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THE CONCEPT AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF MINORITY RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the historical evolution of minority protection in the international system, tracing its development from early confessional safeguards to modern rights-based approaches through a comparative analysis of key institutional frameworks. It finds that minority rights protection has advanced unevenly, shaped by shifting political priorities, with the League of Nations representing the first comprehensive attempt to internationalise the issue through administrative and quasi-judicial mechanisms that, despite significant constraints, provided limited but meaningful oversight during the interwar period. In contrast, the United Nations system moved away from collective minority guarantees in favour of universal individual rights, a shift reinforced by Cold War politics and concerns over state sovereignty, resulting in weaker enforceable protections for minority communities. The article concludes that the League's system was neither predetermined to fail nor devoid of lasting influence, as core principles developed in the 1920s continue to inform contemporary debates on autonomy, cultural accommodation, and mass atrocity prevention. Ultimately, the persistence of tensions between sovereignty, self-determination, and group protection explains why international responses remain largely reactive rather than preventive.*

Keywords: *human rights; international law; League of Nations; minority rights; United Nations.*

Introduction: methodology, objectives and limitations

Throughout the history of international relations, the status of minority groups has remained a persistent tension at the intersection of law, diplomacy, and state-building. While modern human rights instruments purport to safeguard the dignity of all individuals, the lived reality of minorities continues to expose structural vulnerabilities within contemporary governance. As ethnic, linguistic, national, and religious communities persist across newly consolidated borders, policymakers are confronted with the dual imperative of maintaining territorial integrity while ensuring equitable protection for groups whose identities diverge from the majority. These complexities render the evolution of minority rights neither linear nor uniform, but profoundly shaped by shifting geopolitical constellations, legal innovation, and the oscillation between multilateral ambition and political restraint.

This article employs the case study method, utilising a multiple-case design and the comparative synthesis technique to analyse the evolution and differences in the fight for minority rights within the structure of the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations (UN). From a theoretical perspective, the chosen topic is important because it refreshes academic knowledge, as the case study effectively links previously known theoretical aspects to a practical approach, with a view to their application. This topic also has practical utility, as the article thoroughly analyses the achievements and limitations of different ways of using public policies to manage minority rights and interethnic tensions. Such an analysis is crucial in the context in which we currently face numerous interethnic conflicts and violations of minority rights around the world. However, it is worth noting that this article also has its own limitations. The academic community has not yet developed generally accepted proposals regarding interethnic public policies, and it is therefore not possible for the article to offer firm recommendations in this regard.

The methodology used also has its own limitations, since the last two decades have been rather barren from an academic point of view for interethnic public policies, which also affects the depth of the case study, considering that its nature is eminently theoretical, with an important historical dimension.

1. A brief history of minority rights up to World War I

There is a long-standing tradition of protecting groups that are different from the majority of a population (Barten, 2015). Across the evolution of international legal practice, there are multiple instances in which agreements have been deliberately formalised through treaty instruments to protect certain groups, representing "paradigmatic instruments recognizing the right of minorities to fair treatment". Although they are more a collection of specific cases than a comprehensive system, there is a certain similarity in terms of the occasions and circumstances that give rise to such treaties, namely the link created between the protecting power and the protected minority, whether it be religious, national, or cultural. A representative example in this regard is the treaties that guarantee the rights of minorities formed by former citizens of the protecting power in the ceded territories, thereby associating minority rights with the cession of territories (Thornberry, 1991, p. 25). An early example of this is the Treaty of Oliva of 1660, whereby Poland ceded Pomerania and Livonia to Sweden, conditional on the guarantee of religious freedoms for the inhabitants of the ceded territories (Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991). Further examples can be found in the Constantinople Convention of 1879 and the Convention of 1881 between the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Greece, respectively.

