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RETHINKING POWER SHARING: ASSESSING MODELS THROUGH EXPERT INSIGHTS IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract

The paper examines expert assessments of the effectiveness, sustainability, and integrative potential of power-sharing institutions in three post-conflict Balkan polities—Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo—with Montenegro serving as a control case. Drawing on an original survey of 111 scholars and civil-society representatives, the study quantifies expert perceptions of institutional performance, the risk of renewed conflict, and the role of international actors. The findings reveal a common pattern: while power-sharing arrangements have delivered short-term conflict containment and ensured ethnic representation, they have fallen short of fostering durable inter-ethnic integration. By contrasting these results with the more moderate Montenegrin evaluations, the article shows that the lasting intensity of wartime legacies—rather than institutional

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design alone—shapes expectations of political stability and reconciliation. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the added value of expert surveys for capturing post-conflict dynamics that escape conventional datasets. Substantively, it refines the debate on when and how power-sharing can move beyond elite accommodation to societal integration, providing a baseline against which future longitudinal and comparative research can be gauged.

Keywords: *power sharing, Balkan post-conflict societies, expert survey, ethnic divisions, political elites, international actors, conflict resolution*

1. Introduction

Power-sharing arrangements have long been regarded as a viable institutional mechanism for managing ethnic divisions and preventing the recurrence of conflict in deeply divided societies. Drawing from consociational theory (Lijphart, 1977; 2004), such frameworks emphasize guaranteed political representation, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto powers to ensure the inclusion and protection of diverse identity groups. While these mechanisms have facilitated conflict resolution and state-building in various contexts, scholars have raised concerns about their potential to entrench ethnic divisions, hinder democratic consolidation, and limit the prospects for integrative governance (Roeder & Rothchild, 2005; McCulloch, 2014; Wolff, 2011).

The Western Balkans provide a critical testing ground for evaluating the effectiveness of power-sharing models (Maleska, Hristova, & Ananiev, 2006; Keil & Bieber, 2009). Institutional arrangements established by the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia, and the Ahtisaari Plan in Kosovo were designed to accommodate the interests of multiple ethnic groups following violent conflicts. Despite initial successes in stabilizing political systems and ensuring minority participation, these arrangements continue to face challenges, including persistent ethnic stratification, political deadlock, and limited progress toward interethnic integration.

While numerous studies have assessed the legal and political dimensions of these power-sharing frameworks, fewer have systematically quantified expert perceptions regarding their performance and sustainability. To address this gap, the present study employs an expert survey methodology to evaluate how scholars and practitioners specializing in ethnic relations, conflict resolution,

and institutional design assess the current state and prospects of power-sharing arrangements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. By incorporating a control group of experts from Montenegro, the study also offers a comparative perspective that enhances the validity of its findings.

The survey gathered responses from 98 experts across the three main case studies and 23 experts from Montenegro. Conducted electronically between September and December 2024, the survey included both closed and open-ended questions covering institutional performance, the potential for conflict recurrence, the role of political elites, and the influence of international actors. The methodology builds on established theoretical and empirical foundations (Benoit & Laver, 2006; Castles & Mair, 1984) and is particularly suitable for assessing complex phenomena where reliable data from other sources are scarce or difficult to obtain.

The results reveal significant fragmentation of expert opinions across and within the case studies. While some experts acknowledge the adaptability and partial successes of existing institutional arrangements, many express dissatisfactions and perceive substantial risks of future conflict. The findings also underscore the ambivalent role of international actors, whose engagement is seen as both stabilizing and potentially detrimental to the development of domestic political accountability.

By integrating theoretical insights with empirical data, this study contributes to ongoing debates concerning the strengths and limitations of power-sharing in post-conflict societies. It also demonstrates the utility of expert surveys as a methodological tool for capturing nuanced assessments of institutional performance and social dynamics that are often overlooked in conventional analyses. Ultimately, the research offers valuable implications for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking to design more effective governance frameworks in divided societies.

