Book Reviews

Southeastern Europe

Soeren Keil

*Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Farnham, Surrey, Eng.; Burlington, VT: 2013: Ashgate).

Bosnia’s post-1995 history has been marked (and marred) by parallel processes of post-conflict statebuilding, political and economic ‘transition’ from socialism, and more recently the pursuit of membership in the European Union. The future of these developments continues to hinge on the fundamental question concerning the character of the Bosnian state, and the most suitable institutional expression of that character. The answers provided by the local actors generally tend to revolve around one of two poles: Bosnia is primarily either a state composed of three (ethnic) nations, or a state of its (multiethnic) citizenry. The institutional recipes vary accordingly – those subscribing to the former view believe the state should retain much of its ethnofederal and consociational character, whereas those who assume the latter position advocate a less ‘ethnicized’ constitutional architecture.

Soren Keil’s new book is positioned at the nexus of these political (and theoretical) concerns. It examines Bosnia’s federal and power-sharing institutions and links their dynamics (if one can be so generous) to the political struggles among the country’s divided elites. The broader aim of this book, however, is to use the Bosnian case as a foil to the literature on comparative federalism. The book’s central contribution is conceptual – it adds to the analytical toolbox of comparative federalism what Keil calls an ‘internationally administered’ or ‘imposed’ federal variant (pp. 131–32). The author arrives at this innovation by setting the Bosnian case against the discussions of the essential features of federalism in some of the classic (Riker 1964, Wheare 1963) and more recent (Burgess 2006) scholarship on the subject. In this literature, one of the key preconditions for a sustainable federal ‘bargain’ is its voluntary character, and a degree of commitment of all relevant actors to the common state. Bosnia
clearly falls short of this benchmark, given that its federal institutions were imposed by external actors through the Dayton Agreement of 1995. Local actors were, at best, subordinates to the true architects of the country’s constitution.

Keil’s conceptual argument rests on a fairly extensive discussion of federal institutions and ideas (chapters 1 and 2). In the remained of the book, he offers a wealth of empirical material on historical and contemporary Bosnian politics, with an emphasis on the institutional dimension. Chapter 3 summarizes the historical development of separate national identities in Bosnia, as well as the various attempts at managing the territory’s ethnic diversity during late Ottoman, Habsburg and Yugoslav periods. It ends with the examination of the war of independence and the political challenges of the post-war period. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the pillars of Bosnia’s political structure, including the political party system, the institutions of government, and the role played by the international community, notably through the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Chapter 5 is a sweep of the constitutional preferences of the political parties that (claim to) represent Bosnia’s political communities, but also an examination of the dynamics of the Bosnian political system since 1995, such as they are. One is left with the conclusion that Bosnia underwent fairly significant institutional change, but has seen less in terms of meaningful constitutional reform. Thus, the decade of the 2000s brought about the transfer of authority over the armed forces to the central level, the unification of previously separate armies, as well as limited fiscal strengthening of the central government. Yet, it also witnessed the failure of several constitutional reform initiatives. It is only at this point that the author elaborates the book’s main argument (pp. 126–134).

Keil’s emphasis on the new variety of federal system is important, especially if one accepts his premise that future international interventions in ethnically-rooted conflicts will bring about more attempts by the international community to use federal solutions as a way to lasting peace. Certainly, as Keil himself points out, this is already the case in Iraq and, to a more limited degree, in several other places. Yet, I wonder if the contrast that the author draws between Bosnia’s imposed federalism and the presumed voluntarism of federal bargains elsewhere is not overdrawn. Perhaps the apparent dissimilarity between internationally imposed and ‘home-grown’ multinational federalisms would have been less remarkable if Keil compared Bosnia’s system not with ideal-type federations theorized in some of the foundational (though theoretically and empirically limited) work on the subject, but with actual multinational federations.

In such cases, the federal ‘bargain’ is frequently a result of processes subject to a degree of one-sidedness and coercion that puts its consensual credentials