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How to Prevent Ethnic Conflicts: the Unlearned Lessons of History

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We may argue whether the recent riots in the suburbs of Paris were ethnic or social based conflicts, but there is no question that the roots of the last wars in Europe, the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s (in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo), were national and religious differences. Or more properly: they were the results of old and new tensions between national groups living intermingled, in ethnically mixed areas. The on-going violence in Iraq and Afghanistan also goes back to such antagonisms. But the history of the last two hundred years shows not only numerous wars between nations, but also many successful efforts at reconciliation, and we know of many models for the harmonious co-existence of national/religious groups who live side-by-side or in close proximity. A study, an overview of the successful and unsuccessful arrangements may be useful for the prevention of future, ethnic-based tensions and conflicts.

Conflict resolution is a fashionable field of study, a Google search on the internet resulted in **96 800 000** hits. The number of special institutions that deal with it is impressive: you may find an *Association for Conflict Resolution*, a *Center* for the same, the *Conflict Resolution Information Source* (www.CRInfo.org) and the website of the Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base Project (www.BeyondIntractability.org) offer succinct, executive summary-type articles on almost 400 topics as well as links to recommended sources (web, print, and audiovisual) offering more in-depth information. Also available are over a hundred hours of online interviews, featuring more than 70 distinguished scholars and practitioners, and comprehensive bibliographies with more than 20,000 citations. Periodicals, like the *Ethnic Conflict Research Digest*, or the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* contain articles, reviews, as well as numerous on-line resources.

Far less can one read about conflict prevention, how to defuse the many potential time-bombs, how to remove combustible or inflammable material from the many dangerous hot-spots of the world. Although **42 600 000 hits** in a similar Google search is not too bad, but it shows much fewer institutions and no periodical. The International Crisis Group, an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with nearly 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict (headed by my one-time colleague, Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia), deals mainly with „third world” conflicts, as its recent reports and briefings testify.¹

Finally a search for ethnic conflicts also gave **42 500 000** hits, but in the *Ethnic Conflict Research Digest*, a journal which „contains peer reviews of recently published books, journal articles and research papers on the dynamics and management of ethnic conflict”, I was unable to find any reference to the problem of minorities in Central Europe.

Fortunately Europe does not figure prominently on today's conflict maps, and even Central and Eastern Europe or the Balkans did not show high-level conflicts in the last few years.² Nevertheless I am convinced that a study of the "ethnonational" conflicts of this continent offer the best lessons for the prevention of such conflicts.

As we all know, ethnic conflict is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the age of nationalism, before the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte social class and wealth was far more important than language, and the source of primary loyalty was the territory and its sovereign. The nobles speaking different tongues did not identify themselves with the peasants who happened to use the same language as their masters. By the early 19th century, at least in Europe, that changed. Most national/ethnic groups (in Europe) asserted themselves, and national identity became based on language and culture, rather than on history. Their aim, the creation of a State of their own, ran into two difficulties: the existing Romanov, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and the fact that in most cases it was next to impossible to carve out units from the existing states where one national/linguistic group would form a compact bloc. One way of solving the problem was to change the composition of the population by killing, expelling or assimilating the alien, undesirable ethnic elements. The 19th and 20th centuries were characterized by such attempts, the last ones being called – euphemistically – "ethnic cleansing", i.e. killing based on one's nationality, ethnicity.

Despite efforts to exterminate all the Jews and to force millions of people out of their homeland in the 1930s and 1940s the majority of existing states of the world are multi-national. That means that their population is far from being ethnically homogeneous, they contain different national, linguistic or religious groups, all with a rather strong sense of separate identity. Most countries in Asia and Africa bear this statement out. At first glance Europe is different, being composed of so-called nation states. But just a few years ago the United Kingdom accorded substantial self-government to Scotland and Wales, the Spanish Parliament has just recognized that the Catalonians constitute a separate nation, and the Basques are clearly not Spanish. Even after the break-up of the Soviet Union the Russian Federation includes at least 15 million non-Russians. Between the Germans and the Russians today there are eighteen independent countries with an aggregate population of about 170 million. Between the two world wars about one third of them belonged to a national minority. Hitler's and Stalin's (and more recently Milosevic') policies, expulsions and so-called "ethnic cleansings" (in reality ethnic killings) reduced the proportion of those minorities to about 12 per cent of the overall number. But close to 20 million is still a large number.

