

ҚАЗАҚСТАН РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫ ҒЫЛЫМ ЖӘНЕ ЖОҒАРЫ БІЛІМ МИНИСТРЛІГІ

«Л.Н. ГУМИЛЕВ АТЫНДАҒЫ ЕУРАЗИЯ ҰЛТТЫҚ УНИВЕРСИТЕТІ» КЕАҚ

**Студенттер мен жас ғалымдардың
«GYLYM JÁNE BILIM - 2023»
XVIII Халықаралық ғылыми конференциясының
БАЯНДАМАЛАР ЖИНАҒЫ**

**СБОРНИК МАТЕРИАЛОВ
XVIII Международной научной конференции
студентов и молодых ученых
«GYLYM JÁNE BILIM - 2023»**

**PROCEEDINGS
of the XVIII International Scientific Conference
for students and young scholars
«GYLYM JÁNE BILIM - 2023»**

**2023
Астана**

УДК 001+37
ББК 72+74
G99

«GYLYM JÁNE BILIM – 2023» студенттер мен жас ғалымдардың XVIII Халықаралық ғылыми конференциясы = XVIII Международная научная конференция студентов и молодых ученых «GYLYM JÁNE BILIM – 2023» = The XVIII International Scientific Conference for students and young scholars «GYLYM JÁNE BILIM – 2023». – Астана: – 6865 б. - қазақша, орысша, ағылшынша.

ISBN 978-601-337-871-8

Жинаққа студенттердің, магистранттардың, докторанттардың және жас ғалымдардың жаратылыстану-техникалық және гуманитарлық ғылымдардың өзекті мәселелері бойынша баяндамалары енгізілген.

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УДК 001+37
ББК 72+74

ISBN 978-601-337-871-8

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ұлттық университеті, 2023**

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UDC 327.57

THE ROLE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY VIOLENT CONFLICT

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Abstract. While some scholars posit that ethnic identity is not to be blamed for ethnic conflict and that it is a mistake to categorise civil war as an ethnic conflict just because ethnic groups are involved, others argue that cooperation between ethnic groups is fragile and ethnic differences lead to opposition. From primordialist perspective, ethnic identity is a given, and differences in ethnic identities lead to conflicts. However, constructivist approach contends that ethnic identity on its own plays no role in conflicts. Yet if a high-conflict identity is constructed by playing on fear, through political institutions and with the aim to achieve goals, then it can become politicised and easily involved in conflicts.

Keywords: ethnic conflict, regional security, ethnic identity, primordialism, constructivism, insecurity, violent conflict

Introduction

The end of the Cold War era has not brought so much-needed peace, instead, violent conflicts started to take place in different parts of the world. Analysis of conflict and its causes has become of great salience. According to Harff and Gurr [1: 1] ethnic conflicts are the most devastating as they cause more victims and suffering than other conflicts. Moreover, ethnic conflicts contribute negatively to the rise of forced migration with millions of international refugees desperate to find a safer place. However, thoughts about ethnic conflicts beg a question: Is it an ethnic identity that compels people to clash or something else? In order to understand what causes conflict it is necessary to define it.

There are many types of conflict with various ranges of scale, however, the definition proposed by Mitchell [2: 17] that conflict is a case where actors have mutually exclusive

objectives, comes as a standard. Thus, each side of the conflict considers their interests incompatible, so any attempts to realise their goals would lead to a conflict. Coser [3: 8] has a slightly different definition, positing that conflict can be characterised as a struggle over benefits with the objective 'to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals'.

Some scholars analysing conflict underline the significance of attitudes. Thus, parties in conflict can have rational or emotional attitudes. Rational choice theory explains conflict as an attempt to maximise benefits. Social identity theory focuses on individual perception of the conflict. Thereby, scholars of the social identity theory posit that actors due to the discrepancies in their identities have different needs and cognitive imperatives [4: 6].

