Consociationalism in Mid-Life Crisis? The Ageing of the Dayton and Good Friday Agreements

Petra Nesr

September 2025

I. Introduction

Peace is rarely born from consensus in deeply divided societies. More often, it is carved out of stalemate — a cold, uneasy arrangement between rival factions who agree to share power not out of trust, but because the alternative is worse. This is the logic behind consociationalism: a framework designed not to resolve divisions, but to manage them. The appeal of consociationalism lies in its promise of peace. Prevention of further bloodshed outranks demand for justice, reconciliation or transformation. Yet this very strength may also be its greatest limitation. Critics contend that by institutionalising identity-based politics, consociationalism risks cementing the very divisions it is meant to manage, and doing so in ways that artificially reify or even exaggerate communal boundaries. In this view, the structures of consociational governance do not simply reflect existing social cleavages — they help construct and rigidify them, turning fluid or overlapping identities into fixed constitutional categories. Arend Lijphart, the chief theorist of consociationalism, originally developed the model to explain the political stability of divided but peaceful European democracies (Lijphart, 1977). Over time, however, consociationalism evolved from a descriptive typology into a prescriptive framework for post-conflict state-building, most notably in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Ireland. In these contexts, it has been applied as a kind of political triage: a temporary yet necessary means of preventing renewed violence in deeply divided societies.

This paper explores the tension between the stabilising appeal of consociationalism and its potential to ossify conflict lines. It does so through a comparative analysis of two case studies: Bosnia, where an externally imposed and territorially partitioned form of power-sharing was implemented after the 1995 Dayton Accords; and Northern Ireland,

where the 1998 Good Friday Agreement institutionalised consociation in a more flexible — though still structurally rigid — format. While both cases have experienced extended periods of "peace", they have also struggled with institutional dysfunction, symbolic conflict, and persistent elite-driven division. The core argument advanced here is that consociationalism is often a necessary framework for ending violence and establishing order in deeply divided societies. However, unless it is designed with mechanisms for flexibility, civic integration, and long-term transformation, it risks becoming a self-perpetuating system — one that entrenches division and rewards elite entrenchment rather than fostering democratic renewal. The key distinction, as this paper will argue, lies not in whether consociationalism is used, but in whether it is treated as a permanent settlement or a temporary scaffold toward more inclusive politics.

II. Theoretical Framework: Origins, Models, and Critiques

Conventional democratic processes — grounded in majority rule and the assumption of a singular *demos* — often prove ill-suited to contexts where political cleavages map onto entrenched ethnic, religious, or linguistic identities. Rather than channelling competition into civic deliberation, elections may inflame group tensions, foster insecurity, and trigger zero-sum struggles over power. In response to these risks, consociationalism offers a logic of survival rather than transformation. It prioritises institutional stability over national cohesion, trading liberal democratic ideals for a more modest goal: halting violence through elite accommodation and carefully balanced group representation.

Arend Lijphart's theory of consociational democracy, developed in the late 20th century, formalised this approach. Drawing on the experience of relatively peaceful but divided European states such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, Lijphart identified four core institutional mechanisms for managing plural societies: grand coalition governments, mutual veto rights, proportional representation, and segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25). Crucially, Lijphart did not conceive consociational democracy as driven by mass participation or grassroots movements, but rather as a system of elite governance — what he himself termed "government by elite cartel" (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25). While this arrangement offered a pragmatic route to stability in plural societies, the democratic limitations of such elite-centric governance quickly became apparent as Lijphart's model evolved into a prescriptive framework for post-conflict reconstruction. Peace agreements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, and Lebanon all incorporated consociational features to varying degrees. Yet these contexts were far more volatile than the stable democracies Lijphart had studied. Here, the aim was not to manage long-standing pluralism, but to prevent state collapse in the aftermath of war.

This shift sharpened critical scrutiny of the model. Donald Horowitz has been among its most influential detractors, arguing that consociationalism entrenches the very divisions it seeks to manage. In his view, giving each community its own institutions and guaranteeing ethnic quotas encourages leaders to mobilise around exclusive identities, marginalise moderates, and obstruct cross-community cooperation (Horowitz, 1991, pp. 23–31). He explains that in ethnically divided systems, "political competition is often a competition among ethnic groups rather than among alternative policy proposals," with elections becoming "referenda on ethnic loyalties" rather than democratic deliberation

(Horowitz, 1985, pp. 291–293). Where Lijphart sees stability through accommodation, Horowitz sees institutionalised gridlock. As an alternative, he proposes a centripetal model: one that uses electoral rules, such as vote-pooling or preferential ballots, to incentivise politicians to seek support across group lines and reward moderation (Horowitz, 1991, pp. 35–50).

