

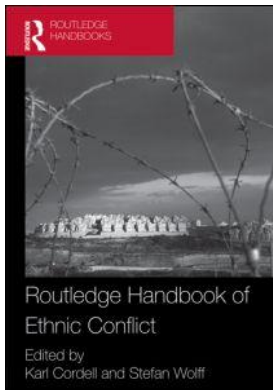
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Karl Cordell, Stefan Wolff

### Playing the ethnic card

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Sandra Barkhof

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## 25 Playing the ethnic card

### Liberal democratic and authoritarian practices compared

*Sandra Barkhof*

In this chapter we shall focus on analysing the differences between liberal democratic and authoritarian systems with regard to ethnic policy. In particular we will stress the persistence of authoritarian practices with regard to ethnicity and ethnic minorities in both established liberal democracies and in ‘new democracies’, especially the ones that have emerged from former Eastern Europe communist systems. We shall explore the extent to which the ‘ethnicity card’ is used and manipulated by the established elites to further their own interests and goals. Finally, this chapter will discuss the role of ethnic movements in the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.

#### **Liberal democracies and authoritarian systems: some comparisons**

It has been argued elsewhere in this volume that one of the basic principles of liberal democracy is equality, whereby each member of a liberal democracy has essentially the same protected rights, freedoms and liberties including the freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly and so forth. At the other end of the political spectrum we find authoritarian regimes, which are usually characterised by infringements of these civil liberties and political rights. Authoritarian regimes often implement some sort of limitations on political competition (indeed such competition might be missing completely), overt use of coercion, and often an important role for ideology. In between the idealised notions of ‘democracy’ and ‘autocracy’, which hardly ever exist in their pure form, we find various political systems that need to be classified as hybrid or transitional systems. Some states can be described as ‘semi-authoritarian’, which may respect some civil liberties but have only ‘show’ elections. Others are often referred to as ‘competitive authoritarian regimes’, which (in contrast to true authoritarian regimes) actually have weak legislatures that serve as focal points for opposition (Way 2006: 148). Some states, including many of the new states emerging from the former Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia, still linger in a transitional phase between the former authoritarian communist system and an aspired-to democratic system (whereby sometimes this ‘aspiration’ is little more than a legitimisation for continued authoritarian practices, as shall be discussed below). On the other hand, while some authoritarian systems use limited ‘liberal’ policies such as mass participation to legitimise their rule, many of the established Western liberal democracies feature exclusive or restrictive political policies that clash with their general liberal democratic framework. We shall discuss examples of this in relation to ethnic minority policy in this chapter.

**Ethnic minorities and authoritarian systems**

Authoritarian states are often unable to cope with ethnic tensions or conflict in non-violent ways. As pointed out above, authoritarian regimes lack meaningful competitive elections and division of power. Stability in these regimes means the rooting out of opposition and preservation of the privileges of the ruling elite. Their strategy with regard to ethnic minorities is often enforced assimilation or even expulsion or elimination of minority groups (non-nationals). Using such measures, strong autocratic regimes may be able, for some time at least, to suppress ethnic or ethno-national movements.

Authoritarian regimes can also be associated with minority ethnic dominance, whereby an ethnic minority occupies a privileged position and access to political power, which is exercised despite the fact that the ruling ethnicity is demographically outnumbered. The goal of such elites is to keep the circle of power as small as possible in order to maximise the benefits associated with that position of power. This includes suppressing the dominant ethnicity and excluding it from political power, a strategy that is becoming more and more difficult to sustain, given the general global trend towards democratic transition (Kaufmann and Haklai 2008: 746). Thus dominant minority regimes have become rarer and are now largely limited to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Historically, some of these regimes emerged from colonialism, whereby either the white settlers formed this dominant minority or they appointed a favoured minority to have exclusive access to political power and administration. An example would be Iraq, where the British created Iraq out of three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire. They installed Faisal, an allied Syrian leader, as king and included the minority Sunni Arab elites in the administration, who then came to dominate military and administrative authority, at least until the revolution in 1958 (Farouk-Slugett and Slugett 1987: 12). Another example is of course South Africa, where the white settlers formed the privileged minority that dominated political power.

