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Addition to the Portrait of the Political Thinker: István Bibó's Analysis of the Conflict in Northern Ireland and Its Possible Solutions

Abstract

This study is concerned with István Bibó's article about the Northern Irish crisis, which was written in 1976. First it discusses the place of the article in the oeuvre of Bibó, referring to some recent critical comments especially on the author's view of how the crisis could be contemporary point of reference. The conclusion is that Bibó's article is not only a thoughtful discussion of the Northern Irish situation and its historical background, but it is valuable for the development of Irish Studies in Hungary in an intercultural context as well.

In the oeuvre of István Bibó the 1976 essay titled 'The question of Northern Ireland in light of an impartial political tribunal' seems to be exceptional at first sight because the questions of political theory, history and society analysed by the author concentrates on the problems of a distant country. However, if we consider the methods of his treatment of the topic it becomes evident that in spite of its unusual focus, Bibó's essay fits seamlessly into the row of his works dealing with national self-determination, the possibilities open for ethnic minorities, the responsibility of the international communities of nations representing the major part of his interest. The 'Northern Irish Question' is one of the author's case studies that can be connected to a longer essay 'The lameness of the international community of nations and its remedies'. In the latter writing he described that in the decades after WWII. it became evident through a succession of conflicts, how perplexed was the international community of nations, how it proved to be lacking in principles, inventions and results during the really crucial international political debates, especially in controversies about state-forming and conclusive decisions over territories. He found the most serious shortcomings in the case of

the basic well-grounded reasons in the solutions. In the case of the renewed Arab –Israeli conflict he offers the content and ways of the realization of a final peace-plan considering the sequence of the steps to be taken, and he takes special care what additional steps could be taken if for some reason the peace plan should be halted¹. The case studies display the methods, how the principle of self-determination, impartiality and independence should appear in the international court of arbitration based on the political power of judgement and not by laws.²

Reflecting on Bibó's oeuvre it is the essay of Mihály Aladár Dobrovits: 'István Bibó's international conflict theory. The conflicts of Cyprus, Near East and Northern Ireland' that analyses Bibó's text in question in detail though the exhaustive comparative analysis is focused on the other two areas. The parallel discussion comparing topic and time is justified because Bibó himself considered the conflict of the three regions and their remedies in the same terms. According to Dobrovits, Bibó's essay was born in a moment when it became evident that the two national communities not only were unable to handle the conflict alone but any kind of solution seemed only possible to have been conceived by some kind of dictate without the participation of the conflicting parties. Looking back, Dobrovits criticizes Bibó's suggestions for a solution the gist of which he saw in the need for the modification of the Irish-British borders defined in 1922 and that not according to historical but to ethnic facts, even if the new border would be uneven, dotted with Protestant enclaves in Catholic regions and *vice versa* and the border could cut through settlements too. The plan was hardly realisable was open to criticism according to Dobrovits because besides some political theorists nobody had seriously considered such a solution and it had not been adopted by any political party in its program (apart from some extreme right – mainly British – programs.³ Gábor Kardos's essay is another summary of

¹ Ibid. pp. 389-398

² Kardos Gábor: „Bibó István nemzetközi konfliktuselmélete. A ciprusi, a közel-keleti és az északír konfliktus”. In: *Rubicon* 2004/4: 47. [István Bibó's international conflict theory. The conflicts of Cyprus, Near East and Northern Ireland]

³ Dobrovits Mihály Aladár: „Idegenként összefoglalva: Bibó István esettanulmányai Észak-Írország, Ciprus és Izrael konfliktusairól”. In: *Világosság* 43. 2-3 (2002): 51-52.

Bibó's writing on Northern Ireland together with the analyses of the conflicts of Cyprus and Near East. While the author lauds Bibó's capacity in recognizing the situation in the case of Northern Ireland too, concludes about Bibó's suggestion for the division of the region that the actual political developments had taken a different course.⁴

In the present paper written on the occasion of the Bibó-centenary it is intended to give further aspects to his essay on the Northern Irish crisis. On the one hand it wants to draw attention to its merits so far left unobserved by the previous commentaries and analyses and also to some arguable points and shortcomings, too. Dobrovits claims that the events since the Publication of Bibó's essay and especially the Belfast Treaty, signed in 1998, should be taken as the proof of Bibó's analysis,⁵ while I shall refer to the ideas of a contemporary Irish politician also left unrealised that do not render Bibó's suggestion so unrealistic. On the other hand I also wish to point out that in Bibó's essay certain aspects of the concept about the settlement of the Northern Irish conflict and its consequences have proved to be pointing ahead and in the later processes they have received roles in one way or another. Thirdly I want to make an excursion to indicate how Bibó's writing has remained especially topical and is providing an important message and inspiration for new approaches of comparative Irish studies that could offer Hungarian researchers successful contributions at international forums.

