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Lyon, Aisling. *Decentralisation and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: Lessons from the Republic of Macedonia*. Oxon: Routledge. 2016. Pp. 248. £90.00. Hardback: 9781138944114.

Can decentralisation of power to the local level contribute to the management of ethnic conflict? This is the main question that Dr Aisling Lyon's well written book tackles by analyzing the Macedonian experience of decentralisation reforms (launched in 2005). Macedonia is a small new state in Europe's Balkan periphery but the problem behind its decision to decentralize is big and old: what to do with sizeable national minorities aggrieved by their unequal position in a nation-state. The fondly nurtured fiction of titular majorities' ownership over European nation-states has left little room for negotiations over the unitary character of these states. This, Dr Lyon points out, is where the appeal of decentralisation lies: it has the potential to address minority grievances (Albanian, in this case), while at the same time preserving the unitary character of the state (p. 43). In particular, the Macedonian experience with decentralisation is interesting because it represents an example of 'the emerging practice of complex power-sharing' (pp. 44, 55), extensively analyzed in the case of Northern Ireland by Prof Brendan O'Leary (who has generously endorsed Dr Lyon's book in a foreword). One of the many strengths of the book is that it engages consistently and thoroughly with the literature on consociational democracy and various self-government arrangements, arguing in a balanced manner for the benefits of decentralisation in appeasing both the aggrieved minority and the insecure majority.

The book's explicit focus, however, is not on the complexity of the power-sharing arrangement in Macedonia (combining 'consociational, centripetalist and integrative approaches to peace building', p. 43) but on its local implementation in the period 2005-2012. More specifically, Dr Lyon's interest in decentralisation focuses on its potential to address the 'political, cultural, social, [and] economic inequalities' (pp. 28-39) experienced by the Albanian community in Macedonia during the 1990s that caused them in 2001 to pursue their interests outside the political process and under the banner of the insurgents from the Albanian National Liberation Army. The central argument advanced in the analysis is that decentralisation does, indeed, have the potential *to address* these inequalities, but it has been constrained by limited fiscal autonomy (which undermines the actual devolution of political and administrative authority) and by existing socio-economic disparities between urban and rural areas (pp. 11-3).

The analysis constantly returns to the theme of inequality, both as an explanation of ethnic conflict, and as a key to managing it. Dr Lyon offers two very useful tables (at the end of Chapter I and at the end of the Conclusion) detailing areas of inequalities and corresponding Albanian demands at the beginning of the conflict (together with Macedonian concerns over addressing them), as well as the quality of the solution offered by decentralisation. In between these two tables is the empirical analysis of the reforms, organized in four chapters. Three of them closely follow the author's central argument about the subversive potential of fiscal central control over municipal power-sharing, enhanced citizens participation, the relevance of local party politics, and the decentralisation of services such as primary and secondary education. The fourth chapter appears to somehow challenge this coherence of structure by diverting the reader's attention from the effects of decentralisation on the inequalities between Albanians and Macedonians, to the effects of decentralisation on general territorial and socio-economic disparities across Macedonia's six nominal regions (not necessarily relating these to Macedonian-Albanian differences). While these disparities are no doubt relevant to fully understanding the Macedonian-Albanian context, they do not directly

address the book's central concern (sustainably managing ethnic conflict) but rather problematize sustainable (and equal) economic development. One way for the reader to bridge this gap in structural coherence is mentioned, partially and rather in passing, by the author herself (p. 139). What unites Chapter V with the previous three is, again, the theme of inequality. The first three empirical chapters are dedicated to *vertical* imbalances between the central and sub-central levels of government in terms of planned and actual devolution of powers. Dr Lyon only ever speaks of vertical *fiscal* imbalances, when contrasting them to the *horizontal* fiscal imbalances reviewed in the fourth empirical chapter. But it seems clear that the municipal democracy and sub-central services chapters, too, neatly fit along the vertical dimension of imbalances, because they discuss the achievements and faults of implementing only partial devolution. While this assumption reinforces the coherence of the empirical investigation, it also points to the special predilection of the author for fiscal analysis. Linked to her professional experience as a feasibility expert and consultant on local self-government in Macedonia and in Kosovo, the fiscal analysis aptly complements the cross-disciplinary angle of the study.

What the analytical emphasis on inequality seems to omit is that neither the breakout of ethnic conflict, nor its 'management', as the book title goes, would have been feasible without the agency of determined - and, later, willing to accommodate - leadership. Dr Lyon's book is not concerned with the role of elites but with the potential of decentralisation as a long-term solution to ethnic conflict: and the analysis of the implemented reforms is by no means poorer for it. However, without giving any consideration to the specific role of elites in Macedonia, the central argument of the book sounds somewhat incomplete. Of course, decentralisation has the potential to address inequalities: in an ideal world. But as the rich in detail investigation offered here of the highly deficient democratic process, the adverse effects of administrative devolution, the unwillingness to relinquish fiscal control, and the disparate starting positions demonstrates, Macedonia is not an ideal world. Decentralisation stands to be credited with 'managing' the ethnic conflict and offering potential long-term solution to it, whereas it appears that it has not really corrected almost any of the inequalities which Dr Lyon singles out as central to Albanian grievances. The decisive role of the decentralisation reform has much more likely been one of legitimizing the inclusion of the Albanian insurgency leadership - which in 2002 formed its own political party (DUI) - into the ranks of the central government. This allowed the Albanian elites to claim symbolic, and even more so material, ownership of the resources of the state, thus removing themselves from the landscape of inter-ethnic inequalities as the enablers of ethnic conflict. Dr Lyon rightly includes this 'politics of betrayal' (p. 184) on behalf of the Albanian leadership among her 'obstacles to successful implementation of decentralisation' (pp. 178-85). The fact that she dedicates it a little over a page in the final section of her Conclusion suggests that she does not consider it critical to her analysis. But without full assessment of the role of elites - both ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian - in the successes and failures of decentralisation, it is very difficult to appreciate the *actual* (as opposed to theoretical) potential of decentralisation to 'manage' ethnic conflict.

Dr Nevena Nancheva

Kingston University London

n.nancheva@kingston.ac.uk

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