EULEX in the eyes of locals

Citation for published version (APA):

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2022

DOI:
10.26481/dis.20221123em

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher’s website.
• The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
• The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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Download date: 22 Nov. 2022
Scientific and social impact of the research
This thesis focuses on the peacebuilding operations of international organisations. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a dramatic increase in such operations. Though the missions have mostly taken place in Africa and in Europe, they have been deployed on almost every continent. However, looking at their very mixed results, one must ask the question: what can international peacebuilders do better to achieve sustainable peace in war-torn countries? One element is particularly important to answer this question: the local people, or locals, of the countries to which the international peacebuilders are sent. While locals clearly have a big impact on developments in their country, their role in international peacebuilding efforts has so far not been researched enough to fully understand it. This is true for the United Nations—the organisation which has been involved in peacebuilding for almost 70 years; it is even truer for the European Union, which only started its peacebuilding operations in 2003. This is the starting point of this thesis, which contributes to the understanding of the locals’ impact on peacebuilding in their countries.

Naturally, this research does not start from scratch but benefits from the work of other authors on the role of local factors in peacebuilding. There has been a growing number of people working on this topic since the early 2000s, not only in academia and think tanks but also in international organisations and in the missions themselves. This increasing awareness of the “local” is known as the “local turn” in the literature, and this thesis is a part of it. To better understand the topic, the thesis focuses on a particular case where locals interacted with an international mission: it looks at the Kosovar population after the 1998–1999 conflict and their perceptions of the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX, deployed in 2008). As membership in the EU is strongly supported by Kosovar society, the mission should have been warmly welcomed. Surprisingly, however, many locals had very negative perceptions of EULEX, and strongly contested it. This thesis asks the question of how we can explain the unexpectedly strong negative local perceptions of EULEX, including the high level of contestation against it. It analyses three different aspects of the question in detail. The thesis begins by looking at the work of EULEX and NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR). KFOR, a mission operating in Kosovo in parallel to EULEX, in many aspects had similar tasks regarding security, but it was perceived in a more positive light. The thesis considers the reasons for such a difference in perceptions. It then shifts its focus to the negative local perceptions of EULEX and public expressions of them, called contestation, and analyses the reasons for this contestation. Finally, the thesis examines how influential actors within the local society attempted to sway that society’s perceptions of EULEX; this is done through the example of the Kosovar government, which spoke to the people about EULEX in a way designed to increase its own local legitimacy.
Looking more in detail at these three specific issues, the thesis finds that the difference in the local perceptions between EULEX and KFOR was caused by the fact that locals generally saw KFOR as powerful and EULEX as lacking power. This was important, because power was seen as crucial if the missions wanted to execute their security-related tasks well. The outcome was that KFOR was seen as successful, while EULEX was unable to realise its goals. For the second question—the reasons for local contestation against EULEX—two reasons turned out to be the most important: the local perceptions that the mission was violating the country’s sovereignty and that it was ineffective. Finally, by examining how the Kosovar government communicated about EULEX, we can see that the government was very strategic in its messages and varied them based on the changing levels of legitimacy of both EULEX and itself to boost its own local legitimacy.

Several interesting results in this research add to our knowledge about the locals’ relations with the peacebuilding missions. The most general point that the thesis shows, and probably also the most important, is that the local people are not a homogenous group but rather differ considerably from each other. This relates to mindsets, worldviews, goals, perceptions of international peacebuilders, and their willingness to cooperate with them. As the thesis shows, all those factors are influenced by the local culture(s), history, ethnicity, and possibly many other elements. This conclusion might seem obvious, but in fact local people have often been treated as a uniform group by both researchers and peacebuilders. This research shows that it is very important to understand local populations, their ways of thinking, and their structures (such as who their leaders and other important figures are). Not doing so can have serious consequences, as without such understanding it is difficult, and even impossible, for any peacebuilding missions to achieve their goals. Local people can oppose the missions’ goals passively, which in itself can be a serious problem. Even more worryingly, they can actively work against the goals of the missions.

The thesis is very relevant to the academic debate on international peacebuilding and crisis management, because, as explained above, it brings in new results and conclusions about the role of local populations in international peacebuilding. The debate on how to improve international peacebuilding is currently very intense and will probably continue for many years. Every new conflict, and the international activities designed to help countries overcome such conflict, adds urgency to efforts to understand what works well and what does not, how the international community operates, and how the local populations see the community. The thesis also adds to the general academic research, by defining the concept of “contestation”, which has so far not been used in the analysis of international peacebuilding missions. Contestation is helpful in
such research, as it captures an important dimension of international peacebuilding: local public demonstrations of disagreement with international policies. It can take different forms, from collective to individual and from confrontational to peaceful.

The same questions about the international peacebuilding that are interesting for academics are also hotly debated among practitioners. These include politicians and other decision makers in organisations such as the European Union, the United Nations, NATO, and the African Union (in other words, those sending the missions) but also leaders in the countries receiving the missions and many think tanks and civil society organisations working to prevent and stop violent conflicts in various parts of the world. This thesis is relevant for such practitioners, as it focuses on the same questions that they have and offers them some answers.

Naturally, research which is not known and shared is not useful. This is why the results of this research have been presented at academic conferences and published in the form of academic articles (two articles have already been published, and the last article is under review). The articles were made publicly available, as is the standard of Maastricht University, to allow everybody interested in the topic to read them. They were also shared with the relevant staff of the European Parliament, both through a public newsletter on the EU’s external policies and individually with those working in the field. Finally, the author’s job in the European Parliament in the field of external policies of the EU offers numerous unofficial occasions to share the new knowledge with colleagues from EU institutions, Members of Parliament, think tanks, and NGOs dealing with the peacebuilding missions of the EU and other international organisations.