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Economic Development and Ethnic Conflicts: Evidence from Xinjiang, PR China**

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War the number of intra-state conflicts has increased, especially those who have been ethnically motivated. The new wave of ethno-political movements have re-emerged in almost all parts of the world since the nineties. As ethno-national conflicts have become one of the most common forms of the use of violence posing a threat to the international order they also have become of increasing significance and have drawn the attention of many scholars who have sought to explain the reasons for their outbreak. Among these explanations, economic factors as potential cause of ethnic conflict are gaining a significant attention. Since China was not an exception to this trend, bearing in mind the existence of ethnic conflicts on its territory, it was important to look at what are the factors of ethnic conflict in the People's Republic of China. Based on that, the aim of this paper is to describe, on the case of Xinjiang, the impact of economic factors, more precise economic development, on ethnic relations in China. The main question is whether the Chinese state has managed to solve problems in ethnic relations with economic development as intended or has further deepened the existing social and ethnic cleavages. We argue that the opposite happened of what the state planned - economic development which is carried out by the central authorities is stated as one of the reasons for ethnic conflict in these region so it is placed in the context of ethnic discrimination by the part of the Uyghur community.

Key words: Economic Development, Ethnic Conflict, Xinjiang, PR China

1. Introduction

Conflicts between different ethnic groups, both non-violent and those who manifest themselves through the widespread use of violence, have been a major subject of research in many scientific disciplines for a long time. As the form of interethnic relations, violent and non-violent conflicts are one of the very important areas of scientific interest of political science, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines and scientific fields. Within these scientific disciplines, new arguments and explanations are being developed that deal with the causes of ethnic conflicts as well as the ways of preventing them.

There are a large number of possible explanations why different ethnic groups come into conflict. For example, there are the explanations that "ancient hatreds" between groups produce conflict, that ethnic conflict is a product of a clash of different cultures, that the process of modernization is the cause of ethnic conflicts, that "security dilemma" can cause ethnic conflict and many others.¹ There are also explanations according to which the design

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of political institutions is an important factor for the existence or non-existence of conflicts in a multiethnic society. Different ways of organizing key political institutions such as, for example, unitary or federal arrangement of the state structure, a majority or proportional electoral system, and similar factors are important in explaining the emergence of ethnic conflicts.

Usually there are four groups of factors that can be identified in the literature dealing with internal conflicts: structural factors ("weak" states, internal security problems, geographical distribution of ethnic groups), political (discriminatory political institutions and others), cultural factors (patterns of cultural discrimination and others) and economic / social factors (discriminatory economic systems, modernization).² All these different explanations can be divided into two groups, those that derive from primordial argumentation and the (structural) which are based on socio-political argumentation.

When it comes to the relation between economic growth and ethnic conflict most research shows that economic growth and wealth reduces the likelihood of conflict between different ethnic groups within society.³ Many argue since global wealth is rising we should expect to see a fall in the amount of conflict in the world.⁴ We are witnessing that even though some countries have become much richer, the number of conflicts, especially ethnic ones, has grown. Generally speaking, the rise of global economic development has not led to a decline in number of conflicts.

The question is whether it is possible that economic growth can be harmful to ethnic relations and to encourage ethnic conflicts and how?

There are a lot of arguments why economic development may drive people to come into conflict. For example, economic development may produce a radical re-organization of political and economic structures that may in turn provide opportunities for conflict. Another argument is that limited resources which are necessary for economic development may create the need of one ethnic group to have more direct control over them in order to maintain economic growth and because of that the group can come into conflict with other groups who want the same.⁵ This is very important because the socio-economic differences may coincide with ethnic differences and social class stratification may overlaps with ethnic stratification. The cause of conflict between ethnic groups can be the unequal benefits from economic development that these groups are appropriating, which further gives the group that benefited more an advantage in the competition for better positions in society.

