



**FEDERALISM AND INTERNAL CONFLICTS**

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# Peace through Self-Determination

Success and Failure of  
Territorial Autonomy

Felix Schulte

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# Federalism and Internal Conflicts

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Felix Schulte

# Peace through Self-Determination

Success and Failure of Territorial Autonomy

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Heidelberg,  
Christmas 2019

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# Introduction: Ethnic Conflict Regulation Through Territorial Autonomy

Ethnic group's demands for increased autonomy or secession have been a cause for more than a third of all civil wars since the end of the Second World War. To simultaneously appease highly emotional separatists and maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity, governments often offer forms of self-government. The number of ethnic groups that have been granted meaningful autonomy rights has steadily increased since the end of the Second World War and has almost doubled after the fall of the Iron Curtain.<sup>1</sup> However, territorial autonomy is obviously no panacea for regulating ethnic self-determination conflicts. Self-rule for the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, Mindanao in the Philippines, or Jammu and Kashmir in India has not led to peaceful interethnic coexistence between majorities and ethnic minorities, while autonomy reforms have significantly reduced ethnic tensions in other places, such as Gagauzia in Moldova or Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. How can this variance in outcomes be explained?

Despite increased scholarly interest in recent years, answers to the question of how and under what circumstances a conflictual relationship between ethnic groups can be institutionally transformed into a peaceful coexistence remain vague, and at times inconsistent. Previous research focuses primarily on the question of whether specific institutions, such as grand coalitions, veto rights, electoral reforms, or, most prominently, decentralization and the strengthening of subnational governance, are

<sup>1</sup> Sambanis, Germann, and Schädel, "SDM."

appropriate instruments to prevent or reduce ethnic tensions or whether they are destined to fail because of inherent weaknesses. Current autonomy research can be broadly divided into two camps: those who believe that autonomy solutions are a valuable option and those who do not. The proponents believe that the transfer of autonomy rights is a suitable solution for multiethnic societies and argue that territorial autonomy arrangements function as an institutional bargaining arena that enhances the chance of a peaceful conflict regulation.<sup>2</sup> Post-conflict territorial self-government reforms follow the logic of separating groups by distributing political powers. This is expected to reduce the stakes of competition for state power and can even, as some argue, strengthen the rule of law and create good governance.<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, autonomy reforms ensure official minority recognition and substantial self-government guaranteed for ethnic groups, which may dampen separatist desires. At the same time, territorial autonomy takes into account sovereignty and territorial integrity as key interests of a nation-state.

According to critics, proponents underestimate certain practical realities on the ground as such an institutional balance is often an unhappy compromise between ethnic groups that are pursuing higher levels of self-determination and central governments that are seeking to re-centralize powers.<sup>4</sup> The highly asymmetric and exclusive character of territorial autonomy leads to a strong accentuation of ethnic differences. This, in turn, facilitates centrifugal activities, as empowerment equips ethnic leaders with necessary resources, strengthens social cohesion, and creates optimal conditions for collective action: "While [autonomy] provides national minorities with a workable alternative to secession, it also helps to make secession a more realistic alternative".<sup>5</sup> Establishing a local authority homogenizes on a sub-state level, when ethnic leaders who have endured

<sup>2</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy. Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*; Nordquist, "Autonomy as a Conflict-Solving Mechanism-an Overview"; Hartzell and Hoddie, "Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Conflict Management"; Schneekener and Wolff, *Managing and Settling Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives on Successes and Failures in Europe, Africa and Asia*; Åkermærk, "Internal Self-Determination and the Role of Territorial Autonomy as a Tool for the Resolution of Ethno-Political Disputes."

<sup>3</sup> Ghai, "Autonomy as a Strategy for Diffusing Conflict"; Gagnon and Keating, *Political Autonomy and Divided Societies*; Ganguly, *Autonomy and Ethnic Conflict in South and South-East Asia*.

<sup>4</sup> Hale, "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse."

