Confessional War without Confessional State

Argumenting Just War in the Transylvanian Participation in the Thirty Years War

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Religion has always been regarded as an element of utmost importance of early modern European history. The ongoing debate in German historiography has unearthed various aspects of the phenomenon they titled as confessionalization: the social and cultural implications of the institutionalization of different confessions from the second half of the 16th to the middle of 17th century. Both "fathers" of the paradigm, Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard, stressed the concurrence of these developments with the problems around the formation of the modern state.[1] Even if the role of the state in the imposition of confessional values has been much debated in recent historiography, the term "confessional state" still managed to maintain its validity for the description of most European states. Furthermore, Schilling argued that the earliest steps towards the formation of a modern international system in Europe happened mostly due to the consequences of the confessional diversity and the confessionalization of the state.[2]

The small Principality of Transylvania has always been regarded as a counter-example of the confessionalization paradigm. Most studies dedicated to it from the perspective of the confessionalization debate, have emphasized that the Principality was never turned into a confessional state.[3] Several acts of legislation in the middle of the 16th century – most renowned among them the laws of 1568 – secured the position of no less than four religions in the public life of Transylvania: Catholicism, Lutheranism,

[1] See eg. Wolfgang Reinhard, Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters, *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 10 (1983) 257–277.; Heinz Schilling, Das konfessionelle Europa: Die Konfessionalisierung der europäischen Länder seit Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts und ihren Folgen für Kirche, Staat, Gesellschaft und Kultur, in *Konfessionalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa: Wirkungen des religiösen Wandels im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert in Staat, Gesellschaft und Kultur*, ed. by Joachim Bahlcke and Arno Strohmeyer (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999) 13–62.

[2] Heinz Schilling, Konfessionalisierung und Formierung eines internationalen Systems während der frühen Neuzeit, in *Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa: Interpretationen und Debatten*, ed. by Hans R. Guggisberg and Gottfried G. Krodel (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993) 597–613.

[3] Most recently see Krista Zach, Politische Ursachen und Motive der Konfessionalisierung in Siebenbürgen, in *Konfessionsbildung und Konfessionskultur in Siebenbürgen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Volker Leppin and Ulrich A. Wien (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005) 57–70.

Calvinism and Antitrinitarianism (known in the region as Unitarianism). Despite its assumed – and much-vaunted – confessional neutrality, the Principality did position herself in the newly forming international system: the Princes' armies entered the Thirty Years War on the Protestant side not less than four times, in 1619, 1623, 1626 (led by Prince Gábor Bethlen (1613–29)) and 1644 (led by Prince György Rákóczi I (1630–48)). The paper aims to discuss how this contradiction can be reconciled.

Let us start with questioning the two assumptions: (1) Transylvania was not a confessional state, and (2) her participation in the Thirty Years War can be regarded as a confessional war. The studies mentioned, which describe Transylvania as a non-confessional state focus on its 16th century history – a period, when, even if such a liberal legislation was far from common in Europe, the confessional character of most states was not yet fully developed. However, in the first half of the 17th century, Transylvania was all but confessionally neutral: the public life of the Principality had a distinct Calvinist character. Bethlen seems to have had a more tolerant attitude towards the other confessions, than Rákóczi; nevertheless, both rulers favored the Calvinist church. Catholics and Unitarians, on the other hand, had to endure severe restraints. From the beginning of the 17th century, there was no Catholic bishop in the country, and the question of the appointment of its substitute (a vicar) remained unsolved throughout the epoch. The Jesuits were officially banned from the country (although some lived in the major towns), and the other monastic orders were also dependent on the support they gained from the rather small-scale Catholic nobility. Theological attacks on Unitarians flourished in the middle of the century, and were sometimes connected to political actions, such as the procedure against a radical group, the Sabbattarians, in 1638. Although their churches suffered serious setbacks, Catholic and Unitarian noblemen did not disappear from the political elite of the Principality: many of them were members of the Princely Council – what is more, the commander-in-chief of Rákóczi's troops in 1644, Zsigmond Korniss, was a Catholic himself. From the perspective of the confessionalization paradigm, Transylvania indeed remained in an interesting, middle-way position: however, the idea of a confessionally neutral state is surely misleading if applied to the Principality in the middle of the 17th century.

The other aspect to be discussed is the confessional character of the Transylvanian participation in the Thirty Years War. In the 1920s, there was a fierce debate in the Hungarian historiography between two prominent historians, Gyula Szekfű and István R. Kiss about the motives and aims of Bethlen's campaign, and the literature that appeared since also came up with a variety of interpretations, ranging from the entire dismissal of the confessional element to its identification as the main organizing substance of Bethlen's political career.[4] What is a religious war anyway? Konrad Repgen asked the same question in the 1980s, and his answer was: we are entitled to use this term on any war, which was identified as a religious conflict by its contemporaries.[5] This rather broad definition was a result of his methodological considerations: he was searching for a method of writing a structural, long-term history of politics. In trying to reach a typology of early modern wars, he had to face some problems: the sources, which were at hand – all kinds of sources that provide argumentation for or against a given military conflict – were only able to show the methods and effectiveness of its legitimization, and not its real causes. Therefore, he promoted a change of the subject: a research in the legitimization of wars – which is manageable –, instead of their real causes.[6] The relativist character of his stance was later somewhat damped by Johannes Burkhardt, who called attention on the fact that the gap between the legitimization and real causes is not necessary.[7] Repgen's definition is, however, fruitful for the research on the confessional element in Transylvanian foreign policy.

