

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE AUTONOMY

“Let the positive examples be norms and the European institutions insist to it.”

Conversation with Ambassador Géza Jeszenszky
about the expression of autonomy*

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South-East Europe. Question 1: In case of territorial autonomy, what exactly does the power assigned to an autonomous unit include and what does it authorize? Is it enough in general for us to be able to talk about self-determination?

Géza Jeszenszky: Autonomy is a Greek word; we could translate it as „self-government”. It also means self-determination, but that is a more difficult, arguable expression. In fact it means that an individual, or in our case a community that lives in the same area, more or less, and forms the majority there, deals with its own tasks. The difference between autonomy and total self-determination is that in the latter case a community forms a state. This principle of self-determination led to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the First World War, in an unnatural way though. On that basis did colonies gain their absolute independence in the 1960s. Autonomy in practice today means less than that, therefore it does not mean specifically the right of or the need for forming a state, but it means that the certain community has the right to decide about issues that affect them, e.g. issues in education, culture and the conservation of identity. Or that it can elect its own leaders, the leaders of a village, a town, a county or a whole region, instead of an exterior power or the government of a majority from the distant capital putting people from a different ethnic group or nation into powerful positions.

Q2. On what basis can a community demand authority for itself?

Basically this is the question of the fight for life -or more politely- the struggle for existence. Why does a national or religious minority strive to reach autonomy? To avoid vanishing or assimilation. It is very interesting and unusual to refer to religion-based autonomy, and to compare national and terrestrial autonomy to it, though Lajos Kossuth already did that. He saw the future of the historical Hungary in the existence of autonomies leastwise after the suggestion of a Danubian confederation in 1862, and he did see correspondence with the autonomy of religious minorities, with the fact that countries with many religions such as old, historical Hungary was, progression showed a direction towards the autonomy of certain churches, which has actually been accomplished after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. For these churches autonomy meant that a given community and its members - or leaders - could decide who was going to be the priest in the village, the bishop of a larger area, the archbishop, what religious songs to be sung, and more importantly, having no other church governing them. They feared that the denomination of the majority will suppress and later on assimilate the minority. After the above mentioned Compromise there were great debates in Hungary in the matter of baptizing children, since the Catholic church aimed to baptize infants in mixed religious families to the Catholic church, and to raise them as Catholics. This was the so

called reversal, to which protestants opposed and exclaimed against because they saw that sooner or later, after a few decades or generations, their congregations will disappear. The situation is the same with ethnic minorities; the fear, with reason, that assimilation is a real treat. Demographic data from Hungary's neighboring countries show that Hungarian minorities in these countries are dramatically decreased in numbers. And autonomy is the way to prevent this. It is no coincidence that Hungary's neighbours so strictly seclude themselves from this question, because, admittedly or not, their goal is to assimilate or abolish those ethnic groups. Autonomy is the solution for it because small communities then have the chance to educate their children on their mother tongue even up to university level, and so the nation in minor position in the given area, such as in Székely Land, will not colonize them. Without autonomy the nation in majority would gradually migrate into the area of the minority and by that time it would be generality, and from this point it is really easy to expel the language of the minority from public life. This can be seen in Délvidék, today's Vojvodina, where before the peace treaties of Trianon, from Serbian, German and Hungarian the latter had the majority, but today 3 out of 4 residents are Serbs. The number of mixed marriages are increasing, from these marriages the descendants scarcely become Hungarians, thus there are less and less Hungarian students, parents are not sending their children to schools with Hungarian language because of the large distances of the few remaining ones. Autonomy thus makes it possible for an ethnic community to preserve the ethnic rates in a given area, but now we see how consciously people can try to change this balance. Consequently, the demand for autonomy is a reaction of self defense, and this can explain why we have not made any progress in this issue in the past 22 years.

Q3. The goal of autonomy is not only to help the minority to fit in the state it is incorporated in, and to provide successful operation within the state and as a part of it, but also to provide self identity to its members. What are the most important measures for an autonomous community to take to preserve its identity? Are the preservation of language and traditions of other kinds the most important ones?

