

Beyond Ethnic Politics in Central and Eastern Europe

STEFAN WOLFF

University of Bath, UK

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Department of European Studies, University of Bath, UK

In his article 'Multiculturalism and Minority Rights: West and East', Will Kymlicka argues, among others, that a key condition for the success of legal and political reforms in the area of minority rights is a fundamental change in public attitudes towards an acceptance of the legitimacy and normality of nationalist mobilization by substate national groups. Following a brief overview of the complexity of ethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe and the intricacy of minority-state relations, the author of this article contends that, contrary to Kymlicka, the region might even be better off if political spaces were constructed around other than ethnic identities. In line with Kymlicka, it is nevertheless conceded that there may be a need in several cases for lengthy transition periods in which ethnic identities are given institutional space and security to play an important role in everyday politics.

I. Introduction

Towards the end of the introductory section of his opening article, Will Kymlicka states that, in his view, “we can afford to sit back and think more carefully about the potential and pitfalls of ‘exporting’ and ‘internationalizing’ minority rights” because “the initial panic about ethnic violence has subsided” and “relative peace” now prevails in Central and Eastern Europe (2002: 2). If we assume the latter to be correct (and I am by no means certain that this relative peace is an irreversible trend), why should we even bother to think about exporting and internationalizing minority rights? To the extent that they were exported and internationalized, they seem to have brought about this condition of relative peace. So why rock the boat? Why raise the hopes of minority groups for wide-ranging regional or local autonomy regimes? Why frighten majorities with the prospect of uncontrollable areas within what they would consider their national homelands? Why, in short, disturb the relative peace that has been established in Central and Eastern Europe after a decade of high interethnic tensions and warfare that led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people and to the displacement of many more?

My answer is relatively similar to that Will Kymlicka gives in his article – apart from intellectual curiosity, there is a very pragmatic need for understanding why and how we have arrived in this state of relative peace and what we have to do to consolidate it. Clearly, this is a very far-reaching agenda, which goes well beyond the scope of a single article. However, it establishes two fundamental points from which I will proceed. First, Kymlicka is correct

when he identifies a need for a thorough analysis of, and debate about, the internationalization of minority rights standards. Second, my approach to the issue is open-ended in terms of policy recommendations that might arise from it; that is, I am not focused on how to achieve a particular outcome, such as the institutionalization of a comprehensive system of minority rights.¹ This, however, does not mean that there is no objective behind such a more open-ended inquiry. Yet, its objective is of a more general nature in that it seeks to identify conditions for the peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic groups (minorities and majorities alike) within a single political, social and economic space. I am well aware that it is not possible to accomplish such an ambitious aim within the scope of a single essay. Instead, I propose one alternative strategy to Kymlicka's suggestion that "nationalist mobilization by subnational groups is a normal and legitimate part of everyday politics in a free and democratic society" (Kymlicka 2002: 22). In doing so, I am not rejecting Will Kymlicka's analysis or recommendations, but want to add another, different perspective on the long-term policy goals regarding interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe. In order to implement this vision of de-ethnicized political, social and economic spaces, fundamental changes in the current patterns of socialization will be necessary which may well last for more than one generation. However, without a different vision of interethnic relations in place, the current, volatile state of affairs is in danger of being perpetuated *ad infinitum*.

Following a contextualization of the dynamics of interethnic relations and a brief analysis of minority-state relations in Central and Eastern Europe, I argue that taking ethnic identities out of politics may be another, and perhaps equally valid, strategy to achieve harmonious interethnic relations in the region.

II. The Context of Interethnic Relations in Central and Eastern Europe: Ethnic and Territorial Claims

For a proper understanding of the dynamics of interethnic relations and thus of the viability of distinct strategies to consolidate the relative peace achieved thus far in Central and Eastern Europe, it is initially necessary to establish the nature of the key actors being discussed. Ethnic groups are "a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences

¹ In his earlier work, Kymlicka has, in my view, convincingly laid the normative foundations for this approach. I am, however, not sure that his theory of ethnocultural justice is universally applicable.