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1 Donald L. Horowitz, "Structure and Strategy in Ethnic Conflict", *Paper prepared for the Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics*, 1998, pp. 5-13, Available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DEC/Resources/84797-1251813753820/6415739-1251813951236/horowitz.pdf> (accessed on 10/10/2018)

2 Michael E. Brown (Ed.), *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*, MIT Press, 1996, p.14.

3 Macartan Humphreys, *Economics and Violent Conflict*, UNICEF, 2003, p. 2, Available at: https://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Economics_and_Violent_Conflict.pdf (accessed on 12/10/2018)

4 Ibid, p. 3.

5 Patrick Barron, "How do conflicts and economic growth go together in Asia?", *Deutsche Welle*, 2014, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/1Crlc> (accessed on 12/10/2018)

Based on that, the aim of this paper is to analyze, on the case of Xinjiang, the impact of economic development on ethnic conflicts in China. The basic research question of this paper is whether the economic development of the region has influenced the region to be more peaceful or produced additional causes for the minority ethnic groups' grievance?

2. Consequences of economic development on ethnic relations in Xinjiang

The People's Republic of China is a multiethnic country with 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities, which according to the official ethnic policy of the Chinese authorities together make a unified Chinese nation. The Chinese central government is striving to show that 55 ethnic groups in China live in harmony with the dominant Han Chinese majority. However, the complexity of many problems in ethnic relations between different ethnic minorities pose a serious threat to Chinese national unity. China has been facing increasing demand for greater autonomy or independence for the past several decades in Xinjiang. The roots of this lie deeply in the long history of this area but only in the past twenty years the riots in Xinjiang are intensifying and Uyghur national feelings are strengthening. Referring to differences in culture, religion, language and claiming that the political structure of the Chinese state prevents the practice of basic elements of the Uyghur identity, a part of the Uyghur community organizes separatist and terrorist groups in order to achieve their national goals.⁶

The political and economic reforms that took place in China after 1949, also took place in Xinjiang as an integral part of the Chinese state. The most important consequence of the new Chinese policy in this area was the change of traditional socio-economic and political structure, as well as the demolition of traditional local political and religious authorities. Also, an important feature of these changes was the relocation of the center of economic and political power from Kashgar, where traditionally this power was concentrated, to Urumqi. In this part of its territory the People's Republic of China faces deep ethnic, religious, cultural, socio-economic and other social divisions between the two ethnic groups (Uyghurs and Han Chinese). The first level of cleavage is on the center (Beijing, Urumqi – Han Chinese) - periphery (Kashgar - Uyghurs) line, based on a split over the way of internal organization of the state institutions. This cleavage is also manifested through the confrontation such as: unitarists (Han Chinese) – autonomists/independentists (Uyghurs). The second level of social cleavage is based on an ideological and cultural split and on different ideas of socio-cultural identities. On this part of its territory, Chinese society is divided along lines: the dominant Han culture – Uyghur subculture, modernists (Han Chinese) – traditionalists (Uyghurs), secularists (Han Chinese) and believers (Uyghurs – Islam). The third level is determined by a socio-economic cleavage based on a split between those who advocate for more market allocation of resources (Uyghurs) and those who advocate for state redistribution (Han Chinese).⁷

Prior to the founding of Peoples Republic of China, Xinjiang was an economically underde-

⁶ From the beginning of the nineties conflicts are intensifying. The first incident that pushed the Xinjiang region into instability was the uprising in the city of Baren in April 1990. There was a mass uprising, calling for jihad and the establishment of the Republic of East Turkestan. One of the biggest incidents in Xinjiang occurred in 2009 in Urumqi. During this escalation of violence, 197 people were killed, while more than 1,600 were injured. In the period 2013-2016 there was another wave of Uyghur terrorist activities.

⁷ Драган Траиловић, „Социјални расцепи и захтеви за сецесијом у НР Кини: Случај Синђанга“, *Политичка ревија*, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, 4/2012, стр. 269.

veloped region. The industry almost did not exist, while the economy rested on traditional agriculture. Since then, especially since the period of “reform and opening up”, the nineties and after year 2000 Xinjiang is experiencing rapid economic development and progress. The Chinese state launches investment programs for the development of its border areas, and in time, Xinjiang has become one of the priority regions. Large investments are allocated for the development of infrastructure, the construction of railways, roads and bridges, as well as for the initiation of industrial production and the development of services and tourism. A significant part of the investments went to the construction of oil pipelines and gas pipelines.

