
Book Review

Timofey Agarin and Karl Cordell (2016) *Minority Rights and Minority Protection in Europe*. London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield.

This monograph fits into a body of research on minority rights in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that seeks to go beyond arguments of external imposition or imitation, highlighting, instead, the domestic nature of policy-change instead. Cordell and Agarin's book is a welcome addition not only because it attests to the importance of internal structures and endogenous processes, but also because it does not shy away from articulating inconvenient truths: for example that the strategy of EU officials for the promotion of minority protection was (at least partly) based on misunderstandings (PP. 1), that the post-communist governments' adoption and implementation of minority rights frameworks has been 'grudging, haphazard and uneven' (PP. 2), and that the much-desired 'return to Europe' did not improve the position of minorities substantially after all.

More specifically, the authors advance the two-fold argument that minority protection in post-communist states has been both limited and domestically driven (PP. 3). To arrive at this conclusion, they examine the evolution of minority protection from a variety of angles as well as through the contrasting assessment of cases across CEE and beyond. Their proposed explanation centers on the continued importance of ethno-nationalism. They claim that nation-states in post-communist Europe have continued to serve the interests of the titular majorities despite the ongoing process of supranational integration, the result being the persistent marginalization of minorities (PP. 181). Moreover, according to the authors, European integration contributed to entrenching these power inequalities, because it locked-in minority rights protection 'into a rhetoric of formal compliance with European norms that are themselves vaguely defined' (PP. 6).

Agarin and Cordell develop this argument in seven thematically linked chapters. The substantive discussion begins with Chapter 1 that outlines the theoretical approach, including the concepts and analytical tools used in the book. The chapter emphasizes the theoretical significance of domestic opportunity structures constituted by the institutional environments in which actors operate (PP. 16). It highlights the role the institutional setting of the nation-state plays in determining whether and which policy changes domestic political elites are likely to advocate (PP. 19), as well as in framing the expectations of the public (PP. 20). Chapter 2 provides a background discussion on post-communist state-building, with the aim of showcasing the persisting political relevance of ethnicity in CEE. This, the authors claim, has led to deliberately giving political institutions an ethno-national form, which has, in turn, had detrimental effects for the rights of non-dominant populations (PP. 38). Moreover, far from mitigating the power imbalance between minorities and majorities, post-communist nation-state building further solidified ethno-national claims to state ownership, including the majorities' privileged access to economic resources available in that state, and thus entrenching ethnically based systems of inequality (PP. 39). The authors argue that national sovereignty across the

post-communist area 'has remained defined via ethno-nationally designed institutions of the state' (PP. 50), which explains the failure to put into place effective and equitable mechanisms of diversity management (PP. 51).

Chapter 3 brings the analysis closer to empirics, by contrasting constitutional design in Lithuania, Macedonia and Slovakia, with the aim of demonstrating how institutionally-constituted opportunity structures have favored majorities, while putting minorities at a disadvantage (PP. 62). Chapter 4 also looks at legal and policy frameworks adopted across the region in order to take this point further. The authors provocatively assert that far from protecting minorities, nation-states set out to devise means to protect majorities from minorities' claims, especially in contexts where minority ethno-political entrepreneurs or kin-states have systematically challenged state-sovereignty (PP. 85). In both chapters, the authors identify as one of the central impediments to the development of extensive minority protection frameworks the emphasis EU officials and bodies put on individual equality and personal flourishing rather than advocating for group rights.

Chapter 5 directs attention to the Roma, Europe's largest and most disadvantaged minority population. It stresses the shortcomings of policy-making and implementation and criticizes poorly designed and poorly implemented policies, which, according to the authors, have left the problem of systemic discrimination untouched and prevailing notions of rightful state-ownership unchallenged (PP. 115). It is indeed ironic that, by implying that the Roma represented a potential impediment for EU accession, the weight put on the integration of this severely marginalized social category may have unintentionally exacerbated already negative majority attitudes towards its members (PP. 110). Chapter 5 discusses in detail the cases of Bulgaria, Slovakia and Poland, attempting also to convey a broader sense of space, by bringing in perspectives beyond Eastern Europe.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus to kin-states, seeking to understand how these influence domestic politics and policy-making and, in turn, the ways domestic dynamics impact interstate relations. In the link between homelands and minorities, the authors identify yet another sign of the significance of ethnicity in CEE, which, in their view, 'constitutes the basis of post-communist states' approaches to extraterritorial citizenship' (PP. 135). The chapter maintains that the EU's emphasis on good neighborly relations enhanced domestic policymakers' capacity to increase the costs for minorities to claim external support, both from the EU and external kin-states (PP. 148). Finally, Chapter 7 looks at the question of minority rights for migrants in the context of intra-EU mobility. Specifically, the authors ask how EU integration alters majority-minority relations by allowing the latter to 'remove themselves out of the vertical relation with their nationalising state of citizenship' (PP. 158). Through the discussion of the cases of Latvia and Estonia the authors conclude that the European project has 'alienated domestic minorities from both the state where they live and the EU as an institution' (PP. 163). Further, by examining the examples of evictions and expulsions of EU citizens in France and Italy, they also establish that 'the principle of nation-state sovereignty over territory remains a fundamental block of EU integration' (PP. 168).

