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Why European organisations fail to be truly transformative actors in interethnic relations

About this research

Minority rights are central to many debates in and across Europe, particularly where policymaking is concerned with the ever-present risk of ethnic tension and conflict in the region. Research carried out by Professor David Galbreath (University of Bath) and Dr Joanne McEvoy (University of Aberdeen) critically examines how minority rights are thought about, discussed, and acted on by key European organisations; particularly given the on-going process of EU enlargement. Their central argument is that although debates are often framed in terms of deepening integration, enhancing democracy and respecting human rights, the research shows that the overriding concern of European organisations involved with this agenda has been the protection of minority rights to reduce the likelihood of regional instability. Whilst policy priorities are weighted towards, and therefore largely restricted to, mitigating the risks of immediate conflict rather than empowering minorities, the deeper root causes of tension remain. As a result of adopting strategies that only minimally address the issue of majority-minority ethnic tension, the research argues that European organisations have so far failed to realise their ability to be truly transformative actors in interethnic relations.

Key findings

The research questions the way that key European organisations address minority rights in the region, in that they:

- Are not asking how they can improve the role of minorities in Europe, but instead how they can reduce the likelihood of regional instability;
- Try to 'satisfice' rather than maximise the role of minorities in European political communities;
- Push protection over empowerment as a solution to the 'minorities problem' in Europe.

The research concludes that this is because despite rhetoric about the importance of deepening integration, enhancing democracy and respecting human rights, these organisations are limited by their predominant concern with security. They therefore seek to mitigate the risk of conflict rather than tackle the deeper causes of tension. Thus the very character and mandate of these organisations reduces their ability to transform interethnic relations in the region.

Research findings in context

Having suffered the effects of two World Wars – both the result of ethno-nationalist tendencies – and several occurrences since of major ethnic conflict (for example, in countries of the former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union), Europe has perhaps done more than any other continent to protect the rights of minorities. The question however remains as to how effective these efforts have been. What has been the nature and extent of change? To address this question, the research by Professor Galbreath and Dr McEvoy, evaluated the aims and outcomes of these efforts in relation to the stated goals of deepening integration, enhancing democracy, and respecting human rights.

When it comes to managing the tensions between ethnic groups within a territory or region there are two schools of thought. The first promotes a security agenda. From this perspective security policy, which places conditions on States for the protection of minority rights, is required to mitigate the ever-present risk of conflict. The second promotes the 'desecuritization' of ethnic tension. From this perspective it is argued that security policy can only ever be a remedial solution to the problem, whilst tackling the root cause of tension – struggles over identity, status, and the terms of inclusion – provides the only real hope for achieving the goal of diverse but stable and cohesive societies.

It is from this latter perspective that the key European organisations (loosely organised to form a 'minority rights regime') - the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council for Europe - claim to be approaching the issue of minority-majority ethnic tensions in Europe.

However, by analysing these organisations' policy statements and practices, and conducting interviews with key personnel, this research shows that despite often appealing to a rhetoric of greater democracy and respect for human rights (to provide a logic for intervention and as the basis from which to conceptualise minority rights), their approach to, and mechanisms for, solving the 'minorities problem' in Europe are essentially concerned with the minimal goal of regional security. Put another way, whilst these organisations may claim to be concerned with democratic participation and minority rights, their concern for these issues stems from the threat to security that is posed by the 'problem of minorities', and as such their potential to be truly transformative actors in interethnic relations is stifled.

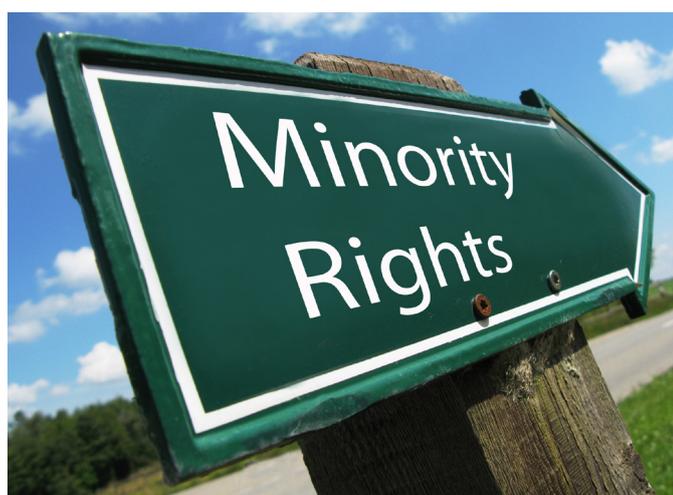


Implications for policy and messages for policymakers

First and foremost, the research stresses the potential for European organisations that emphasise the maximum empowerment rather than the minimum protection of minority rights, to play an important role in desecuritizing ethnic tensions within the region.

Therefore, this research has an important conceptual message for policymakers. That the way in which minority rights are thought about, discussed and acted on by the European organisations that make up the 'minority rights regime' needs to shift: from a concern with protecting rights to mitigate risks of conflict (a security logic), to a concern with empowering minority rights and tackling the root causes of majority-minority ethnic tension (a desecuritization logic). It is only as a result of a shift in the underpinning logic of the European rights regime that these organisations will realise their ability to be truly transformative actors in interethnic relations within the region.

This is of particular importance because, whilst domestic politics may struggle to escape from 'us-them' dichotomies, desecuritization of ethnic tension at a regional level can be achieved by the adoption of a 'European' narrative informed by multicultural principles, (the coexistence of identities within a political community). In other words, European organisations – in particular the EU - may be able to influence social relations in ways which preserve group identities by incorporating them into a larger political framework.



In short, the options presented by the research offer two scenarios for the future of interethnic relations in Europe. Either the continuation of strategies that perpetuate a security agenda and struggle to contain the ever-present threat of conflict, or the adoption of strategies that tackle the root cause of majority-minority tension, transforming and desecuritizing interethnic relations.

Methodology

The research is based on analysis of the key European organisations' policy statements and practices from the period 1993 to 2010, and interviews with key personnel (between 2008 and 2010).

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More on this research:

For the full article that this policy brief is based on, please see:

Galbreath, DJ and McEvoy, J. (2012). European organization and minority rights in Europe: on transforming the securitization dynamic, *Security Dialogue*, 43(3), pp. 267-284

For more on this subject you may be interested in the following book:

Galbreath DJ and McEvoy J (2012) *The European Minority Rights Regime: Towards a Theory of Regime Effectiveness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.



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