While Horowitz focuses on institutional incentives and electoral design, Rupert Taylor offers a more sociological critique of consociationalism. He argues that although consociational settlements may stabilise post-conflict societies, they often do so at the cost of democratic renewal. Through his concept of the "peace cartel," Taylor describes power-sharing as "an elite pact that has marginalised civic politics and institutionalised ethnonational divisions" (Taylor, 2006, p. 220). In this view, consociational arrangements empower wartime elites to divide state resources through patronage networks, entrenching their dominance and freezing political development. Far from encouraging inclusive governance, these systems risk excluding grassroots actors, silencing dissenting voices, and reducing politics to a negotiation among entrenched communal blocs. Over time, the institutional hardwiring of identity into governance may erode accountability, undermine issue-based contestation, and depoliticise citizenship itself (Taylor, 2006, pp. 217–226).

In response, some scholars have advanced more flexible models under the label of "liberal consociationalism." Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry (2004) — key architects of the Northern Ireland peace process — argue that the rigidity of early consociational designs can be softened through institutional innovation and procedural reform. Liberal consociationalism aspires to strike a delicate balance: to accommodate communal identities

while upholding individual rights, to stabilise deeply divided societies without sacrificing democratic responsiveness, and to build institutions that are both inclusive and adaptable. It promises a more dynamic framework — one that allows for pluralism within groups, legal protections for minorities, and the possibility of gradual transformation (McGarry & O'Leary, 2004, pp. 15–22). Yet these ambitions remain largely theoretical. In practice, liberal consociationalism still hinges on the willingness of political elites to cooperate, compromise, and engage in good faith. Where that will is absent, even the most flexible designs risk ossifying division and becoming permanent frameworks for managing dysfunction rather than pathways to political integration.

Ultimately, the debate is not between consociationalism and some idealised form of democracy, but between consociationalism and continued violence. As such, critics and defenders alike agree on one point: **context matters**. The effects of consociational design depend less on abstract institutional blueprints than on the histories, incentives, and political cultures in which they are embedded. Bosnia's 1995 Dayton Agreement offers a stark example — not just of consociationalism in action, but of its consequences when frozen into a constitutional structure with no end in sight.

III. The Dayton Agreement: A Recipe for Peace and Permanent Paralysis

The Dayton Agreement ended the Bosnian War, but by preserving many of the divisions that had fuelled it. Between 1992 and 1995, Bosnia endured the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Sparked by the disintegration of Yugoslavia and driven by competing nationalist projects, the war saw campaigns of ethnic cleansing, mass rape, and genocide — most infamously in Srebrenica, where over 8,000 Bosniak men and

boys were executed by Bosnian Serb forces (ICTY, 2001). Yet these atrocities were not an aberration from history but a violent intensification of long-standing tensions. The animosities that exploded in the 1990s had deep historical roots, shaped by the legacies of Ottoman, Habsburg, and Yugoslav rule, and perpetuated by competing national myths of betrayal, martyrdom, and historical entitlement (Malcolm, 1996). In the post-Tito vacuum, political elites in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo weaponised these narratives to deepen the fractures within an already fragile Yugoslav identity and mobilise support along ethnic lines. By the war's end, more than 100,000 people had been killed and over two million displaced (Burg and Shoup, 1999, pp.146-206).

Dayton achieved peace not by healing Bosnia's divided society, but by formalising its separation through rigid constitutional structures. Bosnia survived, but as a federation in name only: a state held together by mutual distrust and external mediation. Under Dayton's terms, the country was divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (predominantly Bosniak and Croat) and the Republika Srpska (predominantly Serb). Each entity was granted extensive autonomy over core state functions, including education, policing, and taxation (Bose, 2002, pp.55-72). Above them sat a weak central government with a tripartite presidency, rotating among the three constituent peoples, and a bicameral legislature elected through proportional representation. Given the scale of trauma and the depth of communal fear, a civic, integrationist settlement was widely seen as unworkable (Bose, 2002, pp. 4–8). Only by embedding ethnic vetoes and territorial autonomy could a ceasefire be made durable. In that narrow sense, consociationalism was not a political preference but a conflict management necessity.