In the past, there were, of course, examples of minorities being protected without the cession of territory. For example, in 1250, Louis IX of France pledged to protect the Maronites as if they were French in a letter addressed to religious leaders. His promise was renewed in 1649 by Louis XIV in an official communication addressed to the Maronite patriarch and the Maronite nation, and again by Louis XV in 1737 (Thornberry, 1991). These were unilateral acts, but the earliest treaty in this regard seems to be that between the Ottoman Empire, which granted special rights to religious minorities as early as the 16th century, and the Holy Roman Empire in 1615, whereby the Ottomans undertook to respect the rights of Christian minorities. The 1615 treaty was followed by a host of other similar treaties, such as the Treaties of Carlowitz (1699), Koutchouk-Kainardji (1774), and Adrianople (1829) (Barten, 2015; Thornberry, 1991).

The Protestant Reformation also gave rise to treaties protecting Christian minorities within states with a different Christian majority. An early example is the Treaty of Vienna of 1607, signed between the King of Hungary and the Prince of Transylvania, which guaranteed religious freedom for the Protestant minority (Thornberry, 1991). Other examples include the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which came as a confirmation of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991), and the Treaties of Nijmegen (1678), Ryswick (1697), Utrecht (1713), Dresden (1745) and Paris (1763) (Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991). The revolutions in the United States (1765–1791) and France (1789–1799) led to a new era of secularisation of protection treaties (Thornberry, 1991), while the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815 marked both the beginning of a period in which the clauses in treaties protecting minorities became more detailed and a shift in focus toward protecting national minorities rather than religious minorities (Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991).

The practice of safeguarding minority groups by means of treaty provisions persisted throughout the 19th century (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991), with a clear tendency towards the development of multilateral instruments. This approach illustrates the differentiation made between states, as the corresponding obligations were imposed selectively, thereby reflecting the notion of a "second-class citizenship". The focal point of the so-called "minorities question" shifted eastward, coming to be regarded as "a predominantly Central and East European problem" (Thornberry, 1991, p. 30). Confronted with the impending dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the aspirations of Balkan populations for independence, the great powers responded almost reflexively, invoking minority protection as articulated in the Treaties of Westphalia and Vienna. Although this intervention neither halted the fragmentation of the Ottoman state nor prevented the establishment of the Balkan polities, it nevertheless contributed to the erosion of the credibility of the concept of minority rights.

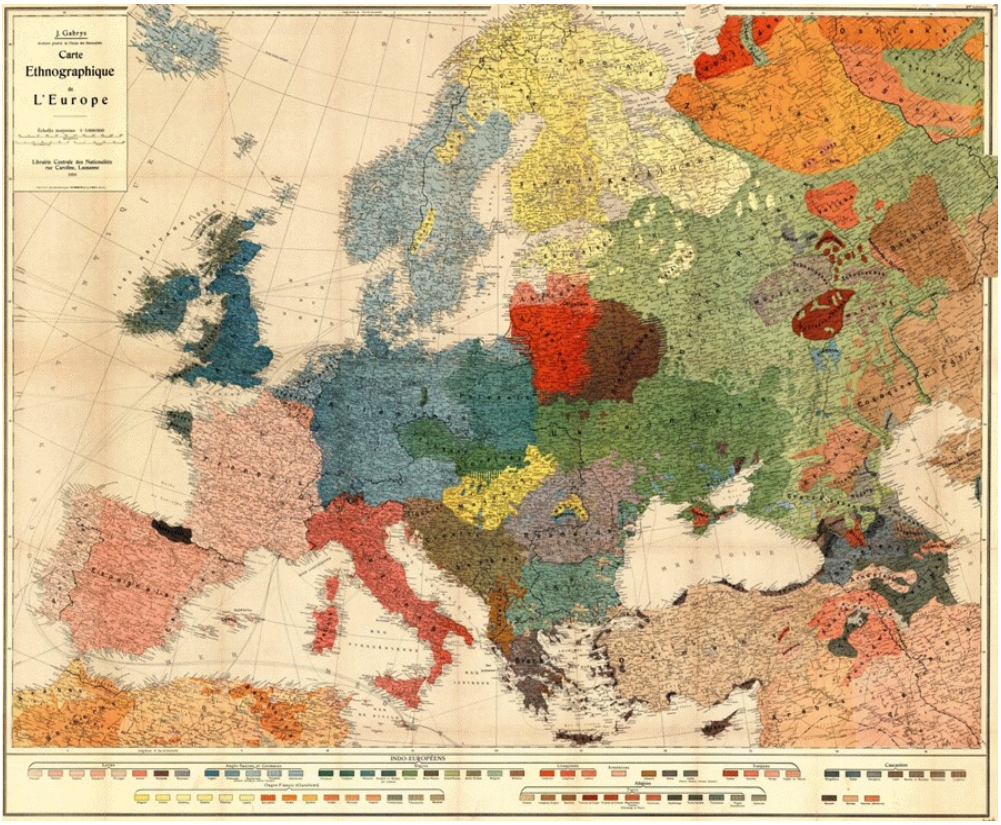
The creation of an autonomous Greek state under the London Protocol of 1830 marked the first instance where the great powers were able to enforce their own understanding of minority rights, encompassing considerations of both