like religion, customs, language, or institutions.” (Smith 1991: 20) As a self-defined community, ethnic groups are distinguishable by a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, the association with a specific homeland, and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (ibid.: 21). Beyond this very general (and admittedly not uncontroversial) definition, a further distinction is necessary between ‘external’, ‘transnational’ and ‘indigenous’ minorities because of the implications that the absence or presence of cross-border links with kin-states or kin-nations in other states have for the perception of the minorities by themselves, their host-states, and a variety of external actors. Within the context of Central and Eastern Europe, *external minorities* are best described as minorities that, while living on the territory of one state (host-state) are ethnically akin to the titular nation of another, often neighbouring, state (kin-state); *transnational minorities* can be defined as ethnic groups whose homelands stretch across several different states without them forming the titular nation in any of them; and *indigenous minorities* can be set apart from the former two as ethnic groups living in their ancestral homelands in only one state of which they are not the titular nation. Examples of the first type of ethnic minorities are the Albanians in Kosovo, the Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania and the Poles in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. In the second category belong the Roma. Ethnic minorities of the third type are a number of ethnic groups in the Russian Federation, such as the Chuvash, Bashkirs, Mordvinians and Komi.

Ethnic identity in itself is not necessarily politically controversial or conflict-prone. Key to understanding the political implications of ethnic identity and of the formation of conflict groups on this basis is the link between the tangible and intangible aspects of ethnic identity. Walker Connor has noted that tangible characteristics are only important inasmuch as they “contribute to this notion or sense of a group’s self-identity and uniqueness.” (Connor 1994: 104) In turn, then, a threat to, or opportunity for, these tangibles, real or perceived, is considered a threat to, or opportunity for, self-identity and uniqueness. Confronting this threat or taking this opportunity, leads to ethnic identity being politicized, that is to say, to the ethnic group becoming a political actor by virtue of its shared ethnic identity. As such, ethnic identity “can be located on a spectrum between primordial historic continuities and instrumental opportunistic adaptations.” (Esman 1994: 15)

Consequently, ethnic groups, especially if they are in a (perceived) situation of disadvantage in comparison with other such groups make demands that reflect both the historic continuities as well as perceived contemporary opportunities. As outlined in Table 1

Territory is a similarly important political category in interethnic relations. It can be used as a defining criterion in relation to citizenship rights and identities, it can be the basis of political entities (states, regions, communities), and it can be a potent source of mass mobilization (regionalism). All these functions can also be performed by ethnicity, and often territorial components form a significant dimension of ethnic identities. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between ethnicity and territory as key factors in the dynamics of interethnic relations.

For states and ethnic groups alike, territory possesses certain values in and of itself. These include ownership of natural resources, such as water, iron, coal, oil or gas, they extend to the goods and services produced by the population living in this territory, and they can comprise military or strategic advantages in terms of natural boundaries, access to the open sea, and control over terrestrial transport routes and waterways. Thus, throughout history wars have been fought over territories, they have changed hands as a result of wars, and new wars have arisen as a consequence of that. Yet, all of that took place largely without consideration of the people living in these territories,³ and it was only with the advent of nationalism that the issues of state, nation and territory became linked.

Because of the significance of territory as a symbol of individual and collective identities, its political, economic and social importance for the constitution of states, and its strategic value as a source of control and influence, states and ethnic groups alike make claims to territories that they consider essential from any one of these perspectives. The most common justifications for such claims to territory are indigenoussness, historic entitlement, divine rights, and (alleged) superior culture of the claimant (Moore 1998: 142-50). Regardless of the reasons given in justification, territorial claims can be secessionist, irredentist and/or autonomist in their nature. In the context of this article, I define secessionism as the political movement of a specified population group that drives a process at the end of which it hopes to have succeeded in detaching itself and its territory from its host-state and to have established an independent state of its own. In contrast to such a group-based movement, irredentism is a state-based, but not necessarily government-backed, movement that seeks to retrieve an external minority together with the territory that the latter inhabits across an

³ There are some early examples of peace treaties and territorial settlements in which, to use modern terminology, minority rights provisions were included. These include the Treaty of Perpetual Union between the King of France and the Helvetic state (1516), the Peace Treaty of Westphalia (1648), and the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna (1815).

existing border, i.e. to add territory as well as population to an existing state. Territorial autonomism expresses the desire of the population (or a part thereof) resident in a particular territory to gain a measure of self-governance within this territory without seceding from its host-state. Disputed territories can thus simultaneously be a phenomenon of inter-state, interethnic, and group-state relations – depending on the nature of the territorial claim and the level at which it is made (see Table 2). In this context, it is also important to note that inter-group relations must be conceived of more broadly than the traditional pattern of minority – majority relations when territorial aspects are considered. Quite often, disputed territories are inhabited by members of more than one ethnic group whose interest and opportunity structures in relation to the territory in question are most likely to be different and can thus have the potential to spark further interethnic conflicts.