Maintaining minority dominance usually has to rely on extensive use of coercive measures and exclusion of the majorities from political decision-making and representation. Again, we can refer to South Africa, where under apartheid policies the large majority of non-whites were disenfranchised. Usually, such measures needed to go hand in hand with extensive military and security police presence to ensure the marginalisation of the rest of the population, including the suppression of any form of political opposition or activism. This policy has been more successful in some cases than in others. Maintaining a large-scale military and police presence costs money, and those regimes without the necessary resources struggled to maintain order and their position (Kaufmann and Haklai 2008: 751). Thus oil-rich regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Syria had more access to resources and thus fared better than, for example, Burundi, where numerous uprisings and revolts occurred until an internationally brokered agreement in 2003 (the Burundi Global Peace Accords of November 2003) paved the way for a fitful transition to a more democratic system (Rothchild 2007: 83).

Coercion, however, is not the only way to maintain minority rule. Many autocratic regimes have used concepts of national and ethno-national ideology to broaden their support base. The vehicle for this is often the construction of a one-party state with vast networks of associations to extend the outreach of the party and thus the ruling elite (similar to the fascist networks of Nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy). Party membership and association can mean better access to social

welfare provisions, education, etc., thus providing incentives for people to identify with and support the state. The message used to legitimise the regime was often worded along nationalist or ethno-nationalist lines, thus using the 'ethnic card' as a tool to control the majority. To encompass both the minority and the majority ethnicity, it is necessary to appeal to a 'higher order'. For example, respective regimes in Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Egypt have often attempted to promote a pan-Arab identity, making their nation the leader for a wider idea. Such supra-ethnic ideologies are often coupled with a continued domestic suppression of the majority ethnicity (Kaufmann and Haklai 2008: 754).

Seemingly, some new states, especially parts of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia, have reverted to authoritarianism, partly because the legacies of commingled ethnic groups, convoluted borders and emerging national identities all posed severe challenges to the stability of Central Asia (Roudik 2007: 154). In addition, Schatz (2005: 232) points to the importance and continued significance of sub-ethnic clans and kinship politics, which further complicate the transition in the post-communist period. For example, Schatz (2005: 232) notes that sub-ethnic clans were among the main actors as Tajikistan descended into civil war in the 1990s, while in Uzbekistan local identities related to kinship dominate rural areas, thus adding to the multi-ethnic dynamic in the region.

To take the example of Uzbekistan, after the fall of communism, an authoritarian presidential system emerged. Some opposition parties were allowed to give the illusion of democracies, but these parties all supported the ruling party (People's Democracy Party, PDP). Other opposition groups including ethnic opposition groups have been restricted or prohibited, in order to ensure inter-ethnic 'harmony' in the country (Kubicek 1998: 32). The political elite hereby portrayed themselves as guardians of the motherland (although President Karimov announced in 2005 a move away from the presidential system, giving more powers to the Prime Minister and the other branches of government).

A similar situation arose in Kazakhstan, where the post-independence political system could at first be characterised as 'semi-democratic authoritarianism', although after 1995 most observers would describe it as a typical authoritarian regime as the consolidation of presidential power under Nazarbaev began (Oka 2009: 4). The emergence of a delegative democracy meant that an elected President ruled practically unrestricted, and many members of the ruling elite believe that popular participation is overrated and that the popular will should instead be shaped through ideological indoctrination (Brill Olcott 2002: 21). The argument is that democratisation would bring with it ethnic mobilisation, which might result in political instability, since the different claims of the various ethnic groups would be difficult to reconcile, especially given the acute socioeconomic crisis in many of the Central Asian states (Kubicek 1998: 35–36). Again, opposition including ethnic opposition has been curtailed to avoid ethnic or national tensions and conflict and to preserve national unity. Kazakhstan is unique among the former Soviet Republics as the only one without a majority nationality. After independence, the main risk to Kazakh domination of state organs was considered to be opposition by ethnic Russians (Oka 2009: 3). Considering that ethnic Kazakhs make up under half of the population, the ruling elite gave priority to the consolidation of the political community and creating Kazakh patriotism rather than to establishing democracy. Subsequently, the new constitution in 1993 defined the state as a 'self-determined Kazakh nation' (Alexandrov 1999: 99).