nationality and religious affiliation. The next opportunity came with the end of the Crimean War and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1856, which made the Ottomans' victory conditional on guaranteeing a high degree of autonomy to Moldavia and Wallachia, which became almost independent from the Sultan of Constantinople, a fact confirmed by the Convention of Paris in 1858 (Liebich, 2008). Perhaps the most relevant treaty in this context, however, is the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, which recognised, among other things, the autonomy of Bulgaria and the independence of Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro, all of which were conditional on respect for minority rights (Liebich, 2008; Thornberry, 1991). In contrast, the Treaty of Bucharest of 1913, negotiated exclusively between the Balkan states and enshrining the brief peace between the Balkan Wars and World War I (1914-1918), contained almost no provisions relating to the protection of minority rights (Liebich, 2008).

The protection of minorities other than religious ones began only three decades before the outbreak of World War I (Barten, 2015). The 20th century accepted the continuation of the tradition of protecting certain communities, while simultaneously developing a more ambitious system with universal applicability. Although they have a long history in international law, the primary failure of these treaties has been their implementation, including in the last century, when significant difficulties were encountered in fully implementing all human rights in all states worldwide, despite the successes achieved through regional and bilateral systems (Thornberry, 1991).

2. The League of Nations and the protection of minority rights in the interwar period

The First World War changed both the situation of minorities and the type of minorities that were protected. Whereas until then the tradition of protecting minorities had focused almost exclusively on religious minorities, the Great War shifted the international community's



Ethnic map of Europe, 1918
(Gabrys, J., 1918, Librairie Centrale des Nationalités)

attention to ethnic and national minorities (Barten, 2015; Pentassuglia, 2009). The idea of drafting laws to protect minorities emerged late, towards the end of World War I, when the sudden collapse of the great empires of Central and Eastern Europe took most political decision-makers by surprise. The policy towards minorities associated with the League of Nations, newly established after the peace treaties, was to keep minorities in the territories where they already lived, offering them the protection afforded by international law, rather than relocating them to territories where they would become part of the majority. The League of Nations had come to represent a system that, on the one hand, accepted the nation-state as the norm in international relations and, on the other hand, made considerable efforts to address the problems thus created regarding minorities (Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997). It accepted, and sometimes even encouraged, the creation of collective entities for minorities, whose profiles and political weight were shaped by the annual meetings of the European Congress of Nationalities, which highlighted the problematic situations in which they found themselves (Mazower, 1997).