2. Theoretical framework

Lijphart (1977) argues that effective minority protection within power-sharing arrangements requires the integration of four key components. First, guaranteed representation in both legislative and executive branches ensures proportional participation of all societal segments in decision-making processes. Second, proportionality principles should be applied not only to political representation but also to public administration and resource distribution. Third, segmental autonomy should be granted, providing minority groups with substantial self-governance in areas of particular relevance to their identity and interests. Finally, mutual veto rights should be established, allowing minority groups to block decisions that could adversely affect their vital interests.

Power-sharing arrangements are premised on the assumption that distinct ethnic groups require direct representation to safeguard their interests, as these cannot be effectively advocated by external actors. Lijphart (2002, 2004) emphasizes that minorities are generally unwilling to accept representation by majority group leaders. While power sharing may sustain ethnic divisions and politicize identity, it also creates incentives for interethnic compromise. Political leaders, motivated by the desire to participate in governance and maintain power, are often willing to negotiate and reach agreements (Lijphart, 2002, p. 44). However, scholars have raised concerns about the long-term effects of power-sharing institutions. Reilly and Reynolds (1999) and Roeder and Rothchild (2005) argue that while such arrangements may facilitate initial conflict resolution, they can later obstruct democratic consolidation and peacebuilding. Furthermore, rigid guarantees, such as ethnic quotas in executive and legislative bodies, may entrench divisions by reinforcing ethnic voting patterns, potentially undermining long-term stability and democratic development (Reilly & Reynolds, 1999).

There is a prevailing belief that consociational mechanisms do not necessarily lead to lasting peace, as they are primarily oriented toward elite security and their inclusion in power-sharing arrangements at both the national and regional levels. Consequently, elite acceptance of agreements may not reflect a genuine commitment to peace but rather a shift in approach or confrontation strategy. While critiques of ethnically based power-sharing are partially justified, the question remains whether consociational institutions themselves generate divisions or whether such divisions would be even more pronounced without institutional accommodation. Imposing integrative approaches would likely have been unacceptable to conflicting parties at the outset, and rejecting consociationalism does not automatically imply the viability of establishing a unified civic society (McCulloch, 2014).

White (2018) argues that the failure of power-sharing arrangements often stems from parties' perceptions that such frameworks do not serve their interests. However, the Northern Ireland case demonstrates that a genuine commitment to power-sharing and democratic procedures can lead to long-term institutional success, even in deeply divided societies (White, 2018, pp. 86–96). On the other hand, negative experiences in Bosnia and Afghanistan have led some scholars to conclude that cohesive and effective states cannot be built through peace agreements or by distributing power among former combatants. Instead, solutions involving military victories or territorial divisions may appear more feasible (Roeder & Rothchild, 2005, p. 6).

Despite theoretical debates, Lijphart (2004) maintains that power-sharing democracy remains the most appropriate model for deeply divided and plural societies. He distinguishes between "self-determination," which allows groups to freely define their identity, and "predetermination," where groups are pre-identified and exercise power-sharing based on that recognition (Lijphart, 2004, pp. 96–97). The primary critique of power-sharing focuses on its

corporate nature, which may hinder integration processes in post-conflict societies. Corporate consociational agreements typically emerge during periods of high polarization, with conflicting parties demanding firm guarantees of power regardless of electoral outcomes. While acceptable at the time of peace agreements, such guarantees can later obstruct liberalization (McCulloch, 2014). However, empirical evidence does not consistently support this outcome. Cases like Lebanon and Bosnia illustrate entrenched divisions, but examples such as South Tyrol and Burundi show relative stability despite corporate arrangements (McCulloch, 2014, p. 180).

Ultimately, the effectiveness of power-sharing arrangements depends more on the willingness of identity groups and their leaders than on institutional design alone. McCulloch (2014) emphasizes that liberal consociationalism may better address entrenched divisions and identifies four factors influencing group acceptance of liberal rules: demographic majority/minority status and number of groups; group orientation toward the state; dominance of moderate or extremist forces; and involvement of external actors in negotiations (McCulloch, 2014, pp. 181–183). Hybrid models combining liberal and corporate approaches, such as those in Northern Ireland, North Macedonia, Kenya, and Switzerland, offer viable solutions. Additionally, agreements with secessionist forces may incorporate strong autonomy provisions and cross-border ties in exchange for adopting liberal rules at the national level. However, dominant extremist forces may insist on rigid corporate rules, viewing potential conflict renewal as a means to increase their power (Wolff, 2011).

