Sisk, 2022, p. 410).

The power-sharing model, initially developed by Arend Lijphart as a means to establish stable democracies in countries with diverse identity groups, has gained prominence in the post-Cold War era as a framework for conflict resolution and the establishment of a post-conflict political order (Sisk, 1996). In this vein, power-sharing arrangements have been implemented in the aftermath of numerous conflicts where ethnic or other divisions have been politicized. The integration of all major warring parties into the political system is considered crucial for achieving a successful transition from war to peace and stability (Cammett & Malesky, 2012, p. 983; Sisk, 2022, p. 408). However, the question of whether power-sharing arrangements are effective in achieving sustainable peace and stable democracy in divided societies remains contested among scholars. Many contend that power-sharing mechanisms, which facilitate political representation, basic group-based democratic rights, and engagement of conflicting groups in policy-making, effectively mitigate the likelihood of both outbreaks and recurrences of conflict in divided societies (Cheeseman & Tendi, 2010, p. 204; C. A. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2007; C. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; P. Roeder & Rothchild, 2005b). Nevertheless, critics have posited that power-sharing can lead to a heightened radicalization of politics, intensified polarization, institutionalization of ethnic differences (Bieber, 2001; Simonsen, 2005), and a form of ethnic outbidding (Mitchell et al., 2009; Sisk, 2022, p. 411). Moreover, such a system may inadvertently reward conflict and violence by ensuring a guaranteed share of power for warring political elites (Jarstad, 2008). Consequently, power-sharing appears to fall short of achieving effective and enduring peace (Brancati, 2006).

While the power-sharing approach has been discussed in the literature with various aspects, the role of the attitudes of political elites of the conflicting parties regarding the achievement or failure of sustainable power-sharing in post-conflict countries has not been sufficiently addressed. Indeed, the cooperation of political elites constitutes a central part of the power-sharing approach.

However, further empirical investigation is necessary to ascertain whether, in post-conflict scenarios, political elites are likely to engage in the cooperation anticipated by the theoretical framework of power-sharing. Although the framework assumes that political elites will cooperate under power-sharing arrangements and accept compromises due to the benefits gained, it does not sufficiently explore how political elites with secessionist tendencies might behave under such arrangements.

This study critically examines the power-sharing approach through one of its most controversial theoretical dimensions: the role it assigns to political elites. The central research question focuses on understanding how political elites with secessionist agendas shape their attitudes and policies within the framework of power-sharing arrangements. To address this, the study employs qualitative research methods, utilizing a case study design. Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia), recognized as a critical case for examining power-sharing in post-conflict peacebuilding and state-building, is the focus of this analysis. Within this context, the study examines how political leadership in Republika Srpska (RS) has systematically pursued secessionist policies, jeopardizing the post-conflict state-building framework established by the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). The aim is to critically evaluate the assumptions underlying the power-sharing approach regarding the constructive role of political elites. By exploring the discrepancies between these theoretical assumptions and the actual attitudes and policies of political elites in the context of RS, the study seeks to uncover the flaws and limitations in the theoretical foundation of power-sharing. Furthermore, it intends to contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges posed by secessionist elites, who might exploit power-sharing mechanisms to further their divisive agendas rather than foster cooperation and reconciliation.

1. Approaches to Post-Conflict State-building in Divided Societies

Several approaches have proposed different solutions and analyses for achieving peace and stability in post-conflict societies divided along identity lines. Among these, some analyses, such as Toft's (2010), rely on observation of empirical data rather than policy recommendations, arguing that stable peace can only emerge when one side achieves absolute victory in a conflict. Meanwhile, political settlements aimed at promoting peace in countries that have experienced civil wars between ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups are often categorized into integrative and disintegrative solutions. Integrative solutions are based on the premise that ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other identity-based divisions are not the root causes of conflict, and that identity differences do not inherently create insurmountable problems. Unlike the disintegrative approach, which views identity-based divisions as fixed and unchangeable barriers, the integrative approach adopts a social constructivist perspective, suggesting that identities are not static or predetermined, but can evolve over time under certain conditions. From this perspective, it is possible to transform societal divisions toward peace and integration by constructing overarching, shared identities that unite divided groups. Even when identity differences persist, democratic institutions and political participation can channel these differences into platforms for political competition rather than sources of conflict (Byman, 2002; Sisk, 1996). In this vein, majoritarian liberal democracy, which unites diverse identity groups under democratic values and citizenship-based civic allegiances, is presented as an integrative political arrangement capable of bringing peace to post-conflict societies. Reflecting the notion of *identity reconstruction*, the integrative approach argues that societal divisions, often blamed for causing conflict, can be depoliticized within the framework of liberal democratic values. It asserts that it is possible for conflicting groups to come together under inclusive identities that transcend divisions, so that identity-based divisions are no longer an obstacle to peace (Byman, 2002).