A discourse analysis (in the way applied for the study of early modern politics by Erik Ringmar and Asser Amdisen)[8] shows a variety of legitimizing strategies in Bethlen's

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[4] The major works in the controversy about Bethlen's motives are Gyula Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor* (Budapest: M. Kir. Egyetemi Nyomda, 1929); István R. Kiss, *Az átértékelt Bethlen Gábor: Válaszul Szekfű Gyulának [Gábor Bethlen Reconsidered: A Response to Gyula Szekfű]* (Debrecen: Author, 1929); Tibor Wittman, *Bethlen Gábor* (Budapest: Művelt Nép, 1952); László Nagy, *Bethlen Gábor a független Magyarországért [Gábor Bethlen for the independent Hungary]* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1969); Ágnes R. Várkonyi, Historical Personality, Crisis and Progress in 17th Century Hungary, *Studia Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 71 (1970) 265–299.; József Barcza, *Bethlen Gábor, a református fejedelem [Gábor Bethlen, the Calvinist Prince]* (Budapest: A Magyarországi Református Egyház Sajtóosztálya, 1980).

[5] Konrad Repgen, Was ist eine Religionskrieg? *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 18 (1986) 334–349.

[6] Konrad Repgen, Kriegslegitimationen in Alteuropa: Entwurf einer historischen Typologie, *Historische Zeitschrift* 241 (1985) 27–49.

[7] Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 137.

[8] Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Asser Amdisen, Diskursanalyse som historisk metode: En nytolkning af Ulfsbækmødet 1629, *Historie (Jysk Selskab for Historie)* 27 (2000) 1–23.

and Rákóczi's manifestos. A common feature of them is that the Princes tried to distance themselves from the idea of the sacred war, waged for the spread of one's own religion. Both put a considerable emphasis on their statement that they do not want to disturb anyone in her confessional adherence. This was a general pattern of the European political discourse: sacred war was furthered only by small radical groups (as in Puritan political thought) or in extraordinary circumstances (by the Emperor during some years of the Thirty Years War).

The focus of the war manifestos of both Princes was instead on the political rights of Hungarian nobility. Both Bethlen and Rákóczi provide a long list of grievances the Protestants had to suffer from the Catholic clergy: churches and cemeteries taken away, Protestant subjects deprived of the chances of office-holding and Jesuits having more and more influence in Hungary contrary to the country's legislation. These grievances of confessional character are however clearly identified as insults against the rights of Hungarian nobles generally. The religious aspects were skillfully connected to more general, political issues – issues that concerned not only the Protestant, but also the Catholic noblemen. The most important of these – both from Rákóczi's manifestos – were the increase of the political power of the Archbishop of Esztergom at the expense of the Palatine (the highest office of the country under the king, and a representative of the estates), or the question of turning Hungary into a hereditary kingdom of the Hasburgs, raised by an unknown clergyman and experienced as a threat by the vast majority of the nobility: an attempt of depriving them of their most important rights.

Going to war for defending another group's rights was not an unknown strategy of legitimization for early modern Europe: the Crown of France claimed that she entered the Thirty Years War in order to counteract Habsburg attempts for establishing a universal monarchy, and to support the rights of the German principalities. However, the Princes did not put much emphasis on being independent rulers. They might be expected to legitimize their campaigns with grievances as a sovereign against the Emperor. This was, however, hardly the case. The Prince of Transylvania – a territory which was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary until the second half of the 16th century – did not necessarily have to fashion himself as an independent ruler, with no direct interests in Habsburg-ruled Hungary. Surprisingly, it was Bethlen – elected to the princely seat from a

Transylvanian noble family –, who spent less energy on finding diplomatic offences from the Emperor. His successor, Rákóczi, despite being an aristocrat of Upper Hungary – in contemporary usage, a "membrum regni" in Hungary himself – dedicated much more arguments to show that he was endangered by Ferdinand III as an independent prince, not only as a subject of a different faith than the king.

The Prince of Transylvania had much stronger claims for having the right to interfere: it was not only that they were invited some Hungarian noblemen – a fact which was stressed in both Princes' manifestos –, but they were defending their own "Patria et Gens", as we can read in Rákóczi's letter to Ferdinand III.[9] As it was shown by Balázs Trencsényi, Transylvanians were not only included into the Hungarian nation even after the establishment of the separate principality, but in one form of the political discourse around nationhood, the actions of the Prince embodied the true national interest of the Hungarian nation.[10] On the other hand, leading politicians of the Principality legitimized the existence of their country under a separate ruler, with the argument that Transylvania provides background for the Hungarian nobility against the oppression of their rights.

The confession was indeed a fundamental element in the foreign policy of the 16th–17th centuries: religious adherence was in many cases able to overshadow the loyalty of subjects towards their rulers. Princes of Transylvania did not need to resort to such arguments in their political actions – it would not have been a very wise choice either, trying to maintain their claim of accepting the rights of their own subject for a confessional multiplicity. Their campaigns can be seen as religious wars first of all due to the response of their Catholic adversaries, who identified this element as the most important (at the same time questioning its validity). Bethlen and Rákóczi could refer to much broader and widely accepted arguments: the defense of the rights of those people, with whom they traditionally assumed community.

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[9] György Rákóczi I to Ferdinand III (Nagykálló, 17 February 1644) in *Galantai grófi Esterházy Miklós munkái [The Works of Count Miklós Esterházy of Galánta]*, ed. by Ferenc Toldy (Pest: Emich and Eisenfels, 1852) 412.

[10] Balázs Trencsényi, *Early-Modern Discourses of Nationhood* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Central European University).