

Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher (eds.): Potentials of Disorder: New Approaches to Conflict Analysis

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Due to their ethnic and religious diversities, and the histories of conflict based on the two, the former Yugoslav territories and the Caucasus are two of the most relevant areas for analyses of the development of ethnic conflicts, and their violent or non-violent resolution. In those territories, ethnicity has become territorialised, and systems of ethno-federalism became the basis for secessionism. Ethnic diversities, ethno-cultural factors and unsolved conflicts between ethnicities, unable to reveal themselves under communist regimes, blazed up after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many authors have acknowledged the collapse of the states as a key variable for explaining conflicts (p. 12). But this should not be seen as the sole explanation for conflicts and violence. Instead it should be seen as the macro-context, and an additional spark to the blaze.

The introduction to this volume, written by editors Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher, is a good summary of the thirteen analytical essays, and a necessary act of the editors to help the reader understand the complexity of the conflicts analysed, and the complexity of conflict as such. In the introduction we are acquainted with the role of official and unofficial institutions in the collapsed states, with social variables in the different cases, and we are introduced to the potential for conflict, violence and disorder in the territories of the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. The authors get to the point right at the beginning in explaining the problems deriving from a state's collapse – a conflict-prone process:

“The former centrally administered society fragments into multiple societies, which have to (re-) build state administrations, (re-) draw boundaries and (re-) invent loyalties. They have to establish new institutional arrangements for self-regulation in order to ensure security, political participation and economic development after empire” (p. 1).

Institutional weakness – inevitable when it comes to state collapse – is both a cause and a consequence of violent conflict. It is used by different factors in a society, who have particular competing (economic, political and/or ideological) interests, and can develop themselves to a level of so-called unofficial institutions, and gain important positions of power in a society or a state. These factors range from single political entrepreneurs to well-structured unofficial institutions like mafia and para-state institutions, such as the “secessionist pseudo-state” (p. 46) of Herzeg-Bosna in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Following the introduction, the book focuses on the question of which parts of society have been able to use the state power vacuum for their own benefit. This can be done by manipulating both the creation of official institutions in new states and their weaknesses, enabling them to come to power, to consolidate their ideology among the people and to benefit from armed conflicts.

The first five chapters analyse the conflicts and their background in the territories of the former Yugoslavia. The authors analyse the situation in the Krajina region of Croatia (Hannes Grandits and Carolin Leutloff), the separatist Croat Republic of Herceg-Bosna in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kristof Gosztanyi), and Kosovo and Macedonia (Norbert Mappes-Niediek). Our attention is then drawn to sometimes forgotten factors in conflict resolutions, such as the unofficial institution of the Albanian mafia (Xavier Raufer), and the historical factor in land reforms (Christian Giordano). These chapters are followed by five more analysing the situation in Dagestan and Chechnya (Enver Kisriev), Georgia (Pavel K. Baev), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher). Following the country-level approach, the Caucasus is studied regarding the development of a regional identity (Olga Vassilieva), and state society relations and conflict in post-socialist Transcaucasia (Barbara Christophe). The volume ends with three chapters: on reconciliation after ethnic cleansing (John Borneman); on interventions in markets of violence, providing insights into the economics of ending organised violence (Georg Elwert); and on the issue of institutions and the organisation of stability and violence (Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher).

The analysis of conflicts' causes draws upon a mix of factors from the historical and ethno-cultural to the personality of political entrepreneurs and the institutional frameworks of official and unofficial institutions—their status, and the centralisation of power and responsibility within them. Case studies from both regions explain that there is no single or simple cause for conflict and violence. For example, the chapter on land reforms in Romania and Yugoslavia can be used as a caricature of the complexity of the cases. Land reforms were namely “aimed at changing the ethnic diversity of historically mixed regions along with disputed, changeable, uncertain and essentially unstable boundaries” (pp. 76–77), and thus represent one potential cause for contemporary ethnic conflicts.

Yet there is no simple solution for the conflicts. The case studies show that similar conflicts can end differently because the political elites act differently, as with Dagestan and Chechnya. In Dagestan, the potential conflict did not erupt because the leading ideology of the nation favoured the republic's existing political status; the political leaders represented the nationalities of the republic as a whole, and they worked well together for the republic's wellbeing. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Chechnya and Georgia, the official institutions were either too weak to control the unofficial ones (parastate institutions, mafia, paramilitary organisations and entrepreneurs), or the historical background, with present events, stimulated fear and intensified nationalism among the people, which was played upon by political entrepreneurs.

State collapse, the weakness of a newly established state, and the peoples' uncertainty and fear (p. 8) all increase the possibility of violent conflict. But the social institutions on the ground also have to be taken into account when we are looking for the resolution to the conflict. Organised crime, for example, plays an important role in supporting and organising violence. The cases of Kosovo, with its well-established mafia structure, and of Georgia draw our attention to the interconnectedness of political violence and organised crime.

REVIEWS

The new post-communist leadership in Georgia was unable to control the paramilitary organisations that relied entirely on illegal sources of income, similar to the UCK in Kosovo, so those organisations had a strong influence on both wars in Georgia: in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia.

Potentials of Disorder, with its wide range of material, will appeal to students, researchers and readers interested in the complexity of conflicts and the different outcomes of similar ethnic conflicts. This is a book which not only reads smoothly, but also, and more importantly, offers some solid approaches to conflict analysis.

Špela Veselič