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Foreign Policy as a Tool of State-Building in the Post-Yugoslav States

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SOEREN KEIL, OCT 10 2014

Since the break-up of the Yugoslav socialist federation in the early 1990s, there have been three waves of scholarly discussion on the post-Yugoslav states. [1] The first wave of literature in the 1990s discussed the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the role of international actors, and peace-building efforts. This literature often included the accounts of officials who were directly involved in peace-building and the negotiations which created the post-war order (Woodward 1995, Calic 1996, Glenny 1996, Bildt 1998, Burg and Shoup 1999, Holbrooke 1999). The second set of literature, starting in the early 2000s focused more on questions of democratisation and state-building in the region. With the peace processes in Bosnia and Kosovo being relatively successful, the academic focus shifted to questions of sustainable state consolidation, democratic elections, civil society involvement and the role of international actors in these processes (Chandler 2000, Caplan 2005, Coles 2007, Hehir 2010). In recent years a new trend can be observed. Not only are the political systems of the post-Yugoslav studied using methods of comparative institutional design, but the role of the European Union (EU) has become more and more important (Bose 2002, Bieber 2006, Keil 2013, Radalijc 2013, Keil and Arkan 2014).

While the more recent trend towards a focus on the post-Yugoslav states as independent political systems is most welcome, many areas remain under-researched. This has a significant impact not only on our academic understanding of the political development of these countries since they became independent and their current constitutional challenges in light of EU integration, but also for the EU, which has been struggling in its engagement with the region in recent years, often being unable to address serious political conflicts. Hence, further studies are needed to understand how the political systems work, how political actors reach their decision, which role nationalism plays as an ideological framework for political motivation and what the future role of the EU and other international actors in the region will be. One way to address some of these questions is by studying the foreign policy of the post-Yugoslav states and its link to the political system and its main features.

Foreign Policy as a Tool of State-Building? [2]

The interesting thing about the study of the foreign policy of the post-Yugoslav foreign policy is not only the lack of academic literature on this topic and the potential for new research insights, but also the link between foreign policy and other state- and nation-building processes in the region. In other words, the study of foreign policy as one policy field within the wider political decision-making processes of the post-Yugoslav states tells us something about (1) policy formulation and decision-making; (2) the role of internal and external actors in the policy process; (3) the role of historical narratives in the process of policy-making and implementation; (4) the capacity of a state to formulate and implement a specific foreign policy; (5) the relationship between different internal and external actors, and (5) to what extent foreign policy reflects wider policy issues. In short, foreign policy often reflects wider issues of state-building and nation-formation, particularly (but not only) in the young states in Southeastern Europe. Hence, the study of foreign policy as a tool of state-building promises to shed light into fundamental questions of state capacity, decision-making, state-identification, internal and external policy priorities and the role of historical narratives. These narratives should not be underestimated, as Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (2002) remind us in the context of the Scandinavian countries.

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In its simplest definition, foreign policy refers to the engagement of one state with other states (and other subjects of international politics such as international organisations) and state-building is defined as the process of building effective state structures at local, regional and central level. [3] What connects the two processes in the case of the post-Yugoslav states is the question of legitimacy. The post-Yugoslav states became independent states since the early 1990s, for them state-building and state-consolidation were key tools of building internal legitimacy among their population. The war in Croatia and Bosnia occurred because a part of the population did not want to recognise the legitimacy of these states. Hence state-building, including the establishment of functional administrative structures, the implementation of constitutional law in all parts of the country and the building of police and military structures are all part of the wider strategy to secure internal legitimacy. However, internal legitimacy should not be confused with democracy. It is well established that neither Croatia after 1991 nor rump-Yugoslavia (after 1992) should be considered democracies. Elections were used to confirm the ruling elites in power, rather than representing the will of the people. This of course had consequences for their foreign policy, i.e. their ambition to be recognised as legitimate actors by other states within the international sphere. Their lack of democratic governance meant that these states struggled to engage in constructive relations not only with their near neighbourhood but also with other states in Europe. Croatia is a particularly interesting example here, in the early 1990s the Tudman government used the discourse on Croatia as a European country to legitimise its secession from Yugoslavia and its “return to Europe,” however once the EU and other actors began to criticise Tudman for his authoritarian leadership, Europe became the enemy, the entity that left Croatia alone during the war.