Nonetheless, the League's role within this framework remained equivocal. It proved challenging to have matters formally brought before the organisation, and even more arduous to navigate the complete Geneva procedure required for their submission to the Council. Although the League of Nations possessed the authority to refer such disputes to the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague, this mechanism was seldom invoked. At the same time, it did everything possible to keep this power within its own remit, blocking proposals to transfer the right to refer cases directly to the Court to minorities (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009). "The League Secretariat did not see itself as a champion of minorities", but rather as a modest interlocutor helping governments fulfil their obligations. Furthermore, the League of Nations was reluctant to sanction notorious offenders, which explains why nothing happened to Yugoslavia despite the repressive behaviour of its gendarmes in Macedonia, or to the Polish government after its "bloody pacification campaign against the Ukrainians in 1930". The intolerance of the Serbs or Poles did not bother the French, who were more interested in the stability of their eastern allies than in the situation of minorities, nor did it bother the British, who were beginning to consider that treaties on minorities "were hindering the process of assimilation".

Nevertheless, despite this indifference shown by the League's leading promoters, certain groups adopted a more involved, almost activist stance. In addition to Jewish groups (Mazower, 1997, pp. 51-52), the Weimar Republic, which had joined the League of Nations in 1926 under the diplomatic leadership of Gustav Stresemann, had begun to assume the role of a guardian of minorities, its obvious interest being directed towards the six million ethnic Germans scattered throughout Eastern Europe, whom it hoped to bring back within its borders, along with the territories in which they lived (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997). While German and Jewish groups were at the forefront of lobbying activities in the European Congress of Nationalities, Stresemann became increasingly involved in reforming the Geneva machinery in order to create a permanent commission for minority rights (Mazower, 1997). His attempts had limited success, primarily because they were suspected of being part of a broader effort to revise the terms imposed at Versailles (Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009). Stresemann's efforts did nothing more than convince German nationalists within the new borders once again that the League of Nations would never adequately protect ethnic Germans outside those borders (Mazower, 1997).

At the same time, the treaties on minorities aroused deep indignation among the countries involved, which considered them humiliating, being especially aggrieved by the absence of a universal framework governing the protection of minority rights. They wondered why they had been singled out when no such obligation had been imposed on Germany or Italy, which persecuted the German-speaking minority in South Tyrol (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009). A statistical argument in this regard is that, of the approximately 35 million ethnic minorities in interwar Europe, only about 8.6 million lived in Western Europe, where they represented about one in 20 of the region's total population, while around 25 million lived in Central and Eastern Europe, representing approximately a quarter of the population of these regions (Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997). Nonetheless, as Mark Mazower brilliantly put it:

"The lack of a universal regime was an embarrassment for the Great Powers. Such an idea had in fact been considered in 1919 in Paris, only to be rejected. As […] fundamental issues of state sovereignty were at stake. […] Thus the Great Powers were happy to interfere in the internal affairs of 'new' states but allowed no meddling in their own affairs. This supremely paternalistic stance assumed that 'civilized' states such as those in Western Europe had evolved procedures to facilitate the assimilation of minorities that did not yet exist in 'immature states.' […] The minorities treaties were a way of educating less civilized nations in international deportment. But the underlying premise was that assimilation into the civilized life of the nation was possible and desirable. […] The goal of the treaties was not to perpetuate a state of affairs in which certain groups in society saw themselves as 'constantly alien', but, rather, to establish the conditions for 'a complete national unity'. After 1933, however, the 'assimilation thesis' […] was spectacularly refuted with the rise of the Third Reich. Ethnic nationalism as practiced in Warsaw or Bucharest had limited scope for assimilation; racial nationalism of the kind that spread across Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s allowed none. The rise of institutionalized anti-Semitism in Hitler's Germany therefore undermined the whole basis of the League's approach to minorities. A supposedly 'civilized' state was rejecting the assimilationist idea in the most sweeping fashion possible. In October of 1933, Nazi Germany left the League." (1997, pp. 52-54)

A year later, Polish Prime Minister Colonel Beck drove another nail into the League's coffin when he denounced his country's obligations regarding minority rights (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997). The number of petitions received in Geneva concerning the issue of minorities fell dramatically from 204 in 1930 to only 15 in 1936. This sharp decline can be seen as a barometer of the growing lack of confidence that European minorities felt in the League's real value before the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945) (Mazower, 1997).