Disintegrative solutions, such as dividing conflicting parties into separate independent states or granting autonomy to certain groups, are grounded in the belief that identity divisions are a major cause of conflict. Moreover, even if identity differences were not the initial issue, prolonged violence can deepen these divisions, making coexistence under a single state increasingly difficult (Kaufmann, 1996b, 1996a, 1998; Mearsheimer & Pape, 1993; Mearsheimer & Van Evera, 1995; Tullberg & Tullberg, 1997). Thus, the only or most effective way for conflicting groups to feel secure and safeguard their interests is to divide warring parties into their own homogeneous political entities. Forcing hostile groups that are unwilling to coexist peacefully to remain under the same state framework is unlikely to bring peace and stability. Instead, such enforced unity would create a political environment filled with mutual tension and distrust, where the group that controls central government will likely use its power against the other (Byman, 2002; Kaufmann, 2003; Stroschein, 2005). Thus, dividing warring parties into their own homogeneous political entities is often seen as the most effective way for conflicting groups to feel secure and protect their interests. However, it should be noted that this approach has faced moral criticism and is no longer widely regarded as a valid or effective solution for resolving conflicts and achieving lasting peace (Jenne, 2009, 2012; Sisk, 2022, p. 408).

While disintegrative approaches have faced considerable criticism, and integrative solutions, such as the liberal-majoritarian model, have been argued to risk excluding minority groups from governance - potentially leading to renewed political crises or even conflict - the power-sharing model emerges as an appropriate approach to conflict resolution and state-building in divided societies. Although some studies (e.g. Kaufmann, 2003) classify power-sharing as an integrative solution, it is better understood as a middle ground between integrative and disintegrative approaches (Sisk, 1996). It is closer to integrative solutions in that it rejects the idea of resolving conflict by creating separate state entities. However, it also shares similarities with disintegrative approaches in its skepticism about the feasibility of uniting conflicting groups under a common identity, downplaying identity differences, or resolving identity issues through majoritarian democracy.

2. Arend Lijphart's Consociationalism: A Framework for Power-Sharing in Divided Societies

The power-sharing model's roots lie in political scientist Arend Lijphart's concept of consociational democracy. Lijphart first introduced this concept to examine how to achieve political stability in countries characterized as divided societies, where different religious, ethnic, political, and other identity groups coexist. In his influential work *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977), Lijphart argues that the traditional majoritarian model of democracy is insufficient for maintaining peace and stability in multi-ethnic societies, as it fails to address the complexities of divided societies. To overcome these challenges, Lijphart proposes a consociational democracy framework designed to ensure stable democracy through several key principles. These include cooperation among political elites to form coalition governments and share executive power, along with mechanisms for separating powers and checks and balances across branches and levels of government. A balanced bicameral system, with special minority representation in the upper house of parliament, is essential, as is a multiparty system that represents diverse ethnic groups and ensures fairness through proportional representation. The framework also prioritizes federalism and decentralization—both territorial and non-territorial—to distribute power effectively and grants ethnic groups veto rights to protect their vital interests. Additionally, it allows minority groups significant autonomy to manage their own affairs. A central element of the model is a written constitution that safeguards fundamental rights, includes complex amendment procedures, and prevents government overreach. Lijphart's consociational model aims to foster inclusion, balance, and cooperation, addressing the unique challenges of divided societies (Taras & Ganguly, 2016, p. 10–11).