In the introduction to his essay Bibó modestly remarks that, as a distant voice, he gives his opinion in an international debate that formally is the internal affair of the United Kingdom and the affair of the western world and thus he hazards to make statements that had already been made by others.⁶ Reading the text with our present knowledge of the situation, however, it becomes evident that the author had reliable information about the historical dimension of the Northern Irish question and enough sensitivity in writing about the irreconcilable stand points of opposing parties: the Protestant majority and Catholic minority. Already the title suggests that

⁴ Kardos 2004:49.

⁵ Dobrovits 2002:51.

⁶ Bibó, István: „Észak-Írország kérdése egy lehetséges pártatlan politikai döntő bírósági döntés fényében”. In: *Különbség*. 403. [The question of Northern Ireland in the light of an impartial political tribunal]

Bibó deals primarily with the historical, social and cultural components of the Northern Irish problem in order to find solutions for the conflict. According to Gábor Kovács, Bibó was mainly interested in the process of democratic transition thus he deserves the attribute as the 'specialist of regime changes'. The major part of his intellectual endeavours were directed toward the development of the possible varieties of transition and the avoidance of the pitfalls of these transitions.⁷ For Bibó the Northern Irish crisis starting in the late 1960s and later becoming ever more acute seemed to be such a situation to be solved in 1976 when he wrote the essay.

Being short, the essay is very concise and is divided into sub-chapters containing the aspects discussed. Thanks to its flexible construction these are in constant dialogue with each other and in the various sub-chapters together light is thrown on the different communal features and goals of the conflicting Catholics and Protestants, inhabitants of the same land, citizens of the same country.

The background of the problem is mapped out in the part 'Relevant facts', with an excellent selection of the complicated data, because, as Bibó remarked it is necessary to review the important facts relevant for the problem in order to make decisions about them. He summed up these facts in seven points starting with the religious differences since the 16th c. when the majority of England's and Scotland's population turned toward Protestantism while Ireland remained almost entirely Catholic under English rule that was at first loose and full of revolts.⁸ There is only a well-chosen short line in the essay summing up the early, 16th c., conflicts that count as the dividing line in the history of the two nations' relationship. Maybe it would have been worth the author's while to mention the political reasons leading to the 17th c. Protestant settlements, too.

The sub-chapter gives an informative summary about the creation of the independent Irish Free State in 1922, with the exclusion of six Ulster counties that became an independent part of the United Kingdom called Northern Ireland but the involuntary arrangement

⁷ Kovács, Gábor: *Az európai egyensúlytól a kölcsönös szolgáltatások társadalmáig. Bibó István a politikai gondolkodó.* Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, Bibó István Szellemi Műhely, 2004: 465. [From the European equilibrium to the society of mutual services. B.I. the political thinker]

⁸ Bibó 1976:406.

proved to become the hotbed of problems concerning the practising power and later even leading to civil war. Discussing the tension created by the varied ethnic and religious composition in Northern Ireland, Bibó pointed out the following important features summed up in his facts mentioned as number five and six: since Northern Ireland was created to contain the majority of the Ulster Protestants, there were included Catholics too, about 1/3 of the population, and the number of Catholic inhabitants has been continuously growing since the establishment of the territory thanks to their better productivity; in consequence the attitude of the Ulster Protestant majority became gradually keener. The increasing demand of the Catholic Irish for political and parliamentary participation and strengthened by their demographic growth presented a danger for the Protestants in power and though they have not reached total majority, but together with the radicals of the country and those inhabitants who did not necessarily identify with Ulster Protestantism, could create a situation that would endanger Protestant majority in parliament and as well as the Northern Irish political and national identity of the self-conscious Ulster citizens.⁹

When depicting the facts, the author did not find it important to mention data of historical importance, but points out the processes that by the creation of the part-country deepened the problems of the relationship between nation- groups of differing ethnicity, religion and culture deeply rooted in their past. According to Gábor Kardos, Bibó had maintained his basic tenet in connection of Northern Ireland too, that the debate is about development of nations, creation of state, discussion over territory and it is not a religious, i.e. cultural controversy.¹⁰ I myself have found that the Bibó-text itself contradicts this statement, if only partially. Identity and territory are closely connected ideas and values in Northern Ireland and considering the deepening chasm between the communities of different religion and culture, it is no mere chance that Bibó tried to find the solution in the geographic rearrangement of the territory.