Bosnia's post-war settlement illustrates the core trade-off at the heart of consociationalism: it can halt violence by institutionalising group autonomy, but often at the cost of long-term political functionality. What emerged at Dayton was not a roadmap to reintegration, but a system designed to freeze the conflict in place. With entrenched ethnic vetoes, weak central authority, and persistent external oversight, Bosnia's institutions were built to prevent renewed war, not to foster civic trust or democratic renewal. Yet Bosnia is not an outlier. In different forms and under different conditions, the same structural logic would shape power-sharing efforts elsewhere. Northern Ireland offers one such case: a more negotiated settlement, but one still defined by communal division, political fragility, and the limits of elite accommodation.

IV. The Good Friday Agreement: Northern Ireland's Fragile Peace

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) – also known as the Belfast Agreement – marked the end of Northern Ireland's thirty-year armed conflict, the Troubles — a period of protracted violence rooted in competing national allegiances and claims to sovereignty. Unionists, predominantly Protestant and broadly supportive of remaining within the United Kingdom, clashed politically and violently with Nationalists, primarily Catholic and favouring unification with the Republic of Ireland (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, pp. 2–5). The Northern Irish state was widely seen as biased toward the Unionist majority, with Nationalist communities experiencing systemic discrimination in housing, employment, and policing (Mulholland, 2002, pp. 50–60). What began as a civil rights campaign in the 1960s rapidly escalated into a low-intensity conflict involving paramilitary groups such as the IRA and UVF, the British Army, and local police forces. By the 1990s, over 3,500 people

had died, and thousands more had been injured or displaced (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 239).

Against this backdrop, the GFA sought to end violence by formalising communal divisions within Northern Ireland's political institutions. The collapse of the majoritarian Stormont regime (1921–1972) had already demonstrated that majority rule was unworkable in a society fractured along national lines (Mulholland, 2002, pp. 88–92). In that context, structural power-sharing — however imperfect — represented the least-worst option. Unionists and Nationalists each feared being permanently outvoted by the other. Without mutual vetoes, proportional representation, and a commitment to parity of esteem, sustained stability would likely have proved elusive. Consociationalism was not chosen because it was ideal, but because it was widely seen as the only model capable of embedding ceasefires and replacing paramilitary confrontation with political negotiation.

Nevertheless, the system's fragility has long been evident. Since the Good Friday Agreement, power-sharing has collapsed repeatedly: in 2002 amid allegations of an IRA spy ring; in 2017 following the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal and disputes over language and cultural rights (Torrance, 2024); and most recently in 2022 over unionist opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Introduced after Brexit to avoid a hard Irish border, the Protocol kept Northern Ireland aligned with EU trade rules—effectively placing a customs barrier in the Irish Sea and, for many unionists, symbolising a weakening of the Union (Rutter and Fright, 2024). In protest, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) withdrew from the Executive. Devolved government remained suspended for two years, only returning in early 2024 following a new agreement addressing unionist concerns over post-Brexit trade arrangements (Rutter and Fright, 2024). During this hiatus, public frustration deepened as

vital services, particularly in healthcare and education, continued to deteriorate (Torrance, 2024). Meanwhile, symbolic disputes over flags, parades, and language rights continued to inflame political tensions (Rutter and Fright, 2024). This recurring cycle reflects a deeper flaw in the system: the verystructures that made stability possible have also made meaningful political transformation profoundly difficult. While formal institutions remain central to Northern Ireland's stability, some scholars argue that the so-called "peace" has also depended on less visible dynamics, such as evolving identities, shifting demographics, and symbolic ambiguity. These dynamics, and the question of whether they can eventually transcend the system's binary logic, are explored in the next section.

V. Comparative Analysis and Critical Reflections

Although both Bosnia and Northern Ireland adopted consociational frameworks to end violence, their post-conflict trajectories have diverged in meaningful but complex ways. Bosnia remains trapped in a rigid architecture of division, while Northern Ireland, despite recurrent breakdowns, has demonstrated some capacity for symbolic and political adaptation. The contrast is not stark, but nuanced, shaped by differences in institutional design, political culture, and the incentives each system created for elites and citizens. Understanding these divergences reveals both the stabilising potential of consociationalism and its inherent risk of ossifying the fractures it aims to contain.