According to Lijphart, there are three main approaches to addressing political challenges in divided societies: liberal/majoritarian democracy, which seeks to eliminate divisions through integration; consociational or power-sharing arrangements, which aim to foster cooperation among elites rather than removing divisions; and partition, which advocates for creating new homogeneous states based on existing divisions. In his analysis of the Northern Ireland conflict (1975), he described attempts to eliminate deep societal divisions through integration as *wishful thinking*. However, he also rejected the notion that stable democracy is impossible in divided societies or that partition is the only viable solution. To support his argument, he cited examples such as Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Lebanon, demonstrating that divided societies can achieve stability through power-sharing mechanisms and elite cooperation without resorting to partition. Thus, among these approaches, he concluded that consociational democracy is the most realistic and effective option (Lijphart, 1968, 1969, 1975, 1977).

While he acknowledged that integration is not impossible in divided societies, he suggested that it could only be achieved over the long term (Lijphart, 1975, p. 104–105). One of the main problems with majoritarian democracies, he argued (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25–28; 114–118), is the risk of turning into a *tyranny of the majority* by excluding minority groups. This exclusion can lead to the radicalization of minority groups and increase the risk of identity-based tensions or even conflict (Cohen, 1997). Lijphart suggested that the way to avoid such dangers is through arrangements that give minority groups a share of political power. He, therefore, argued that consociational democracy is a more appropriate alternative for divided societies than majoritarian democracy. The main attributes of consensual democracy comprise a grand coalition of political elites representing various identity groups, proportionality in the electoral system and administrative posts, mutual veto or minority veto over crucial government decisions, and group autonomy with respect to certain areas of social and cultural matters (Lijphart, 1969, 1977, 1992, p. 494–495).

2.1. The Role of Political Elites in the Power-Sharing Framework

The power-sharing approach places political elites at the center of efforts to achieve stability and cooperation within divided societies. The core idea is to create an inclusive political system that brings the main conflicting groups into the political process and encourages collaboration among their political elites (Lijphart, 1975, 1977; Lustick, 1979; Norris, 2008, p. 23). When elites representing different groups set aside zero-sum competition and tensions and instead move toward cooperation, it becomes possible to achieve a stable democracy despite societal divisions (Lijphart, 1968, 1969, 1975, 2004). By learning from the painful consequences of a lack of mutual tolerance among identity groups—such as civil wars—political elites who commit to consensus-building can significantly mitigate the negative impact of societal divisions on political stability (Lijphart, 1968, 1969, 1975).

Power-sharing among political elites is expected to provide a sense of security for the interests of the conflicting groups and encourage a cooperative environment where laws and regulations addressing mutual interests can be developed. In this context, according to Lijphart, the collective effort and collaboration of elites to stabilize the political system and establish a consociational democracy are more critical than any specific institutional arrangement. Indeed, Lijphart highlights the importance of preserving elite cooperation by referencing examples such as Colombia and the Netherlands, where fundamental democratic mechanisms like elections were temporarily suspended or adjusted to maintain elite consensus (1969, p. 213–214).

In light of the significance attributed to the role of political elites in power-sharing theory, it becomes evident that the willingness of leaders to avert the escalation or intensification of conflicts is critical for the successful implementation of such a system. However, finding such motivation among political leaders is often challenging. The expectation that leaders in post-conflict societies

would become more moderate or willing to share power with former adversaries—or that more moderate leaders would emerge—remains, much like Lijphart's critique of majority-rule democracies, mere *wishful thinking* without empirical support (Sisk, 1996).

Lijphart's perspective on the role of elites in power-sharing dynamics is marked by a strong emphasis on the indispensability of cooperation among elites. However, a substantial body of research on the subject of political elites' involvement in internal conflicts presents a contrasting viewpoint. Instead of fostering cooperation, elites are often found to exploit and manipulate societal and identity divisions for their own interests (see Brass, 1991; Gagnon, 2004).

There have been many critics of the central role assigned to political elites in the power-sharing approach. Cammett and Malesky (2012, p. 986), for instance, question the expectation of elite cooperation in post-conflict societies, arguing that this reliance on elite collaboration often ignores the realities of post-conflict politics, where competition over scarce state resources is intensely politicized along ethnic lines. While the distribution of political authority among elites representing different groups is intended to promote elite consensus and, by extension, guarantee peace and stability, in practice, it can lead to legal deadlocks and deep disagreements over the division of national resources. These dynamics often push elites toward rigidity rather than compromise, resulting in a situation where even the least controversial decisions are vulnerable to vetoes, undermining the very goals of cooperation and stability (Bahtić-Kunrath, 2011; Cammett & Malesky, 2012, p. 986; McCulloch, 2018; P. Roeder & Rothchild, 2005a). Cheeseman and Tendi (2010, p. 207) further emphasize this point, suggesting that while designed to build cooperation for lasting peace, power-sharing arrangements can be manipulated by political elites to protect their political interests and expand their political dominance. Consequently, efforts to promote sustainable peace and establish stable democracy may be undermined by the very elites empowered to advance these objectives.

