

Maria Koinova

Ethno-nationalist conflict in Post-communist States: Varieties of Governance in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo

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Maria Koinova's book *Ethno-nationalist conflict in Post-communist States: Varieties of Governance in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo* offers a sophisticated approach in answering two major questions about ethno-national violence and its evolution. In her comparative study she aims to provide an explanation of why ethno-nationalist conflicts reach different levels of violence and why they often persist despite strong international conflict resolution and peace- and institution-building programs. The author compares three similar post-communist countries at the beginning of the transition period: Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo all have Muslim minorities and Christian Orthodox majorities, communist parties control over politics and undeveloped civil movements. The studies were selected as they provide variation on an explanatory variable- the relative change of minority status, which starts a chain of sequences of majority-minority interactions during a critical juncture. The different political choices and contingencies at the end of the 1990s led to the outcome variable and different degrees of ethno-nationalist violence, which was low in Bulgaria, extensive in Kosovo and episodic in Macedonia.

Koinova goes on to shift "the focus from a particular political phenomenon to the relationships between the agents involved" (p.3). She provides a critique of the existent literature on ethno-nationalist conflict and suggests an alternative comprehensive approach eschewing from the explanation of historical legacies of ancient hatred. The book is situated at the nexus of comparative historical scholarship on path-dependence, timing and sequencing of policies, democratization and conflict, and international intervention. The author's key argument is that the levels and duration of ethnonational violence are rooted in conflict dynamics established between majorities, minorities and international agents during the formative period at the end of communism (1987/89-1992). Koinova

maintains that the continuities and change of conflict dynamics depend on the majority-minority relationships at a critical juncture and especially how international agents, kin-states and diasporas influence the conflict path at an early stage. The author identifies the critical juncture “through policy choices and strategies that created durable dynamics in the relationships” (p.7). She later demonstrates how these conflict dynamics become self-reinforced and informally institutionalized, which is where the author excels. Finally, the book extrapolates on the importance of exogenous shock and mechanisms of gradual change in altering aspects of conflict dynamics but without changing them completely, a point where the author clashes with rationalist theorists.

The book is structured in an unusual way with each chapter introducing new agents to the conflict. The result is a fragmented way of presenting detail, which makes the comparison between Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo stand out more clearly as the unfolding of the conflict is told and re-told repeatedly.

The first chapter centres on the critical juncture at the end of communism, which saw majority-minority relations develop differently depending on the relative change in the minority status compared to the communist period. Koinova does not deny the importance of centuries-old historical legacies in political mobilization but does not point them as determinants in shaping conflict dynamics either. The increase (Bulgaria) or decrease (Kosovo, Macedonia) in status was followed by a self-reinforcing strategy of coercion or co-optation by the governments and a reactive sequence of acceptance, rejection or a two-pronged strategy towards the new regime on the side of the minorities. This formative period saw the introduction of informally institutionalized conflict dynamics.

The second chapter extrapolates on the self-reinforcement mechanisms in perpetuating conflict dynamics over time. Koinova argues that the new rules of the ethno-national game were reinforced by two causal mechanisms: advantage of political incumbency and adaptive expectations. Through the first mechanism the non-reformed post-communist elites, who arrived early on the political stage, were able to “bypass minorities during constitution formation and perpetuated neglect for minorities and their rights through much of the 1990s” (p.77). Koinova

asserts that the timely government response to non-territorial minority demands was crucial in preventing escalation of violence- in Bulgaria the government responded relatively quickly to the demands of ethnic Turks for mother-tongue education, in Macedonia it had a belated response to opening a faculty for education in Albanian and in Kosovo Milošević postponed the implementation of the Education Agreement indefinitely. At the same time through the adaptive expectations mechanism, majorities and minorities adapted their in-group and out-group behaviour to that expected from the out-group.

The third chapter sees the international community becoming entangled in the conflict dynamics during the critical juncture by timely providing three types of guarantees: minority participation in state institutions, its assurance that the state would not be restructured internally or externally, and long-term commitment to conflict resolution. All three guarantees were met only in Bulgaria, partially in Macedonia and not at all in Kosovo. Koinova shows how the different geopolitical interests of the international community affected the “timing and type of long-term commitment to reducing inter-ethnic tensions during the transition” (p. 97).

The fourth chapter explains the tripartite dynamic between majorities, minorities and the international community after the formative period and how they became self-perpetuating through processes of adaptive expectations. Adaptation between majorities and the international community was not difficult as they shared an interest in the non-redefinition of the state. The minorities established a relationship along the informal lines with the international community by using it as a forum to “voice” grievances for human rights violations (p. 109). The author also examines how exogenous shocks and European Union integration altered certain aspects of the conflict dynamics.

The fifth chapter follows the intervention of identity-based agents: kin-states and diasporas. The former intervened less formally and clearly favoured the minorities, while radical elements of the diaspora, which were not part of the adaptation processes sustaining the informally institutionalized conflict dynamics, provided a powerful impetus to conflict escalation in the direction of internal warfare.

The sixth chapter goes further and looks at the change in conflict dynamics through mechanisms of “replacement” of the established rules and “layering” of new rules on top of existing ones. The last chapter develops a new thesis about the effects of informally institutionalized conflict dynamics to explain persistent low to middle levels of violence during the 2000s. Three major factors contributed to the conflict perpetuation: the “normalization” of corruption, lessons learned from the international community that democratization could not be neglected for security and stability, and clandestine influences from kin-states and diasporas.

The book's major merit is that it analyses the informally institutionalized conflict dynamics between majorities, minorities and international agents during a critical juncture and their influence on ethno-national violence and its perseverance over time. Koinova goes beyond historical institutionalism and unpacks why, when and how conflicts become path-dependent and how after a formative period the role of international agents subsides as they become “locked” in interaction between majorities and minorities. One of the strongest assertions is that conflict dynamics are static, which is at odds with rationalist scholars. While not claiming to have predictive powers, the path-dependence conclusions in the book do offer a few proximate predictions, which are testes in other cases such as Romania, Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the major findings of the book is the importance of the early and broad international intervention in encouraging elites to accommodate minority demands in times of accelerated change. Koinova also depicts the hypocrisy of the international community in praising stability over democratization and thus fuelling inter-ethnic tensions. The study is a recommended read for academics not only interested in the Balkans but also in the escalation and de-escalation of violence. The alternative approach to conflict dynamics that the author offers was developed through extensive field visits and more than 150 individual interviews and is a good starting point for follow-up studies examining ethno-nationalist conflicts.

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