1. Stability Without Accountability? The Perils of External Tutelage

A central challenge in post-conflict consociationalism is how to balance international support with domestic political responsibility. While external involvement is often necessary to broker peace and enforce settlements, it can also undermine the very institutions it seeks to stabilise. This tension is particularly evident in the contrast between Bosnia and Northern Ireland. Both experienced deep communal divisions, both required externally backed consociational frameworks, and both saw periodic collapse of local institutions. **But the form of external oversight differed, and with it, the incentives it created for domestic actors.**

The Office of the High Representative (OHR) is not merely an advisory body, but a supranational authority built into Bosnia's legal and political framework. Appointed by international consensus and empowered by the 1997 Bonn Powers, the High Representative holds sweeping executive authority over domestic institutions, without being democratically accountable to them (Bose, 2002). In practice, the OHR acts as an internationalised layer of governance: it can impose laws, override elected officials, and unilaterally shape the post-war political order. Between 1997 and 2010, it issued over 900 binding decisions and dismissed more than 100 officials, including judges, mayors, and parliamentarians (Szewczyk, 2010, p. 7). While this was meant to safeguard peace and prevent nationalist backsliding, it has also had unintended effects. The arrangement has constrained Bosnian sovereignty and, crucially, allowed political elites to avoid the consequences of obstruction—making intransigence a viable and often low-cost strategy. As Bieber (2005, pp. 63–67) points out, the OHR's ongoing presence has fostered a culture of dependency, where local actors feel little pressure to compromise or reform, since the real responsibility for governance lies with international actors. This dynamic has blurred

the line between stabilisation and stagnation, as international oversight has at times substituted for, rather than supported, the development of accountable local governance.

As previously discussed, when the devolved Stormont Assembly collapses, governance reverts to Westminster through the mechanism of Direct Rule. Though deeply unpopular and widely resented—especially by Nationalists who saw it as a symbol of continued British dominance—Direct Rule still operated within a democratic and constitutional framework. Unlike Bosnia's OHR, it did not involve an unelected foreign envoy with sweeping decree powers. Instead, legislation was passed through the British Parliament, and ministers remained accountable to an elected UK government. This distinction, as Guelke (2013) notes, was crucial: while Direct Rule was imposed from above, it still drew its authority from democratic institutions, offering a degree of legitimacy that Bosnia's international oversight lacked. Direct Rule did not dismantle Northern Ireland's devolved structures, but simply paused them. The power-sharing framework remained in place, allowing space for local politics to resume (Wilford, 2018). In contrast to Bosnia, where international intervention often replaced domestic political responsibility, Northern Ireland's experience shows how external support can help stabilise consociationalism without completely overriding it.

Lebanon, though not a central case in this essay, offers a useful counterpoint. Unlike Bosnia or Northern Ireland, it has operated under a consociational framework without formal international oversight since the 1989 Taif Agreement. On paper, sovereignty was restored. But in practice, the absence of both strong institutions and external conditionality has left space for sectarian elites to seek accountability not through the state, but through foreign patrons. When groups feel structurally underrepresented or threatened, the

incentive is not to compromise within the system, but to bypass it entirely. Hezbollah, for instance, functions simultaneously as a political party, a militia, and a regional proxy, backed by Iran and often operating beyond the reach of the Lebanese state. As Salamey (2009) argues, Lebanon's political order has "converged domestic and regional geopolitical struggles," producing a system where governance is fragmented and responsibility diffuse. If Bosnia shows the risks of overbearing international tutelage, and Northern Ireland demonstrates the value of accountable fallback mechanisms, Lebanon reveals a third danger: when no external scaffolding exists and domestic legitimacy falters, informal and unaccountable forms of external influence can take hold.

These cases suggest that consociationalism does not *inevitably* entrench division, but it can do so when the surrounding political incentives reward obstruction or externalise responsibility. In Bosnia, rigid international tutelage has stabilised the peace but hollowed out domestic agency, allowing division to calcify. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, a more accountable form of external support—however imperfect—has preserved space for political re-engagement and compromise. Lebanon illustrates a different danger: where groups feel persistently marginalised and neither robust institutions nor structured oversight are present, they may turn to external patrons, deepening fragmentation through informal and unaccountable channels. What unites these cases is not the presence or absence of consociationalism itself, but how the institutional design interacts with the incentives faced by elites. Consociationalism is most vulnerable not because it is inherently divisive, but because, when unaccompanied by mechanisms that tie power to responsibility, it allows division to become politically useful. Whether it merely preserves

division or creates a scaffold to move beyond it depends on how it is structured, supported, and ultimately, exited.

