ENVIRONMENT OF TENSION, MOMENTS OF CONFLICT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAJORITY-ROMA INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA


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Why is majority-Roma conflict more prevalent in the Czech Republic than in neighboring Slovakia, despite social, political, and historical similarities between these societies? In this dissertation, I compare the dynamics of interethnic relations in these most similar cases employing conceptions of group position, intergroup contact, and political process. I find that perceived challenges to Whites’ superior group position evince more intergroup conflict in the Czech Republic, while Slovak politicians and activists attempt to maintain an uneasy peace through avoiding threat to the majority. The project mainly draws evidence from interview-based fieldwork conducted from 2014-2015.

This dissertation contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of majority-Roma relations on the societal and local levels with implications for the study of interethnic relations and conflict. First, I show how the influence of policy on group threat represents how state-level actions could contribute to conflict as it did in the Czech Republic in the first decade of the 21st century. Then, by revealing how majority threat is further avoided at the local level in integrated church organizations in Slovakia, I show that a local mechanism of structured contact, even in integrated settings, prevents interethnic conflict without the transformation of inequitable relations. Finally, through understanding majority-Roma relations from the perspective of those who serve and advocate for the Romani minority in East Central Europe I argue that interethnic relations should be considered alongside other elements of the polity in understanding ethnic movements and the way they may affect conflict through majority threat.

Findings contribute to the study of interethnic relations and conflict. I illuminate mechanisms of interethnic conflict that reflect a more open polity and mechanisms of interethnic peace that do not transform inequitable intergroup relations. I also challenge scholars to consider how the dynamics of group position can influence actors’ decisions in ethnically-driven civil rights movements.