

*Emese Mezei**

THOMAS BENEDIKTER: 100 YEARS OF MODERN TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY

100 Years of Modern Territorial Autonomy: Autonomy Around the World was originally published in 2021 by LIT, a German publisher located in Vienna. At first glance, the book's most outstanding feature, especially from a Hungarian point of view, is the cover photo. The picture shows Balázs Izsák, President of the Szekler National Council (SNC), during a demonstration for the autonomy of Szeklerland (Romania) held in Marosvásárhely in 2018. Balázs Izsák is not only on the cover but also one of the interviewees in the book. Despite its relevance, the book is yet to be translated for the Hungarian reading audience. The book is dedicated to Alfons Benedikter, the author's father, who, as a politician, devoted his life to the autonomy and self-determination of South Tyrol.

Thomas Benedikter, the author of this book, is an economist, political scientist, publicist and today executive director of South Tyrol's Center for Political Studies and Civic Education POLITiS. As discussed in the foreword of the book, the author has a personal connection to the struggles of territorial autonomy. South Tyrol is a German-speaking territory of Italy, which was separated from Austria one hundred years ago, creating a significant minority within the state. The territory achieved extended autonomy in legislation and administration at the beginning of the 1970s. Thomas Benedikter was born into these unique circumstances and has since dedicated his life to the research of different autonomy practices around the globe and visited 20 of the currently existing 60 autonomous units worldwide, leading to the writing of this book.

Why "100 years of modern territorial autonomy"? In 1921 the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands were granted wide-spread self-government by

* History BA student, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

Finland. Therefore, at the time of publishing, Åland was celebrating 100 years of its autonomy, marking the beginning of the era of modern territorial autonomy. The author defines territorial autonomy as “being able to govern oneself democratically as a regional community to the greatest possible extent without being a sovereign state or having to break away from the state of affiliation”¹. This kind of special relationship within a democratic constitutional state was unknown before 1921. Benedikter’s book aims to examine three aspects of modern territorial autonomy: the past, present and future. The author provides us with a deep understanding of the history of territorial autonomy around the world, from the approval of the Åland Islands’ autonomy to the present day, while highlighting the struggles that led to where we are now. Benedikter offers a wide-ranging perspective of what autonomy looks like in different parts of the globe and how effective it can realistically be. He inspects how autonomy can be achieved, what forms it can take and what happens when territorial autonomy is no longer satisfactory. In this book, we are given examples of successful, failed, and yet-to-be-achieved autonomy examples to give us a clear understanding of what autonomy can provide, how can it resolve minority conflicts within a state and what happens when autonomy cannot be achieved.

The book is very well structured. It has 20 main chapters apart from the foreword and the introduction, from which 15 pertain to specific autonomy practices while the other five provide a frame for the topic. The book begins with a clarification about what “modern” territorial autonomy means. The book helps us set the definitions straight, which are vital to understanding the topic. It explains what territorial autonomy is, how can autonomy be defined and how we can distinguish between territorial autonomy, federalism, and territories with effective or pseudo autonomy. Provides us with a list of territories around the world that we can call autonomous even if their autonomy practices differ and gives us examples of territories where autonomy has eventually failed.

¹ Benedikter, 2021.

Following the clarifications comes a brief history overview of autonomy from the Åland Islands to Bangsamoro 1920-2020. This is followed by the main part of the text in which the author introduces different minorities' autonomy practices around the world through case studies and interviews. Each chapter introduces the minority in question, their history, their struggle for autonomy, and an overview of their relationship with the territorial state. In some instances, he only introduces a territory through a case study, for example, in Turkish Kurdistan. Other countries are introduced solely through discussion like India, and some are a mix of the two, for example, South Tyrol. Every interview and study begin with a brief introduction about the territory or the interviewee in question. The interviews were conducted with prominent members of certain minority communities, university professors, politicians, minority council members and representatives. Among the interviewees are Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the Parliament of East Belgium, Prof. Eduardo Ruiz Vieyetz from the University of Deusto, Lóránt Vincze, President of the Federal Union of European Nationalities FUEN and Member of the European Parliament, and many more notable public figures. All interviews follow a clear structure that supports our better understanding of each minority's situation and the territory's struggle for autonomy. The questions all revolve around whether effective territorial autonomy has been or could be achieved, the relationship between the territorial state and the autonomous region, deficiencies in rights and self-government, the demands of the minority communities and the issues they must face in order to achieve a peaceful co-existence with the majority in the selected countries. The discussions aim to determine how certain minority rights function within a given state, how they were achieved, and what happens when the received autonomy is not satisfactory anymore.