### Ethnic diversity in liberal democracies

The basis of political systems or states is usually the ‘nation’, a somewhat contentious and ambiguous concept that has been analysed in greater detail in previous chapters. In modern European political theory, the constitutional concept of a sovereign nation has always been trapped between *ethos* and *demos*. In the political sense, the nation is the entity living in the state’s territory and under its administrative control. This conflicts with the ethnic concept of nation, which reflects the differences and often tensions between different ethnic groups living in a state’s territory (Přibáň 2004: 417). Ethnic minorities hereby often claim a nationality that is somewhat different from that of the core ethnic group in the state (Gallagher 2005: 32).

In general, there are different ways in which states can respond to ethnic diversity. Eide (2004: 60) broadly categorised these approaches as (1) assimilation and integration or (2) separation and exclusion. The former is normally associated with liberal democracies, the latter with authoritarian regimes. Ideally, the liberal democratic state should make no distinction between different ethnic groups, seeking to encompass all of them in the form of a common civil society whereby all members should share sovereignty as citizens eligible to vote and be represented in government. In addition, liberal democracies should protect ethnic minorities, either through positive minority rights and/or anti-discriminatory measures. The accommodation of ethnic diversity thus becomes an intrinsic part of the modern liberal-democratic reality (Přibáň 2004: 418–19). However, as Riggs (1995) points out, democratic government in itself does not automatically resolve ethnic conflicts, and liberal democracies, for various reasons, do not or cannot always adhere to the norms they aspire to as will be illustrated by the following examples.

Common strategies of ethnic policy in liberal democracies include seeking to assimilate minority groups by non-coercive means. An easy way to accommodate the concerns and issues of ethnic minorities is to empower them within the established political system and for example permit political organisation, thus paving the way for legislative representation. The success of ethnic minorities hereby depends to some degree on the political and electoral system. Political systems based on proportional representation usually make it easier for ethnic minorities to gain representation than those where only one candidate per district is elected (for example, ‘first past the post’ in UK national elections), especially if an ethnic minority is dispersed. Thus ethnic minorities have a greater chance of access to political power as part of a governing coalition in PR systems than in majoritarian systems (Kosłowski 1994: 392).

Political representation, however, is a political right based on citizenship, and many liberal-democratic states employ citizenship laws that can lead to exclusion of ethnic minorities from political rights and political representation. In general, we need to distinguish between countries employing citizenship laws based on the principles of *jus sanguinis* (ancestral lineage) and those using the principle of *jus soli* (birthplace). Ireland and the United Kingdom are often cited as examples of countries using the principle of *jus soli* for both ascription of citizenship and naturalisation. On the European continent, as Kosłowski (1994: 371) points out, *jus sanguinis* became the norm for ascription, although the rules governing naturalisation tended to vary greatly. Germany used to be a prime example of a liberal democracy (after 1949) where the principle of *jus sanguinis* (in place since 1913) governed both ascription of citizenship and naturalisation, leading to the existence of (1) an understanding of nationhood as an ethno-cultural concept and

(2) a growing number of permanent resident aliens without political citizenship rights. Since *jus sanguinis* also applied to naturalisation, 'alien' status was in effect hereditary; for example, the majority of the children of Turkish migrant workers born in Germany were unable to acquire German citizenship. Thus the German citizenship laws challenged the liberal-democratic framework of the state by denying political rights to a considerable ethnic minority despite the fact that many of Germany's 'aliens' belong now to the third generation born in Germany. As Radtke (1997: 253) explains, without political rights, the migrant workers (and their children) needed (German) advocates and became an enduring topic of discourse for the majority, who often labelled migrants as either illegitimate participants in the social welfare system or as victims of discrimination.

