BOOK REVIEW

Filep, B.: The Politics of Good Neighbourhood. State, civil society and the enhancement of cultural capital in East Central Europe. Abingdon–New York, Routledge, 2017. 208 p.
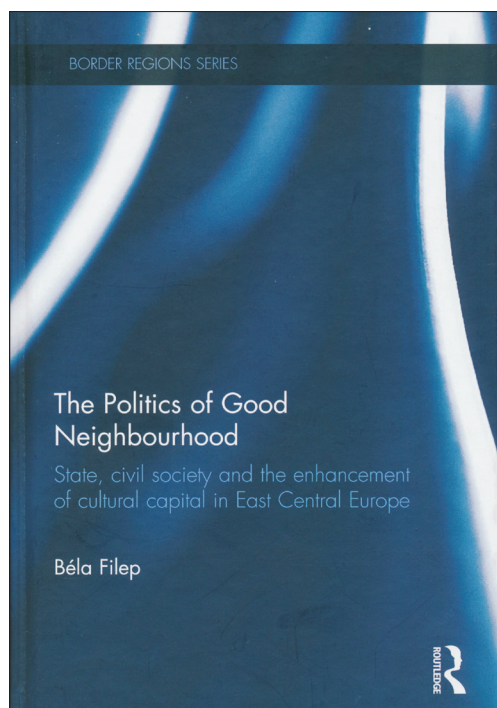
Studies on inter-ethnic relations in East Central Europe have tended to emphasise problems and challenges (Wolff, S. 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi, A. 2008), and in contrast "this book pursues a solution-oriented approach, aimed at highlighting good-neighbourly discourses, strategies and practices" (p. 4). The author bases this on a "simple observation that the everyday life of people seems far removed from an emerging violent conflict in contrast to the nationalist state policies and rhetoric of leading politicians" (pp. 4–5). This is a promising and welcome approach considering that topics such as ethnic and neighbourly relations remain "very present in the political, public (and scientific) debate in East Central Europe, but also in 'Western' discourses on the region", even though "there are also 'good' examples, 'best practices', and peaceful 'normalities' to be found, which have received less attention" (p. 5).

It is not so much that inter-ethnic relations are no longer burdensome in East Central Europe,

something Filep is well aware of (pp. 3–4). Ethnonationalist discourses remain key elements of political rhetoric and – I would argue – partly also everyday life; ethnic groups such as Roma largely remain excluded (Ram, M.H. 2014); and, though perhaps temporarily, an East–West divide in Europe was apparent in the handling of the 2015 refugee crisis (cf. Balogh, P. 2016).

Yet considering certain realities, raising the question whether ethno-cultural identities matter more in East Central Europe than in the western parts of the continent can be legitimate (see Joly, D. 1998), for two main reasons. First, ethnicity-related issues have become or remained present in the West as well. Apart of sharpened debates around national identities and the integration of migrants and refugees, ethno-territorial claims keep contesting the unity of centuries-old states such as Spain or the UK, to a lesser extent Belgium and Italy. The second reason is that recent efforts of alliance-building among countries of East Central Europe (e.g. the Visegrad cooperation, the Three Seas Initiative, and the Balkan Four) have partly overshadowed their ethnic tensions. There is no doubt that the newly strengthened intra-regional cooperations remain as fragile as do inter-ethnic relations in the region. But as Filep notes, "inter-ethnic relations within these countries and the relationship between Hungary and its neighbouring states have generally improved in the years that followed the fall of the Iron Curtain" (p. 4). This might be related to the fact that most, if not all, East Central European countries host ethnic minorities whose kin-states are neighbours, thus one could say that being in the same shoes has taught them to "agree to disagree" on certain ethnicity-related issues.

Filep's main empirical research questions are "how good neighbourhood is understood and 'practised' by different stakeholders in a multicultural environment. What are their ideas and strategies for the building of good-neighbourly relations?" (p. 4) To investigate these issues, the author conducted more than 130 (!) qualitative interviews between 2007 and 2011 with a variety of stakeholders in two ethno-culturally diverse border regions in East Central Europe as well as in the European Commission and Parliament. But also since 2011, Filep has kept revisiting his study areas and engaged with locals. He has further enriched his analysis "with the help of scientific and popular literature, documents and strategy papers of EU institutions, national, regional and local admin-

istrations, cultural associations, newspaper articles, radio and TV interviews, other visual materials and online sources" (p. 4).