Table 2: The Nature and Level of Territorial Claims

Nature of the Territorial Claim	Level of the Territorial Claim
irredentist/secessionist	<i>state-state and minority vs. host-state</i> Transdnister Republica Srpska
irredentist/non-secessionist	<i>state-state</i> ⁴ Bulgaria-Macedonia Romania-Moldova
non-irredentist/secessionist	<i>minority vs. host-state</i> Kosovo some sections of Macedonians in Bulgaria radical Muslims in Sandzak
non-irredentist/non-secessionist/autonomist	<i>minority vs. host-state</i> Albanians of Macedonia Hungarians of Romania moderate Muslims in Sandzak

⁴ These are not ideal-typical cases, as the issues at stake are more complex, involving, among others, unresolved questions of nationhood. However, Romania in particular is an example for the latent dangers of unresolved border questions. In the context of the conclusion of a treaty with Moldova, nineteen senators signed a declaration on 22 May demanding that the treaty be substantially amended insofar as that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact be explicitly condemned, that ‘Bessarabia’ be explicitly recognized in the treaty as being “historical Romanian territory” whose future fate “can be decided only in a joint [Romanian-Moldovan] referendum,” and that the treaty be defined as “provisional” and “a stage [toward] ... Moldova’s natural unification with the mother country”. RFE/RL Newslines Vol. 4, No. 99, Part II, 23 May 2000. A more clear-cut example for this type of territorial claim is inter-war Alsace, a territory disputed between Germany and France for centuries. Here, German irredentism clashed with an Alsatian determination to remain part of France despite an ethnic affiliation with Germany.

III. Minority-State Relationships in Central and Eastern Europe: Conflict and Patronage within and beyond State Borders

In their attempts to preserve, express and develop their distinct identities, ethnic groups perceive threats and opportunities. The more deeply felt these perceptions are, the more they will be linked to the very survival of the group and the more intense will the conflict be that they can potentially generate. This links the issues of ethnicity and territory to the notion of power. The political implication of this connection between ethnicity/territory and power is that any ethnonational group that is conscious of its uniqueness, and wishes to preserve it, is involved in a struggle for political power – either retaining the measure of political power it possesses or striving to acquire the amount of power that it deems necessary to preserve its identity as a distinct ethnonational group, that is, to defeat the threats and seize the opportunities it faces. This desire to gain political power for an ethnic group is expressed in the concept of nationalism; according to Smith “an ideological movement aiming to attain or maintain autonomy, unity and identity for a social group which is deemed to constitute a nation.” (1991: 51)

Incompatible doctrines of ethnonationalism are often at the centre of the relationship between a minority and its host-state, and it is in this context that opportunity and threat have various, yet concretely identifiable meanings, being either positively or negatively related to the preservation, expression, and development of a group’s ethnic identity and to the ability of the host-state to preserve the integrity of the territorial or civic nation. For a minority, opportunities will manifest themselves, for example, in rights, self-administration, or self-government, and they can be realized in local, regional, or federal frameworks within the host-state; alternatively, opportunities may also arise in the separation from the host-state leading either to independent statehood or to unification with the kin-state. Threats generally occur when state institutions deny an ethnic group access to the resources that are essential for the preservation, expression, and development of a group’s identity – access to linguistic, educational, or religious facilities as well as to positions of power in the institutions of the state. Threats can also become manifest in policies of unwanted assimilation, in discrimination and deprivation. At their most extreme, they take the form of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

It is in these most extreme cases that the relationship between minority and host-state coincides with that between minority and host-nation, that is, the titular nation has

monopolized the institutions of the state. Although recent history has provided a number of examples of this kind – Nazi Germany, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda – this is, nevertheless, not the rule. Yet, even in its less extreme forms, the relationship between minority and host-nation is often characterized by inter-group tension, resulting from the politicization and radicalization of different ethnic identities and from claims for the establishment of conditions conducive to their preservation, expression, and development. Responses to such claims made by the respectively other ethnic group are then perceived as threats (which often, but not exclusively, result from discrimination in the distribution of resources) and/or opportunities (which often, but not exclusively, result from policies of accommodation). In ethnically diverse states or territories, these potential conflict patterns extend to the relationships between all ethnic groups inhabiting the area concerned.

