



## Protection of Minorities by “Competition of Systems”

**ROBERT NEF**

*Ten propositions on the protection of minorities*

It is often alleged that centralistic structures are more effective in protecting minorities' interests through their power of intervention and financial support. The experience of Switzerland shows that the minorities have better chances when living in smaller, competing political systems with overlapping minorities and majorities. Centralistic governments on all levels have a tendency to define from above the minority's identity and to draw up borders, trying to “clean up” the regions and to make them homogenous by “ethnic purification”. The central government may be ready to pay subsidies, but these subsidies make the minorities more dependent on the supporting authorities, thereby reducing their chances to decide their own future. Competition of overlapping heterogeneous entities may not be the “first best solution” but in the middle and long view it runs in favor of the minorities.

1. “Irrational borders” can be advantageous. Political borders have often assumed their shape following an act of war and as such they indicate a result of a power relation. The so-called “natural borders” have something arbitrary in them as well: nations have settled areas on both sides of a river or a mountain-pass in order to use it for mutually advantageous trade. Switzerland is a typical representative of a country whose borders are partly political and partly natural. Over the years we have learned how to cope with “irrational borders”, and even how to make good economic use of them.

2. At times of war it is potentially dangerous to have ethnic groups inhabiting both sides of the disputed border. The option of treason is always open and feared by both sides. Parts of the population inhabiting a region spanning across a border are under a considerable pressure in war times. If the war is between the two respective states, the ethnic groups have to face an insurmountable dilemma: should they stay loyal to their culture and language or to their fatherland? If they choose to be loyal to their cultural environment, they commit a treason on the rest of their state's citizenry. If they stay loyal to their state, they betray their fellows in their cultural group. In both cases they will become disliked and possibly discriminated against by one or the other. Possibly this will lead to attempts at assimilation by force and consequent wiping out of the group's identity. Such is the experience of minorities over the last 200 years which have been marked by fierce nationalism and nationalistic wars. Despite the growing continental and global economic networks, the time of nationalistic wars is not over yet. However, these are now relicts of a type of politics which overreached itself. There is hope that at least in Europe there will be no more nationalistic wars and that in the next century will see an era of intensive exchange of goods and services.

3. At times of peace these cultural groups inhabiting both sides of the border offer a route towards good trade relations. In this way they can contribute greatly to an increasing efficiency. If their remain being disliked, it is not because of fear; rather, it is because of the envy at the better possibilities of communication. The “minority question” can start from a better point at times of peace. A state can benefit greatly from having minorities of the same language and mentality as neighbouring states and main trading partners. No energy needs to be wasted on protecting the minorities from petty fears of their betrayal. The energy may be directed towards allowing them to become more economically productive. In this way the whole state can benefit from their minorities which cease to be sources of danger and start functioning as sources of opportunity.

4. These days the minorities question still remains often locked within the sphere of nationalistic wars. It is time to unlock it and make it useful in the economic sphere. Minorities still have to defend themselves against assimilation pressures. The protection of minorities is seen by the majority population as a necessary cost, which has to be yielded because of considerations of international law. The obsession with the cost-side is great and as yet nobody has realised to the full extent the possibility of turning the “minority question” from riskminimisation to opportunity-maximisation. The more one substitutes economic calculation for national-political considerations, the better for the minorities. I can refer here to the experience of Switzerland with its canton Tessin inhabited by an Italian-speaking minority which in the context of the whole confederation does not even reach 10 percent. In the last century, Tessin was one of the poorest cantons. Thanks to strong economic links with northern Italy and influx of German immigrants it could develop into an economically very important canton whose net contribution to the con-federal well-being is definitively positive. Be it as it may, it remains questionable whether and how the complex web of costs and benefits of a minority could be precisely measured.

5. In an open society, diversity is an opportunity and not a handicap. It is somewhat more difficult to document an economically beneficial role for those minorities which do not live along a border and/or which do not constitute the majority population in any country in the world. Within the Swiss context, one could bring in the case of the rhaetoromanche peoples. In my opinion it cannot be said that their protection on the con-federal level is a luxury, as a necessary cost. Diversity is a phenomenon which brings out creativity and immunity in people. He who knows two languages and mentalities can also learn a third one with greater ease. The rhaetoromanche Switzerland has therefore not degenerated into any kind of a ghetto. Many great openminded personalities come from this region. They have a natural flair for globalisation and prospective branches of the economy such as tourism and sport.

6. Minorities should not fear heterogeneity and overlapping identities. Minorities often fall victim to the ideal of ethnic purity. As a consequence, they often adopt this principle themselves and use it when dealing with the outside world. Even if one can subjectively somehow understand it, it hardly constitutes the best survival strategy. Minorities would do much better to adopt and adhere to the following motto: “If I want to be accepted by the majority, I should bring it some benefits. Then I shall be respected not because of my cultural status but because of the benefits I can offer.”

7. An all-too-strong protection of minorities “from above” can stifle the growth of a minority-friendly environment. The best way of dealing with the minority question lies on the principle “I am accepting you because you bring me a net benefit even though you are different”. However, a principle like this one cannot be put into practice through compulsion or subsidies. On the contrary, these measures may be counterproductive by sharpening the existing tension and the propensity to aggression.

8. The assistance of the central authorities can lead not only to anger of the majority (envy), but also to the loss of self-subsistence capability of the minority. If one walks on crutches for too long, one eventually forgets how to walk without them. Minorities should not be

discriminated against or persecuted. By the same coin, however, in the name of their chances of survival, one should not ascribe them the label of being in need of social assistance.

9. If this kind of “enlightened self-interested” kind of minority protection does not rest on an artificial support “from above”, there has to be a mechanism of making visible the beneficial contributions of the minorities. At first it may appear naive to purport that such mechanism may arise spontaneously on its own.

10. The mechanism most suited for fulfilling the role of making visible the advantages of diversity and heterogeneity is the mechanism of competition; of peaceful competition of systems and of countries. At first it may appear that homogeneity, ethnic purity and centralisation are economically more successful. This assertion, however, cannot in the vast majority of cases stand up to the test of history. It is especially now in the modern age of globalisation that the benefits of diversity, ethnic impurity, overlapping systems and noncentrality will demonstrate themselves most clearly. The heterogeneous will be able to make good use of their faster progress. States which will have had such experience should share it with others. At the same time, in the name of continuing diversity, they should not aspire to serve always and everywhere as an example.

2005