2. Partitioned Space, Partitioned Minds

Bosnia's post-war political design locked in territorial separation in ways that profoundly shaped political behaviour. The creation of two entities — the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Republika Srpska (RS) — did not simply recognise wartime realities; it embedded them into the constitutional fabric of the state. Governance became not a collaborative exercise in national reconstruction, but a competition between quasi-sovereign spaces. This semi-partition made compromise structurally difficult: concessions to the centre could be framed as betrayals of entity autonomy, while the physical geography of power reinforced ethnic mobilisation. In Republika Srpska, the persistence of separate administrative structures — from tax systems to police forces — fosters the perception that full independence is not only desirable but technically feasible (Bieber, 2005). Over time, governance begins to resemble sovereign statehood — what Caspersen (2010, p. 101) terms a "rehearsal for exit," the quiet normalisation of secession as a viable endpoint. **Why strengthen a shared state when you're already running your own?**

Partition also fragments social experience. Many young people grow up without meaningful contact with other groups — a dynamic institutionalised by policies such as *two schools under one roof,* where children from different ethnic backgrounds attend the same building but learn different curricula. This educational segregation reinforces communal myths and deepens mistrust (Torsti, 2009, p.68). Everyday spatial divides mirror

institutional ones: crossing from Sarajevo into RS can still feel, for many, like crossing an international border. As Berg and Solvak (2011, pp. 462–464) observe, this internal foreignness is not just a psychological hangover of war — **it is continually reproduced by a governance system that encourages identification with entities over the state.** Citizens may aspire to a shared future — surveys show that a majority support a centralised state with strong regional autonomy — but such preferences remain politically inert because the institutional framework offers no real avenue to express or implement them (Berg and Solvak, 2011). The lived experience of Dayton Bosnia is one of formalised estrangement rather than reconciliation. The state functions, but only through the logic of partition—technically unified, yet emotionally and institutionally fragmented.

Northern Ireland's consociationalism, by contrast, plays out in a single shared space. While Nationalists may favour Irish unification, there is no separate administrative structure through which to pursue that goal. Unlike Bosnia, the system does not train communities to govern apart. The absence of territorial partition limits the extent to which secessionist logics can be normalised in daily life. **When governance is shared, political futures — however contested — must be imagined together.** Where territory is divided, the logic of separation tends to dominate. This raises an important nuance in assessing consociationalism's complicity in entrenching division. Territorial partition is not a core feature of the consociational model (Lijphart, 1977), but a context-specific choice. Bosnia's case shows that when consociationalism is implemented through such partition, its effects are dramatically intensified: it gives division physical structure, legal legitimacy, and political momentum. In these contexts, it becomes essential to distinguish between

consociational mechanisms themselves and the accompanying frameworks, such as territorialisation, that can amplify their divisive impact.

3. Structures and Shifting Identities

Electoral systems don't just count votes — they shape how people think about political belonging. In Bosnia, closed-list proportional representation has locked voters into rigid ethnic blocs. Parties are organised by group, candidates are selected by party elites, and cross-community appeal is neither rewarded nor expected (Bieber, 2005; Belloni, 2001). The result is a system where ethnicity isn't just politically relevant — it's structurally required. As Belloni (2001, p. 165) argues, post-Dayton democracy in Bosnia has prioritised ethnic power-sharing over political pluralism, sidelining civic actors and narrowing democratic choice. While this model was introduced to guarantee group parity after war, it came at the cost of institutionalising communal division: **voters are treated not as individuals, but as members of constituent peoples.**

Northern Ireland, though also shaped by communal politics, tells a different story. The Good Friday Agreement mandates power-sharing between elected parties rather than constitutionally fixed ethnic groups — a choice that, according to McGarry and O'Leary (2004), reflects an effort to institutionalise group representation without permanently locking it into constitutional form. Combined with the Single Transferable Vote system, this design leaves some room, however narrow, for voters to move beyond communal lines. STV lets voters rank individual candidates, allowing preferences to transfer across party and sectarian boundaries when political incentives align (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1991). This mechanism doesn't eliminate identity politics, but it dilutes its structural dominance.

