

Griffiths, Ryan D., and Muro, Diego (eds.) (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-Secession*. ECPR. 244 pages.

### **Chess or poker? The triumph of the *realpolitik***

The book *Strategies of Secession and Counter-Secession* edited by professors Ryan D. Griffiths and Diego Muro is a major and necessary contribution to the study of secessionism. The book should be read not only by scholars and students of territorial politics but by practitioners and political actors too. The chapters gathered in this volume offer useful reflections to understand this global phenomenon.

The study of secessionism has witnessed a growing relevance during the last decades. The disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia was a turning point to this specific field, since then the books and articles on causes, consequences and normative theories of this particular type of territorial conflict multiplied. However, this book is not just one more title to the publication lists on the topic. This is a solid volume that provides a necessary bridge between the two dominant approaches to secessionism: moral evaluations and empirical research. It does so by combining political science and international relations approaches through single cases, large-N studies, explanatory and normative research.

Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, a very popular approach to secessionism has been its normative theorisation. Theories of secession generally evaluate the morality, legitimacy, permissibility or justification of secessionism according to certain principles. This subfield is now rich in kinds and forms of theories, it contains competing approaches typically classified as just cause, national and free will justifications including several synthesis and debates between these categories (Beran 1984; Birch 1984; Buchanan 1991, 2004; Margalit and Raz 1990; Moore 1998; Sanjaume-Calvet 2020). In a “neighbouring” subfield of study, many theories do not aim to justify or evaluate the morality of secessionism but to capture the causes and/or factors that explain it. Causal theories of secessionism generally focus on case-studies or large-N analysis do determine either aggregate (Dion 1996; Hechter 2000; Horowitz 2000; Sorens 2012) or individual causes (Rodon and Guinjoan 2018) of secessionist support including variables such as economy, institutions, psychology or geography among others.

In this book, Professors Griffiths and Muro open a third way between normative and empirical research to the study of secessionism. The unique combination of conflict studies, international relations and political science offered by this edited volume allows for an understanding of this phenomenon based on its strategic dimension.

That is, instead of looking for the causes of secessionism or its justification alone, the book grasps into the secessionist phenomenon as a strategic interaction between two main actors: the secessionist movement and the sovereign state (pp. 2-3). Therefore, the main and ground-breaking thesis of the book is that we must see secessionism as an interaction game occurring in a “strategic field” (brilliantly synthesized in Figure 1, p. 3).

This thesis is developed in Chapter 1 by Griffiths & Muro and serves both as a contribution to the field and as a theoretical framework to the book chapters. Understanding secessionism in its “strategic field”, which includes both sub-state, state and international arenas has several implications. This approach allows for rethinking the role of legality, normative values and causes in the political reality of these conflicts.

Beyond the introductory chapter, the book is divided in two blocks that put flesh on the “strategic” approach bone. The first block of chapters is devoted to theoretical and conceptual aspects of secessionism, that is five chapters on: Unilateral Declarations of Independence (UDIs) and recognition (Aleksandar Pavkovic); remedialism and international law (Argyro Kartsonaki); parent states and *de facto* states (Eiki Berg and Scott Pegg); parent state strategies (Ahsan I. Butt); and constitutional strategies against secessionism (Rivka Weill). In spite of its title, this first block of chapters has many empirical insights and builds a grounded case for a realist view of secessionist conflicts. The contributions of the chapters are multiple and cannot be summarised here, but at least three aspects call the attention of the reader.

First, legal and moral analysis might be necessary and contribute to frame territorial conflicts, but in many cases the gap between actors’ normative motivations (and discourses) and reality is simply enormous. In fact, through these chapters we learn that grievances and normative principles have little (or zero) impact to actual recognition (Pavkovic, Chapter 1) or that, similarly, “remedial reasons” are believed to be effective to persuade big powers by secessionist movements when they are not (Kartsonaki, Chapter 2). Political philosophers and political scientists working on this field should take note of these findings. Second, Berg & Pegg (Chapter 3) make a convincing case for diminishing the relevance of counter-secessionist strategies. Through their chapter, we learn that state strategies are

in fact not very relevant to change international recognition chances. However, we also learn that what secessionists do, might be more relevant at the international arena although international actors are basically opportunistic (Butt, Chapter 4).

Finally, in a brilliant and elaborated analysis, Weill (Chapter 5) reminds us that modern constitutionalism is essentially incompatible with secession since it generally implies a “militant democracy” because of its territorially rooted nature. Mechanisms to stop secessionists are in practice endless but often look as democracies defending democracy: “allowing non-threatening secessionist parties to operate serves the purpose of steaming out their frustration within the confines of normal politics. But even when states allow secessionist parties to operate despite a ban on the books, the parties know that they exist at the mercy of democracies, and not as a matter of right.” (Weill, pp. 90-91).