2.2. How do secessionist political elites pursue politics under power-sharing arrangements?

Secession is defined as the move to independence from a sovereign state, either through the use or threat of force or through a gradual political process that leads to separation and independence without a formal declaration (Crawford, 2006, p. 375; Taras & Ganguly, 2016, p. 34). Secession is not a spontaneous phenomenon; rather, it is a deliberate and strategic endeavor that relies on the mobilization of elites to channel prevailing discontent and resentment into a compelling national narrative. This narrative serves as the discursive framework that fosters the nation's awakening, mobilizes its populace, and propels the claim-making process (Muro, 2023, p. 140). While the power-sharing approach rests on the necessity and viability of collaboration among political elites in divided societies to achieve peace and stability, it fails to adequately account for the potential actions and responses of political elites, particularly those with secessionist agendas, in post-conflict power-sharing structures.

Lijphart believes that sharing power between conflicting groups will stop the fighting and encourage all parties to coexist peacefully under the same state. It is assumed that although one of the parties to the conflict—typically minority groups—may have acted with secessionist intentions during the conflict, they will abandon such ambitions because the political, military, economic, and social rights achieved through power-sharing will address concerns about political representation, identity, and security (Lijphart, 1977, 1985; Lustick et al., 2004, p. 209–210; Sambanis, 2000). This view aligns with the idea that secessionist movements emerge when material or non-material resources are unfairly distributed, when minority groups' rights are taken away, and when there is discrimination, oppression, or violence (see Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Gurr, 1993).

Indeed, when the primary causes of conflict are identified as the injustices inherent in the distribution of power among groups or its utilization as a means of oppression against minority

groups, the proposal of power sharing as a post-conflict settlement seems to be a reasonable option. Nevertheless, the missing point herein is that secessionism is not always motivated by reactions to inequality or oppression; in some cases, the primary motivation of secessionist factions is to have their own states or political units, irrespective of any injustices or oppressions that have occurred (Collier, 2000; Heraclides, 1991, p. 8). Secessionist elites seeking to break away from the host state are unlikely to be interested in political accommodation or institutional reforms of the existing polity, including power-sharing agreements (Muro, 2023, p. 140). Many ethnic conflicts and secessionist movements that have emerged in the post-Cold War era have not been manifestations of a revolt against an oppressive regime and injustices in the distribution of power and resources. Rather, these movements have arisen as opportunities for secessionist groups to capitalize on periods of relative détente, liberalization, and moderation of the central authority, or power vacuums resulting from the collapse of such central authorities (Laitin, 2001, p. 842; Toft, 2006).

Given that political elites of minority groups in divided societies do not launch secessionist movements merely in response to oppression and injustice but may sometimes seek to pursue secession as a political maneuver when opportunities arise, it can be posited that secessionism may not disappear even if power-sharing arrangements result in a more equitable distribution between conflicting groups (Hechter & Okamoto, 2001). Thus, it can be surmised that secessionist leaders may retain their wartime secessionist motivations even if they gain various rights through power-sharing arrangements, as the leadership of the RS in Bosnia has demonstrated. Many studies suggest that secessionist groups, especially if they have a homogeneous population concentrated in a certain part of the country, may view the political autonomy and power gained through arrangements such as power-sharing, federalism, autonomy, and self-government as opportunities to further their secessionist agendas (Cornell, 2002; Hale, 2000; P. G. Roeder, 1991). Other studies have identified various external dynamics, rather than domestic factors like the uneven distribution of power, that contribute to the likelihood of secessionism. These include political or military support for secessionist groups from neighboring countries, kin states, or major powers, as well as regional and global circumstances that engender opportunities for secession (Horowitz, 1981, p. 167–169; van Houten, 1998).

