



Timofey Agarin, Karl Cordell. *Minority Rights and Minority Protection in Europe*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016. 218 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78348-191-0.



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## Minority Protection in Postcommunist Europe: European in Form, National in Content

The context of Timofey Agarin and Karl Cordell's book, *Minority Rights and Minority Protection in Europe*, is minority protection in postcommunist member states of the European Union. Since the fall of communist regimes, central and eastern Europe have undergone a radical reconfiguration on the societal, political, and economic levels. This dramatic transition to liberal democracy and market economy was closely followed, if not accompanied by the disintegration of the multinational Soviet, Yugoslav, and binational Czechoslovak states; twenty-four successor states emerged in eastern and central Europe and Eurasia. The emergence of these states, some amidst bitter ethno-national conflict (the former Yugoslavia mainly) carried a deep meaning for their populations. Some became nation-states for the first time in their history, and all (re)gained sovereignty after decades of sacrificing it to an ideological imposition of socialist internationalism.

It is important not to underestimate the significance of the transformation from a national unit within a multinational federation to an independent state, or in the case

of existing states, such as Poland and Hungary, the significance of national sovereignty in conditions of a newly established democracy. At the time when western Europe was putatively entering a postnational era, postcommunist Europe was entering a national era. In order to analyze the salience of nationalism and ensuing nationalist processes within and beyond the newly reconfigured postcommunist states, Rogers Brubaker in *Nationalism Reframed* (1996) refers to "nationalizing states."

To this reviewer, all postcommunist states were nationalizing states. These states were not of and for one nation; they were a micro-version of the multiethnic entities that they emerged from. They were a home to one core national group which understood itself as the legitimate "owner" of the state and a number of other ethnic groups, or, as they are usually and unhelpfully known, minorities (where cultural and political nation do not overlap). This does not stop the nation-builders from pursuing the dream of a real or rather imaginary nation-state where culture, territory, and polity are congruent.

In a markedly different development to western Europe, the particularity of postcommunism is that the nation-building process became synchronized with a state-building process, whose aim was the promotion not of the dominant nation and its story, but of democratic citizenship policies, including minority rights, and decisions about its position in the international community and what kind of a state it should be. The simultaneity of these two often contradictory processes results in a dynamic in which nation building competes with state building and vice versa. The result is that ethnicity enters the political arena precisely at the time when democracy rather than ethnicity should be at the heart of the political process. In reality, democracy becomes a way of confirming national sovereignty and gets confused with national self-determination of the titular nationality whose interest it is to serve.

The simultaneity of nation and state building is further exacerbated by the European integration and internationalization of interethnic relations and minority rights. Nine postcommunist states are now full members of the European Union and a number of others have signed association agreements. While European integration is generally assumed to have been positive for eastern and central European democracy and produced impressive minority protection legislation, the focus of academic scholarship on European integration has rested far too much on the acquisition of membership, compliance, conditionality, and other institutional matters, mostly relating to the speed and process of “Europeanization.”

I have argued elsewhere that while postcommunism is synonymous with democratization and democratization is synonymous with European integration, European integration is not synonymous with the decreased relevance of ethnicity. Contrary to expectations, the eastward expansion of the European Union did not dampen the politicization of ethnicity, but rather signaled its reinvention and, in some cases, reinvigoration.[1]

Timofey Agarin and Karl Cordell’s much-welcomed book is a great contribution to this debate and enriches the scholarship on eastern Europe by presenting a number of postcommunist states in their new role, that of a well-established member of the European Union. Nevertheless, the book has an important message for the European Union and its future: it argues that domestic institutions prioritize the interests of national states and their majorities over European norms. In systematic evaluation of the impact of domestic institutional dynam-

ics on the operationalization of the European minority-rights regime, they show that the “return to Europe” did not improve the situation of minorities in postcommunist states.

I am not convinced that this is quite as bad as it is presented. The initial conditionality of the Copenhagen Criteria did bring in a minority legislation which would not be there otherwise. The question is rather about why conditionality ceases to be scrutinized after the accession when it is more than evident that all member states (not postcommunist ones only) frequently do not adhere to the ethos and norms of the European Union. Agarin and Cordell write that “European integration and normative convergence into a coherent regime for ethnic diversity management based on non-discrimination have largely failed to challenge the nation-based model of state consolidation, democratization and European integration inside the EU” (p. 93).

If one of the aims of this book was to make academics and policymakers assess the impact of postcommunist domestic institutions on the implementation of the European minority-rights regime, Agarin and Cordell have succeeded very well. The methodological framework of three-level analysis—sub-state politics, domestic/national policymaking, and European norms fixed in international agreements—serves well the authors’ argument that minority interests were undermined at all three levels. The structure of the book and the case studies endorse this main theme and perhaps more interestingly, also show the good intention of the European Union to grant minorities a degree of protection and the pre-accession willingness of domestic actors to comply with these requirements.

The goodwill and good intentions and existing norms and policies do not appear to have led to a change of attitude toward minorities and consequently have failed to improve the position of minorities—particularly in the case of Roma—new migrants, and refugees in any substantive way.

Agarin and Cordell’s book is compelling for those who are not familiar with minority-protection policies and the dynamics preventing a full implementation of European norms in postcommunist Europe. For those familiar with the interaction between domestic and European structures at the policymaking level, the book is a reminder of the fundamental tension between the nationalism-transcending ethos of the European Union and the latter’s own structure institutionalizing the nation-state.

European integration aided the establishment of democratic governance in postcommunist Europe. Perhaps inadvertently, it reestablished the notion of nation-states as “serving primarily their majority in order to guarantee the stability of the overall intergovernmental system of the Union” (p. 101). There is a tension at the heart of the Union: its norms require solidarity of citizens across the borders of its member nation-states, but the implementation of these norms, particularly in minority protection, relies on domestic structures of the nation-state, which continues to serve its majorities and venerate its sovereignty.

The current crisis of the European Union, Brexit, the rejection of refugee quotas by central European states, the rise of far-right nationalist parties, and the ever-

growing appeal to national interest over European solidarity all point in the direction of this fundamental tension in eastern and western Europe alike. Thus, the only weakness of this overall excellent book is its focus on postcommunist Europe rather than on Europe (as the title somewhat misleadingly suggests), in which all states are European in form, but national in content.

#### Note

[1]. Erika Harris, “What is New about ‘Eastern Nationalism’ and What Are the Implications for Studies of Ethnicity Today?,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 18, no. 3 (2012): 337-357.

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