Usually we say these are the most important, but they need a lot more. Nowadays it is becoming more and more evident that some kind of economical autonomy is needed as well. This is because even if we can prevent colonization, if the area is out of economic progress, if it does not get anything from common taxes, if it does not get resources, if the infrastructure does not improve or there are no investments, then this area becomes so poor that residents themselves will leave. So autonomy today is more and more about being able to involve foreign investors, to promote its own charm, even in the field of tourism. It can be recognized that if an autonomous area really has autonomy, it is capable of improving its economy more successfully. I will bring you a personal example: in Hungary for those involved in this question the most desirable example is the northern, German speaking part of South Tirol. In Oslo - and generally in Norway - in shops and in supermarkets there are apples in large quantities, and I was happy to learn that one kind of apple always has a little sticker on it saying Südtirol. It's not written in Italian, but in German, Südtirol. Most likely not many Norwegians start to think about this, but this means that South Tirol exports its own, really excellent apples, its main source of income is growing apples, and it does it while representing its identity. I remember 30-40 years ago, it was really a sight (at least for myself) that German people from South Tirol - still fighting for their autonomy - put stickers on their cars. On these stickers besides the internationally regulated I (for Italy), there was a writing saying *Ich bin ein Süd-Tiroler* (I am from South-Tirol), so anyone who saw a car like this from close, instantly realized that this was an Italian car, but owned by a German-speaking person from South Tirol and not an Italian one. So autonomy also implies this kind of self-representation. But the most important is economy, not to be economically destroyed, abandoned. It is a recent experience and complaint that the southern part of Slovakia, where Hungarians are still in majority - at least in villages, since colonization in cities was successful - is neglected in the fields of investment and infrastructure. This explains that a couple of years ago even Slovaks living there tended to vote for the party of the Hungarian coalition because this party seemed to be representing regional interests, and because this party represented their economical interests. Unfortunately this tendency is over, though I found it very promising. In the last years Slovakia expressly neglected the southern territories, lowering the life-standards and the opportunities to find a job, making even the Hungarians to leave. In a better case they come to Hungary, but they may turn west just because they do not have a perspective. When an area has autonomy, it can manage itself well or badly, it is the responsibility of itself. That is the reason this economical aspect is so important.

Q4. We could bring up the example of the indians in America as an example of economical autonomy. Is this closed-in-a-reservation type of life an example of autonomous lifestyle? What is the difference between theirs and the autonomies known by us, and how do they manage their economic issues?

This is a very specific case with very few discussions about it in Hungary, and with very few people with a knowledge on the topic. I have a slight knowledge about this matter and I am interested in the situation of the reservations, since on one hand I was playing cowboys and indians as a child, on the other hand I was a teacher and an ambassador in America. On one hand while America - such as Western European countries -

