

Book Reviews



Marek Mikuš. *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia* (New York, USA: Berghahn, 2018) ISBN 9781785338908.

Whereas a large proportion of scholarship on the ‘transition’ of the Western Balkans as part of the Europeanisation process tends to focus on the successes or failures of reforms, Marek Mikuš takes a fundamentally different approach to the topic. In this insightful and engaging book, he takes the discourses and practices of reforms as the object of analysis, thereby engaging in a critical analysis of the Europeanisation process. Focusing on the role of civil society in the post-Milošević transitions in Serbia, Mikuš provides an in-depth anthropological analysis of the hegemonic struggles between the liberal and nationalist elements of Serbian civil society over the ‘transformation of the state, the frontiers of civil society with other domains, and the public representation of these processes in categories of common interest and common sense’ (p. 265).

Frontiers of Civil Society provides a theoretical contribution which reconceptualises civil society and transgresses disciplinary boundaries. Although the book seems to mainly speak to anthropological debates, I would argue that the relational conceptualisation of civil society has a much wider theoretical relevance, and will be of interest to scholars from a variety of fields. By bringing the struggles between the state and civil society to the fore, the presented theoretical framework does not only provide the conceptual tools to critically examine different types of transitions and reforms—including, but not limited to Europeanisation, democratisation and neoliberalisation processes—but it also fundamentally challenges the idea of the liberal and progressive nature of civil society that is often taken for granted by political science scholars.

The theoretical framework is developed in Part One of the book. Using a Gramscian approach, the author defines civil society relationally. In doing so, he rejects the idea that civil society is a sector and argues that it instead should be understood as ‘mechanisms and practices that mediate between, and thereby reconstitute, the structures of the economy and the superstructures

of ideology and the state' (p. 17). *Frontiers of Civil Society* considers civil society to be a field of hegemonic structures that is delineated by frontiers. The metaphor of frontier is invoked to denote the inherently dynamic, contested and porous nature of the boundaries of civil society. Chapter 1 extends the theoretical framework presented in the introduction by applying it to the Serbian context. Through the historicising of civil society within the Serbian context, Mikuš provides the necessary historical and political background of Serbia's civil society against which the empirical material should be read.

From Part Two onwards, the book unpacks the empirical research and presents an extremely detailed and nuanced discussion of the hegemonic projects that govern Serbia's civil society as well as of how the frontiers of civil society have been shaped and reshaped in the process. The richness of the data and the analysis make it nearly impossible to summarise the multiplicity of arguments made, but I highlight some key points, which are of potential interest to a variety of audiences.

Part Two of *Frontiers of Civil Society* turns to the struggles within civil society regarding the hegemonic process of transnational and European integration. Unpacking the Europeanisation process as based on a modernisation myth, Mikuš provides a critical understanding of how this process has shaped civil society, both the liberal and nationalist forces within it. Whereas scholars interested in EU integration and civil society often consider how the EU has empowered civil society (see e.g. Wunsch 2018), *Frontiers of Civil Society* demonstrates how the hegemonic process has also trapped Serbian liberal civil society in a position that prevents it from radically challenging the transnational integration process. Although civil society actors voice radical critiques of EU integration in informal settings, the modernisation myth and hegemonic narratives of transition prevent the public discussion of said critiques. Similarly, through examining the narratives against the Belgrade Pride Parade, it is shown how the hegemonic project shaped the so-called 'Patriotic Bloc' contestation of Europeanisation. As few scholars pay attention to the 'dark side' of civil society, the critical and in-depth analysis of the Patriotic Bloc provides valuable insights which are of interest for Europeanisation scholars, but also provide new nuances to populism studies. Of particular interest here is the empirical finding that the nationalist Patriotic Bloc consists of well-educated, middle-class elites, which challenges the notion that populism (at least in Serbia) is driven by working-class dispositions.

Part Three of the book focuses on the frontier between civil society and the state. It analyses how the hegemonic project of neoliberalisation has created transgressions of the frontier as well as a new regulatory regime that governs said frontier. Looking at the government-civil society partnership's

reform agenda, *Frontiers of Civil Society* highlights how elements of the state have been transferred to civil society. The neoliberal agenda of transparency and efficiency, it is argued, has created a regime of regulations that governs (the transgressions of) the frontier. Through rich empirical material, Mikuš demonstrates how the transparency agenda has led to an increased focus on technical aspects, whilst obscuring the political agendas of reforms and civil society. Rather than opening up partnerships to a variety of civil society actors, these reforms favoured a rather elite set of civil society actors. Additionally, the book demonstrates how the neoliberalisation and Europeanisation hegemonic projects have led to what is called the 'projectification of the state'. This idea captures how aspects of the state are increasingly governed by the short-term project-based structures which are typically characteristic of a donor-supported civil society. In doing this, Mikuš contributes with detailed empirical descriptions to the existing debates within Europeanisation literature on the unintended consequences of reforms. He further shows how the project of European integration is not only limited by weak stateness (Elbasani 2013), but that the reforms themselves also create and reinforce state structures that undermine the aims of said project and reforms.

The final section of the book looks at the frontier between civil society and society as a whole. Analysing the emergence of philanthropic fundraising in the wake of donor retreat and civil society engagement with public advocacy in the periphery, Mikuš discusses the indigenisation of the liberal civil society. And although more indigenised organisations are more likely to align their objectives with non-elite citizens, Mikuš also observes that the emphasis of these organisations will be more on practical and subhegemonic agendas that seek to correct and address the gaps and failures of the dominant model of reforms rather than to deal with the wider hegemonic project as such.

In the conclusion, Mikuš brings together the multiple arguments made in the book. In particular, he unpacks the 'antipolitics' of the reforms and civil society. In doing so, he demonstrates the complexity of depoliticisation and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the concept that allows to 'distinguish between its various possible registers in addition to the emphasis on instrumental rationality' (p.270). He eloquently unpacks how civil society has both contested and contributed to these tendencies as well as how the process has shaped Serbian politics. In the much-welcomed epilogue, Mikuš reflects on this, also further considering the recent developments in Serbian politics.

All in all, *Frontiers of Civil Society* is an empirically rich book which provides a wealth of theoretical arguments that will be of interest to a wide range of disciplines and fields. Because the book makes such significant and wide-reaching theoretical and empirical contributions, I can only note that Mikuš

perhaps missed an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of his work for other fields. I would have liked the book to engage in more cross-disciplinary conversations, which would have allowed Mikuš to actively highlight the significance of his work to other fields. That being said, I believe that, apart for the more obvious audiences of the book, all scholars interested in Europeanisation processes should read this book as it provides an important critical account of the reforms pursued by the European integration agenda, which to date has received scant scholarly attention.

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References

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