3. Divided Power, Divided State: Bosnia's Power-Sharing System and Secessionist Challenges

Serbia's centuries-long pursuit of reviving *Greater Serbia* was one of the main causes of the wars of the 1990s, when Yugoslavia broke apart in bloodshed (Cigar, 1995, p. 4–6; Hoare, 2019; Weidmann, 2011, p. 1179–1180). For Slobodan Milošević's Serbia, pursuing a *Greater Serbia* entailed territorial expansion to the northwest, encompassing about one-third of the territory of Croatia and two-thirds of BiH (Biserko, 2012, p. 284). The manifestation of this ideal in BiH was the secessionist policies and acts of ethnic cleansing carried out for unification with Serbia (Björkdahl, 2018; Stjepanović, 2015; Woodward, 1995). Since the redrawing of borders and creating ethnically pure Serb territories in BiH could not be achieved through voluntary resettlement, violent means, including intimidation, expulsion, and mass killings of non-Serbs, were used to 'liberate' imaginary Serb ethnic territories (Hoare, 2019, p. 117–122; Mulaj, 2006, p. 35). The Bosnian Serb Army and other Serb paramilitary units, which were both irregular forces on the territory of BiH, have carried out the violent persecution of Bosniak and Croat civilians from their homes, where they lived until the beginning of the war in 1992. The violent ethnic homogenization and ethnic territorialization (against the non-Serb population) during the war brought about significant changes in the ethnic composition throughout the country (Preljević & Güven, 2024).

Although three decades have passed since the war in BiH ended, the country has yet to achieve a stable political atmosphere, nor has it achieved reconciliation among its constituent nations. One of the most significant post-war political challenges is the secessionist tendencies of the political elites in RS (Fella, 2024). There is concern that Bosnian Serbs are systematically attempting to complete the unfinished ethnic homogenization and ethnic territorialization that was attempted to be established through violence on the territory of the current RS, which is the result of violence committed during the 1992–1995 war. In recent years, the resurgence of secessionist rhetoric by RS political elites, along with attempts to block the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) and the functioning of BiH state institutions, has led the country to experience one of the most significant political crises since the war's end (Brezar, 2021). This ongoing political crisis poses a significant challenge to the country's progress toward European Union membership, as it threatens to paralyze state institutions and undo the achievements of the peace agreement (Keil, 2022).

The war in Bosnia ended with the DPA in 1995. Under the terms of the peace agreement, Bosnia retained its unified statehood, albeit with a markedly decentralized political structure. This system encompassed both ethnically homogeneous regions and those exhibiting a notable degree of autonomous decision-making while concurrently imposing strict power-sharing mechanisms over all institutions of the central state of Bosnia (Keil, 2013). The post-conflict state-building structure, initiated by the DPA, established a complex power-sharing framework that created two entities within the country: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS). Each entity was granted substantial autonomy and equipped with its own president, government, parliament, police, and other similar institutions. In the Federation of BiH, Bosniaks and Croats form the majority of the population and dominate the entity's government, while in the RS, where Serbs constitute the majority, political and administrative power is predominantly held by Serbs. This concept of a loose federation was intended to serve as a unifying political body, thereby fostering cooperation among the country's political elites (Keil, 2022, p. 222). However, this objective has not thus far been achieved. Instead, these structural complexities have resulted in several negative outcomes. First, the decision-making process in the country is slow, ineffective, and often rife with challenges. Second, political party leaders, rather than democratically elected officials, play a central role in political negotiations, with agreements often requiring external pressure and intervention by the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Third, ethnically homogenous territories, most notably RS, enable political parties to hold sway over economic, social, and political institutions in areas where their ethnic group constitutes a majority. This form of state capture discourages political elites from compromising or improving the system, as it would result in the loss of their power, influence, economic benefits, and control over their regions (Kapidžić, 2020).

Despite the significant autonomy afforded by the power-sharing arrangements, which effectively allowed the RS to operate as a quasi-sovereign entity, the Bosnian Serb political elites have not abandoned their secessionist stance. This dynamic has become increasingly evident in recent years, as the RS leadership under Milorad Dodik has adopted a more assertive secessionist stand (Toal, 2013). Dodik, who has been a prominent figure in RS politics for many years, served as president of the RS from 2010 to 2018 and was reelected to the same position in 2022. In between those terms, from 2018 to 2022, he served as the Serb member of BiH's tripartite state presidency. Showing little hesitation in expressing his lack of loyalty to the state of BiH, he has repeatedly expressed his desire to hold a referendum on the independence of the RS. Taking advantage of the significant political power granted to him by the power-sharing arrangements, Dodik has leveraged his position to obstruct the functioning of BiH state institutions, paralyze the political system, block the effective implementation of state-level decisions or the Office of the High Representative, and further push the RS towards becoming an increasingly pro-independence

entity. Dodik's actions illustrate how political leaders with secessionist agendas can abuse power-sharing arrangements to advance their objectives (Gueudet, 2024).