A good ethnic map of Central Europe looks like a colourful mosaic. (As we know, a mosaic is composed of tiny coloured pieces as opposed to colours mixed on a painter's palette.) The former Yugoslavia was a good example. But that mosaic blew up. Many people keep on asking: "Why?"

Most of the wars of the past were caused by or related to conflicts between different national groups fighting for territory, influence and wealth, and, as a concomitant, trying to dispossess, often even to eliminate rival ethnic groups. The very recent tragedies in the former Yugoslavia offer an object lesson. The plan to turn Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, let alone Albanians, Hungarians, Slovaks etc into Yugoslavs proved an illusion. The

primary precondition for the peaceful coexistence of the peoples that made up the new state, the recognition of their special interests and needs, was not realized. The Constitution of 1921 was seen by the majority as creating a Greater Serbia. Even the century-old Croatian *Sabor* was abolished. Following World War II Tito understood the birth-defect of the first Yugoslavia and tried to remedy it by establishing a federal state and autonomous regions, but this federalism was much like the similar structures in what used to be called the U.S.S.R., the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. A rose is by any other name is a rose, a dictatorship is always a tyranny, it is a centralized autocracy, it does not tolerate self-government even on the local level. Nevertheless in communist Yugoslavia not only the Croats and the Slovenians but even the minorities, Albanians, Hungarians, Croats, Rusyns, Slovaks etc. were allowed to cultivate their own culture – probably to compensate them for the lack of political rights. But the last phase of Communism turned out to be nationalism.³ When the iron hand of Tito was gone, Slovenian and Croatian resentments came to the open. Then in 1989 Milosevic abolished the autonomy of Kosovo and the Vojvodina, and that proved to be the death-toll for Yugoslavia.⁴ The real and imaginary grievances of the various peoples that composed Yugoslavia prompted the demands for independence, and the Serbs' unwillingness to accept the separation of Slovenia and Croatia led to war and horrendous crimes motivated by ethnic hatred. But the primary cause of that war was not any age-old feud between the Serbs and the Croats, but the existence of a half a million strong Serbian ethnic island in the heart of Croatia, and the inability of the Croats and the Serbs to work out an equitable arrangement for the future status of that enclave. Then the European Community devised a solution called the "Carrington Plan," which envisaged far-reaching territorial autonomy for the Serbs of Croatia. Foolishly neither side accepted it. While it was too much for the Croats, the Serbs thought it did not provide enough for them. Milosevic declared that "all Serbs must live in one country," in total disregard of the wishes of the non-Serbs. The war and the crimes spread from Croatia to Bosnia⁵ and finally to Kosovo. Eventually NATO, prompted by the United States, stopped the horrors and helped to create at least a lasting truce, opening the way to a real settlement - which has not arrived yet.⁶

The present, fashionable western ideal, an integrated multiethnic and multicultural society, is a far cry in real life. With the best intentions and genuine efforts in Scandinavia and in Western Europe, the absorption of the new immigrants failed miserably, as recent riots, murders and the proliferation of criminal gangs show. The picture is significantly better and more promising if we look at the traditional, old, historical minorities in the western world. Switzerland adopted the system of self-governing, autonomous units, *Kantons*, centuries ago. That works, apparently mainly because it prevents domination by any other national group, and preserves the ethnic balance. Similar aims guide all the more recent and successful arrangements, like the federal-type ones in Spain, Belgium, or overseas in Canada. They are all based on the idea of separate national communities. A somewhat different case is when one language and national identity form the clear majority in the country, to which it gives its own name, like here in Romania, or in neighbouring Bulgaria, Serbia (some call it the titular country), but there is one or more substantial national or ethnic minority. Such minorities have their own distinct culture, traditions, and language, they also have a territory which they have inhabited for centuries, and they want to preserve their own identity for future centuries. This desire is partly explained by the fact that - at least in Europe - those minorities emerged not by people crossing borders but by borders crossing people. Some of these minorities passed from one citizenship to another several times in one's lifetime.⁷ Most of the national minorities have a "mother country" or a kin state just across the border, so their treatment has international connotations.