thinks in states of nations, and American nation in their eyes is the collective of all the citizens living in the USA without reference to ethnicity, language or religion. That is why we talk about United Nations, though this is an organization of states. On the other hand Americans make a distinction - they recognize Indians as a nation, so reservations have some kind of sovereignty. They have different laws, the federal laws of the USA apply only partially in the reservations. Maybe the most typical example is the question of gambling. In the USA gambling is very restricted. Of course Las Vegas comes to our minds first, but Nevada is the only state where gambling is legal, that is why Las Vegas could emerge. But in Indian territories, and I am not sure whether in every single one, or only in those who have requested for it, gambling is allowed. And Indian reservations make a living of this right. The reservations are not very valuable economic areas, first they were banished to Oklahoma from their rich agricultural land, then even further when oil was found there. Nowadays reservations are in a slightly better position thanks to the gambling and casinos, but even this has its drawbacks. Indians live there basically without jobs, at most they make pieces of traditional folk art. Separated, they preserve their language, but basically this is only vegetation. Obviously here in Central Europe we don't picture reservations like that, but autonomies with prospering economics. It is not about Hungarian ethnic groups integrating into the economics of the national states of Romania or Slovakia, but it is about these states also merge into the EU. The disappearance of the borders, the free capital, the free movement of labour must have the result that for instance Transylvania will not simply integrate into Romania through its infrastructural connection, etc., but into the whole of the EU itself. And in cases it can represent itself individually, such as certain Western European regions have their own representatives in Brussels. Transylvania aims to this as well. Romanian government is opposed to this, even the previous one was, and it is trying to bar it. So the example of the American Indians is worth to study as a positive and as a negative example as well, and it makes it clear that the idea of national states does not exist any more. The islands of Indians are not only in America, but the whole world is becoming multi-national. New emigrants - and let us not think only about the Arabs, whose are a big issue in Europe at the moment - nowadays stick to their own culture. For example there are more and more Polish and Lithuanian emigrants coming to Norway who stick together exemplarily, and want to go back to their homeland. There are Swedish as well - a relative, but still not the same nation - they might assimilate, if they stay. But the Polish already made their own cultural institutes, they are sending the children home since Poland is not far, so the Polish community - more than 10,000 people - working in Norway intentionally aim to preserve its identity, and Norway has no objections at all, moreover it supports them. So as I see, future is about national states becoming multicultural. Asia and Africa are basically multicultural. Mixed marriages help this tendency, so time is working for us, for the autonomies. The question is will we see the hopefully coming better Europe, or will we see it in sufficient numbers?

Q5. Is there a difference, or has to be one between the treatment of an emigrant minority and a native minority? Could it be that one is more or less entitled to autonomy?

Yes. For us, Hungarians and usually for all Central and East Europeans - where minorities are results of history, modifications of borders or perhaps historical migrations - it is evident that minorities want to conserve their identity and define themselves as historical minorities. Thus they are not emigrants, they have settled down a very long time ago. New emigrants chose this situation of themselves, or they have been drawn on by states looking for cheap, untrained labour. These emigrants do not have the ability to assimilate, but the main thing is that in many places - such as in certain districts of Paris - they form islands of ethnic groups. In some cities in Holland they are majority now, and also in Hamburg they have a very strong minority. Countries and governments were at first very much closed in the question of giving them special rights. England would be an interesting exemption where I experienced in the '60-s that English educational system helped the increasing number of emigrants with African, Indian, or any other Asian background to retain their own language, they were taught to their own history, so it was not a goal to assimilate them culturally and by language. My experience as a minister was that in 1990 Western European states were quite acceptant - at least in words - of the rights of minorities. They admitted it was a mistake after WWII not wanting to know about minority-rights and discussing only human rights, and they were ready to review this situation. But in 1991 in a very important meeting in Geneva they declined to accept mandatory norms securing the future of minorities, including the ordain or expectation of autonomy. The thing that decided was that French did not want to make the suburban areas of Strasbourg and other areas to be governed by Arabs, and so on with other countries interested in the opposition. These new emigrants with different religion, different culture, different behavior want to apply different laws on themselves, and instead of the laws in effect they want to apply the sharia law. I understand the opposition of these western countries and as a matter of fact we don't condemn them, because they thought or felt that on a legal basis it is not possible to differentiate between new and old minorities. So in case Central European or Eastern European historical minorities would gain a wide range autonomy and could force the nations in majority to respect that, then tomorrow native French, German or English people would be minorities and perhaps sharia law would be in