Despite its shortcomings, the minority system advocated by the League of Nations was not a complete failure. Perhaps the most significant outcome of its work was the first-ever internationalisation of minority protection, and the implicit teaching of valuable lessons for the future. Its few successes demonstrated to the world what can be achieved with skilful and comprehensive international governance. These seem to have been forgotten today, perhaps because they were too peaceful to be recorded in the history books. For instance, the dispute between Sweden and Finland concerning the Åland Islands was discreetly settled in 1921: the islands remained under Finnish sovereignty, while the Swedish-speaking population was accorded extensive administrative autonomy. This arrangement laid the groundwork for a resolution that alleviated a significant point of contention between the two states. Similarly, the Estonian government took the notable step of granting cultural autonomy to national minorities, and Latvia implemented specific concessions in the realm of education. In countries with a more progressive mindset, such as Czechoslovakia and Latvia, minorities could even take part in the internal political process (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997; Roach, 2004). Of course, these are exceptions to the rule, which demonstrate that, as in the cases of Lithuania and Poland, the promises made were not kept; in fact, the opposite occurred.

However, critics of the League should also consider the alternatives. Nation-states were already a reality, not just a mere invention of the great powers' war diplomacy. The best example of this is the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a Turkish nation-state, which would be difficult to attribute to forces outside the country, since neither Wilson nor Lloyd George was in charge there, but Kemal Atatürk. The example of the Turks shows us that there were other ways to solve the problem of minorities: "'First we kill the Armenians, then the Greeks, then the Kurds,' a Turkish gendarme told a Danish Red Cross nurse in July 1915, as the war accelerated the Turkification of the Ottoman Empire". Later, these actions would be called "genocide", and even later, they would be called "ethnic cleansing". Thus, neither mass murder nor population transfers were viable alternatives for resolving ethnic problems in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, while before the outbreak of World War II there may have been critics who were not yet convinced of the horrors that this alternative system to that proposed by the League of Nations would bring, its use by Hitler's regime replaced a policy based on international law and the sovereignty of states with a new continental order that disavowed the foundations of both, thus

revealing the dark side of humanity (Mazower, 1997, pp. 54-55).

3. The toothlessness of the post-war international community after the establishment of the United Nations

Consequently, humanity sought to replace the League of Nations, which had proven flawed and incapable of preventing further bloodshed, with a successor organisation that had learned from the lessons of its predecessor (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997; Roach, 2004). Increasingly, it became evident that safeguarding the individual from the state necessitated a re-evaluation of the traditional doctrine of state sovereignty in domestic affairs, which had hitherto permitted states to persecute their citizens at will within their own territories. This recognition prompted a resurgence of international law, aimed at promoting global peace and, notably, protecting human rights. However, such an endeavour presupposed the existence of an authority above the state to which individuals could appeal.

However, who would convince states of the supremacy of international law? During the interwar period, it was believed that pressure from world public opinion on states would be sufficient; however, after the end of the bloodiest conflict in human history, it became clear that a more effective instrument was needed to compel them to respect international law. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Allied states had already enshrined traditional ideas about state sovereignty in the Atlantic Charter. In other words, post-war states were being asked, to some extent, to consent to the weakening of their own powers. Experienced lawyers saw no realistic way in which individual states could be persuaded to integrate their international obligations into national law. The alternative would have been to propose a kind of world state, but this option was also considered utopian (Mazower, 1997).

Central to this debate was the issue of integrating human rights into the emerging postwar order, and whether such rights should be conceived as individual or collective. It was within this context that the post-World War II reality would see the most significant deviation from the Geneva approach, which had favoured collective rights. Although the importance of protecting minorities was obvious, strong arguments were put forward in favor of dismantling and against building on the old system promoted by the League of Nations (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009): neither the countries that needed protecting nor the major Allied powers seemed particularly enthusiastic about the idea of reinstating a system that had succeeded in internationalizing the most important source of tension in Europe without being able to find adequate solutions.

