



## LESSONS FROM 20 YEARS OF INTER-ETHNIC POWER SHARING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

by  
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In this time of [increased intra-state conflict](#), methods of power-sharing as a form of conflict resolution have increased in importance. Therefore, examining the tools in the belt of those engaging in conflict resolution is relevant. Consociationalism, a particular form of power-sharing, is one such tool. As consociationalism is a form of governance for divided societies and gives different groups a stake in state functioning, it is well-suited for post-conflict situations, at least on paper. But, what can be learned from the Macedonian case?

### What is Consociationalism?

Consociationalism is a form of democratic power-sharing first described by Arend Lijphart to describe the [system of governance in his native Netherlands](#). Consociationalism is a tool for divided societies. The characteristics of consociationalism as per Lijphart are: (a) grand coalition including all schismatic groups (b) segmental autonomy (c) proportional representation in government (d) veto rights. These schismatic groups are minorities in the country, which can be in a religious sense (Ireland), ethnonationalist (Bosnia), political (Netherlands), or any mix of the above, usually with added cultural and linguistic barriers.

As a form of conflict resolution, this means giving minority group(s) a stake in governance: the rebelling party will be brought to the table to become part of the government. They will usually become a political party that will be included in the governing coalition, given proportional representation in government organs and gain the ability to veto any proposal that could be a threat to them. In addition, often they will gain some local autonomy. Examples of consociationalism include Lebanon, Belgium, Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.

### The Case of North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a small multi-ethnic country in the Balkans. The [two main ethnic groups](#) in the country are the ethnic Macedonians (58 percent of the population) and the ethnic Albanians (25 percent of the population). Significant minorities of ethnic Turks and Roma exist, and in addition, many smaller groups like the ethnic Serbs, ethnic Bosnians, Vlachs, Torbesh, and Balkan-Egyptians call North Macedonia home. Some of these groups speak languages that are not mutually intelligible, like Macedonian, Albanian, Vlach, or Romani. Similarly, the different ethnicities tend to group based on religion: Orthodox Serbs and Macedonians, or Sunni Muslim Albanians and Turks. Finally, ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians live in different parts of the country; ethnic Albanians in the Northwest part bordering Albania and Kosovo and ethnic Macedonians in the rest of the country. The two groups have a few multi-ethnic cities; Struga, Kumanovo, Gostivar, and the capital Skopje, but if they do “share” a city they tend to live in different neighborhoods. This means there are few occasions where ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians interact.

After Macedonian independence in 1991, there was considerable inter-ethnic tensions, with ethnic Albanians feeling unfairly treated in the new state. In 1999, a full-scale war broke out in neighboring Kosovo, which saw [more than 300,000](#) Kosovar Albanians flee to North Macedonia – upsetting the delicate inter-ethnic balance. In 2001, the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA), which has strong ties with the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA, both written as UÇK in Albanian), started an insurgency against the Macedonian government. The U.S. and the EU, fearing another large-scale war breaking out in the former Yugoslavia, brokered a quick peace deal under significant foreign pressure: the consociationalist Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA).

The [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#) calls for constitutional amendments to improve minority rights, inter-ethnic relations, and democracy in North Macedonia – making the agreement a de facto base for the Macedonian constitution. Integration into the

Euro-Atlantic community, specifically the EU and NATO, is explicitly part of the OFA, and functioned as something of a carrot for the Macedonian government (anxious to join the EU and NATO) in 2001 to sign the deal, and currently functions as something of a stick to make sure North Macedonia sticks with its consociationalist government.

Deliberately, federalism for the Albanian minority was left out, to avoid the significant troubles seen in Bosnia with its federal solution and to assuage fears of secession (as seen in Yugoslavia). Minority autonomy is however increased on the municipal level, where if a minority constitutes more than 20 percent of a given municipality it gains the right to use its language in government and schools and fly its flag.

Ethnic Albanian requests, like the use of Albanian language in the (federal) government and education, were acceded. The OFA made provisions for ethnic quotas in government institutions, and ethnic Albanian parties were to be included in the ruling coalition (in reality this last point has always been practiced in independent North Macedonia). Finally, the OFA uses a ‘double majority’ principle for any laws that directly affect language, culture, education, personal documentation, and the use of symbols – a roundabout veto. In short, the OFA foresees a consociationalist political system for North Macedonia, which the country still uses today.

