

Peace, Power-Sharing and Citizen Inclusion: Lessons for and from Bosnia and Herzegovina - POLICY BRIEF

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Power-Sharing in Kanaky–New Caledonia: Between Internal and External Decolonization

By: Pr Mathias Chauchat (University of New Caledonia)

New Caledonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina: Comparative Lessons from Peace Agreements. The institutional deadlock, the failure to implement reforms, and growing public distrust are part of the Nouméa Accord's legacy. Despite the ongoing crisis, pathways to a solution still exist.

Image 1 carte Pacifique

At first glance, New Caledonia—a South Pacific Territory shaped by French colonization—seems very different from Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, both share key similarities. Colonial history is the first link. In 1878, the Congress of Berlin gave Austria-Hungary control over Bosnia, which justified its domination through a so-called “civilizing mission,” echoing the same rhetoric France used when annexing New Caledonia in 1853 under Napoleon III.

IF the 1995 Dayton Accords ended the Bosnian war, they also created a complex political system divided along ethnic lines. New Caledonia experienced something similar with the 1988 Matignon and 1998 Nouméa Accords. In both cases, these arrangements ensured peace but failed to build lasting reconciliation.

These peace agreements share the same paradox: they froze conflicts without resolving them. Bosnia faces emigration and frustration; New Caledonia sees population decline and growing disillusionment about its political future within France.

Image 2 cartes politiques

Between 2018 and 2021, three independence referendums gave a fragile majority for staying French. Yet the results were contested, as Paris clearly supported the loyalist side. The votes revealed a near-perfect overlap between ethnicity and politics: the Indigenous Kanak population voted for independence, while settlers of European origin voted to remain French.

Image 3 opposition des deux identités

Thirty years of peace did not erase these deep divisions.

Since the last referendum in 2021, talks have been blocked. When the French government tried to extend the local electorate to new settlers, Kanak protests erupted

on 13 May 2024. The violence left 15 dead and caused major destruction in Nouméa —about 13% of the territory's GDP. For many Europeans, the shock was profound, and confidence in peace collapsed.

Under pressure from Paris, a new draft agreement was signed on 12 July 2025 in Bougival. A month later, the FLNKS rejected it, saying it betrayed the spirit of decolonization. Still, France announced its intention to implement it.

The Bougival draft proposes autonomy within France, without any new independence vote. It promotes the idea of a “*Caledonian people*,” replacing the notion of the “*Kanak people and other concerned populations*.” But instead of preparing independence, this concept in fact blocks it. The electorate would now include recent French settlers, but not foreign Melanesians, transferring the right to self-determination from the colonized Kanak to the settler majority.

Image 4 carte ironique

Finally, the text reinforces the three provinces rather than the common institutions, especially the rich Southern Province dominated by Europeans. By granting it partial fiscal autonomy, the agreement risks formalizing a territorial and ethnic divide between the wealthy South and the poorer Kanak North and Islands.

What's at stake ?

Kanaky–New Caledonia faces two main challenges, which echo the objectives of our Inclusive Peace program and parallel the situation in Bosnia.

The first challenge is internal: **fostering a civic identity** that transcends ethnonationalism, in this case, "ethnoprovincialism".

The second challenge is external: **redefining the relationship with France** by overcoming historically inherited conflicts and reaching a historical compromise on the question of sovereignty.

Key Findings *Image 5*

The results highlight:

- **The difficulty, if not impossibility, of forging a unified people.**
- **A systematic deadlock in the absence of political agreement.**
- **The impossibility of resolving political conflicts through voting.**
- **A costly and dysfunctional governance system.**
- **A pathological relationship with France.**

The 5 main challenges are :

1st challenge. The challenge of creating a people

The Nouméa Accord does not mention a “*Caledonian people*,” but envisions a “*shared common destiny*” through a new identity uniting Kanak and European communities. This principle led in 1998 to a common citizenship, frozen that year to exclude new French settlers. By 2016, citizenship was supposed to include descendants and everyone born in New Caledonia. But no law was ever passed to make that happen.

Independence leaders reject including post-Accord settlers, viewing it as legitimizing colonialism. However, France supports inclusion after ten years of residence. Such a policy would increase the European population at Kanak expense. Ethnic divisions have deepened.