Thus, if interethnic relations are of a conflictual nature, they can either occur as group-state conflict, i.e. conflict between the minority and the institutions of its host-state, or as inter-group conflict, i.e. between the minority and its host-nation (or parts thereof) or between different ethnic minorities. The two may, but need not, occur simultaneously. As ethnic conflicts are rooted in the perception of threats and the policies formulated to counter them, a specific ethnic conflict may also lead to conflict between host-nation and host-state – as a result of an actual or perceived ‘over-accommodation’ of the interests of a minority, which (sections of) the host-nation may regard as being detrimental to their own interests. This is very often, but not necessarily, the case where accommodation of minority interests is pursued territorially, yet the respective territory contains a significant portion of members of the host-nation as well. The simultaneous occurrence of inter-group and group-state conflict is another potential reason for conflict between host-state and host-nation. As inter-group conflict threatens the societal integrity of the host-state, actions taken by sections within the host-nation may be perceived as one source of this threat and be countered accordingly by the host-state. This, in turn, can be perceived by the host-nation, or at least by some sections within it, as denying an opportunity to defend, or establish, conditions conducive to the preservation, expression, and development of its own ethnic identity. A similar case can be made for potential conflicts between kin-state and kin-nation and in relation to the involvement of further external actors.

The involvement of external actors, such as international organizations, regional and world powers, and/or kin-states, normally creates a relationship between them and the ethnic minority that is not one of conflict, but rather one of patronage. This is particularly the case for external minorities as their relationship with a kin-state is based on common ethnicity and

a territorially divided ethnic nation. Here, as in other cases of external involvement in ethnic conflicts, patronage results from one of two aspects, and often from a combination of the two – national sentiment and national interest.

In a kin-state, popular sentiment concerning the fate of members of the nation living in another state is sometimes also driven by the desire to unify the national territory and bring together in it all the members of the ethnic nation. This finds its expression in irredentist nationalism. Although now a rare occurrence in Central and Eastern Europe, the region has had its fair share of irredentist claims: German claims to the Sudetenland in then-Czechoslovakia led to the 1938 Munich ‘Agreement’, Hungarian claims to territories in neighbouring Slovakia and Romania were subsequently satisfied by the so-called Vienna Arbitration Awards prior to World War Two, Serbian claims to territory in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are a continuing factor of instability in the Balkans, as are tendencies among (some) Albanians in different parts of former Yugoslavia to establish a Greater Albania.

Yet, as national sentiment is not always expressed in irredentist nationalism, so is the relationship between external minority and kin-state not always about the secession of the territory inhabited by the kin-group and its subsequent unification with the kin-state. Informed by domestic and foreign national interests, territorial unification may not be desirable for either kin-state or external minority or it may not be possible given geopolitical or regional interest and opportunity structures (Horowitz 1985, 1991). Alternatively then, the relationship between external minority and kin-state can be one of ‘repatriation’ (as with West Germany and German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe in the post-1950, and especially the post-1989 period), or it can be one of aiming at establishing conditions in cooperation with the host-state that are conducive to the preservation, expression and development of the ethnic identity of an external minority. With varying degrees of success, the numerous bilateral treaties concluded between the states of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 testify to this.

For other external actors, motivations to intervene in ethnic conflicts are often different. They may include humanitarian concerns, unease about the potential implications of an ethnic conflict for regional stability, fears of conflict spillovers, the desire to prevent negative consequences for the free flow of goods and services, etc. External intervention is, therefore, not always benign or on behalf of a minority. Instead of a relationship of patronage, a conflictual relationship between minority and external actor, including the kin-state, is then likely to develop when their respective political agendas are mutually incompatible. This can,

for example, be the case if the irredentist nationalism of the kin-state, or of sections within it, is not reciprocated by the external minority. *Vice versa*, a conflictual relationship develops if the kin-state or other external actor does not welcome the secessionism or autonomism of the minority, or when some of its manifestations are perceived as a source of wider regional instability, as has been the case with Albanian secessionism in Kosovo and Macedonia.