### Why is North Macedonian Consociationalism Relevant?

In the 1990s and early 2000s in Europe three consociationalist power-sharing agreements were signed: the Good Friday Agreement (GFA, 1995), which ended ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, the Dayton Accords (DA, 1995), which ended the Bosnian war, and finally the OFA in North Macedonia. The OFA differs in some [key points](#). The societal cleavages in North Macedonia are deeper: in addition to the cultural and religious differences, there is a linguistic and geographic barrier between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. On the other hand, the conflict in North Macedonia was not as long, intense, and deadly compared to the

Irish and Bosnian cases. North Macedonia also had to implement consociationalism without a direct international overseer, like Bosnia. Rather, the implementation of the OFA was linked to Euro-Atlantic integration – a long-standing Macedonian geopolitical goal. Finally, the OFA took lessons from the existing examples, especially the DA, to avoid certain pitfalls.

### What Can Be Learned from Macedonian Consociationalism?

#### *Conflict resolution*

In conflict situations where there is a challenging group that fears repression and demands (further) state-representation, consociationalism might offer a solution. Consociationalist peace deals, like the OFA, DA, or GFA, are good at getting multiple challenging groups to come to the table, as consociationalism can offer something to all groups. Similarly, none of the groups that are party to the peace deal can be excluded from the future consociational state – as long as the implementation is honored. In North Macedonia, the rebel NLA post-OFA became an ethnic Albanian political party, and instead of challenging the state became part of it. While some of the tensions between ethnic groups remain, violent conflict has not resumed in North Macedonia allowing the state to stabilize.

#### *Democratization*

Consociationalism is essentially a trade-off between majority-rule democratization, in favor of giving minorities a stake in state functioning. Similarly, ethnic quotas go against meritocratic appointments. However, giving minority groups a stake in state functioning and a clear place within the political system alleviates the chance of insurgency or rebellion – both disastrous for democratic state functioning. Therefore, consociationalism is not perfect for building a democratic state, but it prevents minority exclusion and conflict, which is the antithesis of functional democracies.

#### *State-building*

Many post-socialist states are relatively new, and many have experienced significant violence

from challenging minority groups who see no future or representation in the new state. North Macedonia is one such case, a country without a historical precedent of independence (in the modern Westphalian view), which suffered from significant foreign pressure from its neighbors that contest the Macedonian identity. The ethnic Macedonian majority quickly co-opted the Macedonian state to protect its own identity, which excluded minorities that were seen as a threat – especially the restive ethnic Albanian minority with its two kinship states (Albania, Kosovo) on the border. In such an environment, conflict with the ethnic Albanian minority, which saw its position in the new state as threatened, was hard to avoid.

Consociationalism proved a way to assuage these ethnic Albanian fears of repression and give them a stake in building the new Macedonian state. Prevention of violent conflict has led to a relatively stable Macedonian state, and further Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO accession in 2020) has essentially cemented North Macedonia as a unitary and relatively democratic state. Foregoing a federal consociational solution, as seen in Bosnia for instance, has prevented fear of ethnic Albanian secession from the Macedonian state – adding again to its stability.

#### **Conclusions: Lessons from North Macedonia**

Consociationalism in North Macedonia has led to an immediate cessation of violence, which has not resumed in two decades. The ethnic Albanian minority plays an active part in decision-making, has gained many rights related to their language and culture, is part of all state organs, and experiences a greater sense of belonging in the country. The Macedonian state is stable and democratic – though there are noticeable issues pertaining to corruption, ethnic mobilization, and governance. Understanding the challenges that consociationalism brings in such divided societies can help understand the choice to propose a consociational peace deal.

The 'looser' character of Macedonian consociationalism, foregoing a federal solution, lack of international overseer, and more freedom in

creating government bodies, has created a much more functional state than the more rigid consociational systems in Bosnia or Lebanon. Fear of unilateral secession of regions is low, because there is no federal unit, whereas in Bosnia it is a constant threat.

A looser approach to consociationalism could therefore be a good model in similar divided, post-conflict societies, to bring all challenging parties to the table and give them a stake in state functioning. The lure of Euro-Atlantic integration provides an option for the international community to shape post-conflict state-building to include minority groups and potentially prevent future conflict. North Macedonia provides a relevant example of what a post-conflict consociational society could look like 20 years later. For all its faults and challenges, many of which are also experienced in neighboring non-consociational countries, the consociational Macedonian state is today stable and democratic.

*Note: For the name of the country, I use the internationally agreed upon terms, though anachronistic in parts, as seen in the Prespa Agreement: the country is 'North Macedonia', the adjective is 'Macedonian' and the language is 'Macedonian'. I use the terms 'ethnic Albanian' and 'ethnic Macedonian', though not in common use, to avoid implications of certain groups belonging to North Macedonia and others being foreigners.*

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