BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Balkan Research Journal Vol.1, Issue 1 (2024): 79-81
Balkan University Press
https://doi.org//10.69648/MSAE1156
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www.ibupress.com

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Self-Determination and Secession, In Between the Law, Theory and Practice,

by Natalija Shikova

Springer Nature, 2023

Book Review by:
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The book Self-Determination and Secession by Natalija Shikova explores the right to self-determination, examining its evolution and applications in contemporary international law. It clarifies the link between self-determination and secession, discussing their similarities and differences. Self-determination is recognized as a collective human right in international law, often associated with groups striving for independence. While international law neither forbids nor explicitly allows secession, it upholds principles like territorial integrity, the prohibition of force, and state recognition, often framing secession in these terms. This book addresses longstanding debates on self-determination and secession, aiming to enrich an international law field that lacks consensus.

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In the book, the author, Natalija Shikova, argues that restricting self-determination solely to colonial contexts is unrealistic. Recognizing groups with legitimate secession claims would require examining their standing within the state, survival prospects, and the broader impact on populations and global stability. States should ideally address secessionist movements through democratic principles. Although international law's role here is limited, it offers general guidelines on secession, which stakeholders should apply pragmatically.

Shikova argues that the focus should be on internal self-determination, prioritizing coexistence over separation. Standards for secession should only apply if internal self-determination efforts fail. Recognizing the complex layers of historical, cultural, and political factors unique to each secession case can inform a balanced approach. This nuanced understanding highlights the distinction between acknowledging a right to secession and advocating it as a final step. The UN, despite its limitations, provides a necessary platform for these discussions.

Divided into four interconnected parts, the book synthesizes theory, historical events, and modern cases to contextualize self-determination and secession. Part one outlines the development of self-determination from a governance ideal to an international right recognized by the UN. Part two discusses secession, exploring potential standards for its legitimacy and practical approaches for policymakers. Part three examines internal self-determination as a developing, ongoing right that supports self-governance and identity within states, offering a flexible response to secessionist demands. The final section summarizes the findings and suggests frameworks for understanding self-determination's legal and practical dimensions.

This book provides an in-depth review of international law's approach to self-determination and secession, framing these concepts within current theory and illustrated by historical and contemporary cases. Self-determination is widely invoked yet often misunderstood, especially concerning its relation to secession. Although international law does not outright forbid unilateral secession, it generally discourages it outside of decolonization contexts, with most legal scholars viewing secession claims skeptically. However, recent diplomatic and international community involvement in secessionist conflicts suggests an openness to exploring cases where secession may be legitimate or legally permissible.

The book affirms that, within existing legal frameworks, societies must balance pluralism and the cultural rights of all groups while also promoting cohesion within state boundaries. Internal self-determination allows cultural, minority, or indig-

enous groups autonomy within the state and offers pathways to peacefully address identity-based conflicts. The role of both states and the international community, therefore, is to mediate such tensions, transforming potential conflicts into cooperative political solutions.

While formulating concrete legal solutions for resolving conflicts may be challenging, this book thoughtfully analyzes self-determination as a frequently invoked yet poorly understood right in international law. It advocates for dialogue and frameworks that address diversity and ongoing self-determination struggles.