effect in Middle England, Bradford or in other old English cities. It is inevitable to differentiate between minorities that became minorities and often underprivileged minorities through no fault of their own, and between new ones. But at the same time it has to be admitted that this difference is hard to accept or to see reason in it. In Norway this can be explained to an educated person, but due to a dogmatic concept of law human rights and amongst them minority rights apply to the Transylvanian-Hungarian - who lives there for a thousand of years or even more - as much as it does to algerian worker who moved in the city 20-30 years ago. So I don't know how will we manage to succeed in this matter and how to differentiate legally. The fact may give us some hope that in Hungary we talk a lot about a three level autonomy. Where there is majority in a particular area the existence of territorial autonomy is obvious, where you find local majority - for example in a county dominated by Romanians there are villages with Hungarian majority - there these villages should be self-governing. These local governments should be able to prevent what happened after the Bosnian war, when Serbians banished or fled from Bosnia settled down in villages and after rendering them to villages with Serbian majority, and then these victims of impatience gratified their impatience on the account of the Hungarian or other ethnicities. The third form of autonomy - the personal autonomy - makes it possible for sporadic communities to establish regional schools, boarding schools for their children to learn their mother tongue, etc. In Western Europe maybe the personal autonomy could bring some kind of solution, because territorial autonomy is not an option. It is hard to imagine that native residents of Germany or France grants a territory and accepts that they will be judged under totally different laws. What can be imagined is that muslims penalize certain crimes according to their own rule - and not talking about cutting hands off or other forms of mutilation. Death penalty - and I am saying this with a little fear - could also fit in this, if perhaps europeans are not willing to accept death penalty but muslims are, than maybe it would be put into practice within their community. These thoughts can also be the reason not to accept any kind of legislative autonomy in Western Europe.

Q6. At the same time the attitude of Western European countries to the question of autonomy has some effect to the decisions of international organizations, because lumping different minorities together will not lead to an improvement in the matter of autonomies of Central and East Europe.

Yes, this is true and this is what I have experienced since 1990. The will to stand for the rights of the autonomies is becoming weaker and weaker. Take the NATO or the EU. Among the basic expectations for applicants there were the good relations with the neighbours, to have all the arguments settled and to provide rights for minorities. This was the essence of the so called Balladur Plan between 1991 and 1995. Then reports came in, and without achieving any significant improvements in the field of rights of minorities these reports became more and more silent on the matter of existing problems with minority-policies. At last Slovakia and Romania became members of the European Council though they not always complied to the regulations, expectations, conventions of the EC, even when they signed them. Later on they became members of the NATO and the EU, while minorities and national minorities - mostly Hungarians - were not satisfied at all with their status. (We always have to consider the opinion of the minorities, since they are entitled to decide whether their status is settled and decent, their future is guaranteed or they need improvements. This cannot be decided by the nation in majority because the lack of affinity and knowledge. It is obvious that the minority that is concerned knows what are its needs, and even a paternalistic, plural government can not and will not respect these needs. How can you call a state national, when even today the 10% or more of the population of Slovakia and Romania is not Slovakian or Romanian. And if constitutionally they insist to that they are national states, it shows that they think, sooner or later they will the minorities will be reduced to a minimum level and then the question of autonomy will not even come up. By that time minorities will be folkloristic entities whose traditions are to be kept in museums but they will not even know their own language. (This can be seen today in Russia, where small finno-ugric minorities becoming extinct.) The struggle to provide rights for minorities is a field where policies of the mother countries interfere with those neighbouring countries with minorities, and this is what we see in the case of Hungary, Poland and Lithuania. They lived in a confederation for a long time that worked just fine until Poland has been divided. Partially because of this there is a Polish community living in Lithuania of a few hundred thousand people. The otherwise appealing Lithuanian government provides some rights, but also restrict them and deny some rights demanded by the Polish community. It is not the Polish government that demand these rights, it supports them at the most and considers these demands rightful, such as I always emphasize that it is not the Hungarian government telling what is needed by hungarian minorities in Transylvania, Slovakia or Serbia. It is for them, their parties, their communities to phrase, and Hungary sees these as rightful and supports them. The demand is not Hungary's demand, it is always up to the minority to decide what is good for them, what is needed, or when can they state these rights are acceptable and satisfying, we cannot expect more. For example Transylvania cannot be attached back to Hungary, or Serbs living in the middle of Croatia could not be attached to Serbia as Serbia wanted to in the early 90's.

Q7. Talking about Serbia - would it not help their accession to the EU if they would settle their relations to the minorities?