Territorial autonomy is frequently criticized, particularly when linked to corporate consociationalism. Some fear that peace agreements granting territorial autonomy might serve as temporary solutions until full independence is achieved. Nonetheless, Wolff (2011) argues that decentralization based on subsidiarity, without legislative authority has proven effective in conflict management in cases like North Macedonia and Kosovo (Wolff, 2011, p. 1785). Such decentralization, often at the municipal level, contributes positively to the consociational model by reducing fears of secession, reflecting demographic distributions, and promoting local minority inclusion while maintaining a unified political system (Bieber & Keil, 2009). Municipal-level autonomy, while limited in legislative power, fulfills an important function by recognizing minority group distinctiveness and reinforcing identity through territorial control. This includes providing resources, a potential power base, and fostering collective memory and historical significance attached to the territory (Wolff, 2011, p. 1787).

Another critique concerns the perceived rigidity and inefficiency of reforming consociational systems. Critics argue not for wholesale rejection but for enhancements that can sustain multiethnic societies within unified state borders. Empirical studies suggest that proportional electoral systems with closed lists have yielded positive post-conflict governance outcomes, while fixed quotas have sometimes undermined peace agreements (Reilly &

Reynolds, 1999; McCulloch, 2014, p. 185). Reforms are possible when key veto players agree to mechanisms that compensate "losing" sides, facilitate issue linkages, and expand negotiation agendas, thereby fostering compromise and gradual institutional change.

The question remains whether and how power-sharing arrangements can eventually be phased out. McCulloch (2014) identifies three perspectives: first, that transition is impossible and consociationalism may perpetuate instability; second, drawing on Lijphart, that stability and adaptability may render consociational mechanisms obsolete over time; and third, that power-sharing can serve as a long-term framework supporting peacebuilding and democratization (McCulloch, 2014, pp. 188–190). In the Balkans, power-sharing elements were largely imposed by peace agreements rather than internal compromises. A major challenge is the empowerment of actors who undermine the system, often leveraging territorial autonomy to bypass power-sharing institutions and assert alternative political legitimacy.

Potential exit strategies include time-bound mandates in peace agreements or judicial rulings to dissolve rigid power-sharing frameworks. However, such legal interventions risk deepening divisions and reinforcing claims of state illegitimacy (Wolff, 2011). Despite various criticisms, power sharing remains one of the most viable institutional designs for post-conflict societies. It offers sufficient guarantees for diverse ethnic groups to accept peace settlements and maintain a unified state. In this context, consociational elements are not simply a choice between democracy and autocracy, or between paralysis and functionality, but between war and peace. They ensure respect for diverse identities and institutional protection of their interests.

3. Methodology

This approach essentially involves summarizing the opinions of identified experts who are in a position to make informed judgments or who specialize in a particular topic—in this case, the institutional design and the implementation of power-sharing arrangements in the countries included in the sample. Collective expert opinions are widely used across various social sciences, especially in cases where it is impossible to gather reliable information from other primary sources or through direct measurements. As Benoit and Laver (2006, pp. 82–83) point out, expert surveys are particularly valuable when assessing phenomena that are too complex for direct observation or when it is necessary to integrate or interpret existing data. To facilitate understanding of the basic principle behind expert surveys, these authors provide an illustrative example from sports such as gymnastics, diving, or figure skating, where a panel of experts specialized in the given discipline evaluates the performance, and the average of their ratings produces the final score (Benoit & Laver, 2006, p. 83).

In political science, the use of expert surveys was popularized by Castles and Mair, who in 1984 published a study generating a detailed database with a transnational classification of party ideologies. This classification was quantified on a unidimensional ideological scale and has proven particularly useful for comparative research (Castles & Mair, 1984). Although there is a substantial body of literature addressing power-sharing arrangements, the effects of these models are often difficult to quantify due to the complexity of post-conflict settings and the multiplicity of variables involved. For this reason, expert opinions are considered particularly valuable in evaluating both the design and the perceived effectiveness of power-sharing mechanisms.