The economy of Xinjiang began to develop since the 1990s when Central Asian republics gained independence and when cross-border trade with them started, but the real economic development of the region began in year 2000 when the Chinese state launched the “Great Western Development Strategy” or the “Open Up the West Program” in order to accelerate economic development and to attract direct investment to this region. In response to the deadliest riots in the capital of Xinjiang in July 2009, the Chinese Communist Party leadership convened the First Xinjiang Work Forum in Beijing in May 2010 to assess and amend the center’s economic strategy toward the Uyghur region. The second Xinjiang Work Forum was held in 2014, within a week of a deadly explosion in Urumqi that killed 31 people and injured 94.⁸ After this Forum, the economic development remains a top priority as the main principle of the central government’s ethnic policy.

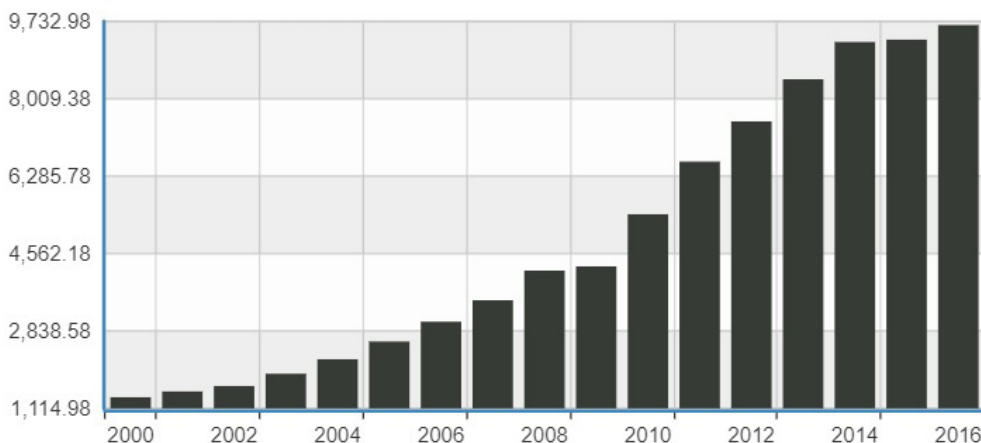
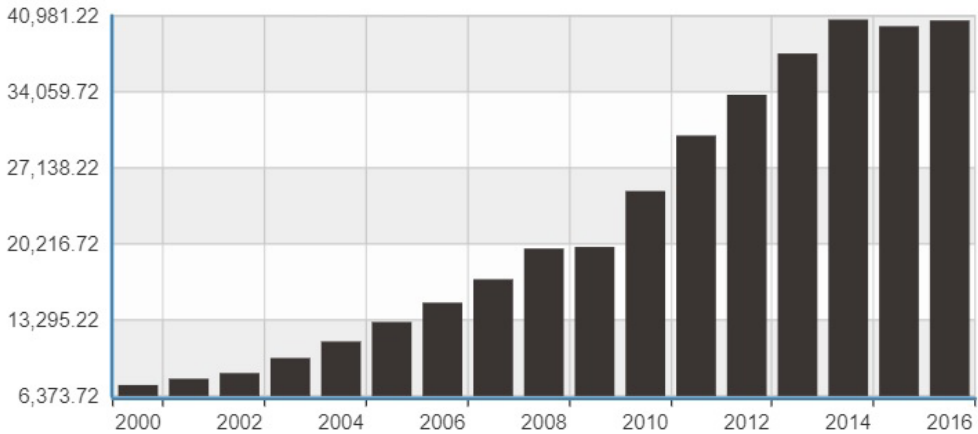


Figure 1. Regional Gross Product (100 million yuan)

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, *National Data*, Available at: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103> (accessed on 15/10/2018)

8 Debasish Chaudhuri, “Second Xinjiang Work Forum: Old Policies in New Language”, *Analysis*, No. 17, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, 2014, pp. 1-5.

