MINORITY CONFLICTS: QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND HOPES

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Why are minority-majority conflicts dangerous?

If the majority – and mainly national or ethnic – minority or minorities are in conflict over political representation, redistribution of income, social inclusion or cultural coexistence, this could lead to a situation in which the country becomes destabilised, and such situation poses danger not only for the state itself and for the neighbours but also for the international community. The main problem is that minority conflicts can not be resolved easily. According to a study on conditions of non-violent resolution of conflicts seven hypothesis concerning the nature of the conflict could explain why it is difficult to achieve a peaceful settlement.[1] The minority conflicts fit at least into four of them. Conflicts are more difficult to solve

- the more different structural variables (economic, social, ethnic, religious, cultural, political) cumulate,
- the more dimensions of sovereignty are at stake i.e. territory, boundaries, independence, political participation,
- the more they are ideologically loaded, ideology touches upon basic values and basic identification issues (language, religion, culture and symbols),
- the less there are institutionalised rules for the management of conflicts.[2]

As far as the first hypothesis is concerned, practical examples clearly show that to overcome a minority conflict it is highly necessary that structural variables or social cleavages do not overlap each other. One of the most important reasons of the success of the Swiss model – beside direct democracy, proportional

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[1] See: Frank R. Pfetsch: Conditions for Non-Violent Resolution of Conflicts. In: Ernst-Otto Czempiel, Liparit Kinzadjan, Zdenes Masopust (eds.): *Non-Violence in International Crises.* Vienna, ISSC, 1990, pp. 104-105.

[2] Ibid.

representation and federalism – is that cross-cutting social cleavages has come to existence. Not all German speaking Swiss are protestant and not all rural people are Catholic and French speaking any more.[3]

In conjunction with the second hypothesis it is obvious that most (but not all) aspirations of at least the bigger minorities touch directly upon certain aspects of sovereignty. The quest for identity and for its attributions are at the core of the minority conflicts.

Regarding the culture of conflict minority groups „often lack the commitment to and experience of conflict management practice"[4] and from the side of the government there is a lack of desire to be engaged in „collective standard setting which is basically a dialogue in search of common solutions."[5]

Minority conflicts present a „clear and present danger" for the international community. It comes predominantly from the fact that a great number of people in minority position are not committed to preservation of the state system as it stands now. They do not identify themselves primarily with a state but with people, they are first and foremost Tamils or Armeniens.[6] The lack of identification or ambivalent identification with the state they live in could lead to a desire for secession and accession to an existing state or establishment of a new one. In conjunction with such territorial changes you can easily come to the conclusion of *veritas duplex*. Inviolability of borders could keep minority conflicts alive. An author describes this situation in the following way: "There are too many borders that were delineated by dictators, and authoritarian regimes, imposed by war or fiat, and sometimes specifically designed to contain ethnic mixes that would preclude viable independence. To „recognise" them is a prescription for war, not peace."[7] On the other hand the possibility of the revision of borders could lead to a domino effect, rewarding secessionism. Consequently the reason why territorial change could not serve the settlement process comes from procedural considerations. Simply from the fact that there is no change in borders without at least bitter conflict, if not war, because no state accepts easily and peacefully a border revision at its own expense. To have the consensus of all parties involved in a negotiated border change is an illusion, especially because the majority national consciousness regards the

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3   Walter Kalin: Federalism and the Resolution of Minority Conflict. In: Günther Bachter (ed.): *Federalism against Ethnicity?* Zürich, Verlag Rüegger, 1997, pp.179-180.
4   David Carment: The International Dimension of Ethnic Conflict, Concepts, Indicators and Theories. *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 30, 1993, p. 145.
5   Asbjorn Eide: Ethnic conflicts and minority protection: Roles for the international community http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu12ee/uu12ee0q.htm
6   Ted Robert Gurr: Why Do Minorites Rebel? In: Günther Bachler, ibid. p. 3
7   C. G. Jacobsen: Myths, Politics, and the Not–So-New World Order. *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 3, 1993, p. 249.

territory as a part of the national mythology. That is the reason why Serbia is so reluctant to accept the independence of Kosovo, where a mythological battle was fought against the Turks many centuries ago.

