

2020-01-02

The European Union's approach to conflict resolution: transformation or regulation in the Western Balkans

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/15979>

10.1080/09662839.2019.1641696

European Security

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Review of Lawrence Cooley (2019) 'The European Union's Approach to Conflict Resolution: transformation or regulation in the Western Balkans', London: Routledge

This is the accepted version of a publication which is going to appear in European Security

Lawrence Cooley's book tackles a timely topic, namely the EU's role in conflict resolution. The literature on this topic is vast and it now spans several decades. However, the book still promises to make a valuable contribution to the literature as it rightfully acknowledges that the EU's aim has mainly been portrayed as the 'transformation of conflicts' rather than their 'regulation or management' (p. 13). That the EU could move away from conflict transformation is something one could be inclined to agree with and therefore this book raises significant expectations in its being quite intriguing. While the discussion in some places could be a bit more concise, the book is well organised overall. The analysis moves quite neatly from a theoretical and conceptual part to the empirical part, which encompasses three case studies. These are Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo. Cooley's theoretical framework draws upon a sophisticated discussion of the literature on the role of ideas in policy-making. The aim of the analysis is to seek out 'evidence of the institutionalisation of ideas about the nature of conflict and its drivers' (p. 8). This discussion leads Cooley to offer a typology of approaches to institutional design in divided societies – namely consociationalism, centripetalism and power dividing. Cooley's analysis seemingly draws upon a preference for consociationalism, given its emphasis on a more cautious approach 'that accepts the realities of divisions and seeks to manage rather than to transform them' (p. 54). Here comes the promise of this book, which is worth re-stating given its importance, namely to advance the argument that the EU's conflict resolution policies fit more closely with regulation rather than transformation of conflicts. This is a very compelling insight and I believe that Cooley's book rightly identifies an avenue of research, which was worth pursuing. Nevertheless, the book has some limitations which impair the analytical punch of the analysis and which ultimately make the argument less penetrating than it could be. Firstly, the case study selection could be discussed a bit more in depth. The EU has become involved in conflicts in many parts of the world and a clearer note could have helped to explain why the author selected the case studies of Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo.

In particular, when referring to Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, the book's premise that the EU is now 'the lead international actor in all three of these states' (p. 3) is not only unqualified but also hard to believe without a thorough discussion. A multitude of actors has played, and arguably continues to play, a role in the Western Balkans. The first, and most obvious one, is NATO. The latter's role is overlooked almost entirely in the analysis. While it is true that the book is about the EU's role in conflict resolution, it is difficult to completely leave NATO out of the analysis. NATO's role in Bosnia (see for example Operation Deliberate Force in 1995), in Kosovo (NATO has led the peace-support operation there since 1999) and in North Macedonia (currently in the process of acceding NATO), is arguably too important not to mention. It could be the case, that the EU has its own distinctive approach in the Western Balkans, transcending NATO but this remains a hypothesis. Unfortunately, too little in Cooley's book contributes to addressing this. Secondly, Cooley's analysis does not sufficiently take into account the role of external powers such as Russia and, to an extent China. How the EU regulates conflicts in the Western Balkans in light of increasing efforts by outside powers to build economic, social and political ties with governments and societies is something, which arguably deserved to be mentioned. Thirdly, the book could be a bit more specific in terms of the period for the analysis. This is arguably quite important when dealing with conflicts, which are in flux such as the ones in the Western Balkans. The EU's engagement with the conflicts in the Balkans arguably began in the early 1990s. Jacques Poos, the Chair of the European Community Foreign Affairs Council and the foreign minister of Luxembourg, famously asserted 'this is the hour of Europe – not the hour of the Americans...if one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem. This is a European country and it is not up to the Americans. It is not up to anyone else' (quoted in Wintz 2010, p. 33). Many changes have occurred within the EU since then and in the ways in which it handled the conflicts in the Western Balkans. Therefore, it is necessary to identify some benchmarks in the analysis to bring theoretical and empirical material closer together. How the EU allegedly began to focus on regulation rather than transformation and why it did so remains a little bit unclear after readings Cooley's book. This omission manifests itself methodologically too as the author could have expanded upon the discussion concerning how the interviews were coded and what explained variation among the case studies. This could be solved by providing a more extensive methodological discussion and

common context against which the three case studies could be set. This is a suggestion for a further volume as the author recognises the need to expand the analysis to further cases, possibly beyond the Western Balkans. Despite the limitations, which were identified, the book still represents a stimulating and refreshing read, bringing attention back to the EU's attempt to bring stability to the Western Balkans. It will be useful for reading lists of modules focusing on European security at advanced undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Scholars who are interested in researching the area of EU's role in conflict resolution will benefit from engaging with this book as it could contribute to a discussion concerning the future role of the EU in the Western Balkans.

References

Wintz, M. (2010) *Transatlantic diplomacy and use of military force in the post-Cold War era*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.