These chapters are followed by a more general discussion about European territorial autonomy, with Lóránt Vincze examining the current situation on the continent, the struggles and possibilities of autonomy for European minorities. The discussion is completed by summarising the point of territorial autonomy, how it can be successful,

and what can be expected in the future. The author establishes that modern territorial autonomy has been around for 100 years and has since spread worldwide, creating different practices for minority protection and self-governance. In some countries, this autonomy has been reformed repeatedly, while in other times, it failed completely. For some communities, territorial autonomy is still negotiated and yet to be reached. He therefore concludes that autonomy has not yet reached its full conflict resolution potential. In this last chapter, the author attempts to draw overall conclusions about the evolution of territorial autonomy and its importance and theorises about the future of it. Benedikter views territorial autonomy as a way to further extend democracy, bring it closer to the citizens while creating better opportunities for state improvement, help resolve international conflicts and prevent border changes and ethnic conflicts.

The book is mainly focused on discussions. The questions are not uniform, they are customised to the country, minority, the situation, and the interviewee, therefore allowing the interview subjects to present their own personal reality. The readers are not only faced with the issues of a certain minority but are also met with concrete members of those societies experiencing the daily autonomy struggles. This way of humanising the issues can bring the readers closer to the issues at hand since it provides a different, less abstract perspective. However, personal experiences are not always objective, therefore additional reading might be needed in order to gain a clear perspective. *100 Years of Modern Territorial Autonomy* is a well-constructed book with easy-to-follow structure, intriguing questions, and clear language. Benedikter's writing can be understood even without preliminary knowledge. It does not necessarily require a deep understanding of minority law or the history of territorial autonomy. While the book is very well detailed and comprehensive, due to its wide-ranging topics it has its own limits concerning its depth. This, on the other hand, makes it a perfect overview of territorial autonomy and can make it a great starting point for someone just getting into the topic or trying to expand their knowledge to other regions of the world. The introductory texts in the beginning are very useful for establishing the

basics for the reader. By providing a clear context of the subject, the definitions and the significance of the topic, the questions discussed in the book become easy to follow, even for non-professionals. The book is well-illustrated. It is filled with pictures, maps, tables, and statistics that help the reader visualise and organise the information.

For the Hungarian audience, the most intriguing chapter might be the question of Szeklers. At the very beginning of the chapter, we can see a map of the territory proposed by SNC for an autonomous Szeklerland. Under the map is a brief text about the “Day of Szekler Freedom”, celebrated on March 10 each year, informing readers about the history, characteristics, goal, relevance, and reception of this event. It is followed by the introduction of Szeklers and Szeklerland. Benedikter talks about the historical background of the minority and the territory from the Middle Ages when they were the former border guards of the Kingdom of Hungary. The author talks about the development of the community as a unified minority, their separation in the 20th century, the Hungarian Autonomous Region during communist times, and their situation in present-day Romania. The chapter discusses the minority’s struggle for autonomy after the fall of communism in 1989 and presents us with the propositions and ideas of the minority aspiring for autonomy and how realistic these visions are. After the introduction comes the interview with Balázs Izsák, President of the Szekler National Council. During the interview, they discuss the previous autonomy of the territory and what that entailed. Then they talk about the current situation in Romania and the struggles Szeklers face within the state. Izsák mentions how their language rights are restricted and how the government is constantly trying to ban their right to use the Szekler flag and symbols. They discuss what autonomy propositions were made by the SNC and how these were received by Romanians. The author and Izsák look through alternatives, and examples of other autonomies that could be followed, for example, South Tyrol, Catalonia, or the Basque Country. The interview talks about what steps should be made in order to achieve territorial autonomy, including uniting the three counties that make up Szeklerland (namely Kovászna, Hargita and Maros counties). Izsák