The root causes of minority conflicts

On a high level of abstraction different theories try to explain the causes of minority – majority conflicts. An author identifies at least five major theoretical explanations. Such conflicts occur if

- the population undergoing modernisation (urbanisation, alphabetisation, etc.) is heterogeneous,
- ethnic competition is involved in the modernisation,
- cultural elites invent „imagined communities" (nations) and use them as weapons against the „Other" who is not a member,
- the world market creates an opportunity for sub-state units – for example for an oil rich province – to search for its own polity.[8]

Such selection of theories is a little bit arbitrary, there are a lot of other remarkable theories at hand.[9] On the next pages I will examine this issue on a lower level of abstraction and I will give special attention to the causes of minority conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe. As far as high theories are concerned only one remark, I understand them in a Max Weberian way, although they correctly pinpoint a major structural cause, they do not have a full explanatory capacity. A specific minority conflict or any other social conflict comes to existence owed to a complexity of different reasons.

We could take it for granted that discriminatory or invidious treatment of minorities because of their cultural, ethnic or religious traits and if they are mobilised for political actions to defend or promote their common interests[10] are a perfect recipe for a minority – majority conflict. As far as the first condition is concerned the scale of minority oppression starts somewhere with the denial of existence and mass discrimination and ends with ethnic cleansing and physical

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[8]   The first theory originated in Karl W. Deutsch's famous *Nationalism and Social Communication,* the second in Susan Olzak's *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Confilct.* Benedict Andeson's famous piece is the *Imagined Communities,* and Alberto Alessino and Enrico Spalaore lamented *On the Number and Size of Nations.* See: Ekkart Zimmermann: Ethnic Mobilisation and Conflict. In: Günther Bachler, ibid. pp. 74-78.

[9]   See for example, Donald L. Horowitz: *Ethnic Groups in Conflict.* Berkeley, University of California, 1985, or Michael E. Brown: *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict.* Cambridge, Mass, 1997.

[10]   Ted Robert Gurr, Ibid. p. 5.

extermination. The political mobilisation of a minority generally starts with the rediscovery of common memories, language, religious tradition and their dissemination to the members of the group. In the second phase the vernacular heritage is politicised,[11] the political representation is not based on political values and beliefs any more, but on ethnic group affiliation. Such phenomenon could come to existence even under democratic conditions – for example the Svenska folkparteit (Swedish People's Party) in Finland, but majority hegemonism means a major push to have such political representation. The paradigmatic case is the fate of the Hungarian political parties in Slovakia, where after the democratic change three Hungarian political parties existed along the ideological lines. Later under Prime Minister Meciar they had to unite to counterbalance the discriminatory and invidious treatment.

As far as the peaceful co-existence of the majority and the minority communities is concerned history frequently proves to be a trap. The reason why we should be careful with history is not interconnected with the problem of how we should learn from the past. The reason for being cautious with the past comes from the frequent misuse of history. Although the objective, scientific rediscovery of the hidden nasty of the past is a precondition of reconciliation the parties tend to select and highlight those events which seem to prove their version of the truth. Furthermore the parties use the selected events as justification for their present behaviour. Especially this second misuse is dangerous, because the past can supply a kind of explanation of the present, but it never provides an excuse for today actions.

As I have mentioned, because of the border issue the process of the creation of a new state itself is problematic. But even if the new state has come to existence and seems to be a solution for one of the communities, it does not mean the end of the causes of conflict. Three other factors are highly significant. The first issue is the reversed oppression. The former minority – now majority in the new state – takes a revenge as a compensation for the prior oppression. The second can be described by using Charles Tilly's frequently quoted observation: „war made the state, and the state made the war[12] – to stabilise statehood external and internal enemies are needed, – for the second minorities are perfectly suitable, – and sometimes war with them. The third could be summed up by Massimo d'Azeglio's statement from the period of the Italian unification:

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[11] Anthony D. Smith points out that cultural politicisation might also end in expulsion and extermination. See: Anthony D. Smith: The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism, *Survival,* Vol. 35, no 1, (1993) pp. 56-57.

[12] Charles Tilly: *The Formation of National States in Western Europe.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 42.

„We have made Italy, now we must make Italians."[13] In a new state unity is always a top priority and especially in Central and Eastern Europe sixteen years after the democratic change there is still a tendency – not only in the new states but also in the others – to view multilingual usage or different religious practice as factors endangering national unity. This understanding of unity leads to the constitutional principle of a „unitary nation-state" in multiethnic, multicultural countries and homogenisation tendencies.