<sup>5</sup> Kymlicka, "Multiculturalism and Minority Rights: West and East," 2.

exclusion become eager nation-builders themselves. Since autonomous territories are home to other ethnic minorities, further tensions and political instability are created. A common concern in both scientific and political discourses is that of a contagion effect. If the central state grants autonomy to a group, demands by other groups for self-determination will follow and ultimately will lead to the disintegration of the entire state.<sup>6</sup>

Although we find empirical evidence for some of the theoretical arguments, a too pessimistic view does not stand up to scrutiny. No empirical study, so far, finds a robust causal relationship between post-conflict autonomy reforms and the re-occurrence of violent secessionist conflict. Where autonomy reforms have been implemented to end ethnic conflict, many have succeeded in at least reducing violence to a manageable level. In the recent past, some authors have tried to rekindle the stalled debate between proponents and critics by taking a more nuanced view on the autonomy-conflict nexus. Daftary or Cederman et al. conclude that conflict regulation through autonomy does not fail because of the type of institutional reform, but rather because of its delayed implementation.<sup>7</sup> Siroky's and Cuffe's findings indicate that the probability of secessionist conflict is only high when groups have lost their historic special status.<sup>8</sup> Abushov argues that the success of conflict regulation through territorial autonomy depends primarily on the nature of the intrastate conflict. He concludes that success is likely if autonomy serves to express cultural identity more strongly, whereas failure is to be expected when it comes to correcting historic injustices about the belonging of the territory.<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Costa find the balance of power between different levels of government decisive.<sup>10</sup> Danspeckgruber or Walsh highlight the necessity of domestic and international guarantees for the special status for overcoming the inherent lack of trust between groups and preventing instability.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Saideman, "Is Pandora's Box Half Empty or Half Full? The Limited Virulence of Secessionism and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration"; Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*; Forsberg, "Do Ethnic Dominoes Fall?"

<sup>7</sup>Daftary, "Territorial Autonomy as a Response to Violent Self-Determination Conflicts: 'Too Little, Too Late?'" Cederman et al., "Territorial Autonomy in the Shadow of Conflict: Too Little, Too Late?"

<sup>8</sup>Siroky and Cuffe, "Lost Autonomy, Nationalism and Separatism."

<sup>9</sup>Abushov, "Autonomy as a Possible Solution to Self-Determination Disputes: Does It Really Work?"

<sup>10</sup>Anderson and Costa, "Survival of the Fittest."

<sup>11</sup>Danspeckgruber, "Self-Governance plus Regional Integration: A Possible Solution to Self-Determination Conflicts"; Walsh, *Territorial Self-Government as a Conflict Management Tool*.

While these works provide for a differentiated perspective on the conflict-regulating potential of territorial autonomy, a general shift in the research interest “away from the pros and cons [...] towards an effort to explain *what factors* influence the stability and longevity of autonomy solutions has, however, not taken place so far”.<sup>12</sup>

Can autonomies end intrastate conflicts between ethnic groups or does the granting of self-determination rights result in violent secessionist conflict? Research efforts to answer this general question have not provided conclusive evidence so far—but only because this question cannot be answered *as such*. Since there are successful examples, such as the Åland Islands in Finland, Gagauzia in Moldova, or South Tyrol in Italy, as well as obviously failed cases, the discussion addressing the general role of autonomy solutions in ethnic conflicts is not a very fruitful one. The implementation of territorial self-governance does not necessarily lead to lasting peace, just like how violent conflicts are not an inevitable consequence. Both institutional successes and failures do not occur in a vacuum. They rather depend on both the right choice of institutional set-up, as well as favorable and unfavorable circumstances strengthening or weakening the implemented rules.

### THE ARGUMENT: ETHNIC RECOGNITION MATTERS

Post-conflict reforms are generally considered successful if tensions do not re-escalate and all relevant actors regard implemented institutions as the only rules in town. This book argues that in the specific context of ethnic self-determination conflicts, institutional success depends on whether post-conflict institutions work toward the fundamental requirement of ethnic peace, namely the mutual recognition of majority and minority, both being part of a national demos.

