

Domestic elites and public opinion—the neglected dimension of externally induced democratization. International conference, September 5–7, 2012, University of Konstanz

How do domestic elites influence post-conflict democratization, and how do they perceive and react to external interference in peace- and democracy-building? In what ways do domestic elites benefit from and/or exploit the long-term presence of external actors for their political purposes? How does public opinion reflect the conflict, the challenges of post-conflict democratization and the interference of external actors? Those were the key research questions addressed at the international conference “Domestic Elites and Public Opinion—The Neglected Dimension of Externally Induced Democratization” organized by *Sonja Grimm* (University of Konstanz), *Brigitte Weiffen* (University of Konstanz) and *Sabina Ferhadbegović* (University of Jena). The conference was funded by the German Science Foundation (DFG) and the Center of Excellence “Cultural Foundations of Social Integration” at the University of Konstanz.

After the end of the Cold War, the international community became increasingly active in building peace and supporting the development of democratic institutions in conflict-ridden societies. Such post-conflict reconstruction activities equally gained the attention of researchers in the fields of political science, international relations, history, and sociology. The overwhelming majority of post-conflict studies focuses on external actors supporting peace and democracy in the context of peace-building and peace-keeping missions or international trusteeship administrations. Scholars assess the internal structure of such missions, their mandates, and the implemented programs and strategies as well as the legitimacy of externally led democratization and state-building activities.

It comes as a surprise that these studies have neglected what scholars of transition studies have highlighted as the most important factors for successful transitions to democracy upon drawing on a broad range of historical examples of regime change: a domestic elite consensus and the support of the emerging democracy by the electorate. A consensus between outgoing and incoming elites on basic values and decision-making procedures allows for the nonviolent management of conflicts and facilitates trust-building and the capacity for compromise which in turn guarantees the survival of democracy. Once the political elites follow the democratic rules of the game, the masses will also accept democracy as a legitimate political system. With their focus on domestic actors, elite-centered approaches stand in stark contrast to recent analyses in democracy promotion research that advance the idea of democratization induced by external actors. Apparently,

there is a lack of dialogue between these different strands of research about the conditions for successful and failed democratization in post-conflict environments. The conference aimed to fill this research gap by bringing together experts on the internal dynamics of democratic transitions, democracy promotion, post-conflict peace-building, the role of elites in societies in transition, and historical experiences of dependence and foreign occupation.

The meeting commenced with a public roundtable discussion entitled “Domestic Elites and Public Opinion: Neglected Dimensions in Post-Conflict Democratization” which outlined the different angles of the topic. From the standpoint of elite research, *John Higley* (University of Texas) pointed out mutual elite distrust as the main impediment to external endeavors of imposing or coaxing democracy. From the perspective of post-conflict research, *Susan Woodward* (City University of New York) singled out and challenged four implicit assumptions from the conference outline, namely: that post-conflict research has neglected the elite dimension; that externally induced democracy is a goal of post-conflict reconstruction; that the findings from transition studies can be applied to post-conflict situations; and that public opinion matters. From the viewpoint of comparative democratization research, *Jörn Grävingholt* (German Development Institute, Bonn) highlighted commonalities and differences between the conditions that foster democracy and those that foster peace. He also addressed possible courses of action for external interveners. From the perspective of a practitioner representing an external donor, *Manfred Öhm* (Friedrich Ebert Foundation) shared his experience of cooperating with local elites in the framework of democracy promotion programs in Sudan and Mozambique. The ensuing discussion expounded the problems of the elite concept, pointed out the ambiguous role of political elites in post-conflict contexts as well as the difficulties that external actors face when deciding with whom to cooperate.

On the following day, Panel 1 further explored the field of elite research in transition studies. *John Higley* argued that consensually united elites are essential in the formation and stabilization of democracy. Looking at recent overthrows of autocratic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, he questioned the widespread assumption that democracy is induced by “elite decapitation” when the governmental authorities and the coercive forces sustaining them collapse more or less completely. Instead, it seems to be more conducive to a smooth transition to democracy and a settlement of basic disputes between elites when elites surrounding the old government remain intact. Subsequently, *Elena Semenova* (University of Jena) introduced some major features of elite recruitment and elite development, looking in particular at the characteristics of political elites in Central and Eastern Europe between 1990 and 2010.

Panel 2 analyzed past experiences with transition under external oversight and reconsidered the role of elites and public opinion in these transitions. *Ursula Hoffmann-Lange* (University of Bamberg) explored the interaction between internal and external forces in the democratization of West Germany after 1945. She characterized the situation in the country as a mixture of elite change and continuity and highlighted significant instances of the impact of the Allied Forces. *Marie-Janine Calic* (University of Munich) considered the Balkan Wars in the 1990s and traced the creation of new elites in Kosovo while focusing on the former combatants from the Kosovo Liberation Army who depict themselves as freedom fighters in order to legitimize their claim to power. In the face of external

pressure for democratization, these elites navigate between the demands of foreign actors and those of their clans.