The Southern Province’s rollback of social programs for mainly Kanak groups risks further segregation. Ultimately, without safeguards, New Caledonia could drift toward “separate development,” undermining the very idea of a shared destiny.

2nd challenge. A systematic deadlock in the absence of political agreement

The French government’s attempt to amend the Constitution in order to extend voting rights to newly arrived French immigrants with ten years of residence was the trigger for the riots of 13 May 2024.

Image 6 répression

The Kanak fear of becoming an Indigenous people condemned to disappear was a major factor in the youth revolt. Another trigger was the widespread perception that, once again, decisions were being made by France without them.

To this political revolt was added the anger of young people against their own living conditions. For several nights, 15,000 youths, left to themselves, destroyed not only numerous public buildings but also supermarkets across the Nouméa metropolitan area, symbols of a consumer society from which they felt excluded.

The extension of the electorate to French residents remains today the primary reason for the FLNKS’s refusal of the Bougival draft agreement. Nevertheless, the French government is once again considering a constitutional amendment on this point.

As the saying goes, madness consists of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. And yet, here we are (*hopefully, the French government resigned yesterday*).

3rd challenge. The Limits of Voting in Resolving Political Conflicts

In deeply divided societies, voting rarely resolves political conflicts, and elections are often postponed. In Kanaky–New Caledonia, the general renewal of Congress, first planned for May 2024, was delayed to December 2024 to amend the Constitution and expand the electorate. The Kanak uprising of 13 May 2024 caused another postponement, this time to November 2025. Now, the French government is considering a further delay to July 2026, to reopen the electorate to resident French citizens and adjust provincial representation by increasing the number of seats for the Southern Province while reducing those of the Northern and Islands Provinces.

Such repeated postponements erode trust and weaken legitimacy. Changing electoral rules before voting risks deepening divisions rather than easing them. Holding elections without further delay is essential—to restore legitimacy to long-expired mandates, measure the true balance of political forces, and provide a stable framework for negotiating the agreement that will follow the Nouméa Accord.

4th challenge. A Costly and Dysfunctional Governance

New Caledonia’s power-sharing system, designed to balance Kanak and European interests, has produced costly and inefficient governance. Its three provinces and collegial government ensure representation but make consensus fragile and decision-making slow. Public spending is excessive—55% of GDP overall—while salaries in the public sector exceed private ones by 45%. Overlapping and incoherent competencies worsen the inefficiency.

The Bougival Project, by granting provinces more fiscal and policing powers, risks deepening inequalities. “Copy-paste” reforms from France—especially in health and urban planning—have created deficits and urban models unsuited to Oceanian culture.

Image 7 destructions

The 13 May 2024 uprising marked the collapse of this assimilationist vision. A durable solution requires coherent reforms rooted in a shared Oceanian identity and stronger solidarity policies at the Congress and national levels, not greater provincial fragmentation.

5th challenge. A Pathological Relationship with France

This is as true for Loyalists, who systematically seek to increase dependence on France, as for Independentists, for whom the struggle for independence overshadows all other concerns. We need to resolve this question through a historic compromise between the country’s two identities.

International law provides such a framework. Independence can be achieved through integration—which is excluded here—through full independence—which is problematic—or through an association arrangement. The third option, independence in free association, already governs the status of many island states in Oceania. It

entails the administering power, France, transferring all sovereign powers to the country and recognizing its independence, while the new state simultaneously signs a treaty of interdependence with France under which the French Republic exercises certain sovereign functions on its behalf. This typically includes the military, justice, policing, and currency, while the country retains control over its foreign relations.

Yet this pragmatic solution is rejected both by Loyalists and by the French state.

In conclusion,

Lessons for Public Policy *Image 8*

Many of these lessons aren't really new. Policymakers know them well, which makes it even more surprising that they keep ignoring them. After all, politics isn't always rational: leaders tend to speak to their own side rather than to everyone. That kind of narrow talk makes it easy to miss the obvious warnings. The main lessons are these:

- **Prioritize a shared civic identity over ethnonationalism.**
- **Ensure consensus by avoiding imposed timetables.**
- **Maintain elections under constant rules.**
- **Rebuild a functional political system around the country's common institutions.**
- **Translate the historic compromise on independence between the country's two identities.**

I hope these lessons, once put into a different context, could also be useful elsewhere.

Thank you for listening