Dynamics of Party Politics, Electoral Competition and Cooperation within the Hungarian Minorities of Romania, Serbia and Slovakia

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Abstract

Intra-ethnic political dynamics are a rather neglected topic in political science, ethnic groups and minorities being regarded most of the time as unitary actors. This dissertation aims to contribute to the dismantling of this obviously oversimplifying perspective through an analysis of the political divisions of the Hungarian minorities of Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. For this purpose the thesis blends the triadic nexus of nationalisms of Brubaker with the toolkit of research on ethnic and ethnoregionalist parties. It proposes a framework of analysis that is innovative primarily because of the central role attributed to external actors (the kin-state) and to the relative weight of different types of party-voter linkage mechanisms (especially to the clientelistic potential of the parties) in party competition. Building on this framework, the dissertation aims to explain why more radical party appeals were less successful in the case of the Hungarian minorities and why intra-ethnic electoral cooperation is rather the exception than the rule in the case of these communities.

Taking into consideration the absence of institutionalized power-sharing in the studied countries, I argue that the key to the more moderate parties’ electoral success lies precisely in their higher clientelistic capacity, as states are more ready to provide access to the national patronage system than to transform themselves into multi-national states. A minority party can maintain high clientelistic capacity primarily by participation in power in the host-state, however, this is conditional on the moderation of ethnopolitical demands. Being excluded from power, the more radical intra-ethnic challengers are unable to counterbalance the clientelistic potential of the moderates, as they can rely almost exclusively on the aid of the kin-state. However, the magnitude of the latter has gradually fallen behind that of the resources accessible in the host-state.

The dependence on host-state resources has important consequences on the incidence of intra-ethnic cooperation too. The incentives of the moderates to cooperate with their more radical counterparts are reduced not only by the need to keep the ethnic coalition minimal, but also because cooperation with the radicals decreases their overall chances of access to resources, due to the resistance of the majority elites. This argument explains why ethnic minorities are often unable to overcome their electoral strategic coordination problems. I go on to argue that this model of interactions between majority and minority elites is better understood as a mixed model of incorporation also entailing softer elements of cooptation and control, than as informal power-sharing. The more moderate minority elites accept this model in order to maintain their access to resources and implicitly their dominant position within the electorate, while for the majority elites this represents a cost-effective solution avoiding the radicalization of the minority.

The thesis also analyses the differences between the electorates of the rival minority parties, provides an account about the interrelatedness of party preferences across the borders (in the case of the newly enfranchised Hungarian dual citizens), and includes an analysis of successful and failed instances of electoral competition between minority parties, which once again confirm the very significant impact of the kin-state, but also the importance of both programmatic and strategic differences between the parties.