BiH's RS entity, whose territorial space was claimed through large-scale ethnic cleansing and approved by the International Community with the DPA, currently exists in a state of ambiguity, operating simultaneously in opposition to and as an integral part of the state of BiH (Belloni, 2007; Fawn & Richmond, 2009, p. 215). Despite its lack of full sovereign status, it has effectively operated with considerable autonomy by invoking *ethnic sovereignty* (Fawn & Richmond, 2009). It shows not the slightest loyalty to the multi-ethnic state of BiH, uses all mechanisms to block it, and attempts to operate as if it possessed sovereignty at the military, political, social, and institutional levels. The conception of the RS territory as an exclusively Serb homeland (Stjepanović, 2015), which was multi-ethnic before the conflict of the 1990s, and emphasizing symbols of statehood (Björkdahl, 2018) have played a role in fostering ethnic nationalism, empowering groups unwilling to cooperate with the peace settlement, hindering peacebuilding efforts, post-war reconciliation and coexistence.

Nationalist aspirations for full independence and secession have remained a recurring agenda among RS political elites, reflecting their continued dissatisfaction with the post-conflict settlement, even all the guarantees and political gains provided by power-sharing arrangements. RS has been waging an increasingly inflammatory secessionist campaign at the risk of unraveling the DPA. Insisting on celebrating January 9 as a national holiday, '*Republika Srpska Day*' (Björkdahl, 2018, p. 40; Euronews, 2023), glorifying convicted war criminals (Džidić & Dzidic, 2013), threatening to form parallel institutions in the areas of justice, defense, security, and taxation (Muslimovic, 2021), blocking state-level legislative and executive institutions (Kovacevic, 2020), adopting laws rendering state-level Constitutional Court decisions invalid in the RS and openly disregarding the decisions of the High Representative is among the several most prominent recent examples of RS secessionist tendencies.

In July 2021, High Representative Valentin Inzko imposed a law banning the denial of genocide in Bosnia (Office of the High Representative, 2021). This move was met with fierce opposition from Milorad Dodik (Al Jazeera, 2021). In response to this decision, Dodik announced a boycott of several key state institutions in BiH. By October, the RS leadership declared their intention to withdraw from BiH's armed forces, judicial bodies, and tax-related institutional mechanisms, announcing plans to establish parallel institutions within RS (Keil, 2022, p. 223–224). However, the Bosnian Serb leader later stated that the decision to withdraw from state institutions had been postponed, citing the war in Ukraine and its potential ripple effects as the primary reasons for the delay (Reuters, 2022).

Dodik's separatist rhetoric, occasionally advocating for unification with Serbia, regained prominence following his re-election as President of RS in November 2022. In June 2023, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted legislation to cease publishing decisions by the High Representative in the entity's Official Gazette (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). Subsequently, the Office of the High Representative (OHR) annulled these laws, stating they violated the constitutional order of Bosnia and the DPA. In response, Dodik reiterated his non-recognition of High Representative Christian Schmidt and threatened secession if such actions against RS continued. In December 2023, Dodik suggested that RS might declare independence if Donald Trump were re-elected as U.S. President in 2024. Meanwhile, the trial against Dodik for defying OHR decisions commenced in February 2024. During this period, in May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution designating July 11 as the *The International Day of Reflection and Remembrance of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide*. Prior to the resolution's

adoption, Dodik warned that Bosnia might not “survive” such a decision (Cantone & Ivanović, 2024).