After 1992, Germany (and other EU member states based on *jus sanguinis*) were themselves challenged by the new EU citizenship which is, in the case of local and MEP elections, based on *jus soli*, that is, every EU citizen can vote for local and European elections in their EU country of residence, even if they are 'aliens' in that country and cannot vote there in national elections. In this changing European political climate, with its encroachment on national sovereignty and changing understanding of the role of the nation-state (at least within the European Union), it is perhaps not surprising that since the early 1990s there has been a general move towards some form of *jus soli* in many European countries. In Germany, as pointed out above, the existence of large numbers of permanent aliens led to demands for easier access to citizenship. As the *New York Times* (1997) stated, one in five babies born in Germany was 'foreign'. Thus, naturalisation policies were revised through the amended Nationality Act (2000) and the Immigration Act (2005). Now children born in Germany to foreign parents may acquire German citizenship if certain conditions are met, although they have to decide between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three whether they wish to retain German nationality or the nationality of their parents. Furthermore, foreigners have now the right to become naturalised after eight years of habitual residence (fifteen years previously) if they meet certain conditions, including adequate knowledge of the German language. In general dual nationality is not accepted, although certain exceptions apply.

On the other hand, however, some countries such as France have moved in the opposite direction. In France, ascription used to be based on *jus sanguinis*, while *jus soli* was used extensively in naturalisation, thus reflecting a more state-centred and assimilationist national self-understanding than in ethno-cultural Germany (Brubaker 1996: 169). Thus, a person born in France to foreign parents used to acquire French citizenship by virtue of place of birth. However, by the 1980s this policy led to the existence of large immigrant communities, generating a rightist campaign for more restrictive naturalisation laws. In 1993, the French government pushed through a bill that eliminated the automatic extension of French citizenship and nationality to children of foreigners once they reach the age of eighteen. Under the new legislation, children of foreigners have to apply for French citizenship between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one.

Citizenship policies are not the only form of disenfranchisement in liberal democracies, which can also occur through indirect measures including cumbersome electoral registration, disproportionate electoral districts (a feature of pre-1972 Northern Ireland), poll taxes or literary tests, as in the southern United States prior to 1965, which can make it difficult or near impossible for certain groups to vote or gain

representation. Such indirect techniques can maintain a de facto dominant ethnicity and discrimination against ethnic minorities or other foreigners. Both post-communist Latvia and Estonia have been criticised for denying citizenship and thus political rights to ethnic Russians who have failed to pass language tests or other bureaucratic hurdles (Jurado, in Kaufmann and Haklai 2008: 759–60).

### **Ethnic movements**

On the other hand, because democracy permits freedom of speech and association, it also enables discontented people, including ethnic minorities, to organise themselves and lobby their interests. Thus ethnic movements tend to flourish in democracies, especially in new democracies where ethnic minorities have, for the first time, the opportunity to express their demands. Ethnic movements also have opportunities in weak authoritarian regimes, where the governing elite is unable to handle or suppress demands. In addition, ethnic movements tend to be especially active among ethnic groups living in enclaves (territorially concentrated). Here, the main aim of ethnic movements is often to achieve a degree of autonomy or self-determination.

An example is the German-speaking South Tyrol, which became part of Italy after the First World War. Since 1945, the German minority in South Tyrol has often been cited as one of the most successful forms of ethnic mobilisation, in the form of the Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP, South Tyrolean People's Party). The SVP represented the German minority's fight against the enforced 'Italianisation' of the region and lobbied for the protection of German ethnic minority rights (although the German 'minority' continued to constitute around two-thirds of the population in South Tyrol after 1945). As Panayi (2000: 161) points out, the German population of South Tyrol became completely politicised in the process, and the SVP regularly took over 90 per cent of the German vote. A final agreement with the Italian government was signed in 1992, resulting in the autonomy of the region, an exemplary success for a regional ethnic movement in Europe which managed to safeguard its main aims (self-determination and language protection for the German ethnic group). Other examples of autonomy, whereby the ethnic group can administer its own domestic affairs, include, for example, the Swedish-speaking Åland islands in Finland, Greenland (granted autonomy by Denmark in 1979) and a number of regions in Spain, including the Basque and Catalan regions. Here again, we note the importance of ethno-nationalist political parties and movements in achieving ethnic minority rights.