Figure 2. Per Capita Regional Gross Product (yuan/person)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, *National Data*, Available at: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103> (accessed on 15/10/2018)

Recognizing that these region is economically underdeveloped and considering that poverty and poor living conditions are the biggest problem and therefore the cause of dissatisfaction of ethnic minorities, the Chinese state started the rounds of investments in agriculture, industrial production, and infrastructure. However, economic development and modernization did not produce the desired outcomes for the minorities. The Chinese state considered that the economic development of Western regions would automatically contribute to the reduction of economic differences between ethnic minorities and thus to the reduction of conflict. In spite of that, the disaffection of minority ethnic groups, especially Uyghurs, continues to exist in the region, as well as sporadic conflicts and outbreaks of violence. It just happened the opposite of what the state planned - economic development which is carried out by the Chinese authorities is stated as one of the reasons for ethnic conflict in these region and it is perceived as a threat to traditional economic activities, to the environment, Uyghur culture and other elements of ethnicity, so it is placed in the context of ethnic discrimination.

Members of the Uyghur ethnic group believe that the Chinese state draws natural resources from their territory and in return minority people have no benefit from it. They point out that there is a great disparity between the distribution of economic wealth between Han Chinese and other ethnic groups in favor of Han Chinese.⁹

Han Chinese mostly inhabit areas that are economically more developed as well as areas that are highly industrialized, such as the larger cities, while the Uyghur population is mainly settled in poor and rural areas. In practice Han Chinese are employed in places that are paid more, while Uyghurs are mostly engaged in agriculture and livestock breeding. Developing industries in the region tend to exclude much of the Uyghur population in favor

⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, *End of the Road: One Belt, One Road and the Cumulative Economic Marginalization of the Uyghurs*, 2016, pp. 28-29, Available at: <http://uhrp.org/docs/End-of-the-Road.pdf> (accessed on 15/10/2018)

of Han Chinese. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps employs upwards of 2.7 million people, though Uyghurs make up only seven percent of its workforce.¹⁰

With constraints such as poor Mandarin language skills, which is the official language, and because of the lower level of education, Uyghur people, regardless of the economic development of the region, remain poorer than the Han Chinese.¹¹

By launching a strategy for the development of Western regions, the Chinese state also stimulated inter provincial migrations to the western parts of China. However, the population that migrated to the western provinces, populated by many ethnic groups, was mostly ethnic Han, which significantly influenced the demographic and ethnic structure of these regions, and opened a series of new social and political issues. The influx of the Han people additionally increased competition for political, economic and other positions in these areas. Given that they are a majority nation, and often due to a large number of other factors, Han people has the advantage in competing for better positions in society, better education and better economic status.¹²

Table 1. Percentage of Uyghur and Han population in Xinjiang (1949 and 2010)

| | 1949.* | 2010.** |
|--------|--------|---------|
| Uyghur | ≈ 75% | ≈50% |
| Han | ≈ 5% | ≈40% |

Source: * Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang – China`s Muslim far NorthWest*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2004, p. 75; ** Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh, "Frontier China: Ethnoregional Disparity, Ethnoterritoriality and Peripheral Nationalism" in Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh (ed.), *China: Developmental Model, State- Civil Societal Interplay and Foreign Relations*, Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 2013, p. 522.

Some authors argue that in order to implement developmental policies Chinese state used strong focus on centralizing power and gave an emphasis on creating a dominant national culture and identity.¹³ The official documents of the Chinese authorities highlight the importance of the unity of all ethnic groups for the prevention of conflicts between ethnic groups and for its social stability. According to the *White Paper on National Minorities Policy and Its Practice* in China only such unity can stabilize and harmonize society, facilitate the lives of people and guarantee long-term peace and stability of the country.¹⁴ Supporters of the "second generation" of ethnic policies in China point out that the cornerstone of the "Chinese dream" is the integration of all the people of China into one unified nation.¹⁵ However,

10 2016 Human Rights Situation in East Turkestan, World Uyghur Congress, 2017, p. 22, Available at: http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2017/05/WUC-Human-Rights-in-East-Turkestan-2017.pdf (accessed on 15/10/2018)

11 Ibid, pp. 21-22.

12 Uyghur Human Rights Project, *End of the Road: One Belt, One Road and the Cumulative Economic Marginalization of the Uyghurs*, op.cit, p. 24.