That's why it is customary to speak of a three-cornered or triadic relationship between the "mother country" or "homeland state", the minority, and the host state to which they belong today.⁸ Besides their strong attachment to their national identity, the national minorities are motivated by the fear, based on too many examples in the past and the present, that the stronger national group will always aim at undermining the position of the weaker groups, and that their very existence is in jeopardy. Recent "ethnic cleansings" only bear that feeling out.⁹

Arnold Toynbee, the renowned philosopher of history, wrote a book in 1915 entitled "Nationality and the War." It was war propaganda against the Central Powers, but the author's intellect and foresight led to some very pertinent observations. Rather than advocating the break-up of all the European multinational states, Toynbee preferred large economic and political units with guarantees for the rights of the various national groups. "We can only secure that the minorities are as small and the suffering as mild as possible. [...] Savages wipe out minorities: civilized men take testimonials from them."¹⁰

Having witnessed the recent break-up of several federal states and the bloodshed that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia, many people think that meeting, satisfying the demands of the various national groups of a State inevitably leads to wars and the proliferation of states. On the contrary, it is usually not the demands of the various national groups which is to blame for ethnic tensions, but the unwillingness of many governments to meet the legitimate, natural aspirations. States which built a centralist system based on the hegemony of one national group, and often try to maintain it by force, have been experiencing great difficulties, an upsurge of separatist movements. The recent history of many Asian and African countries bears this statement out.

In Asia and Africa the problem of multi-national states is even more serious than in Europe. In countries where there was a lasting colonial presence the so-called "liberation movements" directed against the imperial masters united the many ethnic groups, but with independence gained this unity proved difficult to maintain. Nigeria, Congo, Sri Lanka, Rwanda are some of the more obvious examples for that, but the most telling case is Iraq. That country was an artificial creation following World War I, putting together Sunni and Shiite Arabs and non-Arabic Kurds, with smaller national-ethnic groups, such as the Turkomans and the Chaldeans, interspersed. The British mandate tried to be fair to all, but independence soon led to domination by the Sunni Arabs, numerically outnumbered by the Shiite Arabs. Saddam's infamous dictatorship was especially brutal for the Shiites and the Kurds. That's why it is so difficult today to introduce a democratic system which satisfies all the national/religious groups, and why there is not enough mutual confidence for a federal arrangement. In Afghanistan "nation building" is hardly possible, because there is no such thing as an Afghan nation. It is an amalgamation of tribal territories (the overall population is 45 percent Pashtun; 25 percent Hazara; 19 percent Tajik; 8 percent Uzbek), with co-nationals living in the neighbouring states. On the other hand India, South Africa, Kenya, even Pakistan are more promising cases, mainly on account of the fact that those states recognize the separate identities of the various regions, historic provinces and national groups. We can safely say that *one of the key problems facing the world is finding a way for the harmonious coexistence and collaboration of the many national/ethnic groups living together in one state.* While open ethnic cleansing will hopefully not reappear, as the international community made it clear in Bosnia and in Kosovo that it would not tolerate it, it is

also essential to prevent the tensions and conflicts caused by national oppression, mistreatment and second-class citizenship, which are only too frequent even today.

The melting-pot of America is rather the exception than the rule, but even there the various immigrant communities increasingly resist assimilation and keep much of their separate culture. Most multi-national countries have not been a melting pot for their national groups, and attempts at assimilating them may easily turn the country into a powder keg. History abounds in examples. What most national, ethnic and religious communities are seeking is only guarantees for survival. Usually they do not demand separation or a change in borders, but the right to retain their language and culture, to have their children educated in the language of their forbears, and to have local officials and representatives chosen from their own community, who understand their way of life. This is what the claim for autonomy and collective rights is all about.

Most multi-national states have **not** been neutral in matters concerning the national minorities.¹¹ On the contrary, state authorities have often been a tool for their mistreatment, or even elimination through expulsion, assimilation - and sometimes by outright massacre. Too many people tend to think that life is a zero-sum game, that rights accorded to a national minority are bound to hurt the interests of the majority. While open discrimination is no longer the rule, more subtle versions of it are evident. Members of the minority are seldom represented in the civil service, the officers' corps, and the police. Street names, signs, inscriptions, displays usually ignore their language. The proportion of students coming from the national minorities is considerably lower in high schools and even more at universities than that of the members of the national majority. Local officials make no effort to speak the language of the minorities even in regions where the latter form a substantial group, often a local majority. There is also a deliberate policy of moving people from the majority population into the areas inhabited mainly by the minority, so as to colonize those regions and change their ethnic composition. All that is a constant source of tension, leads to massive unemployment among the minority, or, where the formerly closed borders have opened up, to emigration, especially among the educated younger people. The result is an alarming decrease in the number of the minority, leading to growing exasperation.