In many cases the traditions of violent conflict resolution in inter-communal disputes are an extremely detrimental additional source of the escalation. In Bosnia, in Rwanda or in Sri Lanka the issue of identification of the persons belonging to the rival group was no obstacle. As Donald L. Horowitz describes: „The deadly mobs in one country after another have devised ghoulishly reliable methods of ascertaining ethnic identity in their effort to accomplish simultaneously two goals: to kill members of a target group and to avoid killing members of one's own group or of a third group. If they can not rely on visual clues to identify, they find others."[14]

In Eastern and Central Europe – due to historical reasons – further causes of the minority conflicts can be identified. In the region the national aspirations were always accomplished at the expense of others and the national consciousness always degraded or denied the role of the rivals.[15] In the first half of the nineties the region was facing not only the rebirth of nationhood and sovereignty but the resurrection of unresolved problems of the past, atavistic fears, historical pain and glory. Ethnic nationalism and its myth-making, the majority hegemonism and its consequences, the minority language use and religion practices as national security risks or the majoritarian democracy interpretation – „winners take all" – sharpened the old hatreds and paved the way for any kind of intolerance. In the second half of the nineties the conflicts moderated. (The former Yugoslavia and certain states of the CIS were a different story.) I think the following reasons led to moderation:

- economic and social stabilisation of majority of the states in the region, relatively successful transition to market economy,
- the conditionality policy for Council of Europe, NATO and EU membership, especially the EU accession process,

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[13] Quoted by David Welsh: Domestic Politics and Ethnic Conflicts. *Survival,* Vol. 35, no 1, (1993) p. 64.

[14] Donald L. Horowitz: *A Harvest of Hostility: Ethnic Conflict and Self- Determination after the Cold War.* Durham, Duke University, 1993 (Manuscript) p. 6.

[15] András Balogh: *Conventional Wisdoms on National Minorities and International Security.* Budapest, International House, 1993, pp. 17-18.

- the domestic anti-discrimination and minority rights legislation, although unfortunately detailed legal codes were not passed everywhere,

- the establishment and work of rule of law guarantees, such as Ombudsman,

- the involvement of minority political parties into the national governments, for example in Bulgaria, Slovakia or Romania.

The key is the integration of minorities as a governmental priority. In case of Estonia, for example, where in 1993-1994 they got close to a crises, in 1998 a successful integration process of the Russian minority started.[16] If we are appreciating the achievements at the same time we should be aware that in most cases the domestic arrangements do no really accommodate to the aspirations of national minorities, especially in the field of public use of their language, minority education and territorial or cultural autonomies. Furthermore the integrationist attitude has not become irreversible, ethnic nationalist majority political forces could come back to power.[17]

In search of solution

There is no general solution for minority conflicts. Although institutional arrangements should always reflect local circumstances there are certain preconditions to meet and different specific models. In case of religious minorities the individual freedom of religion and the autonomy of the churches could mean a good starting point. (In Eastern and Central Europe the return or the compensation of the church properties confiscated during the *ancien régime* is still a not completely settled problem.) To live together peacefully with language minorities it is necessary not only to recognise their rights to learn in their mother tongue or to use it in public spheres but it is utmost important to provide the necessary infrastructure. In case of national or ethnic minority the solution depends on whether the population is mixed or different communities live on separate territories. Other elements that must be considered include the size and the level of organisation of national or ethnic communities, the quantity of mutual trust, the traditions of state administration and a lot of other factors.

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[16] See: Airat Aklev: *From Confrontation to Integration.* The Evolution of Ethnopolitics in the Baltic States. Frankfurt, PRIF, 2003, especially: pp. 24-26.

[17] As a result of the 2006 general election in Slovakia a new government has come to power consisting of three nationalist parties, incuding Jan Slotas' extreme nationalist SNS (Slovak National Party).

