



(Cue: Hungary's Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, has welcomed the Romanian government's plans for decentralisation which would grant greater powers for local authorities -- including those in areas where ethnic Hungarians form a majority. Mr Gyurcsany voiced his support for the plan when he met the Romanian Prime Minister, Calin Tariceanu, in the course of a week during which he also had talks with the Serbian Foreign Minister, Vuk Draskovic. Over the years Romania and Serbia have taken different approaches to dealing with their Hungarian and other ethnic minorities -- Romania traditionally being a centralised state while Serbia has considerable experience in implementing different forms of autonomy. In this report the BBC's Central and South-east Europe analyst, Gabriel Partos, looks at some of the ways in which the various forms of self-government are applied across Europe to deal with the specific problems of ethnic minorities.)

(REP:) Although across Europe there's a huge array of different mechanisms that are used to improve the lot of ethnic minorities, broadly speaking there are three main approaches. One of these is to have territorial or regional autonomy; another is to have parallel institutions -- a form of ethnically-based or cultural autonomy -- for minority groups; and the third one is to grant specific rights, together with the resources that are required to put these rights into practice, for certain ethnic groups. How and where these different institutional arrangements are employed depends on the individual circumstances of the ethnic minorities and their homelands. And as Professor Stefan Wolff of the University of Bath explains, their success often depends on local conditions and those involved in implementing them:

(TAPE BAND 1 WOLFF:) *The bottom line, what is most important to bear in mind is that autonomy regimes in the end are meant to strengthen the effectiveness of democratic political processes. If political leaders really co-operate with one another and have the interests of their constituents in mind then both regional and ethnically-based autonomies can function quite well. And, above all, they can contribute to preventing the kind of violent ethnic conflict that we've seen so much over the past decade and a half across Europe.*

(REP:) Territorial autonomy is usually the standard practice in cases where there is a sizeable national group living in a clearly defined national homeland or in a compact region. Some of the best-known examples are Britain where Scotland and Wales have benefited since the late 1990s from a policy of devolution giving them their elected assemblies and governments; or Spain where Catalonia and the Basque country have enjoyed a considerable degree of self-government since the aftermath of Franco dictatorship. In south-eastern Europe the old Yugoslavia was the best-known example of such an ethno-federal state. And the decentralisation of power was taken further with the establishment of the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo within one of the federal entities, Serbia. In Kosovo, though the majority Albanian population have been demanding outright independence since the late 1980s. So isn't there a danger for states that by granting autonomy they might be encouraging secession? The Chief Executive of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Ulrich Bohner, is, on the whole, sceptical:

(TAPE BAND 2 BOHNER:) *Well, there can be a danger. In the Council of Europe we've rather felt that in general terms, it is the contrary. When you give certain rights, people will feel at ease in their language, in their culture and then why should they leave a country where they feel at ease? Even in the case of the Basque country, or let's take Corsica in France, if there were a referendum, it's by no means certain that people would be in favour of independence. So sometimes you have to face the reality that there are very small but very militant groups who are trying to gain independence through violence and that is obviously not something we would support from the Council or Europe -- no way.*

(REP:) Professor Wolff also doubts that autonomy is the start of the slippery slope towards separatism -- apart from some specific cases:

(TAPE BAND 3 WOLFF) *There's relatively little evidence that autonomy necessarily leads to secession of the autonomous area in the short or medium term. For most of the time much depends on how autonomy arrangements are actually implemented, whether the political leaders in the region and the capital of the state act in good faith, whether they are willing to give the autonomy arrangements a chance to work, whether they are properly financed and resourced. On the other hand one also has to be realistic about these things, and where there's a very strong and well-established drive towards independence, it might be better to negotiate secession than launching a costly and very often pointless civil war.*

(REP:) Ulrich Bohner believes that it was not the granting of autonomy that marked the beginning of Kosovo's quest for independence but rather, the revoking of that autonomy in 1989 by President Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian administration. Now that Kosovo remains under United Nations administration while it awaits talks on its long-term status, a greater degree of decentralization within Kosovo may -- according to the Council of Europe -- help allay the fears of Kosovo's Serb minority for their security and human rights:

(TAPE BAND 4 BOHNER:) *We believe that there's a solution in granting a little bit more autonomy at the local level, and this is a programme that the Council of Europe has been developing for Kosovo, and we have now been asked to help with the setting up with a number of pilot projects that could give more autonomy to some parts inside Kosovo as part of an overall solution. And similar things have happened actually in Macedonia with the Ohrid agreement that put an end to the armed conflict there.*

(REP:) The prospect of membership of the European Union has over recent years helped alleviate some of the problems faced by national minorities -- not least by ethnic Magyars who live in Slovakia, now an EU member, and Romania, an accession state. Yet neither of these two countries has any system of territorial autonomy. So what role can autonomy arrangements play in an expanding Europe. Professor Wolff:

(TAPE BAND 5 WOLFF:) *The European Union itself has no specific minority rights policy for its own member-states, but it has so far relied primarily on non-discrimination legislation to address minority issues. This, however, does not mean that autonomy as a conflict-resolution and conflict-prevention mechanism has no place in the EU, but merely means that it is in the end up to political leaders on the ground in specific situations to make the most of what the EU's institutions and funds can offer in support of autonomy arrangements both in new member-states as well as in aspiring member-states.*

(REP:) The EU is often viewed as a collection of states that are pursuing a twin-track approach: an increasing sense of European unity is matched by institutions that are designed to devolve power to the local and regional levels. It's a practice that's enshrined in the principle of subsidiarity -- that decisions should be taken at the closest possible level to the people whose lives are affected. That principle is also espoused by the Council of Europe. Ulrich Bohner explains:

(TAPE BAND 6 BOHNER:) *We believe that at the same time that you develop greater European unity on a certain number of important issues, you can give greater autonomy at regional and local level for people to deal with their own affairs. There again, a good example is Spain because Spain was a very centralised state under the Franco regime, and today Spain is one of the most decentralised states we have in Europe. And a few years ago for the first time the public expenditure in Spain -- if you take the regions and the municipalities together, has been greater than the public expenditure of the central state. So I think the basic idea of Europe is that we live in a place where the decisions are made at different levels and in different places.*

(REP:) As the EU takes in more new members, perhaps the prospect of accession may provide the incentive for some kind of deal on some of the most serious ethno-national disputes -- including the future of Kosovo. In the meantime, its expanding number of member-states provide a growing range of different practices when it comes to tackling the problems faced by ethnic minorities. One of the less common approaches was adopted in

Hungary in the mid-1990s -- and more recently in Croatia -- where minorities have their own parallel assemblies. In spite of funding shortfalls, that can be a particularly useful mechanism for an ethnic group, such as Hungary's Roma, or gypsy, community who don't live in just one compact region of the country. But it's only one possible solution among many: and it's probably safe to assume that in the coming years there's likely to be an increasing number of different approaches adopted across Europe. (END)