The result was the establishment of a new, passive UN, designed to avoid problems rather than solve them. This helps us understand why most of the hopes for a revival of international law during the war never materialised after it ended (Mazower, 1997). However, many of the League's bodies and functions were taken over, in a new and more or less developed form, by the numerous international organisations established in the postwar period (Barten, 2015). In practice, however, the UN's dedication to minority rights proved as limited as its broader approach to power politics. Without a doubt, at least in terms of minority protection, the UN Charter represented a significant step backwards from the League of Nations (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997).

As a result, no global treaty on minority rights has been signed to date. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasised the new status of the individual in international law without indicating any coercive measures. Minorities were mentioned sporadically, but their protection was not explicitly stipulated, as this was feared to create separatist tendencies and movements, while their study was limited to an obscure subcommittee of the Human Rights Committee (Barten, 2015; Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009; Roach, 2004). "A UN Secretariat study of 1950, which provided a sharp distinction between the Leaegue's outmoded approach and the new "general and universal protection of human rights," has been described by one commentator as "disastruous for the international protection of minorities" (Mazower, 1997, p. 59), in a context where the UN almost completely neglected minority issues in the early years of its existence, the Commission on Human Rights had no time to waste on trivialities such as the protection of minorities, who enjoy nothing even remotely similar to what the European Court of Human Rights does and represents (Barten, 2015). Despite the fundamental differences between them, minority rights were conceived and

have remained to this day considered to be an integral part of general human rights (Barten, 2015; Liebich, 2008; Pentassuglia, 2009), unable to compete in terms of legitimacy with either an increasingly robust international human rights regime or the right of nations to self-determination (Liebich, 2008).

Of even greater significance was the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 (Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009; Stavenhagen, 1996), following the extraordinary efforts of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term "genocide". Lemkin had been disillusioned by the International Military Tribunal's refusal to prosecute crimes committed by the National Socialists prior to 1939 at the Nuremberg Trials, which he and others had viewed as a crucial opportunity to promote world peace by enabling international law to hold both individuals and states accountable. The Genocide Convention introduced a new and significant crime to the corpus of international law and obligated ratifying states to prevent and punish its commission. However, "the convention's potential has been ignored by the international community, and there has been little evidence to back the UN's confident assertion that 'the feeling will grow in world society that by protecting the national, racial, religious and ethnic groups everywhere in the world we will be protecting ourselves'". Over a span of four decades, numerous genocides beyond Europe remained unpunished. Following the collapse of communism, this indifference extended to Europe itself (Mazower, 1997, p. 59). It took the acts of genocide committed in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda for the UN to invoke the Genocide Convention for the first time, establishing in 1993 and 1994 the first International Criminal Tribunals to punish war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, respectively (Stavenhagen, 1996).

Returning, however, to the Cold War period (1947-1991), the problems faced by Europe's minorities, which had significantly reduced due to changes that occurred in the 1940s, were essentially frozen. Neither side of the Iron Curtain could afford to destabilise the entire bloc, and disputes with destabilising potential were resolved bilaterally, under the watchful eye of the leading superpower. Neither South Tyrol, which continued to strain Austrian-Italian relations, nor the disputes between Romanians and Hungarians over Transylvania were permitted to threaten the cohesion of their respective blocs. At the same time, Germany's situation had shifted from a minority question to one defined by its division into four spheres of influence. The "brutal stability" imposed on Europe by the Cold War merely concealed the reality that the postwar international order had, in terms of minority rights, regressed rather than advanced. It was only the equally violent disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–2008) that persuaded the international community of the need to reconsider minority rights in the aftermath of renewed conflict fundamentally. The contrast between the ambitious and confident international politics of the interwar period and the reactive and tentative approach of the 1990s is striking. Population transfers akin to the 1923 Greek-Turkish exchange may have appealed to some Western policymakers as a means of resolving the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995); yet, none possessed the audacity to propose them openly as a solution for reconciling the belligerent parties.