The following two panels addressed the transition cases of Southeastern Europe. Opening Panel 3, *Solveig Richter* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin) analyzed state capture in the Western Balkans, which is defined as the prevalence of informal and illegitimate structures. In spite of external pressure for reforms, elite corruption is a major impediment to democratization in the region. *Sonja Grimm* and *Lisa Groß* (both University of Konstanz) looked at the case of Croatia's public administration reform in order to exemplify the external-domestic interplay of the European Union pushing for reforms and the reactions of the Western Balkan governments. The main rationale of Panel 4 was to contrast findings from post-conflict research with a practitioner's perspective. *David Chandler* (University of Westminster) pointed out the difficulty of identifying elites in post-conflict situations and the lack of interactions between the elites and the masses. With regard to Kosovo, *Venera Hajrullahu* (Kosovar Civil Society Foundation) confirmed the lack of representativeness of the elites and illustrated the role of the international donor community in the development of civil society after 1999. She also discussed how the setbacks of post-conflict reconstruction are reflected in public opinion. Initially, the people welcomed the intervening international community with great euphoria and hope, but they became increasingly disaffected after the international administration retained its competences for too long or handed them over at a disadvantageous time.

On the last day, the conference looked beyond Europe. Panel 5 explored the role of elites and public opinion in Latin American transitions. *Mitchell A. Seligson* (Vanderbilt University) introduced the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and used the data to compare the mass public with different elite sectors in Bolivia with respect to their political tolerance. *Lisbeth Zimmermann* (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) reflected on the role of local elites in different strands of democracy promotion and international relations research and developed an analytical framework to examine external-local interaction processes in rule of law promotion in Guatemala. The ensuing Panel 6 focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, starting with *Anja Osei's* (University of Konstanz) presentation of her pilot study on Ghana which is part of a major research project on elite networks in Africa. *Charlotte Heyl* (GIGA Hamburg) drew on empirical evidence from Mozambique in order to emphasize the role of informal institutions in the local democratization process. Complementarily, *Bettina Bunk* (University of Potsdam) presented features of local governance and political elites in Mozambique.

Panel 7 assessed the role of public opinion in post-conflict societies in more detail and emphasized the perils of post-conflict democratization. Summarizing the findings from a cross-country study, *Christoph Zürcher* (University of Ottawa) explained that external leverage does not play out in post-conflict democracy promotion due to the fact that adopting democracy can incur costs for local elites. Typically, the interests of peacebuilders and local elites differ. As a result, they engage in bargaining and often settle on a less-than-democratic state. In his comparative study of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Vedran Džihic* (University of Vienna) demonstrated that political elites and the broader public exhibit contradictory perceptions and visions about externally induced democratization processes. *Karin Dyrstad* (Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Peace Research Institute Oslo) presented a study of postwar public opinion in

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. Based on survey data from the two countries, she showed that confidence in political institutions has been increasing in Macedonia in the post-conflict years, while it is decreasing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A possible explanation for this divergence is the role of power-sharing arrangements, which seem to work well in Macedonia while they are inefficient and cause deadlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The participants' discussions at the conference culminated in three issue areas that require further investigation. First, those contributors who explored the post-conflict context and its effects on domestic politics agreed that the role of elites in a post-conflict setting is conducive to explaining success and failure of post-conflict democratization. Furthermore, they showed the relative unimportance of public opinion. The lack of interaction between domestic elites and the people is a field of concern; the effects of this disconnectedness on democratization and the resulting legitimacy deficit remain to be studied. Second, exploring the concept of "elites" in theory and in different country contexts, the participants debated its timeliness and applicability to post-conflict environments. The participants did not agree whether the term "elite" fully captures who is in control of post-conflict democratization. As current cases of post-conflict democratization occur in multi-level governance settings, it needs to be explored to what extent external actors from the outside, domestic elites from above and domestic civil society from below contribute to successful democratic transition. Despite initial results presented at the conference, further research is needed to resolve whether post-conflict democratization is still an elite-driven project or whether it builds on bottom-up processes that develop and implement democratic institutions. This leads to a third aspect of contention. Strategies of external intervention were identified as having an impact on post-conflict democratization, but the details of external interference and its interplay with domestic actors at different levels require further research.

The conference brought together social scientists and practitioners who approach similar issues from very different perspectives, some of whom were not even aware of each others' work prior to the meeting. Hence, the conference was a significant step towards bridging the disciplinary divide of transition studies vs. post-conflict studies that still widely governs the debate.

Brigitte Weiffen and Sonja Grimm