The research relies on an expert survey conducted among more than 98 respondents from academia and civil society specializing in ethnic relations, political institutions, and conflict resolution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. To provide a comparative dimension, the views of an additional 23 experts from Montenegro were included as a control group. The survey aimed to capture informed assessments of institutional performance, the vertical integration of society, the role of political elites, and the influence of international actors in the context of power-sharing arrangements. This design allows for both cross-case comparison and the identification of patterns that may indicate the broader implications of power-sharing in divided societies.

The data were collected through a structured expert survey distributed electronically between September and December 2024 to a carefully selected pool of experts. The selection criteria included academic qualifications, research experience, and professional engagement in areas relevant to ethnic relations, conflict resolution, and institutional design in the Western Balkans. The final sample comprised 98 experts from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, along with 23 experts from Montenegro serving as a control group. The survey was grounded in the theoretical and empirical foundations established by Benoit and Laver. The response rate exceeded 60%, which can be considered a significant success, as the average response rate for similar surveys typically hovers around 28% (Benoit & Laver, 2006).

Questions covered multiple dimensions, including institutional performance, the extent of societal integration, the behavior of political elites, and the role of international actors. Responses were anonymized to ensure candid assessments and aggregated for quantitative and qualitative analysis. This methodological approach facilitated the systematic collection of informed judgments that would otherwise be difficult to obtain through conventional data sources. While the expert survey approach offers valuable insights into complex phenomena that are difficult to measure directly, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, despite careful selection, the sample of experts may still reflect certain biases based on disciplinary background, institutional affiliation, or personal experiences with the political contexts in question. Second, expert judgments, while informed, remain subjective assessments and may vary over time or in response to changing political dynamics. Third, the

reliance on perceptions rather than purely objective indicators introduces the possibility of interpretative variance across respondents. Nevertheless, these limitations are mitigated by the diversity of the expert pool and the triangulation of findings across different countries and dimensions of power-sharing performance.

4. Results and Analysis³

The findings of the expert survey reveal that opinions across the three political systems are highly fragmented. In North Macedonia, a majority of experts (55%) believe that significant or moderate amendments and adjustments to the Ohrid Agreement are necessary. By contrast, experts in Kosovo view the Ahtisaari Plan more positively than the general public, with 36% considering it either satisfactory or requiring only minimal changes. In all three cases (Bosnia and Herzegovina 14%, North Macedonia 12%, and Kosovo 16%), a notable proportion of experts deem the existing agreements or plans dysfunctional and advocate for their abolition.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, expert opinions reflect a comparatively higher degree of extremity, with over 41% believing that renewed conflict is possible in the future, 8.3% suggesting a high probability of recurrence, and approximately 3% perceiving conflict as inevitable. A notable deviation appears in North Macedonia, where experts express a more pessimistic outlook on the prospects for lasting peace compared to public opinion. In this case, 31.5% of experts believe that renewed conflict is possible, while 25.71% see a high likelihood of renewed ethnic violence. In Kosovo, 18.52% of experts consider conflict possible, with comparable percentages perceiving a high probability of recurrence (16% versus 15%). These findings suggest that despite the implementation of power-sharing mechanisms aimed at accommodating ethnic divisions following conflict, experts from academia and civil society in all three societies recognize significant potential for future conflict.

The expert assessment further indicates that the majority of members of each of BiH's three constituent peoples express dissatisfaction with the current institutional framework, reflecting ethnic stratification even among experts. However, variations exist. Among Croat experts, 52.7% report very low agreement with the institutional arrangement and 25% express partial agreement. Serbian experts follow, with 34% indicating very low and 25.7% partial agreement. Bosniak experts show slightly higher partial agreement (30.5%) but maintain a significant percentage of very low agreement (30.5%). Despite dominant narratives portraying Serbs as proponents of secession, the

³ The results presented in this chapter are based on data collected through the expert survey conducted between September and December 2024 (Surlić & Dabetić, 2024).

broad autonomy provided by Republika Srpska appears to facilitate partial or significant acceptance (20%) of the institutional framework. Conversely, this form of autonomy, combined with veto rights, may contribute to Bosniak dissatisfaction and demands for greater centralization, while Croat experts perceive the arrangement as favoring the other two constituent groups.