For those large communities which live in a compact way territorial decentralisation or territorial autonomy can be the solution to accommodate their wishes. Territorial decentralisation may be useful in the service of a good inter-communal relationship, because it could provide assurances both to majority and to the minority national community. In the eyes of the majority territorial decentralisation can be seen much less as a step towards secession. For the minority communities territorial decentralisation can provide a possibility of forming the local majority. Territorial autonomy provides comprehensive self-government to those regions where minorities live. According to Ted Robert Gurr negotiated regional autonomy can be an effective anti-dote to ethno-national war of secession.[18] Territorial autonomy, especially if its competence is wide, could easily lead to a complicated decision making structure. That is why Ruth Lapidoth warns that the division of powers between the autonomy and the central government should be very clearly defined. She adds a lot of other warnings, probably the most important is that it is often better to implement the autonomous regime gradually.[19] Time is needed for mutual trust between majority and minority. The majority should realise that territorial autonomy is not the antechamber of secession and the minority should accept that autonomy is the ultimate form of its self-administration.

In case of scattered communities a combination of personal and cultural autonomy seems to be feasible. The essence of personal autonomy is analogous with a church. Everybody can decide freely whether he would like to be a member of a church and to participate in the administration of the affairs of the religious community. A person living anywhere in the country could register himself as member of a national or ethnic community and through this he could participate in the self-government of that community. It is highly important to have democratic practises within the self-governing community as well as being granted real competence. This competence can be related to cultural autonomy, which means a complete power to make all decisions concerning the educational and cultural institutions of the community, financed by the state.

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[18] Ted Robert Gur, Ibid. p. 12.
[19] Ruth Lapidoth: *Autonomy: Flexible Solution to Ethnic Conflict.* Washington, D. C. US Institute of Peace Press, 1996, pp. 169-205.

SUMMARY

Minority Conflicts: Questions, Answers and Hopes

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In his essay the author examines three problems: what are the reasons why minority conflicts are dangerous, what causes lead to such conflicts and what can be identified as principles of solution.

As far as the first question is concerned, minority conflicts can be very dangerous because in such conflicts different structural variables (economic, social, ethnic, religious, cultural, political) could cumulate, different dimensions of sovereignty might be at stake i.e. territory, boundaries, independence, political participation and they are ideologically loaded, ideology touches upon basic values and basic identification issues (language, religion, culture and symbols).

The theories on high level of abstraction correctly identify a major structural cause but according to the judgement of the author do not have a full explanatory capacity of minority conflicts. On a lower level of abstraction the author examines the conflict potential of the territorial change, the creation of a new state, the effects of the discriminatory treatment of minorities and certain special tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe.

In search of solution the author emphasises that in case of large national minorities which live in a compact way a gradual move to territorial autonomy is the most promising.

RESÜMEE

Minderheitenkonflikte: Fragen, Antworten und Hoffnungen

GÁBOR KARDOS

Der Verfasser untersucht in seiner Studie drei Fragen: warum sind Minderheitenkonflikte gefährlich, welche Ursachen führen zu solchen Konflikten und welche können die Grundprinzipien der Lösung dieser sein.

Was die erste Frage betrifft, so können Minderheitenkonflikte äußerst gefährlich sein, weil in derartigen Konflikten verschiedene strukturelle Variablen (wirtschaftliche, soziale, ethnische, religiöse, kulturelle und politische) kumulieren können, so dass die verschiedenen Dimensionen der Souveränität (Gebiet, Grenzen, politische Teilnahme) auf dem Spiel stehen. Zudem auch deshalb, weil derartige Konflikte einen ideologischen Charakter haben, und die Ideologie auch grundlegende Werte und Identitätsfragen (Sprache, Religion, Kultur und Symbole) betrifft.

Die auf einem hohen Abstraktionsgrad präsentierten Theorien identifizieren die strukturellen Hauptursachen auf richtige Art und Weise, verfügen aber der Meinung des Verfassers zufolge nicht über eine vollständige erklärende Kraft. Der Autor untersucht auf einem niedrigeren Abstraktionsniveau das Konfliktpotenzial der Gebietsveränderungen, der Schaffung eines neuen Staates, bzw. der Diskriminierung von Minderheiten, sowie bestimmte spezielle mittel- und osteuropäische Züge.

Auf der Suche nach der Lösung betont der Verfasser, dass diese erreicht werden könne, wenn die Gebietsautonomie im Falle von kompakt zusammenlebenden nationalen Minderheiten in großer Zahl schrittweise von der Mehrheit akzeptiert wird.