talks about how they are in continuous discussions with the mayors of the region and what possible options they see when it comes to convincing Romanians. While the tone of the interview is often gloomy due to previous failures, Balázs Izsák and the SNC do not seem to give up the fight anytime soon.

Benedikter's book is not just about history. It is about our present as well. Minority issues and struggles are still relevant topics of discussion. Many minorities fight daily to preserve their identity, language, and culture within a hostile state. Some communities are fighting for more extended rights in legislation or self-government, others can no longer be satisfied with autonomy, and some are still struggling to gain basic minority rights. The topic is especially important for Hungarians. Since the Trianon peace treaty, a significant number of Hungarians have lived in neighbouring countries as minorities. These countries, fearing border revisions, continuously roll back on minority protection. Hungarians have individual rights but are constantly struggling to gain collective rights and territorial autonomy. As the interview with Balázs Izsák also shows, the Szeklers as a community are oppressed in Romania.² The Romanian government has been refusing to grant territorial autonomy for the Szeklers, claiming that it would undermine the sovereignty, territorial and national unity of the country.³ From the book, it becomes apparent that Romania is not the only neighbouring state where Hungarian minority rights are not satisfactory. In Ukraine, minority language rights have been at the centre of attention for years now as education in the mother tongue is constantly pushed back.⁴

These issues affect the external affairs of European countries. Since Wilson's 14 points and the peace treaties following World War I, the question of minorities is not solely an internal issue. Today, EU member states, especially Hungary, are attempting to utilise international law and institutions in service of national minorities. One of the main forums for this is the European Citizens' Initiative.

² Benedikter, Thomas: Hungarians struggle for autonomy: the Szeklerland in Romania. In: *Ibid*, 137-156.

³ See: Dabis 2022, 45-80.

⁴ See: Cserniko 2019, 27-40.

If a European Citizens' Initiative reaches 1 million signatures and meets the requirements, the European Commission will discuss what actions to take and whether to propose new laws based on the Initiative. However, so far, this has not reached the expected outcome as Initiatives focusing on minority rights have yet not passed the Commission. These Initiatives have been rejected and attacked by several states with significant minorities, such as Romania. The latest one of these attempts was the Minority SafePack.⁵ Benedikter's book also reflects on the importance of international organisations and their part in minority protection in the interview with Lóránt Vincze, President of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) and Member of the European Parliament.

Thomas Benedikter's book is an excellent instrument to help readers become better informed and more knowledgeable on a serious and relevant issue. The subjects discussed in this book can help us compare different approaches to territorial autonomy around the world in order to learn and further develop these experiences. Even though good autonomy practices in other parts of the world cannot be completely implemented in all minority regions, they can still give us a new perspective when approaching the question of minority rights.

⁵ See: Tárnok 2023.

Bibliography

- Benedikter, Thomas: *100 Years of Modern Territorial Autonomy – Autonomy Around the World: Background, Assessments, Experiences*. Zürich: LIT. 2021.
- Cserniko, István: Az ukrajnai oktatáspolitikai a nyelvi asszimiláció szolgálatában. In: *Korunk* 2019/2, 27-40.
- Dabis, Attila: Hatékony részvétel kontra szuverenitás: A regionális hatalommegosztásra vonatkozó romániai toposzok értelmezése. In: *Kisebbségvédelem* 6(2022), 45-80.
- Tárnok, Balázs: *Mire elég egymillió aláírás?* Budapest: Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó. 2023.