The deeper reasons for this lie in human nature as a *zoon politikon* and social being. It is a well-known fact that everyone has an idea not only of herself, that is, a personal identity, but also of her belonging to social collectives and thus has a social identity. Social Identity Theory tells us that people generally strive for recognition of their personal as well as social identities and cannot simply be persuaded to give up the satisfaction of this

<sup>12</sup> Åkermark, “Internal Self-Determination and the Role of Territorial Autonomy as a Tool for the Resolution of Ethno-Political Disputes,” 17.

basic human need. Ethnic groups whose social identity is based on life-determining cultural elements, namely language, tradition, religion, and historicity, have a particularly high need for recognition through relevant others. Regardless of physical resources or political power, ethnic identity groups will agitate, though with different political strategies, for the satisfaction of those human needs.

As ethnic self-determination conflicts are essentially cultural identity conflicts, mutual ethnic recognition proves to be, in turn, the all-important key for successful ethnic conflict regulation, which can serve as a normative point of orientation for different multicultural policies. This book argues that territorial autonomy arrangements provide the basis for mutual recognition through a substantial degree of self-rule and a guaranteed special status for an ethnic settlement area. This makes them a highly suitable institutional option for transforming antagonistic relations between majority and minority into peaceful interethnic cohabitation. However, while territorial autonomy creates the supportive legal framework, mutual recognition is anything but easy to achieve in the context of highly emotional self-determination conflict and needs to be understood as a fragile and highly context-dependent process. Successful conflict-regulating autonomies follow three sequential steps:

To start, the autonomy reforms must be widely accepted by the majority and minority groups as the best available option. Ethnic leaders support institutional reforms if reforms credibly promise a considerable degree of self-rule and, consequently, political power. The chances of achieving at least partial independence from the influence of the central government are considered higher than the chances of non-cooperative strategies being successful. At the same time, though, the political survival of ethnic leaders depends on the support of ordinary followers. Group members follow moderate and autonomy-friendly politicians and parties when they expect institutional reforms to improve their daily lives and when they have a credible commitment that self-determination rights and cultural protection will continue in the future and will not be replaced by majority dominance and assimilative re-centralization efforts.

While such general acceptance of autonomy reforms is a fundamental prerequisite for autonomy consolidation, it is not wholly sufficient for achieving a state of mutual recognition. Based on consociational considerations, the second step requires rapprochement processes on elite level. Suitable cooperation opportunities available to the actors, incentives, and pressures to stick to the agreements allow leaders to cooperate and



compromise. Successful cooperation at the political level may then trickle down and send decisive signals for rapprochement processes on mass level. This ultimately enables broad mutual recognition between majority and minority and ensures the long-term success of post-conflict autonomy reforms.

Successful autonomy solutions tell us that this process does not occur in a vacuum but can only take place and ultimately lead to long-term consolidation if various favorable framework conditions initiate and support this process of ethnic recognition. It is only the interplay of specific, recognition-promoting factors, both structural and actor centered, that allows territorial self-governance to unfold its positive effect on interethnic cohabitation. From a theoretical perspective, the basic acceptance of autonomy reforms as a first step toward ethnic recognition depends crucially on a high degree of transferred self-determination competencies, which provides ethnic elites with considerable political power, as well as on their chosen conflict strategy beforehand. If mere demands for autonomy have been made, the strategic objective of the self-determination movement and the institutional result achieved are coherent. If this goal has been pursued largely peacefully, there is a good chance that elites will be able to reach agreement on implementation, adhere to negotiated deals, and engage in deeper cooperation. In the case of violent secessionist demands, the signs for autonomy success are far less promising.

It is a robust empirical finding of peace research that highly asymmetric relationships between social groups can have a strong negative effect on peaceful coexistence. Persistent group grievances enhance in-group favoritism and provoke counter-reactions against out-groups, which may spur separatist desires and make unconventional strategies a viable option. Consequently, the absence of strong social and economic horizontal inequalities between majority and minority makes autonomy consolidation a more likely outcome. While a high degree of self-determination, non-violent demands for limited sovereignty, and a low degree of horizontal inequalities theoretically provide good reasons why ethnic minorities are willing to invest in autonomy arrangements over the long run, a comprehensive explanation must also consider the supply side. Cooperation efforts between elites as the subsequent step require further recognition-promoting structural and actor-centered factors, which are found in inclusive state institutions, minority-friendly parties, and international support. While inclusive institutions such as proportional representation or parliamentary systems offer suitable negotiation forums for elite cooperation,

their positive impact hinges strongly on the actors involved. In contrast to right-wing nationalist or populist parties, mainstream right- or left-wing parties are ideologically capable of making multiculturalism a part of their political agenda and of perceiving ethnic minorities as part of the demos. This is an important prerequisite for enabling rapprochement at the elite level and for both sides to accept a special status for a minority territory.

