Democratisation and the Prevention of Violent Conflict: Lessons Learned from Bulgaria and Macedonia

Jenny Engström examines the relationship between democratisation in divided societies and the risk of inter-communal conflict, offering an alternative view of the impact of democratisation on inter-ethnic relations. The author challenges the notion that democratic principles and institutions in post-communist states, if established at all, are likely to have destructive consequences for countries harbouring inter-communal grievances amongst different ethnic groups. Rather, Engström argues that democratisation can help prevent violent conflict and even have a stabilising effect on states that are divided along ethnic lines, given certain conditions. The book draws lessons from a comparative analysis of the post-communist experiences of Bulgaria and Macedonia, two Balkan counties that managed to avoid violent conflict despite the multi-cultural character of their societies, the lack of democratic legacy, and internal and external insecurities during transition.

Engström outlines the preconditions necessary for democratisation to effectively mediate tensions between opposing ethnic or national communities non-violently. She convincingly demonstrates that the process is conditioned by the existence of a general consensus by political elites on the political community and national unity. In this context, Engström demonstrates that the process of consultation is "an important ingredient of peaceful, consensual and inclusive transition to democracy" (p. 164). Bulgaria, she explains, managed to peacefully transition from communism to democracy by establishing a national roundtable that included the Turkish minority and restored its rights. In the case of Maceconia, however, not consulting the non-Macedonian minorities in the process that led to the ratification of its constitution prompted mistrust among the communities in the country.

Engström then addresses the need to understand the type of conflict between different communities sharing the same territorial and political space. She explains that the experiences of Macedonia and Bulgaria have shown that outstanding issues over the gratification of fundamental non-negotiable needs (territory, national belonging, security, and state-building) in multi-ethnic societies render the democratic project, which is based on negotiating competing interests, excessively difficult to realise.

The author also argues for the selection of the right institutional features of the democratic system under development. While inter-ethnic conflicts manifest themselves at the level of ethnicity, their root causes are to be found primarily in historical, economic, political and socio-psychological legacies. She maintains that the main features of democratisation – the formation of a multiparty system, regular and free elections, and civil and political rights – render possible the

political organisation of previously suppressed peoples and allow for inclusion in society. Yet, the Balkan cases demonstrate that for the process to be successful, the political elite of the given country must consistently and deliberately opt for the democratic choice. A limited definition of democracy constrained in the remit of competitive multiparty elections is thus insufficient.

Fourthly, Engström considers the significance of the internal security environment during the initial transition phase following the breakdown of a regime and the influence of external security threats in compromising successful democratisation. Macedonia's experience with democratisation and conflict prevention highlights the interconnectedness of domestic political transformation and international political forces. The author illustrates that following its decision to leave the Yugoslav federation, Macedonia's political leadership managed to maintain a relatively moderate line in national politics and with neighbouring states, in order not to provoke any aggression from within (ethnic Albanian community) or from external actors (Kosovo spillover). Furthermore, Engström points to the role of international actors in encouraging the development of democracy in a given state. Faulty international policies and a lack of understanding of the cultural and historical legacies of the Balkans led to an absence of political and economic support to the region (including Macedonia) at a time of dire need. In Bulgaria, however, the process of democratisation and the development of a minority rights framework was significantly influenced and supported by the Council of Europe and the European Union.

This study offers poignant lessons for democratisation and conflict resolution, which could apply to the Cyprus conflict. While it does not share the communist legacy of the Balkan cases, the Cyprus case is also proof of the premise that the formation of new states in heterogeneous societies is a primary risk factor for ethno-political conflict. As with Macedonia, in 1960 the newly established Republic of Cyprus suffered from a weak political system that was not yet consolidated, a legitimacy deficit and destabilising power struggles that led to violence and extremism. Engström also pertinently points to the need for leaders to publicly address past conflicts and mistakes between the different communities and to strive towards reconciliation between them, an element lacking from efforts to resolve the Cyprus stalemate. Moreover, the author reminds us of an important lesson that could serve Cyprus well: where a parliamentary system was chosen in multi-ethnic Balkan countries (Slovenia, Bulgaria and Macedonia), democratisation progressed relatively peacefully, while in those countries where power became vested in the office of a president – Croatia, Serbia – the democratisation process was stopped in its tracks at an early stage by political leaders.

Engström makes an important contribution to our understanding of the political dynamics of ethnicity and democracy, combining a well-conceptualised theoretical frame-work with two fascinating case studies into an insightful comparative analysis that is relevant far beyond the Balkans. This book would be of interest to a wide range of experts, political scientists, scholars in international relations, and policy-makers on the domestic and international scene, interested in the concept of democracy and political pluralism in ethno-nationalist disputes.

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