Regarding a fully developed international framework for the protection of minority rights, the League's initiatives, viewed from a contemporary perspective, seem to be the product of an extraordinarily activist and idealistic political elite, confident in its authority to reshape half of Europe in accordance with the "principles" of Western liberalism. These endeavours remain noteworthy as the most sustained attempt in European history to address the challenges of nationalism through international law. However, the landscape has changed profoundly since that time: the two significant minorities of the period, Germans and Jews, were eradicated through different means, and minorities now generally constitute a smaller proportion of the national populations of Central and Eastern European states than they did prior to the war. Concurrently, liberal faith in history as a mechanism for ethnic assimilation has largely vanished, perhaps permanently. The international community has expanded in size but contracted in efficacy, rendering the rivalry between New York and Geneva increasingly unlikely to yield meaningful outcomes: "There may be some talk of rewarding Eastern European countries for good behavior, but when the Council of Europe admits Tudjman's Croatia as a member, it is hard to take this very seriously". The breakup of Yugoslavia finally

prompted the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to appoint a High Commissioner for National Minorities (Mazower, 1997, pp. 59-60). It accelerated the publication by the UN of a belated and obscure Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious, or Linguistic Minorities (Liebich, 2008; Mazower, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2009; Roach, 2004). However, to date, these initiatives remain tentative, with the League's policies appearing strong and coherent in comparison: "Internationally as well as domestically, it seems as though history is more about forgetting the past than about learning from it" (Mazower, 1997, p. 60). Under the auspices of the UN, the issue of minority rights has worsened compared to the League system, which, despite its resounding collapse, nevertheless managed to protect minorities considerably better than the current system promoted by the UN (Barten, 2015). This is also indicated by the increased interest shown in the period following the end of the Cold War in the mechanisms for protecting minorities promoted within the League (Liebich, 2008).

Concluding remarks

The trajectory of minority protection examined in this article confirms the persistence of the structural tensions outlined at the outset. The comparative analysis of the League of Nations and the UN reveals how geopolitical ambitions, institutional design, and legal culture have consistently influenced the capacity of international governance to strike a delicate balance between territorial integrity and the equitable treatment of minority groups. Whereas the League pioneered mechanisms that, in a limited number of cases, enabled minorities to internationalise their grievances and obtain substantive redress, these procedures proved vulnerable to political resistance and the uneven willingness of states to accept external scrutiny. The successor system, grounded in a universalist human-rights paradigm, diluted group-specific concerns by privileging individual entitlements and voluntarist compliance. As a result, subsequent initiatives – whether expressed through thematic declarations, genocide-prevention norms, or regional monitoring bodies – have remained fragmented and unable to prevent the recurrence of discrimination, exclusion, and forced assimilation.

The findings of this study further illustrate that neglect tends to generate instability. In contrast, carefully calibrated arrangements – such as cultural autonomy, targeted educational guarantees, and robust linguistic protections – can diffuse interethnic tension without compromising state sovereignty. However, as long as sovereignty is interpreted primarily as a shield against external oversight, international law will struggle to address the vulnerabilities that minorities continue to face. The limited academic progress of the past two decades, as noted in the introduction, reinforces the challenge of advancing coherent interethnic public policies beyond reactive crisis management.

Moreover, the current landscape suggests that incremental institutional adjustments are unlikely to rectify the systemic weaknesses observed over the last century. Contemporary instruments continue to rely on soft-law modalities, post-hoc adjudication, and moral persuasion – tools ill-suited to identifying and mitigating early warning signs. A more preventive orientation would require states to accept modest yet meaningful constraints on domestic discretion, complemented by credible monitoring that can sustain diplomatic engagement over time. While political appetite for such commitments remains uneven, past failures illustrate that the costs of inaction are disproportionately borne by vulnerable communities and ultimately threaten regional stability. Advancing minority protection, therefore, demands not only technical refinement but a renewed normative commitment to pluralism as a foundational principle of international order. Without such resolve, the international community risks perpetuating the cyclical oscillation between ambition and retreat that has characterised the evolution of minority rights since the early twentieth century.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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