The idea of the exclusive nation-state is not in line with modern democracy. The only way to create homogeneous nation-states - short of massive ethnic killings - would be through exchanges of population on a vast scale, involving tens of millions of people, at enormous financial cost and causing untold human sufferings. Some territorial readjustments would also be inevitable in such an arrangement. So it follows that the only real solution for the national minorities is to have democracy on every level, territorial or cultural self-government in which every national group could participate in accordance with its proportion.¹²

One thing is certain, I am afraid. The issue of the national and ethnic minorities is a time-bomb threatening with explosion, and a preventive solution must be found, combining national legislation and enlightened practice with international action like the codification of rights, monitoring their observance and a mechanism of enforcement. The minorities need guarantees for a decent life and a future. Individual minority rights are not enough. That approach is exactly like the notorious adage that the rich and the poor have an equal right to sleep under the

bridge, to be homeless. Real equality requires opportunities, and a positive, at minimum neutral attitude by the authorities.

It is often argued that there is no such thing as collective rights or group rights for minorities. Although both the UN (in Article 27 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and the Council of Europe (most explicitly in the 1993 Recommendation 1201 of its Parliamentary Assembly) speaks of rights that could be exercised “in community with others in their group” and that local self-government is desirable, too many European countries do not endorse the idea. But no one denies that there exists xenophobia, racial and national discrimination. Those prejudices are always directed not at an individual but at the member(s) of a particular ethnic, religious or national group or community. If the denial of rights can take place on a collective basis, then legal guarantees should be also available for a whole community.

The events of the last twelve years demonstrate that the way to achieve and preserve a truly multi-ethnic state does not lie in deliberately and artificially mixing national groups that speak different languages, follow different religions and even use different alphabets. In my view the way to peace, cooperation and prosperity is to be found in allowing each national group to have self-government, in another word, autonomy. In many cases this autonomy can have a territorial basis, but the majority nation tends to oppose it. There is an alternative solution, the voluntary association of the individual members of the minority into a corporate body, like the various denominations are organized. The first to propose that was Lajos Kossuth in his exile in Italy, where in 1862 he proposed the creation of a “Danubian Confederation.” In the 1900s that very idea was taken up by two Austrians, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, using the term “cultural autonomy.” What is essential is an arrangement where the state is decentralized, where the smaller regional units are based on traditions and on ethnic/national composition, where those units decide over their own affairs and receive a due proportion of the taxes paid by the citizens.

We, Hungarians, offer an object lesson both on how not to handle this issue and also, in the 1990s, how to offer self-government to the national minorities. In 1848 Hungary transformed itself into a modern constitutional state. Then well over half the population spoke no Hungarian. The small Slovak, Romanian and Serb elite (mainly lawyers and priests) demanded territorial autonomy, but what the liberal and enlightened Hungarian political class offered was only full individual rights and freedoms. That made it easier for the Habsburg court to incite “the nationalities” against the Hungarians. In July 1849, the Hungarian Parliament realized its mistake and offered generous terms for the non-Hungarians, but it was too late, Hungary was crushed by the army of the intervening Russian Czar. When Hungary made a compromise with the dynasty in 1867 one of the first acts of the restored Parliament was the passing of a Law on Nationalities. It was a good liberal piece of legislation, and offered rather extensive language rights, but refused to recognize the non-Hungarians as state-forming elements with territorial autonomy. Hungarians paid dearly for their political avarice in 1919, when their historic kingdom was partitioned, and well over three million Hungarians were detached from the nation to become ill-treated minorities in Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia.

After the trials of the Second World War and having witnessed brutal treatment (expulsion and often massacres) of the Hungarians in the territories ceded to the neighbouring states, Hungary finally learned the lesson. In 1993 passed a law on its own national minorities giving them self-government on local level and cultural autonomy on national level. With minor shortcomings the system appears to be working.