The secessionist tendencies of RS’s leadership are unlikely to disappear in the near future (see, for instance, The Geopost, 2025). In fact, any new favorable conditions created by changes within the country or the regional context could easily bring the issue of an independence referendum and secessionist actions back to the forefront. It is important to note that these secessionist tendencies are not limited to Milorad Dodik or a marginal political stance. For example, Željka Cvijanović, who served as the President of Republika Srpska from 2018 to 2022 and succeeded Dodik in 2022 as a member of Bosnia’s tripartite State Presidency, has also adopted a pro-secession position. Although Cvijanović is a member of Dodik’s Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), these separatist attitudes extend beyond this party. They have significant support within Republika Srpska’s political sphere and among the general public. Thus, even in a scenario where Dodik is no longer a political leader and his party loses influence, it is plausible that a new leadership would continue to pursue separatist policies. These tendencies are not merely tied to individual leaders but reflect a deeper, structural issue stemming from the power-sharing arrangements established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Under these arrangements, the extensive political powers granted to Republika Srpska provide a strong foundation for secessionist ambitions and make political authorities inclined to misuse them substantial opportunities to advance such agendas. This structural challenge underscores the persistent and systemic nature of separatism within RS, highlighting the enduring fragility of BiH’s post-conflict political framework.

The political strategies pursued by secessionist elites in RS under power-sharing arrangements provide insights that extend beyond the case of Bosnia and may hold relevance for other post-conflict countries. Notably, in contexts where a separatist political movement is a party to the conflict, the likelihood that power-sharing arrangements will deliver the anticipated peaceful solutions is significantly reduced. The persistent lack of sustainable peace, security, and stability in other cases where power-sharing has been implemented—such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan—further underscores this challenge (Dodge, 2021b, 2021a; Mac Ginty, 2007; Vaughan, 2018).

It is apparent that the absence of stability in said cases cannot be exclusively ascribed to power-sharing arrangements. Many political, regional, and global factors have contributed to the failure to establish effective peace and reconciliation in these countries. Among examples of power-sharing arrangements, Northern Ireland stands out as a relatively successful case regarding peace and stability. But, even there, the nationalist aspirations of Irish republicans to leave the United Kingdom and unify with the Republic of Ireland remain significantly intact (Browne, 2019). In Northern Ireland, the emergence of a “Northern Irish” identity, which transcends and incorporates both Irish and British identities, offers a glimpse of how power-sharing arrangements might, over time, result in the formation of a shared identity, contributing to successful peace and reconciliation (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014; Tonge & Gomez, 2015). This could serve as a model for other power-sharing countries, including Bosnia, where the most reasonable outcome might involve the emergence of an overarching identity that encompasses the competing group identities and relegates them to the level of sub-identities, all while preserving territorial integrity. However, history has repeatedly shown that such profound transformations in identity cannot be achieved through top-down policies, nor can they occur rapidly. The natural evolution of collective identities takes time, and whether the identity shift seen in Northern Ireland will eventually lead to meaningful political outcomes remains an open question.

In Bosnia, as well as other cases, the presence of political leaders genuinely committed to peace and reconciliation could enhance the likelihood of power-sharing yielding positive results. Yet, even in such instances, it remains debatable how much of the success should be attributed to the

power-sharing model itself and how much to the leaders' willingness to cooperate. As seen in South Africa, when political leaders like Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk demonstrated a strong commitment to peace and reconciliation, they were able to navigate the transition from apartheid to democracy through dialogue and compromise, without relying on power-sharing arrangements (Glad & Blanton, 1997). Mandela's focus on national unity and forgiveness, combined with de Klerk's willingness to dismantle apartheid and engage in negotiations, set the foundation for a peaceful transition and a new constitutional framework (Stengel, 2021). This collaboration highlights how the determination of leaders can achieve positive outcomes, even in the absence of formalized power-sharing systems. Conversely, in cases where political leaders are unwilling to pursue peace and reconciliation, expecting success from power-sharing—or any other political arrangement—becomes highly unrealistic.

Trumbore (2008) posits that the central issue is not the power-sharing mechanisms but rather the parties' commitment to lasting peace. When parties exhibit a genuine commitment to peace, this inclination naturally propels them to establish institutions and mechanisms designed for lasting peace. Thus, institutional arrangements like power-sharing are a product of peaceful commitments, not their cause. Trumbore challenges Hartzell and Hoddie's (2007) claim that power-sharing was the decisive factor in achieving peace in the Philippines and its failure in Angola. Instead, he argues that lasting peace in the Philippines resulted from the willingness of elites to commit to peace, while its absence in Angola led to continued instability.

