

Decentralisation and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: Lessons from the Republic of Macedonia, by Aisling Lyon, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, xxii + 248 pp., £92.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138944114

For decades, “decentralization” has been a buzzword in academic and policy-making debates on ethnic conflict management, ranging from seminal social science texts on how to achieve sustainable peace and durable democracy in divided societies (Reynolds 2002; Lijphart 2004; Roeder and Rothchild 2005) to recent reports by key players in international development practice (World Bank 2011; United Nations and World Bank 2018). Yet despite the ongoing interest in the arguable strengths and weaknesses of decentralization among academic and nonacademic communities, it remains inconclusive whether—and more specifically, under which circumstances—the distribution of certain powers and resources from the central to noncentral levels of government may help to prevent, mitigate, or end large-scale ethnic violence (Bakke 2015; Keil and Anderson 2018).

In *Decentralisation and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: Lessons from the Republic of Macedonia*, Aisling Lyon explicitly recognizes the inconclusiveness of the decentralization debate as applied to questions of ethnic conflict management and cleverly presents it as a running theme throughout her analytical chapters. In a tour de force of empirical knowledge and insight, she uses her case study to illustrate how and with what effects political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization have been implemented in the Republic of Macedonia between 2005 and 2012, with a five-page afterword covering further key developments to early 2015. The decentralization processes and challenges that Lyon describes are focused on the aftermath of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, which, among other things, called for a strengthening of municipalities’ competences and resources

vis-à-vis the central government while retaining the Republic of Macedonia's unitary state structure. As Lyon notes in Chapter 1, the intention of this decentralization stipulation as part of the Ohrid peace deal was to address some of the political, social, and economic inequalities that seem to have motivated armed conflict in the Republic of Macedonia between politically mobilized members of the Albanian minority and the Macedonian-majority-controlled government (in late January to mid August 2001). This was to be achieved without threatening the territorial integrity of the state, thus striking a balance between addressing grievances within the Albanian community without giving rise to new ones within the Macedonian community if a nonunitary state structure had been pursued. Throughout the introduction, five analytical chapters, and conclusion of her volume, Lyon consistently presents her overarching argument that decentralization "has positively addressed some of the inequalities that existed between the Albanian and Macedonian communities before 2001" (2016, 174)—for example, by creating more opportunities for political participation and cultural representation especially for members of the Albanian community—but that the potential of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization as tools of ethnic conflict management in the Republic of Macedonia has not been fully realized. This, Lyon argues, is due to a combination of flaws in the design of decentralization (which primarily benefits those groups that are geographically concentrated), limited or partial reforms (especially regarding municipalities' fiscal control relative to the central government), factors that not only undermine decentralization attempts but also can be used to actively recentralize the state (such as clientelism and party patronage), and, related to all of the above, a failure to address long-standing points of contention, such as persistent socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban areas and their intersection with ethnic identities. In this sense, decentralization following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement seems to have contributed to negative direct peace in the Republic of Macedonia for now but

has left the conflict between politically mobilized members of the Albanian and Macedonian communities largely untransformed (cf. Galtung 2007).

After a foreword by Brendan O’Leary, the introduction presents the book’s underlying aim and key concepts, followed by a succinct overview of its main arguments and structure. Key concepts that are defined in the introduction include, *inter alia*, the distinction of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization—referring to the transfer of political, administrative, and financial authority from the central to local levels of government—and a continuum of centralization vs. decentralization in territorial self-government arrangements (which, however, is only briefly discussed and not resumed in later chapters).

Chapter 1, the volume’s longest chapter, outlines the book’s underlying grievance-based explanation of violent ethnic conflict, drawing on Relative Deprivation Theory and arguments on Horizontal Inequalities, and presents a concise overview of the political history of the Republic of Macedonia from the late 19th century until the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in August 2001. At the chapter’s core stands the application of the aforementioned grievance-based explanation to the incidence of armed conflict in the Republic of Macedonia from late January to mid August 2001 and its arguable roots in (real and perceived) political, cultural, social, and economic inequalities between Albanian and Macedonian communities dating to at least the 1990s.

Chapters 2 to 5 build on the discussion at the end of Chapter 1 of how the Ohrid Framework Agreement sought to address arguable causes of the 2001 armed conflict. They assess the extent to which—and with what effects—political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization have been implemented in the Republic of Macedonia between 2005 and 2012.