In a nutshell, the first five chapters of the book are literally a jug of cold water over idealist regards to secession conflicts. One realises that normative discourses either do not matter at all or hide powerful counter-secessionist mechanisms behind the veil of liberalism and democracy while international reactions hinge on opportunistic and *realpolitik* interests.

The second block of chapters is less conceptual and offers a diverse case-driven analysis without a precise scheme, but it reinforces what was already said in the first block. In these chapters, the combination of cases is a bit surprising since the contributions combine large-N analysis, case-studies in advanced democracies (including usual suspects such as Quebec, Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia) and de facto states such as Abkhazia and Somalia. In any case, the second block suggests an interesting and complementary dialogue with the theoretical contribution contained in this first half of the volume. Faruk Aksoy and Melike Ayşe Kocacık-Şenol (Chapter 6) present a quantitative analysis of secessionist tactics and their correlations with regime types. Aksoy and Kocacık-Şenol do not claim any causal inference but suggest a positive relationship between peaceful tactics and high democratic quality. Although their research could go further, this chapter seems to point out a clear role of institutional factors (and more precisely elections) in explaining violence. Bart Maddens, Gertjan Muyters, Wouter Wolfs, and Steven Van Hecke (Chapter 7) apply the strategic field described by Griffiths and Muro to the secessionist movements in the EU. Their conclusion suggests that beyond the classic idea of the EU as an opportunity after the Scottish referendum in 2014 and the Catalan events in 2017, the EU is now perceived as being on the side of home states. To some extent, André Lecours (Chapter 8) offers similar findings in his chapters but applied to the Quebec case. In the Canadian context, Lecours highlights the importance of time and context to understand specific secessionist strategies and discourses. However, he also reminds us that after all, the potential recognition of an independent Quebec is still *terra ignota* and it obviously hinges on the eventual reaction of the federal government to a “yes” victory. The contextual analysis is extremely relevant in Karlo Basta’s chapter (Chapter 9). Basta analyses the role of business actors in the Catalan conflict during 2017 and finds well developed strategies on both sides to use business arguments and actors to their own benefit.

The last two chapters are devoted to a totally different context from Western liberal democracies. In this case, the focus is not secessionism but secession itself. According to Giulia Prelz Oltramonti (Chapter 10), viability, as shown by Abkhazia and Somaliland, might be a successful strategy but only in the mid-term. While *de facto* authorities can gain internal legitimacy through making their territory independent, and they do, recognition does not always follow this move. Livia Rohrbach (Chapter 11) carries out a comparison within Indonesia of the East Timor, Aceh, and Papua secessionist movements. Rohrbach reinforces the view of secessionism as a strategic interaction through the analysis of tactics and the role of international actors. Again, tactics matter to explain differences in success but what seems to be crucial is the contrasting reaction of international actors (e.g. accepting or not petitions by the UN Special Committee on Decolonization).

To sum up, the quantity of evidence and potential factors and explanations offered by the second block of chapters is as spectacular as the first part of the book and reinforces the realist approach to the phenomenon. Nonetheless, digesting the diversity of contributions is a difficult task and it does not bring to a totally coherent set of findings or conclusions. On the contrary, as good science always does, we end up with more questions than answers. In fact, the book even contains obvious contradictory findings. To name a few, Rohrbach finds secessionist discourses (decolonization and democracy) relevant to attract international actors, while Kartsonaky downplays the relevance of remedialist approaches to secession and Pavkovic finds no references or impact of “free will” discourse in his UDIs analysis. Weill suggests that democracies push secessionists to violence and radical actions due to inherent militancy in modern constitutionalism, but Aksoy and Kocacık-Şenol find robust evidence of democratization being a key factor in diminishing violent tactics.

In many chapters we end up concluding that both counter-secessionist and secessionist strategies are relevant to understand secessionism but usually do not work to stop an independence process or to promote it when actors use them. Are secessionist discourses relevant? Is democratization an opportunity for secessionists? Do secessionist and counter-secessionist strategies really work? As Griffiths and Muro conclude, further research is needed here, especially on the role of home state strategies and international actors.

Beyond these and more questions, this volume makes a convincing case for a realist approach to secessionism. The strategic approach to secessionism is a good starting point for asking crucial questions to understand this phenomenon. In spite of not answering many of them, the role of interactions between home states, secessionist movements and international actors appears as central and extremely informative. In this strategic playing field, Griffiths and

Muro suggest that the game in mind rather than chess is poker given the element of bluffing, but even there the rules are clear and unchanging. In contrast, in the secession game the rules are fuzzy and protean” (p. 225). In my opinion, they are absolutely right. Maybe it is because we still do not know some rules governing this phenomenon or because we need further research (and we do!), but I am afraid it is to a great extent because we are in front of raw politics.

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