### **New democracies and ethnic policy**

So far, we have looked largely at established liberal democracies in Western Europe. There is, however, also a host of new democracies, which have emerged out of authoritarian regimes. Therefore, we shall now shift focus toward former Central and Eastern European communist countries. It is often argued that transitional regimes or newly democratised regimes, especially in multi-ethnic countries, are particularly prone to ethnic tensions as ethnic groups redefine their identity in political terms thereby challenging the existing elites and processes. Ethno-nationalist movements played an important role in the break-up of communism and the former Soviet Union. After 1985, there were protests in almost every Soviet Republic against official policies of Russification, including the suppression of local languages and cultures (Inder Singh

2001: 33). Perestroika allowed the expression of strong nationalist pressures, with some ethno-national groups such as Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians or Georgians calling for independence. Ukrainian nationalism, for example, developed in stages during and since the Stalin era. In 1980 a Ukrainian Patriotic Movement was founded, and by 1989 around 30,000 national and cultural organisations had developed, many of them calling for independence (Panayi 2000: 165), which was achieved in 1991. In the three Baltic States, to give another example, popular ethno-nationalist movements and parties, such as the Estonian National Front or the Latvian Popular Front, played an equally important role in achieving independence.<sup>1</sup>

The emerging democratic systems in the former European communist bloc found themselves under pressure to condemn the abandoned past, codify future aims and principles and commit the nation and the new constitutional institutions to these principles (Příbáň 2004: 409). Part of this transitional process involved the rebuilding of political identities and civil society, which was necessarily composed of these new principles as well as older civil and ethnic traditions. An important part of the constitution-making processes and rebuilding of political identity was the rebuilding of national identity in the sense of a cultural and ethnic identity, much of which had previously been manipulated or suppressed by the communist regimes. Thus, in East Central Europe, we often find very close links between civil and ethnic politics.

For instance the new Hungarian constitution of 1989, although based internally on a civic concept of nationhood, also contains an article (Article 6/3) which makes a constitutional commitment to ethnic Hungarians living outside of Hungary's borders (causing negative reactions from surrounding states with large Hungarian minorities). In addition, in 1993, Hungary adopted new citizenship legislation based on the principles of *jus sanguinis* meaning that the main prerequisite for the acquisition of Hungarian citizenship would be Hungarian descent (although political rights were at the same time also guaranteed to ethnic minorities living in Hungary). The 'ethnic card' was played again under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (1998–2002), when ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary were granted special access to Hungary's social welfare. Originally intended to be a political symbol of the cohesion of ethnic Hungarians and their identification with the Hungarian state, the legislation was widely criticised by the EU and neighbouring countries due to its alleged inherent ethno-national discrimination and potential violation of other states' sovereignty. Nevertheless, the legislation came into force in 2002, albeit in slightly modified and limited form. Afterwards, the conservative party led by Orbán (after 2002 in the opposition) continued to campaign for granting Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries, although a referendum on this failed in 2004. As this example shows, Hungary's transition to liberal democracy remains influenced by ethnic concepts of the nation (Příbáň 2004: 424).

We have already discussed the role of ethnic movements and parties in securing or pressing for minority ethnic rights. A prime example for this in the new democracies of Eastern Europe would be the Slovak parties that emerged after the 1989 revolution in the former Czechoslovakia, demanding Slovak autonomy or even independence. The most prominent, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS) negotiated the so-called 'Velvet Divorce' which came into effect in 1993. Shortly after the separation into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, both states drafted new constitutions, which displayed a different understanding of 'the nation'. In Slovakia, the constitution addressed primarily the ethnic Slovaks, thus opening opportunities for ethnic



marginalisation, which did occur under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1994–98), leader of the HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), who used historical resentment and recent fears of Hungarian nationalism to isolate the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Mečiar, whose party governed together with the extreme nationalists (the SNS) and the ‘reds’ (the extreme left Association of Workers of Slovakia), pursued a two-track ethnic minority policy. On the one hand they successfully negotiated reconciliation with Hungary, while internally a series of anti-Hungarian measures were passed (Fowkes 2002: 125). It was only after 1998 that more balanced legislation protecting ethnic minorities was implemented, based on the special section of the Slovak constitution which protects ethnic and minority rights. The example shows how Mečiar used the ‘ethnic card’ to address populist fears of Hungarian nationalism as part of a much bigger political agenda and political power struggles in Slovakia (Přibáň 2004: 426).