In the portion of the essay 'The Illusions of the Ulster Brits and the Illusions of the Irish' he declares that the conflicting demands of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kardos 2004:49.

Ulster Protestants and Ulster Catholics to fulfil their own wishes are equally irrational. Bibó uses the word *chimera* for these demands to exactly express how difficult it is to understand the roots with their historical burdens. He writes that it was frequently established about the Irish that for them there exists no difference between history and present and they can enumerate recent grievances and such of 300 hundred year old ones as if both happened just recently. But it is understandable because the Irish have the same grievances for 400 years or more – in contrast to the varied history of other nations – and in a sense it is still the case.¹¹ In contrast to the Hungarians, we could add. In an interview George Szirtes, poet of Hungarian origins honoured with the T.S. Eliot –prize, who arrived to England as a child in 1956, explained that he was invited as a resident poet by Trinity College Dublin in 2000. He believed the invitation was due to the fact that he was not really English but of English and Hungarian double identity. During his stay in Dublin he was asked to give talks on nationalism. Szirtes, as probably was expected of him, compared what he considered to be the defining features of Irish nationalism with the situation in Hungarian history. In his arguments he pointed out that the intensity of the former was due to the fact that the Irish had one important enemy, the English, during their long history (if not counting the Vikings) while the Hungarians had several such enemies thus their negative attitudes against their oppressors was more divided.¹² In his characterization of the special historical experience of the Irish among the nations of Europe it appears that Bibó had forecast one of the most important notions of the later Dublin talks of Szirtes.

Analysing the Protestant demands Bibó remarks when dividing of the historical Ireland in 1922 the borders were delineated in the interest of the Protestants to ensure that even the small dispersed groups of Protestants should stay within Northern Ireland even at the cost of considerable Catholic population. The result was that the national identity of the Ulster British got into danger, and as a consequence the shortening of the human rights and suffrage of the

¹¹ Bibó 1976:410.

¹² András Gerevich: „Hungarian Roots, English Traditions’: George Szirtes on Becoming an English Poet”. *The Hungarian Quarterly* 42 (Winter 2001): 103-104.

minority was the price of the conservation of the Ulster Protestant power in Northern Ireland. While the Protestants have vehemently been adhering to their power, the demand of the Irish Catholics that the whole island should become unified in one state was also irrational, it was a demand that was meant as a kind of reparation of the injustice, the 17th c. settlement of the Ulster Protestants. It is evident that the injustice committed 300 years before ceased to be 'reparable'. However ready the Irish were to consider the injustice relevant, and kept complaining about and insisted on keeping it in evidence, it is evident that a present integral 'remedy', the chasing of the Ulster Protestants back to their ancient country would be a similar injustice.¹³ Thus Bibó gives an exact account how irrational and fanciful the demands of both parties were, moreover how incompatible, thus the contemporary Northern Irish situation seemed unpromising and its further deterioration impossible to be checked by British military intervention.

The definition of nation and national identity and their relationship has great importance in Bibó's oeuvre. Gábor Kovács said that according to Bibó political intention, territorialism and the existence of the state are fundamental for the development of a nation because a nation is a historic product. Within national identity, adds Gábor Kovács, as if continuing Bibó's train of thought, the members of a community are not only in relationship with one another but also with a given territory, thus national identity is linked to a certain territory.¹⁴ The connection between nation, national identity and territory is a very complex question not only in Northern Ireland but in the entire Ireland since the settlement of the Protestants and later, too, because of the division of the country. In Western Europe the borders of the territory of the states as a frame for national identity were more or less stable since the end of the Middle Ages.¹⁵ Though Ireland is in the western part of Europe it is an exception. Besides the analysis of the cultural chasm between the communities living there, the realization of this contradiction explains that Bibó dedicates a special paragraph for the relationships concerning nation.

¹³ Bibó 1976: 411.

¹⁴ Kovács 2004:357,3 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 362.