A closer look at success stories makes it clear that a peaceful and long-term regulation of highly emotional ethnic conflicts can hardly be achieved without the support of external actors. This study shows that external mediation as well as the international integration of autonomous regions in policy networks substantially help to break the logic of ethnic polarization and to reorganize interethnic relations by offering communication channels and credible guarantees for both sides.

Just as important and in need of explanation as the question of autonomy consolidation is the question of the failure of autonomy systems. According to the theoretical assumptions, autonomy solutions fail to pacify self-determination conflicts if the process of mutual recognition is not initiated or interrupted at an early stage. This is the case when the powers transferred to regional institutions are too weak, inequalities create new group grievances, there are only insufficient opportunities for political cooperation and the majority and minority cannot count on external support to reorganize their relationship with each other. If autonomy reforms coincide with such unfavorable circumstances, territorial self-government arrangements are hardly capable of surviving the post-conflict period and the re-occurrence of ethnic violence is a likely consequence.

The book complements existing research in three important ways. First, it examines territorial autonomies and thus takes into account an institution that is particularly relevant from an empirical point of view and that has, in contrast to integrative forms of power sharing or electoral reforms so far been less the focus of political science research. While research has long confirmed the peace-promoting, or at least conflict-dampening, effect of peaceful strategies, inclusive institutions, and low inequalities, it is poorly understood how these conditions, as intervening variables, lead to the success or failure of specific post-conflict institutions. The book presents causal models for both possible outcomes. For this purpose, the study combines institutionalist approaches with socio-psychological theories, thus providing a highly comprehensive and micro-level explanation. Third, and most importantly, the study does not ask for statistical effects

of single variables, but whether exogenous factors are causally relevant for autonomy success and failure in the sense of necessary and sufficient conditions and whether and how these factors interact with each other. While a plethora of variables more or less strongly influence highly complex and case-specific phenomena like autonomy consolidation, it is, as this study shows, a rather modest configuration of six necessary conditions, which are jointly sufficient to explain autonomy success, while a combination of just four factors is sufficient to explain autonomy failures.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book rolls the field up from behind by first discussing the role of ethnic identity in political conflicts. The advent of the modern nation-state has led to the alienation and marginalization of many cultural minorities. In many cases, the resulting self-determination conflicts make it necessary to turn away from the idea of a unitary and homogeneous nation-state to prevent full on state-collapse. Based on consociational literature, minority rights, executive power sharing, and territorial autonomy are identified as potential managing institutions which, at least theoretically, enable ethnic recognition. Due to the vagueness of the term “autonomy” in political science literature, the first chapter deals with constitutive elements of the concept to be investigated. On this basis, a sample of 19 conflict-regulating territorial autonomies implemented between 1922 and 2009 is selected. To assess the outcome condition, I present a comprehensive success analysis based on three criteria, conflict intensity, institutional sustainability, and public acceptance, whereas each case is classified as being successful, partly successful, partly failed, or failed. Chapter 2 then presents the theoretical model of autonomy success and failure. Building on the key assumption of Social Identity Theory, I identify mutual recognition of cultural identities as the focal point for autonomy consolidation and outline the three-step social mechanism toward ethnic recognition mentioned above. In a second step, the theoretically most relevant success factors are selected and the expectations regarding their causal effect on autonomy consolidation are presented. The study focuses initially on three structural conditions, namely the degree of autonomy, democracy, and international integration, and four actor-centered factors, namely conflict strategy, social and economic inequalities, and the engagement of international organizations.

In the first empirical step, which is conducted in Chap. 3, it is examined whether the identified conditions contribute to autonomy success in their