The potential patterns in which interethnic relations may manifest themselves as conflict are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Conflict Issues and Examples of Their Manifestation

	Minority	Host-nation	Host-state	Kin-state/Kin-nation	Other external actors
Minority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Conflict between moderate and radical Muslims in Sandzak 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial control, equal access to resources ☐ Hungarians vs. Slovaks in Southern Slovakia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial control (autonomy/secession) ☐ Russians in Crimea/Moldova • Minority rights and their implementation ☐ Macedonians and Turks in Bulgaria • Equality of opportunity ☐ Poles in Belarus and Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Ethnic Germans in Poland and the Czech Republic vs. expellee organizations in Germany 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Ethnic Albanians fighting for the independence of Kosovo
Host-nation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Serb Resistance Movement after 1997/98 vs. supporters of President Milosevic over Kosovo policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to, and control over, resources ☐ 'popular' resentment of and discrimination against ethnic Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia vs. official state policies of inclusion and cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interference, perceived disadvantages because of support of external minority ☐ Upper Silesia in the early 1990s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interference by external actors ☐ Reaction in Serbia to the NATO air campaign
Host-state			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Conflict between Romanian senators and government over treaty with Moldova 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial control ☐ Nagorno Karabakh • Human and minority rights policy ☐ Hungary-Romania/Slovakia • Citizenship/status issues ☐ Hungarian Status Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty ☐ Role of OSCE/HCNM/CoE in Central and Eastern Europe, e.g. pre-1998 Slovakia
Kin-state/Kin-nation				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political goals and means to realize them ☐ Successive German governments since the late 1960s vs. expellee organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interference by the kin-state in an ethnic conflict in the host-state ☐ Serbia (and Croatia) in the Bosnian war
Other external actors					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting interest structures ☐ Chechnya

IV. Desecuritization vs. De-ethnicization of Politics

As Kymlicka, in my view correctly, asserts, security is a major concern for policymakers in East and West when assessing policy options in the context of interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe. As I have demonstrated in the previous two sections, this is hardly surprising given both the complexity of interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe and the intricacy of the political situation in a region that has been historically prone to ethnic tension and is still in the process of undergoing major social, political and economic changes as part of the transition process initiated by the collapse of the communist bloc some ten years ago. In such a situation, it is also not astonishing that all aspects of security and stability are high on the agenda of politicians and their constituencies. Yet, while Kymlicka seems to put the bulk, if not all, responsibility for desecuritization on the state and its institutions, I contend that minorities and their leaders have to make similar efforts to bring about successful desecuritization of democratic political spaces. Two dimensions are particularly crucial in this respect – (well-)functioning institutions and fundamental changes in attitudes among both majorities and minorities.

The need for (well-)functioning institutions is rather obvious: only institutions that deliver good governance (based on the principles of democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights) and create an environment in which economic growth is possible will bear a chance of being accepted and supported by electorates. However, with very few exceptions, the ethnic demography in Central and Eastern Europe is such that democracy without any safeguards for the rights of ethnic minorities is unlikely to be acceptable to members of such minorities, as in virtually every country in the region, political parties representing the titular nation could form majority governments without participation from ethnic minorities. The acceptability of democracy with its implication of majority rule has been achieved through the implementation of minority rights legislation, even though this is very often limited to areas of language use in public (in contact with authorities, in relation to street signs, etc.) and in education, and only occasionally provides further reaching measures, such as specific electoral provisions guaranteeing minority representation in parliaments (such as in Romania) or establishing far-reaching (albeit non-territorial) self-government rights for minorities (such as in Hungary). In many cases, establishing even minimal rights for minorities in the vital area of language use has required the concerted action of domestic and international actors who often struggled hard to

overcome opposition from nationalists on the extreme left and right of the political spectrum in countries like Croatia, to Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Latvia, to name but a few. Despite the often fierce resistance to ‘minority privileges’, so far governmental institutions have remained stable and democracy has been consolidated in a majority of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, the new political institutions have also weathered the disappointment among minorities who felt short-changed when (western) democratic systems were established, but without attaining the far-reaching mechanisms of protection and promotion offered by, for example, the Swiss, Belgian or Canadian minority rights systems. From this perspective, again, one could simply close the debate, applaud majorities and minorities in Central and Eastern Europe and move on. However, not all the problems in the region are solved or all dangers of worsening interethnic relations eliminated once and for all. The rights that minorities have today were often given grudgingly and under pressure from international organizations threatening exclusion (Council of Europe) or promising membership (EU, NATO). At the same time, minorities have only reluctantly, if at all, accepted that certain provisions for the public use of their mother tongue are the best they can achieve in their attempts to preserve, express and develop their distinct identities.