Western Europe is not an enemy of the minorities, and the European Council has set up a series of requirements which are mandatory. The EU has no such requirements and it is not in any *aquis communautaire*. But they say that they accept the legislation of the EC. I was implying that before they demanded these requirements at least verbally, but later on this tendency stopped. It is certain that they would celebrate if in Serbia (or in any other countries) the situation of minorities would improve, if they would become more satisfied. One reason for that is European countries are afraid of conflicts, either intra- or international conflicts and sooner or later they will see that an unsatisfied, oppressed, discriminated minority is source of many problems, and can be a cause of protests and unrest. So finding a solution and settle the problems can only be celebrated. The whole world celebrated the Slovakian-Hungarian treaty in 1995 and the Romanian-Hungarian Treaty in 1996. As a representative of the opposing party I warned the world in my writings and in the Parliament of Hungary that we need more, these treaties are not sufficient they do not provide the desired ethnical harmony and do not eliminate conflicts. But in case Serbia would take a better course, and amplify existing good tendencies against some bad ones, it would certainly contribute to the accession to the EU by making it easier and faster. On the other hand if Serbia treats its minorities badly, not only Hungary but Romania as well can veto the accession of Serbia. But it is important for the countries and governments not to only fear the veto, but to truly accept the situation. As I always say - bow to the fact that one part of the society belongs to an other nation and it will be like this. After WWII Hungary had to accept that the borders of the country and the nation do not overlap, moreover they are not even close to each other. But as a non lesser person than István Bibó said in 1946 in a study on the Hungarian peace-treaty, Hungary will never give up on being concerned in the rights of Hungarian communities on the other side of the border. A free Hungarian government or any other free countries which have ethnical groups abroad will never give up on them or write them down, moreover they will stand by them more and more determinedly, such as we see in the Polish-Latvian case. My opinion is that European countries do it right when turning needs into virtues and they stick to the wider range of rights of minorities, because this is the way to prevent conflicts and to ensure harmony which we all seek for. Western Europe partially accomplished this in South-Tirol or in Belgium. The borders of Denmark and Germany were modified multiple times in the last 150 years because of armed conflicts, but today's border is accepted by both sides because on the Danish side German people can live as Germans and vice versa. So there is an absolutely tolerant atmosphere there and this is a very important and inspiring example. I would like this to be accomplished by the next Hungarian governments and to become norms to which European institutions persist so do the EU because it is their interest as well to maintain peace. And this is what we are far away from, though this is the interest of the nations in majority as well. János Esterházy phrased in 1938, just before the Vienna Awards that there is no bigger security coefficient, no stronger Maginot-line that could be more effective than a satisfied minority. It is not very difficult to please a minority, but sadly our neighbours are far away from this recognition. It would be their interest as well, because a satisfied minority can contribute to the economy of the state, the talented members of this minority can emerge, because one can prevail the best on ones mother-tongue. In a university one can study in a foreign language but those who not started their education in their mother-language will not be a good student or at least scarcely will. I see the example of my friends and acquaintances that the Hungarian children in Romania or Slovakia attended to schools with Hungarian language are more efficient and will become more successful. Where parents assigned their children to schools where the language of the education is the language of the majority these children will fail, they will always feel bad and cannot accomplish greater things in life. But this - despite our efforts - is not understood by many Hungarian parents, and even less by European countries. We can only hope for Europe to realize it has to be more active in providing the needs of the minorities, especially in providing regulations for the benefits of historical minorities, prescribing these regulations and stick to them.

Q8. We can bring up the successfully working example of Spain, where the constitution regulates the conditions of forming autonomous communities and the scope of their authority. The autonomy of Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia are formed under this regulation. The question is can it be accomplished in other countries or is it too late to incorporate this into their constitutions and to ratify the rights for autonomy?