In comparative terms, Kosovo's Albanian population demonstrates the highest level of agreement with the institutional framework, with 81.5% expressing significant or full agreement. By contrast, 55.5% of Serbian respondents report little or no agreement, reflecting divergent perspectives rooted in Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and the consolidation of institutions that Albanians wish to preserve, whereas the Serbian community maintains loyalty to the institutions of Serbia. In North Macedonia, despite the positive outcomes of the Ohrid Agreement, expert assessments show that both Macedonian (44%) and Albanian (33%) experts express partial agreement, with considerable dissatisfaction also present (Albanians 30.3%, Macedonians 26.5%). Experts in BiH identify the strongest disintegrative forces as stemming from the political arena (54.29%), followed by North Macedonia (25.74%) and Kosovo (22.22%). Two main conclusions emerge. The expert scores across all three case studies suggest that political elites have not successfully mitigated ethnic divisions or achieved meaningful interethnic integration.

Given the persistence of high ethnic distance and political elites who, while accepting consociational institutions, lack incentives to promote integrative policies, a separate question was formulated to assess the extent of basic consensus. This refers to political actors' agreement on a minimal set of principles and processes necessary for the survival of a unified state. North Macedonia achieved the highest score in this regard, with 34.29% of experts indicating partial achievement of basic consensus and 14.29% reporting significant achievement. In BiH, more than 55% of experts believe that only a minimal basic consensus exists. In Kosovo, 44.44% of experts report the absence of basic consensus, reflecting persistent disagreements between Serbian and Albanian political elites, particularly concerning the status of the political system.

The survey also assessed the role of international actors in maintaining stable political life in the three case studies. Most experts in North Macedonia (40%) and Kosovo (40.74%) consider significant international involvement necessary. Interestingly, while BiH is often deemed unsustainable without international intervention, over 33% of experts advocate for minimal international engagement or complete withdrawal. These positions support theoretical claims that prolonged international involvement can create dependency pathways, where state-building efforts coexist with counterproductive effects (Wolff, 2011; McCulloch, 2014).

A general observation across the post-conflict Balkan societies is the divided nature of expert opinions concerning the role of external actors. While a dominant position exists in each case, no clear consensus prevails. Experts also adopt predominantly negative views of the relationship between domestic and international actors. A majority assert that these relationships have significantly contributed to the bypassing of institutions and the establishment of informal decision-making processes (over 60% in BiH and North Macedonia, and over 50% in Kosovo). However, experts may overemphasize negative trends relative to the key positive contributions identified in the literature, including peacekeeping, elite pacification, and the promotion of a culture of compromise.

The expert survey results reveal deeply divided opinions across Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo regarding the effectiveness and future of their respective power-sharing arrangements. While some experts acknowledge the adaptability and partial successes of existing institutional frameworks, significant proportions express dissatisfaction and foresee potential for renewed conflict. Notably, experts perceive persistent ethnic stratification within political institutions and limited progress toward inter-ethnic integration, despite decades of post-conflict governance. The data highlight distinct patterns: North Macedonia demonstrates the highest perceived basic consensus, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina registers both the highest perceived risk of conflict renewal and the strongest disintegrative political forces. Kosovo's experts exhibit the most optimistic assessments, particularly among the Albanian community, while Serbian experts across contexts consistently express lower levels of institutional acceptance.

The analysis also underscores divergent evaluations of international involvement. While many experts advocate for continued or enhanced international engagement, particularly in North Macedonia and Kosovo, others warn that prolonged intervention has fostered dependency and informal decision-making processes, potentially undermining domestic institutions. Overall, the findings suggest that power-sharing arrangements have mitigated some conflict drivers but have not fully addressed underlying ethnic divisions or incentivized political elites to pursue long-term integrative policies. The mixed assessments reflect the complex and contested nature of post-conflict institutional design in deeply divided societies.

