Thematic Panel: **International Aspects**

Rapporteur: Dr Gyula Csurgai[[1]](#footnote-1)

This Panel discussed the international aspects affecting the question of autonomy. After the introduction by Dr Gyula Csurgai, Professor Anne Mandeville and Professor Rose-Marie Antoine presented their views on the theme of the panel. A discussion followed the presentations.

Dr **Gyula Csurgai** in his introduction stated that the fragmentation processes resulting from secessionist conflicts can seriously challenge the stability of states in the contemporary international system. The current European situation illustrates this phenomenon: the evolution of the Catalonia situation can have considerable impact on autonomies and separatist movements in Europe and it may influence some political situations even outside of Europe. Dr Csurgai emphasized that the “absolutist” interpretation of the concepts of self-determination and sovereignty should be re-considered. He stated that the implementation of various types of autonomies can satisfy two main objectives: respect the territorial integrity of a given state and accommodate the diversity of collective identities of the communities of this state.

According to Dr Csurgai, the external *geopolitical* factors should be taken into consideration in the context of autonomies due to the fact that the geopolitical motivations of the neighbouring states and other states in the region combined with the power rivalries of extra regional powers tend to influence autonomy situations. Dr Csurgai then highlighted the *geoeconomic* dimension, stating that successful insertion of a part of a country in the globalized economy may result in economic prosperity, which in turn can make a more autonomous position increasingly attractive for such a region. According to Dr Csurgai, the examples of South Tyrol (in Italy) and Ticino (in Switzerland), among others, illustrate such development. Csurgai also stated that small units such as autonomous regions may integrate in an efficient way into larger geoeconomic units, which highlights the importance of regional integration – as the European integration illustrates.

Professor **Anne Mandeville** stated that the study of the international aspects of autonomies requires the integration of three different levels of analysis that go beyond the local and societal dimension: the state, the regional sub-system, and the international system. According to Dr Mandeville, examining a given conflict with its different factors, actors and forces and their interactions requires an analysis at these three levels.

Professor Mandeville highlighted the fact that the international system, which is fundamentally anarchic, is characterized by tension between the principle of self-determination and the principle of sovereignty of nation states. The principle of self-determination, according to Dr Mandeville, can potentially lead to disorder in the international system and therefore it should be limited. She argued that although self-determination is recognized in the international system, this principle should not always be confounded with the absolute right to gain independent statehood in order prevent further destabilization of the current international system.

Dr Mandeville further stated that the international system should be based on sovereign nation states and within the framework of these nation states the different autonomies can be considered as an important element of conflict resolution and democratic recognition of minorities. Professor Mandeville concluded that the Moroccan initiative of autonomy for the Sahara Region is an important conflict resolution tool and, moreover, the initiative being launched by the Moroccan state, consequently demonstrates the importance of the state-based international system.

Professor **Rose-Marie Antoine** presented the international aspects of autonomies in the Caribbean region, and focused on three ‘twin island’ countries with autonomous regions: Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, and St Kitts and Nevis. She argued that the diversity of the autonomous regions is perceived as a form of strength and that autonomy survives as an idea due to the fact that small states may have difficulties to function on their own in the Caribbean region. Dr Rose-Marie Antoine discussed three main issues impacting the autonomies of small states:

1. The ability to cope with external threats such as natural disasters and climate change;
2. The ability to control not only natural resources but also key service sectors, such as transport, and
3. The question of a uniform constitution.

Professor Antoine highlighted that recent devastating hurricanes exacerbated the autonomy relationship between Antigua and Barbuda as the central government wished to build high-rise hotels while the population of Barbuda resisted this plan. According to Dr Antoine, this situation illustrates that the management of external aid can be an issue, particularly after natural disasters, when environmental, philosophical and legal questions can arise between the central government and an autonomous region about development and land use.

Professor Rose-Marie Antoine stressed the importance of controlling not only natural resources but also the management of related sectors such as transport. She illustrated this with the example of a recent breakdown of transport sector that hit the economy of Tobago, which has no control over its own transport sector. Finally, Professor Antoine briefly discussed the provision of a clause that gives Tobago more control over the Constitution that may lead to situations to pass laws that may infringe upon human rights. In this context, she emphasized the problem of consistency and uniformity in case of an autonomous region may deviate from international human rights norms as evident in the constitution of a unitary state.

A discussion session followed the presentations. Different viewpoints were expressed as to what extent the current international system actually is still a nation-state based system or not. The example of Azores and Madeira was mentioned. The political status of these two Portuguese autonomous regions allows them to negotiate directly with other actors in the international system. For instance, Azores and Madeira negotiated with the European Union (EU) during the process of Portuguese accession to the EU. Finally, the issue of possible manipulations of the self-determination principle by external actors seeking to achieve geopolitical objectives was briefly discussed. The United States support to the secession and independence of Kosovo was mentioned in this context.

Final conclusions:

* Contrary to secessionism and the multiplication of new states, the implementation of autonomies can be a factor of stabilization in the current international system.
* The experiences of autonomies in the Caribbean region can provide useful insights for the implementation of other autonomies including the Moroccan Initiative for the autonomy of the Sahara Region.
* International factors can exercise an important influence on autonomies.

Recommendation**:** a specific international academic conference could be organized in the future on the international aspects of autonomies.

1. Academic Director, School for International Training (SIT), Geneva. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)