Revisiting the question of institutional design in ethnically divided societies through the lens of minority education. Comparative perspectives from Europe’s Eastern periphery

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Abstract
This thesis puts in a new light the old problem of institutional design for ethnically divided societies. The lens through which I examine this question is mass education, a key mechanism of cultural reproduction and ethno-national homogenization. In doing so I integrate the insights of various intellectual traditions, including the most recent developments in the field of comparative ethnicity and nationalism, as well as neoinstitutional analysis. The logic and method of the thesis is comparative, based on case studies from Europe’s Eastern periphery. It draws its evidence from a variety of sources, including interview material and the related historiography. I begin by delineating the general research problem, reviewing the existing theoretical and empirical literature, and outlining the place of my study in it.

More specifically, the first analytical chapter presents the detailed examination of the evolution of interethnic relations in Bulgaria and Romania. It traces the socio-historical process of how minorities have been forged from formerly dominant populations (Turks and Hungarians, respectively) via the interplay of purposeful nationalizing policies and spontaneous social dynamics, linking this process to the institutional configurations that prevail today. The next chapter further elaborates on the role of history and time, exploring the connection between various modalities of “groupness” and the institutional landscape. Specifically, comparing the case of the Russian-speakers in Estonia and the Hungarians in Romania, the chapter investigates the variable ways non-dominant social categories may come to feel attached to “their” institutions constructing notions of fairness and/or collective identities around them, and how these attachments may underlie ethnicized conflict. By highlighting the role of institutions, both as mechanisms contributing to the construction of collective identities, as well as objects in interethnic contestation, the chapter offers an innovative take on how ethnic
identity and institutions interlink. Finally, the last empirical chapter directs attention from the past towards present preoccupations and future prospects, by mapping minorities’ education-related preferences, and explaining what drives their formation. The chapter returns to the pair of the Turks in Bulgaria and the Hungarians in Romania and demonstrates that preferences – as articulated by strategically positioned individuals – are highly context-dependent and that they are largely determined by three factors: majority opinion, minority political representation and the appeal of migration as a normative path to upward social mobility. Overall, this thesis demonstrates how constructivist theorizing and empirical analysis can be combined in moving beyond the assumption of clearly defined ethnic groups with clear-cut identities and interests. In doing so, the thesis advocates an institutionalist approach to ethnicity and nationalism as a way to problematize “groupness” and endogenize institutions to identity projects. The thesis also shows how history matters, by paying close attention to timing and temporal order and by connecting the passage of time with the creation of collective attachments to institutions. Finally, the thesis explicitly adopts the viewpoint of the non-dominant social categories as a corrective to the idea that the management of diversity depends overwhelmingly on the majority population, government or state.

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Bio

Anna Kyriazi is a PhD researcher in the Department of Social and Political Science at the European University Institute. She received an honors degree in literature and linguistics from the Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, and in East European area studies from the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki. Formerly she was a visiting researcher at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at the Pompeu Fabra University. Her main research interests include the sociology of ethnicity and nationalism, minority education, comparative European politics, and political communication.