In all three contexts, the institutional architecture established in the aftermath of ethnic conflicts is grounded in consociational principles, aiming to ensure political representation and the inclusion of various ethnic communities. However, an analysis of expert perceptions reveals that the normative objectives of these models have not been fully achieved, nor have these arrangements contributed to the long-term stabilization and democratization of political systems.

Particularly alarming is the data concerning the success of radical political actors in mobilizing along ethnic lines. In all three cases, experts point out that ethnic mobilization remains the dominant mode of political engagement. While power-sharing models inherently encourage political organization along ethnic lines, such mobilization is not intended to take radical forms. Nevertheless, in Kosovo, as many as 96% of respondents believe that radical actors are successful or highly successful in mobilizing along ethnic cleavages. A similar trend is observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina (91%) and North Macedonia (77%), where ethnic mobilization is also identified as a prevailing feature of political life. These findings point to a continued dependence of political actors on identity-based narratives, despite the formally inclusive institutional frameworks.

Particularly significant are the findings related to expert assessments of the degree of support for existing institutional arrangements among members of different ethnic communities. In all three cases, pronounced ethnic divergences are evident. In Kosovo, experts estimate that the Albanian community largely supports the institutions (with an average score of 4.11), whereas the Serbian community exhibits a very low level of approval (2.19). A similar polarization is observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Bosniak community demonstrates a higher level of agreement (2.97) compared to the Croat (2.36) and Serb (2.80) communities. In North Macedonia, although the differences are somewhat less pronounced, experts indicate that Albanians display a stronger identification with state institutions in comparison to ethnic Macedonians, who constitute the majority population. These results underscore the absence of a shared constitutional patriotism and support the claim that while power-sharing arrangements may provide functional stability, they fall short of achieving symbolic integration among communities.

Finally, the expert survey included questions related to the mechanisms of transitional justice and processes of dealing with the past. In all three cases, experts express a high degree of dissatisfaction with the institutional response. In Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 75% of respondents assess that institutions have either not implemented or have only minimally implemented mechanisms of transitional justice. In North Macedonia, although the assessment is somewhat more favorable, a majority of experts still emphasize the limited institutional reach in this domain. Furthermore, experts indicate that members of ethnic communities do not perceive that justice has been achieved for war victims—particularly in Kosovo (95%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (80%). These perceptions suggest that transitional justice mechanisms remain largely declarative rather than operational, further undermining trust in institutions.

Finally, with regard to the role of political elites in the processes of reconciliation, the findings are virtually identical across all three countries. In each case, over 90% of experts believe that political elites have either not

contributed at all or have done so only minimally to reconciliation and dealing with the past. This assessment confirms the existence of political irresponsibility and the absence of a strategic vision aimed at the long-term reintegration of society.

Based on this comparative analysis, one may conclude that power-sharing models in post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans function primarily as mechanisms of conflict management rather than as tools for building stable, legitimate, and inclusive democracies. Ethnic mobilization, fragmented institutional legitimacy, selective transitional justice, and the absence of constructive political leadership all point to the deep structural limitations of these models.

4.1. Case study Montenegro

Since 1997, Montenegro has embarked on a profound transformation of its foreign policy, distancing itself from the previous course of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the regime of Slobodan Milošević (see more: Vuković, 2010). This shift marked the beginning of its independent foreign policy orientation, despite its formal state union with Serbia lasting until 2006. The turn toward the West was gradual but consistent—by the late 1990s, Montenegro had intensified its relations with international actors, developed the institutional framework of its foreign policy, and began to position itself as a constructive partner in both regional and global processes.

Although in the early 1990s Montenegro, as part of then-Yugoslavia, was involved in armed conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, including military intervention near Dubrovnik in 1991 (Džankić, 2013, p. 112), following internal political realignments, it gradually distanced itself from the conflicts, including the war in Kosovo (Morrison, 2009). During the NATO intervention in 1999, although not a primary target of military operations, Montenegro faced serious humanitarian challenges, most notably by hosting a large number of refugees, particularly from Kosovo, but also from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, it became an important humanitarian zone in the region.