13 Jessica Koch, "Economic Development and Ethnic Separatism in Western China: A New Model of Peripheral Nationalism", Working Paper No.134, Asia Research Centre, Perth, 2006, pp. 13-17.

14 *White Paper on National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China*, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2009, Beijing, available on: http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-09/27/content_18610362.htm (accessed on 25/10/2018)

15 Mark Elliott, "The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate Over a 'Second-Generation' Ethnic Policy", *China Journal*, no. 73, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 195.

the Uyghur people resist Han culture, considering it as materialistic threat to their traditional values, particularly when it comes to religion. According to Uyghur Human Rights Project "Development as it is understood in East Turkestan was an instrument with which to assimilate the Uyghurs and determine loyalty to the center-led vision for the region"¹⁶

Also, there are authors who point out that economic and developmental initiative of the Chinese state was imposed rather than negotiated, and designed to benefit the center rather than the region, and as a result failed to engage the periphery group.¹⁷

James Leibold believes that, while the economic development remains the backbone of ethnic policy, "the new generation of Party leaders understands that money alone will not mollify ethnic and religious tensions..."¹⁸ He points out that party leadership puts emphasis on interethnic fusion now "by calling for the establishment of a mutually embedded social structure and social environment."¹⁹

3. Conclusion

Although the Chinese central authorities managed to develop the region of Xinjiang economically and in any other way, as evidenced by numerous indicators, dissatisfaction of the part of Uyghur population is still ongoing. The economic development of the region, that is evident, has not given the desired outcome when it comes to the position of ethnic minorities. In spite of the preferential policies of the state in relation to ethnic minorities, they remain in a more unfavorable social position than the majority nation.

The region's economic development policy was such that favored modernization, but it was not sensitive to ethnic differences and failed to engage peripheral groups (ethnic minorities). Why is it so? In the case of Xinjiang, it turned out that economic development could not do much because it was opposed by individuals and groups with their own choices and decisions based on different cultural, religious and ethnic values. This has produced conflicts because, in different historical circumstances, these social and cultural patterns differed from those advocated and promoted by the Chinese state. For these reasons, new party leadership puts a strong emphasis on the reduction of ethnic differences as well as on building a shared national identity of Chinese citizens from different ethnic groups.

16 Uyghur Human Rights Project, *End of the Road: One Belt, One Road and the Cumulative Economic Marginalization of the Uyghurs*, op.cit, p. 30.

17 Jessica Koch, "Economic Development and Ethnic Separatism in Western China: A New Model of Peripheral Nationalism", op.cit.

18 James Leibold, "Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of 'Ethnic Mingling'", *China Brief*, Volume XIV, Issue 12, 2014, p. 3.

19 Ibid, p. 5.

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Драган Траиловић

Економски развој и етнички сукоби: случај Синђанга, НР Кина

Апстракт

Од краја хладног рата број унутардржавних сукоба се повећава, посебно број оних који су етнички мотивисани. Од деведесетих година, нови талас етнополитичких покрета поново се појавио у готово свим деловима света. С обзиром да су етнонационални сукоби постали један од најчешћих облика употребе насиља који представља претњу међународном поретку, они постају све значајнији и привлаче пажњу многих научника који покушавају да објасне разлоге за њихово избијање. Међу овим објашњењима, економски фактори као потенцијални узрок етничког сукоба добијају значајну пажњу. С обзиром да Кина није изузетак од овог тренда, имајући у виду постојање етничких сукоба на њеној територији, важно је сагледати и који су то фактори етничких сукоба у њој. На основу тога, циљ овог рада је да на примеру Синђанга опише утицај економских фактора, тачније утицаје економског развоја на етничке односе у Кини. Главно питање је да ли је кинеска држава успела да реши проблеме у етничким односима економским развојем, како је то намеравано, или је тиме додатно продубила постојеће друштвене и етничке расцепа. Аргументујемо да се десило супротно од онога што је држава планирала - економски развој који се спроводи од стране централних власти наводи се као један од разлога за етнички сукоб на овим просторима, тако да је стављен у контекст етничке дискриминације од дела ујгурске заједнице.

Кључне речи: економски развој, етнички сукоби, Синђанг, НР Кина