The question of legitimacy remains important in other areas as well. Clearly, in Kosovo internal and external legitimacy are strongly connected, and Kosovo's foreign policy is focused nearly exclusively on increasing the number of countries that recognise the independence of the Republic of Kosovo. Kosovo's integration into the EU is very much part of this wider strategy, connecting internal legitimacy (i.e. the right of the Kosovan state to exist) to external legitimacy as a country that is part of the EU's enlargement policy. Internal and external legitimacy are also highly interconnected in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not only have the entities the right to engage in their own, limited foreign policy with neighbouring states, but the inability of Bosnian elites to formulate a coherent foreign policy strategy reflects the inability of the Bosnian state to function properly within the framework of the Dayton system. Questions of legitimacy have also become more and more important in the case of Macedonia. In recent years the Macedonian government has engaged in a strong nation-building exercise, which is not only reflected in the architectural re-design of the capital Skopje (as part of the project Skopje 2014), but also in renewed discourses on Macedonian history, identity and nationhood. This has had a very negative impact on Macedonian foreign policy, since these discourses are highly contested in Greece and Bulgaria. Both countries have recently vetoed the start of EU membership negotiations with Macedonia and Greece also vetoed Macedonia's entry into NATO in 2009.

Other examples to demonstrate the link between foreign policy and state-building include Slovenia's foreign policy after independence, which focused on a “return to Europe” and a re-branding of the country as a Central European (rather than Balkan) country. This foreign policy, which prioritised Slovenia's integration into the EU and NATO was also used to legitimise the existence of the Slovenian state and its secession from the Yugoslav federation. More importantly, since Slovenia has joined the EU in 2004, there is a clear lack of foreign policy priorities. The main aim, integrating the country into Europe and thereby completing its manifestation as an independent country, have been achieved and since then several governments have been unable (and unwilling) to agree on a new foreign policy strategy (even as part of a wider European foreign policy)

When studying the use of foreign policy as a tool of state-building, it is important to keep in mind that the post-Yugoslav states are young countries that have only become independent since the early 1990s. In all countries forms of internal legitimacy (state-building) and external legitimacy (through engagement with other states, i.e. foreign policy) overlapped and continue to do so. In 1990 new elites came to power in these countries who were anti-Communist and pro-independence. Only in Serbia and Montenegro, there were elites which supported the continued existence of the Yugoslav state, albeit under the dominance of Serbia and Slobodan Milošević. From the beginning of the Yugoslav dissolution, foreign policy and state-building were strongly interconnected. In fact, the first act to become independent was to ask other states for independence, i.e. to become an equal player within international politics. The overall question of secession/state-dissolution was decided by international actors (in this case the Badinter Commission), who outlined principles that these states had to comply with to be recognised. The violent

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conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia resulted in a strong link between state-building, violent conflict and international engagement to solve the crisis. Even when the violence ended in both countries in 1995 international actors remained important, in Bosnia NATO and the Office of the High Representative (OHR) became key protectors of peace in the immediate post-war era, while in Croatia the UN ensured the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into the Croatian state.

Today, we are still in a situation where foreign policy and state-building overlap and become blurred. In Kosovo internal legitimacy is strongly connected to external recognition. Its relationship with Serbia is strongly connected to its prospects to integrate into the EU, while Serbia too has to engage with Kosovo in order to proceed towards EU membership. The state-building process in Kosovo and Serbia (without Kosovo) is therefore directly connected to their EU integration process, which both countries have defined as their highest foreign policy priority. In Bosnia and Macedonia the EU has become a somewhat 'domesticated actor', which plays a direct role in policy formulation and implementation. EU enlargement and internal state-consolidation and democratization are thereby strongly connected and overlap. Even in Montenegro, which is possibly the most consolidated non-EU Member State in the region, successes in EU integration remain a powerful tool of consolidating and strengthening the rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the leadership of Milo Đukanović.

Conclusion

The study of foreign policy as a tool of state-building promises further insights into the political dynamics within the post-Yugoslav states. However, research in this area does not only promise new empirical evidence from the former Yugoslavia and the foreign policy of new states, but it will ultimately also force us to re-think key concepts in international relations. For example, in the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, where international actors (mainly the EU) are part of the wider governance structure and become domestic actors, what does "sovereignty" mean? How can we understand "independence" when the main foreign policy priority of all post-Yugoslav states is EU integration, i.e. the voluntary transfer of decision-making competences to the EU institutions? Finally, how can we conceptualise "legitimacy" when foreign policy and state-building are so strongly connected in the post-Yugoslav states? These are, but some of the new theoretical and empirical puzzles that the study of the foreign policy of the post-Yugoslav states promises to bring up. They are mainly academic considerations, however, in particular when looking at the engagement of the EU with the region and its limited impact on state-consolidation and democratisation in a number of post-Yugoslav states in recent years, it becomes obvious that these puzzles also have a direct policy relevance, not only for the countries in the region but also for European representatives.

Notes

[1] This refers to Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

[2] Parts of this discussion can be found in the different chapters in Keil and Stahl (2014).

[3] For a definition of foreign policy, see Hill (2002) and for a deeper discussion on state-building see Chandler (2010).

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