In the following years, Montenegro's foreign policy became increasingly focused on Euro-Atlantic integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Government of Montenegro, n.d.). This strategic orientation emerged as a key dimension of the country's democratization process. The establishment of stable relations with the European Union and accession to NATO in 2017 were not only security and political objectives, but also a reflection of Montenegro's commitment to the development of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. Thus, Euro-Atlantic integration served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it safeguarded the country's foreign policy identity

and security, and on the other, it acted as a catalyst for internal transformation and democratization (Vukićević, 2017).

Although Montenegro is geographically and historically intertwined with the broader Western Balkans, its post-conflict positioning is notably distinct. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or North Macedonia, Montenegro did not experience direct armed conflict during the 1990s, which significantly shapes both its internal dynamics and how its expert community perceives regional developments. Montenegro was included in the research because of its legacy of dealing with humanitarian crises, including a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons originating from the territories of the three main case studies. This creates a direct political and societal correlation with the current status of these societies.

A targeted expert survey conducted in Montenegro in 2024 reveals these divergences across several key areas. One of the most striking differences is in how experts perceive the possibility of future ethnic conflicts in the region. While regional respondents largely expressed concern about potential instability, Montenegrin experts were far more reserved in this regard. Only 12.5% of Montenegrin respondents considered the risk of renewed ethnic violence in the region as high, compared to 47% in the regional sample. Furthermore, 62.5% of Montenegrin experts assessed the likelihood of new conflicts as low or very low, emphasizing a belief in the maturity of regional peace, albeit fragile.

Montenegrin experts demonstrated significantly greater confidence in the durability of peace agreements and existing borders. When asked whether the current regional order is sustainable in the long term, 50% of Montenegrin respondents expressed moderate to strong confidence in the current arrangements, compared to only 29% across the wider regional sample. This may reflect Montenegro's stable border status and its lack of participation in major ethnic disputes over territory. While regional experts frequently identified ethno-nationalist political actors as a persistent threat to peace and democracy, Montenegrin experts offered a more nuanced perspective, where 37.5% acknowledged a high level of success of such actors in mobilizing support, while 50% rated their influence as moderate or declining, contrasting with over 60% in the regional survey who identified ethno-nationalist political mobilization as a major destabilizing force. This suggests that although Montenegro has witnessed episodes of ethnic tension, experts perceive the political field as more open and competitive.

Responses from Montenegro also reflect a somewhat more detached stance on the state of transitional justice in the region: only 25% rated regional transitional justice processes as having produced meaningful reconciliation outcomes, while 50% believed the processes were either insufficient or politicized. Compared to the regional average, where nearly 70% considered transitional justice mechanisms as failed or deeply inadequate, Montenegrin's

responses are slightly more optimistic, perhaps due to lesser direct societal involvement in war crimes and post-war trauma.

Experts from Montenegro showed a more ambivalent attitude toward international presence in the region. While support for continued international engagement remained high for certain countries (particularly Bosnia and Kosovo), 37.5% of Montenegrin experts suggested that international actors should gradually reduce their involvement to encourage local agency—substantially higher than the 18% recorded regionally. Moreover, only 12.5% of Montenegrin respondents expressed strong trust in the objectivity and consistency of international actors, aligning with a broader regional skepticism, but often framed in terms of diminishing necessity rather than outright failure.

Compared to experts from the conflict-affected countries, Montenegrin experts express markedly more optimistic views regarding regional stability. Only 12.5% of them consider renewed ethnic conflict likely, compared to 47% in the regional sample. Furthermore, 62.5% rate the likelihood of conflict as low or very low. This sharp contrast underscores how direct conflict experience amplifies perceived risks and erodes trust in institutional resilience. Similarly, 50% of Montenegrin experts show confidence in the durability of peace agreements and borders—far higher than the 29% average in the conflict-affected states.