As Horowitz (1991) argues, electoral systems can either reinforce polarisation or encourage moderation, and STV, while still embedded in a consociational framework, opens a path for the latter. Between 2010 and 2019, the cross-community Alliance Party more than doubled its vote share, rising from 7.9% to 16.9% (Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, 2019). That growth coincided with a steady increase in voters, particularly younger ones, identifying as "neither" nationalist nor unionist (NILT, 2019). These shifts haven't overturned the consociational model, but they have exposed its internal tensions and nudged the system in more civic directions.

The contrast is revealing. In Bosnia, electoral design froze wartime identities into law, rewarding communal loyalty and marginalising civic challenge. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, the combination of party-based power-sharing and STV left the door ajar for cross-cutting identities to emerge. Lijphart (1977) maintained that proportionality was essential for fairness in divided societies — but as Horowitz (1985) contended, without incentives for intergroup cooperation, proportionality alone can entrench conflict lines. The lesson here is not that consociationalism is inherently rigid, but that its effects depend on how deeply its structures are tied to identity, and whether its institutions leave space for that identity to shift.

4. The Foundational Trade Off: Peace Without Progress?

Consociationalism often succeeds where other models fail. In the aftermath of violence, it offers communities credible guarantees: that they will not be outvoted, excluded, or erased. Bosnia and Northern Ireland both illustrate how power-sharing can halt bloodshed by turning enemies into partners — or, at the very least, cohabitants. The

peace, or at least the reduction in violence that consociationalism brought to both cases, is undeniably real. To argue that it merely entrenches and artificially preserves divisions is to overlook the radical difference in the scale of violence before and after these arrangements. Coexistence once seemed unimaginable; now, while neither society is a model of integration, former enemies live side-by-side.

Yet as time passes and new generations come of age, the institutions built to manage conflict can begin to feel out of sync with the societies they govern. In Bosnia, high youth emigration, political disillusionment, and elite obstruction point to a system that has stabilised conflict but failed to foster transformation (Belloni, 2001). Civic reform becomes not just difficult — it becomes politically irrational. As Berg and Solvak (2011) argue, the architects of the Dayton Agreement succeeded in preventing state collapse but fell short of building a cohesive, multiethnic polity with sovereign capacity.

Some have proposed alternatives: transitional consociationalism, or the inclusion of sunset clauses requiring institutional renegotiation after a set period (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004). The idea is simple — build stability first, but avoid institutional ossification. In theory, such mechanisms would allow settlements to evolve alongside shifting political cultures. In practice, however, they are rarely included. Peace agreements tend to be forged in fear, not foresight, and for societies emerging from war, even the possibility of impermanence can feel too risky to accept. Once consociational arrangements are in place, they tend to stick. Institutions reward those who master the system, and over time, reform can come to resemble self-sabotage. As Pierson (2000) explains, designs that generate "increasing returns" create path dependencies: elites adapt, patronage networks form, and identity becomes the primary currency of political power. In Bosnia, even modest reforms

— such as those proposed by the Sejdić-Finci ruling, which sought to expand representation beyond the three constituent peoples — have met with intransigence (Bose, 2002; Caspersen, 2010). Not because they threaten peace, but because they threaten incumbency.

This is the foundational trade-off. Consociationalism offers order, but risks calcification. It creates space for peace, but may suffocate politics if it becomes the endpoint rather than a transitional stage. Treated as a scaffold — a temporary architecture to stabilise the present and support future transformation — consociationalism can evolve. But if institutionalised as a permanent settlement, it may only teach citizens that division is destiny.

VI. Conclusion

Consociationalism is often a necessary response to deeply divided societies — but necessity should not be confused with neutrality. While it may stabilise post-conflict settings, it does so by institutionalising the identities that fuelled the conflict in the first place. In doing so, it does not merely reflect division — it can help construct and preserve it, sometimes in artificial and self-perpetuating ways. Categories that were once fluid or situational become legally enshrined and politically rewarded. Over time, consociational systems risk hardwiring wartime identities into the constitutional order, even as those identities may be evolving beneath the surface.