As elections have indeed become free and fair, and as everyone can bid for voter support, almost regardless of political agenda, extreme nationalist parties have become powerful players in the new political processes in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990. This has created situations in which the ‘ethnic card’ is all too easily played both by majority parties defending the nation against minorities’ allegedly illegitimate demands, and by minority parties protecting their group against perceived majority policies of discrimination and harassment. More recently, another new-old dimension of ethnopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe has come to the fore – the kin-state protecting the nation abroad. Russia, on some occasions over the past decade, and, more recently and more aggressively, Hungary have opted to take an active stance on their kin-groups abroad. Especially in the case of Hungary’s relations with Romania and Slovakia, this has led to a worsening of bilateral relations and bears the potential of a serious deterioration of interethnic relations in Slovakia and Romania.

Thus, with the continuing volatility of interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe in mind, I cannot agree with Kymlicka when he states that “the crucial change ... [in public attitudes – S.W.] involves the acceptance that nationalist mobilization by substate national

groups is a normal and legitimate part of everyday politics in a free and democratic society.” Nationalist mobilization, regardless of whether it occurs on the part of minorities or majorities, always has an exclusionary agenda and thus almost inevitably produces outcomes diametrically opposed to what Kymlicka advocates, namely ‘genuine progress in state-minority relations’. Rather than legitimizing nationalist mobilization, my analysis of the dynamics of interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe drives me to argue for the de-ethnicization of everyday politics. If political issues are no longer framed in ethnic terms, they will also begin to lose their security relevance: de-ethnicization will precede desecuritization of political spaces. Where security issues are framed in ethnic terms, the legitimating of nationalist mobilization is hardly likely, and even if it were in some way possible to legitimize mobilization along ethnonational lines, security issues, especially if they potentially involved territorial integrity and national sovereignty, would hardly become less sensitive. Thus, the major challenge for the fundamental change in public attitudes is not to accept nationalist mobilization, but to accept the need for reforms that make nationalist mobilization superfluous. This will require majorities to accept that it is their responsibility to protect and integrate minorities. After all, democracy works, among others, on the premise that the majority not abuse its position and take decisions that also reflect the interests of minorities. By the same token, it also means that minorities (and their external patrons) moderate their demands and become more flexible in terms of how they seek to achieve their legitimate demands. The range of institutional choices that are available to accommodate diverse demands in multicultural societies are infinitely varied. To accept and embrace this variation is the real challenge in terms of changing public attitudes.

This should not be interpreted as a shift from ‘security as impediment to harmonious interethnic relations’ to ‘ethnicity as impediment to harmonious interethnic relations’. It is not the presence of different ethnic groups and their legitimate desire to preserve, express and develop their distinct identities that impede harmonious interethnic relations, but the formation of conflict groups based on ethnicity. Ethnicity as one of the ultimate binary markers leaves little room for manoeuvre between the lines, for crosscutting cleavages, for shifting political alliances. Political spaces exclusively defined in ethnic terms are static and inflexible, and often unable to cope with the complex political, social and economic dynamics of contemporary societies. To legitimize ethnic politics by advocating the acceptance of nationalist mobilization cannot but be counterproductive in the long term.

At the same time, de-ethnicizing political spaces must not be equated with denying rights and safeguards for ethnic minorities. On the contrary, demands for language, cultural, educational and/or religious rights are legitimate precisely because they help this process of de-ethnicization as they assure minorities of the protection of their identity. However, it is equally the responsibility of minorities to assure majorities that they will also refrain from playing the ethnic card in politics. This way, continuous polarization of ethnically diverse societies can be avoided, and the politicization and radicalization of ethnic identities can be prevented. This is not an argument against the existence of political parties that draw their membership primarily from one particular ethnic group within a given society, but against parties that deliberately exclude other groups from their membership and pursue a single-issue, ethnic agenda.

