

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Controlled consociationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Valentino Grbavac, PhD



Počitelj, a historic village in Herzegovina.

Why this research is important

The reasons why the Dayton Agreement did not lead to: (a) the failure and disintegration of BiH; (b) the establishment of a functioning consociational democracy; or (c) the integration of the three constituent nations in BiH—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs—into an overarching common identity still puzzles researchers and practitioners alike. This research answers this quandary through a detailed examination of the role of the OHR in BiH, explaining the evolution of power-sharing in BiH and the impact of external actors on it over the last three decades. The role of external actors in creating, maintaining, and (re)shaping consociational democracies is, perhaps, the most important question that consociational theory faces today, which this research is attempting to answer.

What you need to know

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is portrayed in the literature as a classic case of consociationalism—a form of democracy based on power-sharing and cooperation of political elites representing major segments of the population in polities that are deeply divided by ethnicity, language, religion, or other identities. However, the reality is much more complicated. The complex political system that the implementation of the Dayton Agreement produced is a hybrid system of consociationalism and control that I call “controlled consociationalism.”

Controlled consociationalism in BiH is marked by the control of the entire political system by external actors personified through the role of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), as well as political control of relative minorities by majorities at different administrative levels.

How the research was conducted

A mixed methods approach was used for this research. I analyzed wartime peace plans for BiH, more than 300 declassified CIA documents concerning the war in BiH, the constitution of BiH and its two entities, the election law of BiH, the most consequential rulings of the Constitutional Court of BiH concerning power-sharing, the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights

against BiH, 932 decisions imposed by the OHR, memoirs and autobiographies of international diplomats, and news articles in local media. I performed statistical analyses of election and census data in STATA. Finally, I interviewed former and current members of the local political elite and international diplomats, including three former High Representatives.

What the researcher found

External actors in BiH turned consociational incentives upside down by introducing integrative mechanisms into the political system. The fundamental misunderstanding of both the nature of BiH itself and accommodation, especially consociationalism, has largely doomed the actions of external actors in BiH. Instead of the three constituent nations feeling a sense of unity or moderating their politics, the decisions of external actors—unintentionally—removed incentives for cooperation. Through the 932 imposed decisions of the OHR, the control of electoral rules until 2001 by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the crucial role of the three foreign Constitutional Court judges in redefining the nature of power-sharing in BiH in 2000, the political system of BiH has been fundamentally altered from the foundations of its consociational constitution negotiated in Dayton in 1995 into a new strand of power-sharing in general, and consociation in particular, which I define as controlled consociationalism. Two main features of controlled consociationalism are a consociational peace settlement implemented and supervised by external actors, such as the Dayton Agreement and the OHR in BiH, as well as the coexistence of two equally important forms of political control in the system, which I define as external control and internal control. External control denotes control of the political system as a whole by external actors, while internal control refers to multidirectional political control of relative minorities by majorities at different administrative levels.

How this research can be used

The primary aim of this research is to offer lessons about the role of external actors in BiH and introduce the theory of controlled consociationalism to power-sharing theorists. Moreover, I hope to inform international mediators and state-building practitioners engaged in the negotiation and implementation of power-sharing settlements. Virtually all modern examples of consociational peace agreements were negotiated or imposed by external actors, which is why it is so crucial for this research to offer them valuable lessons from BiH. I plan to do so by publishing my research as a monograph and presenting it at international conferences.

About the researcher

Dr. Valentino Grbavac is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Political Science at Brandon University, where he works on the Citizen Inclusion in Power-Sharing Settlements project. His research focuses on power-sharing, federalism, and institutional design in deeply divided societies. GrbavacV@BrandonU.CA

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Editor: Christiane Ramsey RamseyC@BrandonU.CA
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