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THE GLOBAL NETWORK ON FEDERALISM

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CONCLUSION

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The three articles included in this special issue are extremely diverse, both in terms of objects studied and methods employed. Travelling from Russia to the EU is a long journey to undertake. Reconciling formal economic models, discourse analysis, and domestic institutionalism is no less challenging. However, at least three commonalities emerge: state formation, territorial identity and the importance of the informal dimension of federalism.

A first way in which the papers can be read is as points on a continuous scale of state formation: sophisticated snapshots in a process of federalisation (see Introduction). The two papers on the European Union occupy one end of the scale. Using education policy as one – if not the – area of political socialisation, Arkan uncovers collective identity building and shared values in a post-nation state, “Union” era. Unlike medieval state formation, liberal democracy is the point of departure, not of arrival, for the EU (Hooghe & Marks 2001, 42). Shifting from a “soft” to a “hard” policy area, Gilroy et al. economically trace subsidiarity by comparing the respective benefits of bi- and multi-lateral trade agreements. “Subsidiarity does not necessarily imply the delegation of power to the lowest level possible”, they conclude, “but instead involves a careful assessment of the optimal level of decision-making, be it in form of centralisation or decentralisation”. The EU’s economic centralisation through progressive deregulation can be read as both empowering local initiative (e.g. regional policy to offset market failures) and contributing to a supra-national consciousness, notably through the four freedoms and trade benefits. Paradoxically, for all their differences, Russia and the EU face similar problems of territorial identity, democracy and legitimacy – in other words, both polities have yet to find their balance on the federalisation axis.

However, whether the concept of balance exists is questionable (King 1982). The article on Russia testifies of decentralising, re-centralising and re-decentralising tendencies. Such (de-)federalisation is connected to recalibrating the balance between centre and periphery, with economic and ethnic diversity complicating the picture. Russia, reborn from the ashes in 1991/3, is a relatively young (modern) state. Territorial identity and the economic, social, cultural, ethnic and historical differences associated with it are perceived an obstacle to stability. Whereas “the ideal ‘European citizen’” speaks many languages and travels freely, in Russia language has been used as a legitimising device to create distinctive sub-national entities. Hence the importance of territory for collective identity – or the other way round. The paradox is that the centripetal tendencies in Russia can be linked to the centrifugal ones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in neighbouring Georgia, or Chechnya and Dagestan for that matter.

Finally, all contributions reveal the informal, extra-constitutional space inherent in federalism. Political actors drive both federalisation (economically and politically in Europe) and de-federalisation (obsessively through concerns with economic development in Russia). Some of these actors are formally grounded and even democratically legitimated (the European Parliament), others move outside the law but embedded in domestic power politics (the Russian “presidential envoys”). Actor constellations are dynamic, because they often change, as when the European Parliament became an ally for the Commission in countering the Council of Ministers’ insistence on European minimalism in education policy. Crucial differences remain, however: in Russia, vertical relations have traditionally been dominated by treaty bargaining and asymmetry to an extent that they flatly contradict a constitutional

division of powers. In the EU, on the other hand, informal politics has often compensated the lack of a more formal structure, e.g. the recent “Fiscal Compact”.

The final picture that emerges from reading these articles, then, may seem ambivalent. On the one hand, federalism and regionalism are circumstantial and amenable to local variation. For example, the party system has been artificially centralised via electoral legislation in Russia, while in the EU more than 30 years after the first direct election to the European Parliament still only “party families”, but no coherent European parties exist. If the meaning of concepts is made to depend on their evolutionary stage, they lose their value of abstraction (Sartori 1970). To give another example: in the EU, federalism is synonymous to centralisation; while in Russia, it is to break-up (Stepan 2001).

On the other hand, the task of comparative federalism is to uncover regular patterns, not to submerge in case-specific details. Exaggerating the commonalities discovered, at least three generalisations can be made. The first is methodological: the informal dimension of federalism deserves closer scrutiny. The second generalisation is theoretical: federalism can be explained as a bargaining process (Riker 1964). Grasping elite bargaining between centre and periphery is crucial to our understanding of institutions, with trade-offs struck and periodically revised. The third and final generalisation is that the EU can most usefully be conceptualized of as a “federal political system” (Stein 1968, Watts 1998), that is neither a federal state nor one of these many amorphous “international federations”, but as something in-between, depending on the policy area. In Russia, we may have “federalism without federalists“, but in the EU we have federalism without federation. To study the EU as federal political system (Burgess 2000) carries the benefit of integrating both

generalisations just made: elite bargaining, e.g. using education policy to foster a “European demos”, and the importance of informality, e.g. “real” or potential trade gains. After all, as the Schuman doctrine goes:

L’Europe se fera par des réalisations concrètes, créant d’abord une solidarité de fait.

However, while specific achievements certainly help creating the kind of factual, informal European-wide solidarity which alone can sustain an integrated Europe, it is political actors and their circumstantial, selfish or ideologically driven bargains that are ultimately responsible for “making” the European federal political system. European identity, then, hinges both on federalism and Europeans themselves. In sum, both the nation-state and the supra-national polity covered in this special issue can learn from each other: on identity building the one, on the federal process the others.

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