Chapter 2 focuses on opportunities for political participation and representation—and, with this, the quality of democracy—at the subnational level, including the interplay between decentralization and other political structures, such as voting procedures or party systems. According to Lyon, “decentralisation has undoubtedly expanded the potential space available for citizens to participate in local governance” (2016, 77), yet clientelism and party patronage have curtailed the ability of decentralization to deepen local democracy and reinforced (instead of alleviated) ethnic divisions.

Chapter 3 examines the effects of decentralization on public service delivery for different ethnic communities in the Republic of Macedonia, using the provision of primary and secondary education as example. Here, too, Lyon’s overall assessment is somewhat mixed, as she notes improvements, especially in the provision of Albanian- and Turkish-medium education, but also disparities in the allocation of education funding, patronage politics in the education system, and an increasing trend of ethnic segregation in schools that again indicates a reinforcing rather than an alleviating of ethnic divisions.

Chapter 4 focuses on the fiscal dimension of decentralization following the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the (lack of) financial autonomy of Macedonian municipalities vis-à-vis the central government. Here, Lyon’s assessment is at its most critical, as she finds that, despite what at face value seem to be substantial reform attempts, the central government continues to exercise considerable financial control, which consequently constrains the political and administrative powers of noncentral governments. In this manner, the lack of substantive fiscal decentralization also seems to undermine political and administrative decentralization and their potential to act as tools of conflict transformation.

Chapter 5 builds on Chapter 4 by assessing whether the rather limited fiscal decentralization may have come at the expense of state cohesion. The chapter's central argument states that territorial disparities, especially rural-urban divides in terms of socioeconomic development, have continued since the socialist era, and "that decentralisation has so far failed to reduce [them]" (2016, 163). Not surprisingly, given Lyon's findings in Chapter 4, limited fiscal decentralization has not been effective in addressing socioeconomic rural-urban divides and, crucially for questions of ethnic conflict management, their intersection with ethnic identities.

In the concluding chapter, Lyon recaps the intentions behind decentralization as part of the Ohrid Framework Agreement; the degree to which decentralization processes have been able to address political, cultural, social, and economic inequalities (real and perceived) that arguably motivated the 2001 armed conflict; and central obstacles to a more meaningful implementation of decentralization in the Republic of Macedonia. She ends the chapter with suggestions for further avenues of research.

Decentralisation and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: Lessons from the Republic of Macedonia is an exemplary case study that illustrates Lyon's poignant empirical insights and attention to detail. Largely based on secondary sources, key arguments are supplemented by primary data collected in 137 semistructured interviews over a three-year period. Lyon clearly knows her case study very well, and her experience with and understanding of academic and policy-making debates on the strengths and weaknesses of decentralization shine through the entire volume. The overarching argument is consistently developed, and her ability to condense a wealth of often complex information into concise chapters is very impressive. Short introductions and conclusions for each chapter help tie the different parts of

the analysis together, and the tables and figures serve to emphasize the central arguments effectively.

At the same time, the volume perhaps could have benefited from more confidence in its engagement with certain theoretical debates, as points such as the aforementioned grievance-based explanations of violent ethnic conflict, distinctions between different types of decentralization vs. devolution, or the interplay between formal and informal political institutions (the latter including patterns of clientelism and party patronage) are mentioned rather briefly. Maybe inevitably in a case study as rich as this, the overall balance seems to favor empirical detail rather than emphasize the theoretical contributions of the study at hand, even though it clearly (perhaps just a bit too implicitly) provides crucial insights for the academic debates on the arguable causes of violent ethnic conflict, peacebuilding, and institutional design. In this context, especially the arguments on how informal political institutions seem to undermine the implementation and capacity of decentralization to act as a tool not just of ethnic conflict *management* but also of ethnic conflict *transformation* could have been developed further, as they ought to be of particular relevance to academic and policy-making communities. Similarly, some more discussion of the 137 semistructured interviews and primary data sample beyond a relatively brief outline in the appendix would have been interesting, especially to gain a greater understanding of issues such as the intersection of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and perhaps also gender, to which the author occasionally alludes in her analytical chapters.

Overall, this is a prime example of a very well-rounded, rich, and very well-researched case study that represents an invaluable resource not just for those interested in finding out more

about decentralization processes and challenges in the Republic of Macedonia, but for anyone seeking to understand the often informal obstacles to formal processes of institutional design.

Ulrike G. Theuerkauf

University of East Anglia

u.theuerkauf@uea.ac.uk

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