The author distinguishes his empirical research questions from what he calls 'analytical' ones, which are more theory-building. The latter are: "How can good neighbourhood or its politics be conceptualized for the East Central European context and beyond? What general factors define and contribute to the building of good-neighbourly relations? How can policy-makers then implement such a concept?" (p. 5).

Both of Filep's research sites have a Hungarian bearing. One is the relatively small town of Komárno in southern Slovakia, directly bordering Hungary; the other is the mid-sized city of Subotica in northern Serbia, only a few kilometres away from the Hungarian border. The author explains these choices in detail. One factor is that ethno-culturally, these places are "among the most diverse areas in these countries"; another is that "the border location also allowed investigating the inter-ethnic question from a different perspective, looking at cross-border processes and how they might influence the inter-ethnic relations" (p. 5). Further, "the Hungarian population in both countries served as a central comparative element. Many challenges in the neighbourly relations between the majority and minority populations (most prominently the Hungarians) … show similarities: educational matters, language-related issues, issues of collective rights and historical grievances, to name a few" (p. 5).

The author also acknowledges the differences of the two sites: "Slovakia and Serbia have experienced different paths to nation-building in the past 25 years and even their communist legacy differed" (p. 5). Czechoslovakia of course dissolved peacefully whereas Yugoslavia violently. Subsequently, "although both countries had been hostile towards minorities in the 1990s, in comparison to Slovakia, Serbia faced much greater challenges in the early 2000s due to its violent recent past" (p. 7).

At this point – i.e. still in the Introduction – Filep reveals one of his findings: paradoxically, "it was not in Slovakia, but in the violently disintegrated, post-conflict Yugoslavia (more precisely in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia), where (more visible) good-neighbourly strategies have since been applied" (p. 7). The author relates this to two possible explanations. One, Vojvodina has a historically rooted multicultural character and remained peaceful even during the Yugoslav wars. Two, those wars can have "generated a necessity to actively 'repair' inter-ethnic relations and to engage in inter-ethnic rapprochement" (p. 7).

Filep mentions one more reason behind his choice of the research sites; namely the criterion to investigate an internal and an external EU border, "because the international framework in which the respective countries are embedded might influence the positioning of the different parties: states, political parties, minority or civil society organizations" (p. 7).

Conceptually, the author motivates his study by an observed lack of consolidation into a theoretical concept of the frequently used terms 'good neighbourhood', 'good neighbourly relations', and 'good-neighbourly policy' (p. 8). The author takes inspiration from Alan Henrikson, who conceptualised good neighbourliness according to three principles in inter-state diplomacy: neighbours are to be accepted as being equal; there is an implied acceptance or at least tolerance of difference; and non-interference in the internal affairs of others (p. 12). Filep partly accepts these principles and claims they can be applied not just to inter-state but also to inter-ethnic relations (within the same country). At the same time, he rightfully criticises the third principle for possibly leading to ignorance or passivity; instead, in his concept of good-neighbourhood contact between groups is a major condition (pp. 12–13).

At the core of the author's concept, however, is Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, which Filep divides into intercultural, cross-cultural, and multicultural capital (see below). Further sources of inspiration are Putnam's notion of bonding and bridging social capital; Kymlicka's ideas of multicultural societies; and Brubaker's and others' framing of 'everyday ethnicity' (p. 8).

The structure of the book follows the conventional logic. In Part I, the Introduction is followed by an overview of earlier studies of theoretical relevance. Part II provides a detailed portrait of the two chosen study areas (Komárno and Subotica), with an emphasis on *ethnicity* as a social category in various spheres of inter-ethnic neighbourly relations: politics, education, religion, cultural life, public space, and media. Part III (the lion's share of the book) largely consists of three chapters each devoted to intercultural, cross-cultural, and multicultural capital, respectively. The three together form the analysis, which – in contrast to Part II – builds on *culture* as the category of analysis, "since it is culture that constitutes the main element of the conceptual framework in which neighbourly relations in East Central Europe should be embedded" (p. 9). The final chapter is obviously devoted to the Conclusions.

In the Introduction to Part III, the author develops a model entitled 'the pyramid of good neighbourhood' that summarises the three forms of capital and the different components of the concept of good neighbourhood (p. 85, p. 186). The pyramid builds on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, divided into three sub-categories by Filep. The first, intercultural capital, comprises proficiency in local languages, cross-cultural (historical) knowledge, and

civic education. The second, cross-cultural capital, can be generated and enhanced in everyday meeting places, in "scenes of cross-cultural contact and intercultural rapprochement" (e.g. events or programs), and through "cross-cultural social contact within the family and among friends" (p. 84). Finally, multicultural capital is expressed as "mutual respect, recognition and appreciation between ethnic (or ethnicized) neighbours", through promoting diversity, historic reconciliation, and granting minority rights (*ibid*).

