

Transethnic Coalition-Building: Definitions, Practices and Possibilities

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The four articles making up this Special Issue of JEMIE are based on papers presented at the conference 'Transethnic Coalition-building within and across States', held at Uppsala University on 7-9 January 2015. This conference was made possible by a grant from the Riksbanken Jubileumsfond, an independent foundation in Sweden promoting research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, as well as additional funding provided by the main organising partners – Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies (UCRS), the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies (CRCEES) of the University of Glasgow and The Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Acknowledgements and thanks are due to all of the funders and organisers, as well as to everyone who took part in an event that brought together forty-one academic and practitioner speakers and sixty-five participants in total from twenty countries.¹

For the purposes of the conference call, 'trans-ethnic coalition-building' was broadly defined as initiatives undertaken by different actors (local, national and international-level, governmental and non-governmental) to establish and maintain institutional frameworks that mitigate conflicts and encourage intercultural dialogue and cooperation between spokespersons for different ethnicities both within and across states. Participants were asked to reflect upon the factors that drive interaction across ethnic boundaries, the status and competence of relevant institutions and the practices and outcomes that derive from such cooperation. The four articles contained herein address all of these themes, as well as suggesting avenues for further research based on a conference that raised as many new questions as it answered.

When it comes to addressing multiple ethnicity-based claims within a single state, one can point to a spectrum of approaches based on varying distributions of power between groups. These range from consociational systems with formalised power-sharing arrangements to settings in which one ethnicity clearly enjoys political predominance and demands advanced on behalf of others are managed through a top-down process of elite co-optation and control. In between these two poles stands a variety of approaches, which can be described as forms of low-level power-sharing. The Special Issue analyses arrangements sitting at various points on this scale, within a collection of articles that comprises case studies of two Balkan countries, a regional survey of practices in former Soviet states and a general taxonomy (deploying multiple examples from across Europe and beyond) of transethnic coalitions.

The first country case study, by Marina Andeva, examines Macedonia, and the participation of ethnic minority political parties in electoral and governmental coalitions in the country since 1991. Particular attention is given to developments following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), drawn up following a short-lived armed conflict between the state and insurgents drawn from the numerically large Albanian minority. Though generally considered to embody three of the four

elements contained in Lijphart's model of consociationalism (segmental autonomy at municipal government level; proportionality; and veto right), OFA does not make any formal provision for an executive grand coalition. The practice, however, (both pre- and post-2001) has been towards the formation of coalition governments including one or other of the largest ethnic Albanian parties, which have until now campaigned for parliament on the basis of separate electoral lists. Andeva's analysis of these arrangements highlights the continued debates surrounding the effectiveness of OFA. While it has succeeded in maintaining peace between the main ethnic segments, the agreement was originally intended to serve as a platform for further democratisation and integration of society. In this respect it has arguably been less successful, for although public opinion surveys routinely convey a desire to move beyond ethnic politics and focus on broader issues such as economic development, the structures in place encourage voters to opt for ethnic parties campaigning on a nationalist agenda. In light of this, Andeva argues that the practice of building pre-electoral coalitions between Macedonian parties and those representing smaller ethnic minorities should be extended to encompass the Albanian parties, which currently enter coalition negotiations only after elections have taken place.

Svetluša Surova's study of Serbia shifts the analytical focus to autonomy, and the National Minority Councils (NMC) established under the terms of a general 2002 law on national minorities and further more specific legislation adopted in 2009, at a time when an alliance of Hungarian parties from Vojvodina had become part of a ruling coalition holding a narrow majority within the Serbian parliament.² The National Minority Councils constitute an example of non-territorial autonomy, as they represent collectivities of persons formed on the basis of individual citizens voluntarily enrolling on a national electoral register and electing bodies with competences extending to the territory of the state as a whole. The relevant legislation was adopted as part of post-Milosevic democratic turn that saw a reversion to former Yugoslav practices, including the restoration of the status previously enjoyed by the province of Vojvodina. While autonomy is often defined as 'self-rule' rather than 'shared rule', it is debatable to what extent one can draw a clear-cut distinction between the two concepts.³ In the Serbian case, NMCs are defined both as representative organs of national minorities and as consultative and advisory bodies to the state authorities. In so far as they can participate in decision-making on minority-related issues, they can serve as channels for dialogue and cooperation between minority and majority ethnicities. This is the standpoint adopted by Surova, who examines in detail the operation of the Slovak NMC first elected in 2010.