The two authors, Cordell and Agarin, are well-known experts of post-communism. Their book, intended for practitioners and academics alike,

demonstrates not only their evident familiarity with the region but also their genuine concern for the object they study. I am particularly sympathetic to the institutionalist approach and the emphasis on internal processes and domestic structures. Like the authors of this book, I, too, am convinced that treating CEE states as ‘autonomous actors and not as mere recipients of directives and initiatives from “the West”’ (PP. 8) is imperative. Exposing the shortcomings and limitations of externally-driven change in the field of minority protection is an important step toward providing a balanced appraisal of institutional and policy transformation in the post-communist context.

That minority protection frameworks have a lot to do with nationalism is also indisputable. However, criticism can be raised towards the authors’ central argument that it is the in-built ethnocentrism of post-communist states that has shaped the observed patterns. Namely, it is not clear what makes the relationship between ethnicity and the state a distinctively Central and Eastern European (as opposed to a more general) phenomenon. Specifically, the authors assert that in the post-communist context ethnic favoritism is the norm, referring, for example, to the ‘cultural bias in the institutional design of states’ (PP. 42) or to the generalized perception that ‘the states belong to the titular majority group and as such exists primarily to serve the needs of that group’ (PP. 102). This bias, they conclude, produces ‘radically different expectations of whom and how the state should serve first and foremost’ (PP. 182), the implication being the limited minority protection we see across the board. However, the authors do not attempt to reconcile this claim with the empirical observation that ethnic favoritism is ingrained in nation-states also beyond the post-communist context (Wimmer, 2002), and state-baring nations everywhere engage, to some extent, in the promotion of a particular language and the cultivation of a sense of membership in a particular community (Kymlicka, 2000: 185). In fact, most national ideologies prescribe a mode of political organization that is ethnic in character, including a claim to represent the interests of a specific ethnicity defined as a cultural unit, which is where the nation-state draws, in turn, its political legitimacy (Eriksen, 2010: 121). Consequently, while the authors cast ethnocentrism as a distinguishing feature of post-communist states, in my view this seems to be a matter of degree, not of kind. It would have been, therefore, particularly helpful for the authors to offer more clarity regarding the scope of their argument, given also the – fortunately declining – tendency of overemphasizing the ‘ethnic’ character of nationalism in CEE in the academy and beyond.

There are also some further limitations to consider. In their effort to bring out the domestically driven, institutionally mediated nature of stability and change by approaching this theme from a variety of angles, the authors have traded depth for breadth. Part of this problem is that the book lacks a rigorous comparative design. Rather than thinking their cases against each other, the authors pick out illustrative examples that fit their line of argument, which enriches their descriptions but decreases analytical rigor. This strategy, moreover, conveys an exaggerated sense of homogeneity across CEE. While I do think that regionally confined analysis can be particularly useful both methodologically and substantially, this cannot come at the price of broad-brushing variation and overlooking key contextual differences.

Despite these shortcomings, the book also contains a number of thought-provoking ideas that can be further developed. In particular, the claim that CEE

actors, institutions and viewpoints have had a feedback effect on the ‘European minority rights regime’ and that therefore change has not been unidirectional but reciprocal (PP. 6) is an innovative thought that merits further elaboration. Another way to advance the debate would be to take up the topic of minority rights from where the authors left it: Europe’s most recent crisis. In particular, the authors note that as a reaction to the European migrant and refugee emergency ‘the governments of all post-communist EU member-states, regardless of ideological hue, have expressed deep reservations about hosting refugees’ (PP. 177). They take this resistance as evidence that CEE nation-states and domestic political actors talk the talk of minority rights while increasingly walking out on minority protection (PP. 10). It would be interesting to further investigate this phenomenon, by relating it, for example, to the demographic landscapes and the structure of the political competition of CEE states. Finally, by emphasizing endogenous development and especially the role of pre-existing institutional structures, this book also signals how to bring analyses of minority rights closer to the complexity of lived experience. Refocusing attention to social and institutional dynamics as they unfold through time constitutes a particularly effective way to assess the extent and direction of change, not only on paper but also on the ground.

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