The Czech constitution of 1992 on the other hand largely ignores ethnic diversity<sup>2</sup> and defines nationhood almost exclusively in terms of citizenship and civil society while also including a section on the protection of ethnic and minority rights. It has been argued that this approach in itself was an ‘ethnic card’, played in view of the accession negotiations with the EU, which would have been hindered by ethnic conflict and ethno-national tensions. This civic interpretation of nation has not, however, prevented local discrimination against the Roma minority in the 1990s, which was highlighted by the so-called ‘Bratinka report’ in 1997, which identified anti-Romani discrimination as a crucial problem in the Czech Republic (Vermeersch 2006: 83). This illustrates that the adoption of a civic concept of nationhood does not necessarily prevent discriminatory policies, while on the other hand the adoption of an ethnic concept of nationhood does not rule out a co-operative and inclusive ethnic policy as in the case of Slovakia after 1998 (Přibáň 2004: 428). Nevertheless, Miller et al. (2001: 181) note that general inter-ethnic alienation was comparatively high in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with over 90 per cent of the population exhibiting unfavourable feelings towards the Roma.

As a final point, it must be noted that in some cases, where the transition to democracy has mobilised marginalised ethnic communities to pursue a more equitable treatment, this has led to the implementation of reactive policies by the established elites or more privileged communities. A frequent reaction is one of a turn toward neo-traditionalist or ultra-nationalist ideas and parties, sometimes aiming to subordinate minority communities. Explicit ethnic nationalism tends to persist mostly among far-right and ultra-nationalist parties who use the ‘ethnic card’ in the form of ethno-nationalist ideas largely to appeal to populist fears of immigration and multiculturalism. In Bulgaria, the far right Ataka (Attack) party has risen in popularity since 2005 (with the slogan ‘Bulgaria back to the Bulgarians’), while in Romania, the Greater Romania Party has attracted many Romanian voters with its anti-minority slogans, attacking ethnic Hungarians, Roma, Jews and others. In Hungary, the far right Movement for a Better Hungary came in third in the European elections of 2009, and in Slovakia the Slovak National Party joined the ruling government in 2006.

Such a nationalist-rightist reaction, however, is by no means restricted to new democracies. We have already noted the role of rightist campaigners in changing citizenship laws in France from inclusive naturalisation to more exclusive policies. Similar rightist parties exist for example in the United Kingdom and Germany, lobbying for example for stricter immigration controls. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Freedom

Party with its anti-immigration policy was the second strongest party there in the 2009 European elections, and in the United Kingdom the British National Party won its first ever seat in the European parliament in the same election. Thus we witness a general rise of rightist nationalist parties across Europe, which is of course linked to the prevailing economic crisis. Rightist parties often use the ‘ethnic card’ in the form of arguments of ‘ethnic minority threat to scarce economic resources’ to mobilise voters, especially during times of economic downturn and in new democracies with weakly developed market economies. Stefanovic (2008: 1214) suggests that the success of the transition to democracy may be helped considerably by the development and maintenance of efficient welfare systems which might reduce the electoral appeal of authoritarian ultra-nationalists.

## Conclusion

This chapter has analysed some aspects of ethnic policy in liberal democratic and authoritarian systems. We have seen that on the one hand, liberal democracy entails the policies of compromise and negotiation and thus in theory a reconciliation of ethnic and state claims (Brown 1996: 309). However, many liberal democracies operate ethnic policies that either directly or indirectly promote exclusivity. We must hereby distinguish between politically and ethnically exclusionary policies. Liberal democracies, especially majoritarian systems or those operating citizenship systems based on *jus sanguinis*, often produce more ethnically exclusive societies than some semi-authoritarian regimes. In addition, the ‘ethnic card’ is popular with both nationalist and liberal democratic elites and as we have seen, is used widely in the domestic context, for example during election campaigns, and within the international context in terms of foreign policy with regard to other states and indeed international organisations.

## Notes

- 1 Although we should note that the restructuring and transition in the former Soviet Union has led to a new wave of ethnic tensions, as most of the newly independent states are themselves multi-ethnic. Recent tensions include the secessionist demands of South Ossetia (from Georgia), for example, and Chechnya (from Russia).
- 2 We should point out that the Czech Republic is ethnically rather homogeneous apart from its Roma minority.

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