According to Jeong [5: 17] identity can be one of the main reasons that might trigger conflict. Following this logic, multinational states might be torn by enduring ethnic conflicts. Nonetheless, there are some countries where different identity-based groups can coexist peacefully. For a better understanding of identity and its influence on conflicts, it is essential to delineate the concept of identity.

The definition of ethnic identity is still a challenging and arguable topic. While Erikson [6: 13] focuses on identity analysis through a psychosocial lens complemented by historical processes, Rosenberg [7: 9] applies the theory of the self-concept, suggesting that various social categories, such as age, sex, race, nationality, religion, and many others compose social identity. Thus, most scholars acknowledge that determination of one's ethnic identity is influenced by shared origins where ethnicity is a 'subjective belief in their common descent' [8: 389] although such premise is debatable for people with mixed origins. Thus, division into ethnic groups has a more social character where people are united by real or imagined past. Their shared history makes a certain group unique and different from others. Hutchinson and Smith [9: 6] argue that any ethnic group embraces six principal characteristics, such as a name distinguishing the essence of the group, a myth of shared origin, collective historical remembrances, elements of communal culture, a connection with the motherland and a sense of unity.

Theories of ethnic conflict

So, if people can be divided into groups according to their ethnic identity, what makes those groups struggle? There are numerous theories dedicated to ethnic conflict, all of them showing the conflict from different angles.

The security dilemma scholars posit that ethnic groups get involved in conflicts if they believe that their existence is threatened [10: 27]. However, Crawford argues that ethnic identity can be under threat in times when central authority is weak and competition for power between ethnic groups might occur [11: 13-14]. For him, the institutionalist approach is a better explanation for this problem. Collective fears for the future give rise to insecurity and result in cultural conflict while political actors and ethnic activists might play on the fears of ethnic groups and thus provoke violence. However, explanations of ethnic conflict with referral to elite manipulation are more instrumentalist style.

North [12: 201-202] argues about the salience of political institutions in strengthening social order, increasing society's prosperity and well-being thus restraining human behaviour. Yet, if institutions grant advantages to some ethnic groups while discriminating against others thus politicising ethnic identity it results in cultural conflict [13: 198; 14: 262].

Instrumentalists posit that ethnic identity is a façade hiding rational calculations of political elites and their interest in ethnicity emerges with competition for wealth or power. Thus Lipschutz [15: 55] argues that 'ethnicity is the result of projects designed to capture state power and control',

that is when identity is politicised in order through mobilisation of ethnic groups to claim ‘the state of one’s own’.

With respect to the above-mentioned approaches, the following article asserts that constructivism has more elaborate explanations of ethnic identity and the ways it is used to provoke conflicts. Thus, Lustick [16: 2] argues that constructivism sets up possibilities ‘for complementary application of different approaches to the study’ and can improve some flaws of instrumentalism. Instrumentalism in many ways is a variation of constructivism as their approaches are akin. Therefore, my argument that ethnic identity is not the main culprit in contemporary conflicts will rest on constructivism.

Primordialist and constructivist debate

Constructivism and primordialism are two main competing theories applied by scholars with the aim to analyse the nexus between violent conflict and ethnic identity. The source and dynamics of ethnicity are the main issues of dispute between the two approaches.

For primordialists ethnicity is something they are born with, shared language, traditions and history make people feel a deep attachment to their group [17: 172]. Ethnic groups are regarded to have emotional bonds that are of great salience to them. Through presumed blood ties, area of living, religion, customs, and language they get the feeling of kinship which makes people become bound to certain groups. Thus, ethnicity is seen as a given, people inherit their fixed identity naturally. Members of ethnic groups have a set of characteristics that make them different from others. Therefore, loyalty to their own group at the same time makes people hostile to other groups with whom they do not share any similarities. According to primordialists, parties of different ethnicity have an incompatible set of values and they are full of hatred for each other. Moreover, as people from different cultural groups are more prone to conflicts, politics of ethnicity would supersede the local one, thereby, countries would be cooperating not due to rational interests but according to their cultural bonds [18: 28; 19: 22; 20: 20]. Yet, Ignatieff (21: 35) argues that ‘tribal hatreds and ancient enmities’ are unacceptable explanations of ethnic conflict.