This essay has shown that the extent to which consociationalism entrenches or artificially preserves division is context-dependent — and shaped by institutional design. In Bosnia, the combination of consociationalism with territorial partition, ethnic quotas, and international tutelage created a rigid system that incentivised obstruction and identity-

based politics. There, consociationalism did not merely preserve existing cleavages — it helped reify and exaggerate them, often beyond what was socially or demographically inevitable. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, the absence of partition and more flexible electoral rules allowed for limited civic drift. Yet even there, power continues to be distributed through group identity, and political dynamics remain largely bounded by the consociational frame.

To suggest that consociationalism alone manufactures division would overstate its power — many of the identities it institutionalises are real and historically embedded. But to ignore its constitutive effects would understate its influence. Where group identity becomes the basis for access to power and resources, it becomes politically rational to sustain and perform that identity — even when social attitudes begin to shift.

Consociationalism may stop the bleeding, but it rarely heals the wound. When treated as a permanent settlement rather than a transitional scaffold, it can trap societies in a logic of difference — a logic that outlives its original rationale. Whether consociationalism merely preserves division or artificially sustains it is not a binary, but a continuum — one that bends toward artificiality when structures are rigid, elite incentives are misaligned, and civic alternatives are institutionally excluded. If its role is to manage division, the deeper question is whether it leaves any room for that division to fade.

Bibliography:

Belloni, R. (2001). Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Journal of Peace Research, 38(2), pp.163–180. [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/425493.

Berg, E. and Solvak, M. (2011). Muted differences: Entrenching legitimacy of the Bosnian statehood? Cooperation and Conflict, 46(4), pp.460–481. doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/45084674.

Bieber, F. (2005). Post-War Bosnia: Ethnicity, Inequality and Public Sector Governance. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bose, S. (2002). Bosnia after Dayton: Nationalist Partition and International Intervention. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burg, S.L. and Shoup, P.S. (1999). The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention. M.E. Sharpe.

Caspersen, N. (2010). Contested Nationalism: Serb Elite Rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s. Berghahn Books.

Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (2019). Election Results Archive. [online] Available at: https://www.eoni.org.uk.

European Court of Human Rights (2009). Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Applications nos. 27996/06 and 34836/06. [online] Available at: https://hudoc.echr.coe.int.

Guelke, A. (2013). Politics in Deeply Divided Societies. John Wiley & Sons.

Horowitz, D.L. (1985). Ethnic Groups in Conflict. University of California Press.

Horowitz, D.L. (1991). A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ICTY (2001). Prosecutor v. Krstić (Trial Judgment). Case No. IT-98-33-T. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. [online] Available at: https://www.icty.org/en/case/krstic.

Lijphart, A. (1977). Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration. Yale University Press. doi: https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300158182.

Malcolm, N. (1996). Bosnia: A Short History. New York: New York University Press.

McGarry, J. and O'Leary, B. (2004). The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements. Oxford University Press.

McKittrick, D. and McVea, D. (2002). Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.

Mitchell, P. and Wilford, R. (2009). Politics in Northern Ireland. In: J. Todd (ed.) Political Transformation in Northern Ireland. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mulholland, M. (2002). The Longest War: Northern Ireland's Troubled History. Oxford University Press.

NILT (2019). Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2019. ARK. [online] Available at: https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt.

Pierson, P. (2000). Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. American Political Science Review, 94(2), pp.251–267.

Rutter, J. and Fright, M. (2024). Government deal with the DUP to restore power sharing in Northern Ireland. [online] Institute for Government. Available at: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/government-deal-dup-restore-power-sharing-northern-ireland.

Salamey, I. (2009). Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative Options. International Journal of Peace Studies, 14(2), pp.83–105. [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41852994.

Szewczyk, B. (2010). The EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Powers, Decisions and Legitimacy. [online] EUISS Occasional Paper. Available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Occ83.pdf.

Taylor, R. (2006). The Belfast Agreement and the Politics of Consociationalism: A Critique. The Political Quarterly, 77(2), pp.217–226. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-

923x.2006.00764.x.

Torrance, D. (2024). Devolution in Northern Ireland. [online] House of Commons Library. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8439/CBP-8439.pdf.

Torsti, P. (2009). Segregated Education and Texts: A Challenge to Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. International Journal on World Peace, 26(2), pp.65–82. [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752886.

Wilford, R. (2018). Politics in Northern Ireland. Routledge eBooks. Informa. doi: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429498152.

Wilson, T. (2025). Dysfunctional Democracy: The Politics of Violence. Week 9 Lecture. Moodle.