It is never too late. It must be done what is necessary. Spain was and is different because while the majority speaks Castilian, the classic Spanish language, the provinces mentioned above are different in language. Basque is not related to Spanish, it is not even a neo-latin language. But in Spain there were historical minorities with considerable areas and economic power, and after the regime of Franco Spain very wisely established a real federation. Most countries with smaller or larger minorities are in a different situation, there are not as big communities, no historical provinces which were states previously such as Castilia was. On one hand it is desirable but difficult to make others to copy this Spanish way - though

Transylvania could be a great example, because it has everything to be a federal unit in a more federal Romania, since Romania as a unified country exists only from 1861. On the other hand it is interesting and sad at the same time that Spain does not try to spread its example. Moreover Spain does not stand for the rights of the minorities, maybe because it is afraid of where this autonomy could lead. It is a fact that the economic separation of Catalonia is possible to imagine, but it is not for Transylvania. So it is an irrational fear of our neighbours that the example of Spain is not to be followed, and Spain could allow itself to consider this an example to follow. We see a similar example in the UK where Scotland and Wales have provincial autonomy. Lord Robertson former secretary of NATO once in a conference in Washington talked about how the conflicts of the Balkan could be settled. I suggested that after the English example, devolution could be the solution. His answer was disappointing because he said that devolution saved UK, but it cannot be applied anywhere else, and he could not explain why. We will see that autonomous tendencies of Scotland would lead to an independent Scotland, or it would cease this effort. Here is an other promising example, the Canadian French, who have wide range of rights. One can almost say that it is not good to be an English in Québec, and they not even really stay there. Québec remained a part of Canada, because after many tries and polls they rejected the separation, and that is because French living there are completely satisfied with their present status. Why to be separated when Québec is a French-like province and nothing threatens them. They find it economically more profitable to stay as a part of Canada than to form a new state. Where all conditions are met for an autonomous territory to become totally separated, the well recognized interest prevents this. This can be a calming message to all those fear of autonomy, that autonomy itself can be a way to avoid separatism. There is an old phrase saying that there are a lot of things can be done with a bayonet except sitting on it for a long time. In reality when a minority is treated in a bad way, it will always be unsatisfied. So it is either made to disappear, in an extreme way its members are killed, exterminated such as it happened on the Balkan, or it must be satisfied. The European ideology, thinking can lead us to the only solution - the efforts for autonomy must be satisfied and the minorities must be kept. As it was a fashionable way to say 20-25 years ago, the Future-Europe will not be made of twenty-three-something states but hundreds of regions. I think this is a very actual and real perspective even nowadays, and this is an idea we should get back to.

Q9. Before the end of this interview I would like to ask you that as an ambassador what attitude did you see towards minorities in Norway and in Iceland? You have mentioned the Polish and their situation...

Iceland with its 300.000 residents... there are emigrants as well, but there are no minority related issues. Those who go there willingly will learn the language and preserve their identity through the family, as I saw the Hungarian families. So there are no minority-rights, not to talk about autonomy. But it is not expected from them not set the Hungarian flag out on the house. Norway is interesting only because they not only treat emigrants very well but because there one can find the distant relatives of Hungarians, the Sami, a couple a thousand or ten-thousand people. Before they were to be assimilated, melted in. The northern territories of the Sami were occupied by Norwegians so they were being colonized. Nowadays they have a kind of territorial autonomy, their own parliament, but this is for a small area only, and in a larger scale they live amongst and mixed with Norwegians. Norway radically left its assimilating politics 30-35 years ago, or you can say they left their despising attitude, because Samis were despised. So today there is a Sami parliament with self-governing authority, and Samis living afar from their autonomous territory are also a part of it in a cultural way. There is a Sami radio programme as well. So in the last moment, or just before that Norway tries to retain its minority and supports this financially and organically. This is a very appealing example, and all I want to achieve is to make Norway proud of this treatment, this revolution and to push other countries to follow in its footsteps. Norway, so to say, has been converted when from an oppressor of minorities it became a guardian for them. It would be reasonable that a country committed to human rights as much as Norway is would do the same on international forums and in its foreign relations as well. Obviously I cannot achieve this by myself, but I consider it as a case of issue, and at any times when talking with Norwegian politicians or journalists. So after all I consider Norway an important example.

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