Most democratic systems of government, certainly those that remain stable in the long term, are based on compromise and consensus. In ethnically diverse societies, compromises can be found either by entrenching politically relevant ethnic identities or by making them politically irrelevant and build democratic political spaces around issues other than ethnic identity. The former may be necessary for interim periods of transition, especially after violent ethnic conflicts, when basic physical and other security needs of different groups remain high on the agenda of group members and their political representatives. Building institutions that serve the particularist agendas of individual elites is also often easier as it provides the same elites with sufficient personal incentives to sign a deal that gives them power, prestige and income. Thus, this route may well be the quickest, and sometimes the only, way to establish peace between conflict groups. The problem, however, is that building institutions around ethnic identities is divisive of societies in the long term and legitimizes nationalist mobilization *ad infinitum*. This does not in itself and necessarily and inevitably lead to renewed violent conflict. However, by organizing political spaces around ethnic identities it will always be much easier for minority and majority nationalisms to retain a foothold and mobilize their respective groups against one another.

Making the transition from a post-conflict situation with heavily entrenched ethnic identities and/or building institutions and constructing political spaces that are based upon issues other than ethnic identities is, of course, a tall order in any ethnically diverse society. There can also be no doubt that in Central and Eastern Europe, where majority and minority ethnic identities have become major factors in political processes, this is a difficult, but not impossible process that is

further complicated by the fact that the ethnic demography in most states of the region is very diverse, consisting of different types of minorities, settling in compact areas or dispersed throughout the country, which in turn may be confronted by very different external ‘challenges’ in the form of cooperative or confrontational kin-states and different agendas driving the policies of major international organizations. It is, thus, impossible and pointless to try and prescribe a particular set of policies that could fit all states in the region. From this perspective, I agree with Kymlicka that “we need to think about the enduring conflicts that arise in multinational states, about the institutions that can manage those conflicts in a peaceful manner, and about the underlying assumptions and beliefs that allow citizens to debate them in a free and democratic way.” (Kymlicka 2002: 23)

Recent experience especially in the Balkans and the Caucasus, but also in some other places in Central and Eastern Europe, leads me to believe that political elites and policymakers in East and West need to work towards de-ethnicizing political processes and spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. This is unlikely to be achieved in the short term or without compromise. In many societies in Central and Eastern Europe, it will also require significant periods in which ethnic identities continue to play an important role in politics and are given the institutional space and security to do so. Nevertheless, in the long term harmonious interethnic relations may be more secure only if politics moves beyond ethnic politics. This will require committed and determined political elites in both majorities and minorities that have a clear vision of post-ethnic politics and that have the skills and resources to implement such a vision. Kymlicka claims that “the original agenda behind the internationalizing of minority rights was driven by short-term concerns about avoiding violence and civil war.” (Kymlicka 2002: 23) This may be true, but it does not necessarily imply that the long-term agenda has to be much different, and in particular I do not think that it means long-term political strategy in relation to ethnic politics in Central and Eastern Europe has to be modelled exclusively on any particular western approach.

As I stated in the beginning of this article, there is a very pragmatic need for understanding why and how we have arrived in this state of relative peace and what we have to do to consolidate it. In criticizing Kymlicka for arguing that “nationalist mobilization by substate national groups is a normal and legitimate part of everyday politics” (Kymlicka 2002: 22), my objective was not to dismiss his approach, but to add another angle to the debate on transposing a particular (and by no means uncontroversial) western model of multiculturalism to Central and

Eastern Europe. There is nothing to say that Kymlicka's model could not work in Central and Eastern Europe, but there is equally little evidence that it is the only approach that will secure harmonious interethnic relations there in the long term.

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Biographical Note

Stefan Wolff is Lecturer in the Department of European Studies at the University of Bath in England, UK. He received his undergraduate education at Leipzig University in Germany, and earned an M.Phil. from Magdalene College, Cambridge, and a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has edited and co-edited several books on ethnopolitics, including *German Minorities in Europe: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Belonging* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), *Peace at Last? The Impact of the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland* (with Jörg Neuheiser; New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2002), and *Managing and Settling Ethnic Conflicts: Comparative Perspectives from Africa, Asia and Europe* (with Ulrich Schneckener, London: Hurst, 2003). Wolff is also the author of *Disputed Territories: The Transnational Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict Settlement* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2002) and of the forthcoming *The German Question in International Politics: From 1919 to the Present* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). Together with Karl Cordell, Wolff is editor of *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* (www.ethnopolitics.org).



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