According to the author, "a lack of intercultural capital involves a lack of mutual understanding" and interest (while its enhancement facilitates communication and raises cross-cultural interest); a lack of cross-cultural capital "results in ethno-cultural segregation"; and a lack of multicultural capital sustains resentment and results in discrimination (pp. 84–85). While all the different elements related to inter-ethnic coexistence raised by Filep are highly significant and relevant, they could probably be distinguished and visualised in other ways as well. Portraying the three different capitals and their sub-components in a circle for instance (rather than as a pyramid) might be just as good; at least it might make an impression of a less hierarchical order. In the Conclusions, the author explains the hierarchy (inherent in the pyramid model) by that "intercultural capital forms the basis of a good multicultural neighbourhood, while cross-cultural social capital and multicultural capital are a function of the first" (p. 186). Accordingly, "[t]he intercultural capacities of individuals are the starting point for them to form cross-cultural social capital, while the first two capitals form and at the same time are affected by the level of multicultural capital" (*ibid*). Thus, "the processes that enhance these different forms of cultural capital are not unidirectional; they influence each other" (*ibid*) – an insight that may have led Filep to modify the pyramid in the Conclusions, now featuring arrows in between each of the three different layers (i.e. forms of capital). In the last paragraph, the author acknowledges that "[i]t is difficult to make a priority of one of the forms of capital or one of their components" (p. 188).

Filep's main conclusion is nevertheless fair, arguing that *all* the components described contribute to the larger framework of a good neighbourhood. Language proficiency is surely a central element, but does not guarantee peaceful coexistence per se (consider e.g. the shared language in the former Yugoslavia). The author thus rightly emphasises the comprehensive nature of good neighbourhood and encourages policy-makers to "develop broad good-neighbourly strategies rather than focus on selective policies" (p. 189).

In my view, the book is missing some necessary elements. It basically avoids dealing with issues of positionality and (self-)reflexivity, which are even more pressing in a study largely based on personal interviews. We can only learn a little bit about the author's background in the Acknowledgments. A few lines in the Introduction indeed describe that "[t]he interviews with Hungarian interviewees were conducted in Hungarian; conversations with Slovak and Serbian interviewees were sometimes held in Hungarian, sometimes in Slovak, Serbian or English… For interviews in Slovak and Serbian, I was accompanied by an interpreter" (p. 9). But how could these have influenced the encounters and the accounts gained? What premises or preconceptions did the researcher have about his field (if any) at the start of his project? Did these change during the research process?

Although the number of interviews conducted is impressively large, at least a paragraph would have been in place in the Introduction on who these 'stakeholders' (p. 4) actually were. What was the selection process like, what criteria did it include? About how long did these interviews last, and in what kind of environments did they take place? Could any of these factors have influenced the encounters and/or the accounts gained?

Further, and relatedly, there is no section on the methodology or research design whatsoever. Were the interviews recorded? How was the material processed, was it transcribed? Were any data processed with the help of any software, for instance?

Finally, I find the Conclusions chapter a little too short (four pages). It provides an analytical summary of 'the pyramid of good neighbourhood', which is of course in place. But the conclusions tend to remain on a theoretical level. The examples meant to illustrate the model are largely abstract; concrete examples from the empirical material could have been taken. In the end, a paragraph or two would have been in place on the – admittedly difficult – subject of how policy-makers could implement the concept (which was after all one of the research questions). Filep also mentions that "many components described throughout the book are easily comparable to other settings" (p. 186), but no potential cases are named.

I have perhaps been too critical and picky: this volume is to be praised for a good number of aspects. The amount of (empirical) work behind it is truly outstanding. How many of us (in our mid-thirties) have conducted over 130 interviews on our own? And that in two different, not even adjacent countries; while living in a third, also nonadjacent one. And yet, the author only impresses with his thorough knowledge of the chosen study areas.

At the same time, the efforts at theory-building are also to be praised. Relatedly, this is a genuinely interdisciplinary work, with conceptual borrowing from fields such as sociology and international relations. This should further serve the enrichment and the open, interdisciplinary character of geography.

The book is well-structured and clear-cut. The number of illustrations and maps is well-balanced, and their quality is high. Last but not least, the author's proficiency in English seems at least to me up to the standards of a native speaker (it is probably the first book in which I have not noticed any spelling mistakes).

I recommend the volume for scholars interested in ethnic relations, reconciliation, as well as those interested in border cities and borderlands.

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