

**The "Confederatio Helvetica"
as a Model for Multiethnic Countries**

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The majority of existing states are multi-national, which means that their population contains several separate national/linguistic/religious groups, with a rather strong sense of identity. In most multiethnic countries religion, ethnicity and language represent the source of primary allegiance and loyalty. Both the Balkans and Central Asia, more particularly Afghanistan, provide ample evidence for that, but Iraq, too, falls into that category. The U.S. ideal, an integrated multiethnic society, is a far cry in most of the countries. Even Canada is composed on the idea of two separate national communities. The main reason is history, the strong attachment to traditions, language, culture, and even more 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. The minorities fear that their very existence is in jeopardy.

Nowadays a lot of attention is focused on Asia, less on Africa. In countries where there was a lasting colonial presence, ethnic, tribal allegiances became weaker and the "liberation movements" directed against the imperial masters united the many ethnic groups, but this unity has proved difficult to maintain. States which tried to build a centralizing system are experiencing great difficulties, an upsurge of separatist movements. Nigeria, Congo, Sri Lanka, Indonesia are only some of the most recent examples for that. On the other hand India, South Africa, Kenya, even Pakistan are more promising cases, partly (or mainly) on account of the fact that they recognize the separate identities of the various regions, historic provinces and national groups.

Below I give a summary of a bad example, the Balkans, where a major precondition for the peaceful coexistence of peoples, the recognition of their special wishes and needs was largely lacking, and that led to war and mass killings. While Central Asia is far more backward than South-Eastern Europe, there seems to be a better chance there to recognize and respect national differences **within existing states**, and thus avoiding new Bosnias and Kosovos.

In the eastern half of Europe the state has traditionally not been neutral in matters concerning the national minorities, on the contrary, it was a centralized tool for their harassment. Facts and figures prove that: minorities are seldom represented in the

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central government, and are practically absent from the civil service, the officers' corps, and the police. 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. (That is the case even where the educational traditions of the minority have been very strong, like in the case of Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia and Vojvodina.) Local officials seldom speak the language of the minorities even in regions where the latter form a substantial group, often a local majority.

The Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe in general have not been a melting pot. The present national minorities did not emerge by people crossing borders but by borders crossing people. Any attempt at turning this region into a melting pot is likely to turn it into a powder keg. Both older and more recent history amply testifies that.

The remedy does not lie in individual minority rights. That approach is exactly the notorious one when rich and poor have an equal right to sleep under the bridge. Real equality requires opportunities, and a positive, at minimum neutral attitude by the authorities. This has not been the case in most multi-national countries.

Self-determination, devolution and the cantonal arrangement

Local self-government is the foundation of genuine democracy, but the "successor states" that emerged out of the ruins of the large multinational empires after World War I all denied the right of their national minorities to run their own affairs, to have a decisive say over the allocation of taxes collected from them, to have (or even just to maintain) their own educational system in their mother tongue, to have officials and policemen who understand and speak their own language. Such policies are responsible for the substantial reduction in the number and even more in the proportion of these communities. In Central Europe in the 1920s they formed about one third of the population, today they are closer to ten than to fifteen per cent. It is not too much to call that process, the result of deliberate policies, creeping ethnic cleansing. But it would be a grave mistake to think that this is an inevitable process, and that the disappearance of these communities is inevitable, thus time will solve the problem. The recent tragedies in the Balkans show that resentment, existential fear builds up and it easily leads to an eruption. Fair and sound policies, however, can prevent such an eruption, whether in Europe or outside it.

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. The way to peace, cooperation and prosperity is to be found in allowing each national group self-government, in another word autonomy. In most cases this autonomy can have a territorial basis, and where that is not possible it can be based on the voluntary association of the individuals, like the various denominations are organized. (In the 1900s that was proposed in the Habsburg Monarchy under the term "cultural autonomy.") What is desirable 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. Why not following the Swiss model of autonomous units, *Kantons*, bound together by geography, common traditions and economic interests in a federal state? This model has been found working not only in Switzerland , but also in Italy in the South Tyrol , in Finland (Aland Islands), and is now being tried in France in Corsica . Sadly such an arrangement is not what the international community is supporting in the eastern half of Europe .

A version of the cantonal system is the autonomy of a larger region. That has eliminated the age-old conflict in Spain . The Catalonians are doing very well and are satisfied, and most of the Basques also support the present federal system. “Devolution” seems to work in the U.K. , in Scotland and Wales . Autonomy is probably the only chance to avoid the renewal of violence and partition in Macedonia . It may now be introduced in Serbia , in the Vojvodina. That is what the millions of Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania are striving for, particularly in the south-eastern corner of Transylvania , where close to 700,000 Hungarians live in what is still a compact bloc, but is the target of penetration and a kind of colonization by the Romanian state authorities.

The members of the EU and NATO have great influence over all the countries that aspire for membership in those organizations. That influence can be used to prevent measures violating the rights and interests of the national minorities. That influence can be used for bringing about fair and lasting arrangements on local government, including genuine local democracy through decentralization or “devolution”. An “Eastern Switzerland” in the Danubian Basin was a dream once, advocated by many. South-eastern Europe , composed of several countries made up by autonomous self-governing *Kantons*, can find not only peace but eventually also unity within the framework of European integration.