The initial constitutional and legislative framework in Serbia offered far-reaching scope for dialogue and cooperation with state, regional and local authorities, including the right of NMCs to submit proposals, initiatives and opinions to the National Assembly and Government as well as to other state bodies and special organisations. The aforementioned state authorities were also obliged to request an opinion from NMCs when it came to decision-making on areas falling within the purview of the latter (culture, education, information and official use of minority languages and scripts). These provisions have since been modified by a 2014 ruling of the Serbian Constitutional Court, which restricted the scope of contacts with state authorities while confirming the consultative and non-legally binding character of such interactions. While this ruling has restricted possibilities for trans-ethnic coalition-building on the basis of NMCs, Surova concludes that the framework in place is still relatively sound, and continues to provide a broad range of possibilities for constructive cooperation. Moreover, the devolved powers granted to Vojvodina mean that this ethnically diverse region (where minority political parties are represented in government) retains right to adopt its

own statute in this area. The article, however, again raises the question about the efficacy of autonomy arrangements *per se*, in the absence of supplementary forms of 'shared rule' at the level of the state or regional government.⁴

In both of the two aforementioned case studies, the focus is primarily on the binary relationship between a single ethnic minority and the state of which it forms part. Andeva's article, it is true, discusses coalition-building practices by a range of minority groups in Macedonia, but mainly to show how the smaller amongst these have been denied space by political arrangements designed primarily to regulate the relationship between the numerically large Albanian minority, the state and its (before 2001 politically dominant) ethnic majority. This is a point picked up by Marina Germane in her wide-ranging overview of different forms of coalition-building, which highlights the persistence of ethnic hierarchies within states and illustrates the difficult position faced by smaller minorities which find themselves caught between two larger competing cultures. This was the case, for instance, for Jewish communities living in inter-war Czechoslovakia, Latvia and Romania. More broadly, Germane notes that the existing literature has tended to investigate 'vertical' relationships between particular minorities and states, and has thus been dedicated to studying *ethno-national*, rather than *interethnic* relations. This in turn reflects the continued predominance of the nation-state model as an organising analytical framework for research in this field.⁵

The persistence of ethnic hierarchies has not, however, precluded numerous (though far less-studied) examples of *horizontal* cooperation between different ethnic minorities, both within and also across the borders of individual states. In the remainder of the article Germane provides the reader with a helpful typology, which covers both intra and interethnic coalitions operating at local, state, regional and international levels and which offers many interesting pointers to further research in this area. Within this typology, a distinction is also drawn between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' minority coalitions – 'in other words, between those organised on the initiative or under the auspices of the nation-state or international organisations, and those of grassroots origin, organised on minorities' own initiative'.⁶ Although it is widely assumed that grassroots coalitions are more 'authentic' and have greater legitimacy, the article notes that state-sponsored minority coalitions can also be used to address structural inequalities across different sectors of society. Acknowledging and engaging with issues of 'groupism' and the possible reification of ethnicity, Germane underlines the importance of studying ethnic coalitions in order to achieve 'a better understanding of the persistence of organisations based upon ethnic membership, the reasons behind their creation, their goals, their modes of operation, and the impact of their activities on politics within the nation-state and internationally'.⁷ The author further argues that to simply dismiss ethnic solidarities as illegitimate and irrational risks occluding their potential and in many cases actual contribution to equal participation and democratisation processes within ethnically diverse societies.