4. Conclusion

Power-sharing arrangements in the context of divided societies have been devised to establish peace and stability by distributing power among the constituent groups and securing their political, military, and socio-economic rights. The underlying assumption is that granting minority or marginalized groups access to power and resources will address their grievances and reduce the likelihood of further conflict. Ensuring representation and protecting fundamental rights are central tenets of power-sharing, which aims to establish an inclusive political framework capable of accommodating diverse political interests within the boundaries of a single state. This approach often assumes that once groups achieve their desired rights and privileges, they will abandon more extreme demands, such as secession. However, empirical evidence suggests that power-sharing arrangements in post-conflict countries have yielded different outcomes than anticipated in theory, particularly in cases where one or more groups harbor long-term aspirations for secession. Rather than nurturing the process of reconciliation, the autonomy that is often granted through power-sharing arrangements has the potential to become a means of advancing those secessionist agendas. When political elites prioritize nationalist or secessionist agendas over collective state-building efforts, this unintended consequence is almost inevitable. Therefore, it can be stated that the political benefits offered by power-sharing arrangements seem to be insufficient to motivate political elites who have pursued secessionist politics to demonstrate allegiance to post-conflict state-building structures.

The case of Bosnia highlights the difficulties of power-sharing models when they grant substantial autonomy to secessionist groups. The advent of RS as a secessionist political entity under the leadership of Radovan Karadžić in the early 1990s and its continued pursuit of separation since then provides a compelling example of how power-sharing arrangements can inadvertently reinforce secessionist aspirations rather than mitigating them, thereby hindering the process of peace and reconciliation. Over the past decade, the RS has seen a rise in secessionist actions and rhetoric, particularly under the leadership of Milorad Dodik. Despite the considerable autonomy granted by the Dayton Peace Agreement's power-sharing framework, the RS authorities have shown little interest in abandoning their secessionist aspirations or cooperating with Bosnia's state

structures. Instead, they continue to seize every opportunity to advance their separatist agenda. These empirical observations appear to contradict Lijphart's assumptions regarding the behavior of elites in power-sharing arrangements, which rely on the premise that elites will act cooperatively when power-sharing mechanisms ensure political gains and protect group rights. This assumption seems overly optimistic, as evidenced by the persistent secessionist tendencies observed in RS.

Following Bosnia's declaration of independence through a referendum in 1992, the leadership of RS responded by waging war against the newly independent state. Throughout the conflict, the Bosnian Serb leadership sought to forcibly carve out a homogenized Republika Srpska through ethnic cleansing, including massacres, genocide, concentration camps, torture, and sexual violence, targeting Bosniaks and Croats. While the DPA ultimately denied the RS full independence, the power-sharing arrangements gave it substantial autonomy. This autonomy has allowed RS to function as a de facto independent state in many respects. However, rather than fostering peace and reconciliation, the gains offered by power-sharing have instead encouraged secessionist elites to continue pursuing their ultimate goal of independence. This has left Bosnia in a fragile and unstable post-war state, with political efforts of Bosnian Serb political elites driven by the hope that full independence can eventually be achieved. Therefore, the power-sharing model in Bosnia has fallen short of its intended purpose of ensuring lasting peace and stability.

In conclusion, the limitations of power-sharing arrangements in addressing secessionist tendencies, as evidenced by the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, underscore the need to critically evaluate alternative post-conflict state-building models. While majoritarian democracy offers an integrative approach by seeking to unite divided societies under shared civic identities, it risks marginalizing minority groups and exacerbating tensions in deeply divided societies. Conversely, partition, which advocates for the creation of separate homogeneous states, may provide immediate security for conflicting groups but often perpetuates ethnic divisions and undermines long-term reconciliation. Both approaches present significant challenges, particularly in contexts where identity-based divisions are deeply entrenched. Moving forward, policymakers should consider hybrid models that combine elements of power-sharing with stronger mechanisms for integration, such as fostering inclusive national narratives, promoting intergroup dialogue, and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Additionally, international actors must remain vigilant in supporting local institutions and elites committed to peace, while holding secessionist leaders accountable for actions that undermine state stability. Ultimately, sustainable peace in divided societies requires not only institutional innovation but also a genuine commitment from political elites to prioritize collective state-building over divisive agendas.

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