Montenegrin responses also exhibit a more restrained view of ethno-nationalist political influence, with only 37.5% identifying such actors as dominant, versus over 60% regionally. Moreover, they exhibit greater belief in the diminishing role of international actors: 37.5% favor reduced international involvement, contrasting with 18% regionally. These findings suggest that Montenegro's relative stability fosters a more pragmatic and sovereign view of political agency, whereas experts from post-conflict countries remain cautious, emphasizing elite intransigence, ethnic stratification, and international dependency.

This comparative design enhances the article's scientific rigor. The Montenegrin control group not only strengthens the validity of regional conclusions but also highlights the conditional nature of expert perceptions—shaped less by institutional design *per se* and more by conflict legacies and societal trauma. The divergence in assessments supports theoretical arguments that institutional success in divided societies depends significantly on elite behavior, group willingness to compromise, and the degree of local ownership over governance processes.

In conclusion, the control group from Montenegro plays an indispensable role in this study. It reinforces that while power-sharing can provide frameworks for stability, its effectiveness is deeply contingent upon the broader political and historical context—an insight of critical relevance for both scholars and policymakers engaged in peacebuilding and democratic

institutional design. While concerns about ethnic politics and transitional justice persist, the tone of Montenegrin expert responses is generally less alarmist and more institutionally optimistic than that of peers in conflict-affected states.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the expert perceptions of the effectiveness and sustainability of power-sharing arrangements in three post-conflict Balkan societies: Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Utilizing an expert survey methodology, the research has quantified expert opinions on institutional performance, prospects for conflict recurrence, and the role of international actors in promoting stability.

The findings demonstrate that, while power-sharing mechanisms have provided necessary frameworks for conflict management and have enabled the participation of diverse ethnic groups in political processes, they have not fully succeeded in overcoming entrenched ethnic divisions or fostering durable interethnic integration. In each case, significant proportions of experts express dissatisfaction with the current institutional arrangements, and a considerable number foresee the possibility of renewed ethnic conflict. Notably, North Macedonia shows relatively higher levels of perceived basic consensus, while Bosnia and Herzegovina registers the greatest concerns regarding political disintegration and conflict risk. Kosovo's expert community presents the most optimistic evaluations, although sharp ethnic divisions persist. The study also highlights the ambivalent role of international actors. While many experts recognize the stabilizing influence of external engagement, concerns about dependency, institutional bypassing, and the erosion of domestic political accountability are prevalent. This duality underscores the complex relationship between international support and domestic political development in post-conflict settings.

The expert survey conducted in Montenegro highlights the country's distinct post-conflict trajectory compared to other Western Balkan states. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, Montenegro's relative stability, absence of direct war experience, and more open political landscape have fostered moderate and pragmatic expert assessments. Montenegrin experts express lower concerns about future ethnic conflict, greater confidence in peace agreements and borders, and a nuanced view of ethno-nationalist mobilization and transitional justice. While recognizing ongoing challenges, particularly regarding international engagement and transitional justice, their perspectives are generally less alarmist and reflect stronger institutional optimism. These findings emphasize the need for context-sensitive peacebuilding strategies that account for Montenegro's unique

political and societal dynamics, which are shaped more by structural governance challenges than by unresolved wartime legacies.

Importantly, the research reinforces key theoretical debates in literature. First, it confirms that power-sharing institutions, while offering essential guarantees for minority representation and conflict prevention, can also entrench ethnic divisions and impede democratic consolidation if not accompanied by incentives for cross-ethnic cooperation and integrative policymaking. Second, the findings support the argument that the success of power-sharing arrangements depends not solely on institutional design but also on the willingness of political elites and identity groups to engage in meaningful compromise and adapt to changing social and political contexts. Finally, the study demonstrates the value of expert surveys as a methodological tool for assessing complex and often subjective dimensions of post-conflict institutional performance. By capturing informed judgments from a diverse range of experts, the research provides insights that are not readily obtainable through other quantitative or qualitative methods.

Future research should further explore the conditions under which power-sharing arrangements can evolve toward more integrative and flexible governance models, particularly in deeply divided societies where the balance between group autonomy and state cohesion remains fragile. Comparative studies involving additional cases and longitudinal data could enhance understanding of the dynamic interplay between institutional design, elite behavior, and societal change in post-conflict environments.

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