I have already mentioned several good examples in Western Europe, whether larger federal units (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland in the U.K., Catalonia and the Basque country in Spain), or local autonomies like South Tyrol, the Åland Islands. Autonomy prevented the renewal of violence and partition in Macedonia. It may now be introduced in Kosovo for the Serbs, in case of the independence of that territory would be recognized. Then some form of autonomy for the non-Serbs in the Vojvodina cannot be denied. That is what the Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania are also striving for, particularly in the south-eastern corner of Transylvania, where Hungarians live in a compact bloc.

The EU and NATO have great influence over all the countries that aspire for membership in those organizations. That influence could have been used to induce governments for guaranteeing the rights and interests of the national minorities through decentralization or “devolution.” European integration goes hand-in-hand with regionalism, at least in the West. But apparently a Hungarian region in Romania and in Slovakia is still an anathema for the majority.

The lessons go beyond Europe. In Asia federalism based on autonomies appears to be the only way for respecting national and religious differences **within existing states**. The survival of Afghanistan and Iraq hinges on that. This is the way to avoid new Bosnias and Kosovos, to prevent new ethnic cleansings in the continents with vast populations. But the model is still to be found in Europe, and particularly in Central Europe. “The various nationalities of Central Europe are so interlocked, and their racial frontiers are so unsuitable as the frontiers of really independent sovereign states, that the only satisfactory and permanent working policy for them lies in their incorporation in a non-national superstate. We can delay, but we cannot prevent the eventual coming of that superstate.” Those words were written in October, 1918 in a Foreign Office memorandum by the British Leo Amery, a close adviser to Prime Minister Lloyd George.¹³ It took a long time for that truism to come close to be realized, but today European integration indeed promises to guarantee the peaceful co-existence and cooperation of the peoples who live in the ethnic mosaic of Central and Eastern Europe.

¹ When I made a search in its impressive data base the word „Hungary,” “Hungarians”, “Transylvania”, gave no results, and finally under “Romania” I found reports on Uzbek refugees transported to that country by the UNHCR.

² See PIOOM World Conflict and Human Rights Map 2001. St. Louis, MO: Goals for Americans Foundation, 2002.

³ Banac, Ivo: *The National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984.

⁴ Ramet, Sabrina P.: *Balkan Babel : the Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*. Boulder, Colo. : Westview Press, 2002

⁵ Magaš, Branka and Žanić, Ivo (eds.): *The war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1991-1995*. London ; Portland, OR : Frank Cass, 2001

⁶ Hasani, Enver: *Dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Case of Kosova : Political and Legal Aspects*. Tirana : Albanian Institute for International Studies, 2000.

⁷ There is the celebrated case of a person who was born in 1914 in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, went to school in Czechoslovakia, married in Hungary, spent years in prison in the Soviet Union and today finds it very hard to survive on a meager pension in Ukraine - and the man or woman never left his/her birthplace in a region called Subcarpathia.

⁸ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. Chapter 3.; Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), *The New European Diasporas. National Minorities and Conflict in Eastern Europe* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2000), esp. Introduction.

⁹ Carmichael, Cathie: *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans : Nationalism and the Destruction of Tradition*. London : Routledge, 2002; Várdy, Steven Béla and Tooley, T. Hunt (eds.): *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Nationality and the War* (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1915), 17, 20. p.

¹¹ A most illuminative treatise on the 'non-national' state, where "every cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic group could have its own school system, or more generally put, its own cultural 'infrastructure,' subsidized on an equal basis by the state," is by Koen Koch in *Minorities. The New Europe's Old Issue*. Ed. by Ian M. Cuthbertson and Jane Leibowitz. Prague, etc.: Institute for EastWest Studies, 1993.

¹² Resolution 1334 (2003) of the Council of Europe, "Positive experiences of autonomous regions as a source of inspiration for conflict resolution in Europe." <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/AdoptedText/TA03/EREC1609.htm>

¹³ The Austro-Hungarian Problem. Memorandum by Leo S. Amery, 20 October 1918. Public Record Office, London. FO 371/3136/17223. Cf. G. Jeszenszky, "British Policy towards Central Europe during Word War I," in Ignác Romsics (ed.) *20th Century Hungary and the Great Powers*, Atlantic Research and Publications. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. p. 66-67.