

Introduction

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The European continent has a long history of ethnopolitical conflict. Almost as long are attempts to deal with this phenomenon – either, and ideally, by way of prevention, or, more often, through prolonged, and not always successful attempts at resolution. Although traditionally seen as a policy area clearly in the domain of a state’s “internal affairs”, and thus a matter of its sovereignty and, in many cases, its territorial integrity, international organisations (IOs) have nevertheless increasingly become involved in the management of ethnopolitical conflict. Seen as one of the key security challenges in the early post-Cold War era, the United Nations (UN), and some of its specialist organisations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU), among others, have paid considerable attention to such conflicts, and have – to varying degrees – been active in attempts to prevent and/or resolve them.

In the period after the collapse of communism, much attention has been focused on central and eastern Europe. The proliferation of ethnopolitical conflicts there from the late 1980s onwards, the new geopolitical situation devoid of superpower rivalry, and the beginning of a new stage in the process of European integration triggered and facilitated the increased engagement of IOs with the region. This is not to say that they had not, in earlier decades, also been engaged in similar such conflicts elsewhere on the continent: the UN had been, and remains, a major player in Cyprus, the CoE was active in the Saarland and South Tyrol in the 1950s and 1960s, and the EU has been an active supporter of the Northern Ireland peace process since the mid-1990s. Yet, for better or worse, this level of activity pales in comparison with what occurred in central and eastern Europe over the past decade and a half. The degree of activism of IOs in the region’s ethnopolitical conflicts, the number of IOs participating, and the varied success and failure they experienced justify our focus on central and eastern Europe in this volume. Assessing the contribution that the different organisations made individually and collectively to the management of ethnopolitical conflict there offers valuable lessons for future such activities in, and beyond, this region.

A further point is worth considering: only since the end of the Cold War and in relation to central and eastern Europe can we really speak of

“institutions for the management of ethno-political conflict”. While some IOs had been active in this policy area before, many of their efforts were constrained geographically – the Soviet bloc was off limits – or in the way in which conflicts were conceptualised as proxy wars or an extension of superpower rivalry, especially in Africa and Asia. With the end of bipolarity, the involvement of IOs became more acceptable, specific institutions, such as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) or the range of EU special representatives, were created, and particular policies were developed and implemented to deal, at least in part, with the challenge of ethno-political conflict, such as the EU’s European Security and Defence Policy, and more recently its European Neighbourhood Policy. As a consequence, a new security architecture began to emerge in Europe that embraced the former communist countries and consisted of a number of interlocked institutions with overlapping membership that aspired to build a co-operative security environment in which any number of security challenges, including ethno-political conflict, could be managed promptly, efficiently and successfully.

Against this broad background of necessity and opportunity, this volume examines institutions for the management of ethno-political conflict in central and eastern Europe. It does so through a series of studies of individual organisations and the approaches they take, thus offering a broad overview and introduction to the subject complemented by relevant case studies as they pertain to the mandate and activities of individual organisations.

The contributors to this handbook cover eight different institutions: the OSCE, its High Commissioner on National Minorities, NATO, UNDP and OCHA, the Council of Europe, the EU, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, and the World Bank. In addition, there is a chapter that examines the non-governmental organisations as another very important player in the management of ethno-political conflict in central and eastern Europe. What all these different organisations and institutions have in common is that they seek to prevent ethno-political conflict wherever possible, stop violence (if the conflict has already escalated) and help establish a framework in which serious interethnic tensions can be avoided in the future. Beyond this commonality in aims, there are significant differences, if not disagreements, about how to achieve successful prevention and resolution of ethno-political conflicts.

Considering the wide range of organisations covered in this handbook, it is not surprising that such differences in approach exist. Different organisations have different mandates and different capabilities. NATO has impressive military muscle, but no particular capability to further economic reconstruction. The EU has begun to develop military capabilities,

and has established civilian police capability, but its real strength so far has been, similar to the World Bank, in promoting economic reform and development. At the same time, however, the EU, alongside the OSCE and the Council of Europe, has contributed significantly to achieving sustainable political change in the process of post-communist transition in central and eastern Europe. The importance of early warning and early action capabilities was developed at the earliest within the UN system, while the OSCE established a specific institution – the High Commissioner on National Minorities – to provide such a capability particularly in the area of ethnopolitical conflict. The idea of comprehensive preventive action is also embodied in the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, created precisely to foster a climate of stability and security in which the potential for ethnopolitical conflict could be gradually eliminated from the region.

The mandates that the different organisations and institutions were given, and the aspirations that underlay their establishment, were and are ambitious. They testify, on the one hand, to the sincere commitment by policy makers not only to *react* to ethnopolitical conflict once it occurs but also to *prevent* it wherever possible. Emphasis on preventive action, however, does not mean that mechanisms of reactive conflict management can be neglected. Sometimes the violent escalation of conflict cannot be prevented, and IOs need to be ready to respond in other ways: containing conflict so that it does not spread across a wider region, providing humanitarian aid to its victims, facilitating negotiations or mediating between the conflict parties, and, if necessary, intervening militarily to end a conflict. It is obvious that few, if any, IOs are in a position to develop all of these capabilities simultaneously and sufficiently. As a consequence, IOs need to be able and willing to co-operate with one another and to co-ordinate their efforts in the management of ethnopolitical conflict, just as much as they need to establish their own capabilities to act and to fund their actions.

These three sets of capabilities – to act, to fund, and to co-ordinate and co-operate – are crucial factors for the success of managing ethnopolitical conflict in Europe by IOs individually, as well as across the interlocking network of different organisations and institutions that now make up a part of the European security architecture. Contributors assess the degree to which these capabilities have been developed in the individual institutions and organisations they examine. Their findings are not universally positive and indicate that some work is left to be done to fulfil the aspirations of many an organisation in the management of ethnopolitical conflict in central and eastern Europe. Yet, what also becomes clear is that since the end of the Cold War, significant progress has been made in this respect. Important lessons have been

learned from early success and failures, and these have been translated into more responsive institutions and more responsible policies. It is important to maintain the momentum of these improvements: the challenges of ethno-political conflict in central and eastern Europe have changed over the past decade and a half, but they have not declined, let alone disappeared. The situation in the Western Balkans remains somewhat volatile, several protracted conflicts in the former Soviet Union – Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh – still await a permanent settlement, and yet new conflicts may emerge from a deadly brew of aggrieved minorities, organised crime and international terrorism. To deal with these challenges successfully will require political skill and principled leadership. The cornerstones of the institutional setting for the management of ethno-political conflict in Europe are there, but they must be strengthened and further built upon to provide the framework in which the aspirations to a peaceful, prosperous Europe without the threat of ethno-political conflict can become a sustainable reality.