Although primordialists claim that it is reasonable to see ethnic identity as a fixed and stable notion that is hard to reconstruct, from a constructivist view, ethnic identity is fluid. It is not fixed so it can change over time. Frameworks of interpretation influence identity, thus, constructing, and reconstructing ethnicity (22: 132-133). Constructivists challenge the idea that ethnicity is something biological, natural, and primordial. Moreover, some primordialists assert that ethnic identity is socially constructed. According to Van den Berghe (23: 256) ethnicity is a kinship of a group with the same biological descent, yet it is flexible, that is when external factors shape ethnic identity. In response to various circumstances, groups separate or merge. During construction and reconstruction processes some identities become integrated and eventually lost, while other identities remain. Such variations in ethnic identity are possible due to the fact that people are intelligent organisms and are able to manipulate in order to adapt to different conditions.

Primordialist approach gives no clarification at what moment people who are so much alike and managed to live peacefully become enemies. However, if minor differences between them are highlighted, it artificially distances people. Political entrepreneurs emphasise on glorious past of a cultural group with distinct ethnic, territorial, or religious aspects thus dividing the nation into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Since interaction between groups constructs their relationship, the activation of one ethnic group triggers the activeness of the other. If official statesmen provide security and equal conditions for both groups, then competition takes non-violent forms. Yet if ethnic group leaders have some more material interests rather than narcissistic contests, they can play on old grievances, accentuate differences between groups and result in conflict.

According to Fearon and Laitin (24: 874) masses might follow political entrepreneurs who construct conflicting ethnic identities seeking to gain their own interests, such as robbery, personal revenge, or land seizure. So, it is not only elites that construct antagonistic identities in order to gain political power or achieve material objectives. Therefore, as elites, the mass public can make rational choices and strategically plan conflict by playing on the 'ethnic card'. However, there is another constructivist explanation of ethnic conflicts focusing on discursive logic. In this thesis individuals through ideational discourses of ethnicity construct identities prone to violence. The narratives about mythological, legendary heroes, or former glory might construct specific patterns of behaviour which get activated in stressful times. Consequently, antagonistic ethnic identity is constructed to serve material interests. Opportunists can use ethnicity as a symbol to mobilise groups, however, identity serves only as means but not ends.

Conclusion

To bring the argument together, when primordialists make assumptions that conflicts are grounded in ethnic identity, they give no clear answer to groups' previous inactivity. What makes collective memories of erstwhile grievances stay passive for a long time but then explode becoming the trigger of violent behaviour? Conflicts take place due to political manipulations rather than ancient hostility, cultural incompatibilities, or the destructive nature of collective memories. The relative unpopularity of primordialism theory is probably due to the fact that the interpretation of ethnic conflict as 'ancient hatreds' and ethnic identity as a rigid concept is heavily criticised by constructivists. Instead, constructivists believe that ethnic groups can be involved in conflicts that are non-ethnic. The intensity of feeling about ethnicity is changing and can be manipulated by elites. Therefore, intolerant ethnic identity is constructed by socio-political conditions but is not a natural primordial phenomenon.

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UDC 656

THE ISSUES OF UNREGULATED ARMS TRAFFICKING IN THE WORLD

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Every day thousands of people are killed, injured or forced from their homes because of armed conflicts and gun violence. Twelve billion rounds of ammunition are produced in the world each year. That's almost enough to kill all the people in the world twice over. For five years now, the International Arms Trade Treaty has been in place, establishing strict rules to regulate the international arms trade, but the global arms trade market still thrives and continues to engage in gross human rights abuses. This is because major arms exporters like China, Russia and the United States have not ratified the treaty. But even countries that have ratified it do not comply with the