Numerous themes within Germane's analysis are further explored in the article by Alexander Osipov, which switches the focus to what are described as 'trans-ethnic organisational settings' existing within post-Soviet countries. By this term, the author refers to non-governmental organisations, autonomous parts of the public sector or organised practices founded on the basis of multi-ethnicity and tasked with the promotion of inter-ethnic accord and communication between ethnicities and public authorities. Osipov goes on to consider a range of settings, from *de facto* statehood resting on the very idea of multi-ethnic coalition (Transnistria), through official or semi-official Assemblies of

Peoples (found in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia) to consultative bodies, cultural festivals and voluntary umbrella organisations uniting spokespersons for different ethnicities. Common to all of these arrangements are patronizing involvement of the state, which would seem to place them firmly within the realm of 'top-down' minority coalitions. Moreover, beyond symbolic recognition they offer little in the way of assets or opportunities for the ethnic groups involved and, as the author observes, are not inconsistent with 'nationalising state' policies or regimes of ethnic control. These transethnic organisational settings have nevertheless proved durable, finding broad support amongst ethnic elites and encountering little dissension at grassroots level, within a context which cannot be characterised as resting on explicit state compulsion. According to Osipov, this state of affairs only appears puzzling if one treats ethnicity as a property of substantive groups possessing collective agency and pursuing interests predicated on preserving a given identity and maximising the resources available for this purpose. If one instead treats ethnicity as a form of social categorisation and representation, the durability of the aforementioned trans-ethnic organisational settings can be explained by reference to still hegemonic understandings of ethnic diversity inherited from the Soviet period. These have allowed for the generation of publicly acceptable narratives combining explicit official recognition of multi-ethnicity, securitisation of ethnic issues (with state-sponsored inter-ethnic dialogue as a remedy to potential conflicts) and 'banalisation' of ethnic claims (which are confined to the sphere of culture and thereby excluded from 'real' politics). At the same time, trans-ethnic organisational settings have served as a mechanism for the incorporation and co-optation of ethnic spokespersons into the system of government. In Osipov's view, these arrangements can be situated within the broader theoretical framework of 'neopatrimonialism' applied to post-colonial and post-communist societies. His conclusion, though, also considers the extent to which (following his general theoretical framework) legitimating practices of officialisation, securitisation and banalisation might also be deemed applicable to other more liberal and less authoritarian contexts.

All in all, the collected articles offer a wide-ranging and stimulating discussion of the multi-faceted phenomenon of transethnic coalition-building. It is hoped that this will provide a basis for further research in this area.

¹ Thanks are also due to Martyn Housden (University of Bradford), Vytautas Petronis (Lithuanian Institute of History), Marko Lehti (University of Turku) and Marina Germane (Formerly Visiting Researcher at UCRS in 2013), who further assisted with the funding application to Riksbanken Jubileumsfond and the organisation of the conference.

² On the establishment and operation of the NMCs, see Tamás Korhecz, 'Non-territorial autonomy in practice: the Hungarian National Council in Serbia', in Zoltán Kantor (ed.), *Autonomies in Europe: Solutions and Challenges* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2014), pp.151-164.

³ For a discussion of autonomy along these lines, see John Coakley's introduction to the forthcoming special issue of *Ethnopolitics* (15 (1) 2016) on 'Non-territorial autonomy and the government of divided societies'.

⁴ On this point, see David J Smith, 'Estonia: a model for interwar Europe?', *Ethnopolitics*, 15 (1) 2016.

⁵ On this point, see also Marina Germane, 'The fifth element. Expanding the Quadratic Nexus?', *Ethnopolitics Papers* No. 24, May 2013. www.ethnopolitics.org/ethnopolitics-papers/EPP024.pdf

⁶ Germane in this issue, p.13.

⁷ Germane in this issue, p.22.