At the beginning of the sub-chapter ‘Conflicting groups: religions, classes or nations?’ Bibó argues that though there exist prominent religious and class differences in Northern Ireland these can be found in other countries too, thus they could not be the real reason for the unprecedented conflicts. Thinking further he reaches the conclusion that in this case the conflict broke out between politically defined groups with common historical, political experiences thus it is the confrontation between *nations* or *parts of a nation*. The Northern Irish Catholics belong to the Irish nation, the Protestants are a part of the British nation.¹⁶ Bibó’s explanation suggests that among the seemingly homogenous nation living on the Irish island the Protestants are a separate group, and this, in fact, is historically true. The description of the division as being strict and unchangeable, however, raise the question whether it would be possible to approach the problem from a different angle by widening the nation-concept that has been limited to national identity. Bibó did not alter his concept that he developed during his career and gives his essay a more practical turn. The methods he proposes for a solution may be in the name of ‘anti-speculative alignment’ as László Percz had ascribed his attitude, that implies that for Bibó every theory has to grow solely out of the interpretation of reality and should return back to it: therefore the theory that broke away from reality and cannot return to it is a false theory.¹⁷ Bibó did not come to the idea of the reunification of the Irish nation, but it seemed obviously necessary to him to contemplate the practical steps to ease the conflict. His thoughts were motivated by the search for the possible directions of the dangerous no-win situation costing in lives he described in his essay.

The medicine metaphor of the longer essay ‘*The lameness of the international community of nations and its remedies*’ on the Northern Irish situation is also apt. The topic is another unsolved problem and Bibó offers a kind of recipe what could offer the principles and conditions to solve and settle the disputed questions for good. ‘The Question of Northern Ireland’, the first sub-chapter suggests that

¹⁶ Bibó1976: 407, 408.

¹⁷ Percz, László: „Az antispekulatívitás jegyében: Bibó István filozófiai előfeltevéseiről” In: Dénes Iván Zoltán, szerk.: *Megtaláni a szabadság rendjét. Tanulmányok Bibó István életművéről*. Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 2001.p. 39. [In the sign of anti-speculation: István Bibó’s presuppositions]

the realization of the right to self-determination should have become a procedure in the strictest sense of the word to serve an effective solution in such a way that a court of arbitration should develop to manage the political debates that would gain the support of the great powers too. Bibó found it necessary to mention that impartiality is the basic condition of the appropriate working of a really realizable political arbitration.¹⁸ He recommends the earliest possible creation of an impartial court of arbitration in the portion of the essay titled *'The necessary principle, power and procedure to the settle the problems of Northern Ireland'* Especially his ideas about the settling are interesting for us. In Bibó's opinion the political court of arbitration should be created by the United Kingdom because being an interested party it could not take part in helping to solve the problem by the use of force. In the composition of such a court it could be decisive that the inhabitants of the British Commonwealth and other Anglophone countries stand nearer to the one or to the other party. Canada, for example, as the nearest dominium could send Protestant and Catholic arbitrators; the same way the public sphere of the United States could also participate with its English and Irish sympathies. It was difficult to say how the court of arbitration itself was to be created for lack of appropriate precedents or permanent courts. He contemplated to leave it to one of the organisations of the United Kingdom or to some other political forum that could have appointed Protestant and Catholic representatives in the USA and Canada to be chosen from by a political organisation of the Irish and the Catholics of Northern Ireland one each; these two persons then would elect a president.¹⁹

Planning the above Bibó proved to have been a prophet because during the process toward reconciliation in Northern Ireland the participation of the wider Anglophone world, as well as international help was necessary, because the internal political powers were unable to fulfil the task due to the un-surmountable controversies. It is true, Bibó's suggestion was based on the proportion of Catholics and Protestants especially that his information about the sectarian conflicts of the 1970s made him unable to observe the problem inde-

¹⁸ Bibó 1976:403-404.

¹⁹ Bibó 1976: 405.

penderly of its religious and ethnic aspects. On the other hand he accurately saw that without the help of the USA (i.e. a great power) the process of solution cannot become successful as it was proved by the coming years. Accepting the role of mediator the Clinton-Administration delegated Senator George Mitchell to Northern Ireland who proved worthwhile in moving the negotiations from their standstill, he presided over the debates about disarmament and was present at the creation of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Treaty.²⁰ Earlier President Jimmy Carter tried – in vain – to offer American investments as a premium for an acceptable solution of the Northern Irish question.

Later such powers joined the process of settling the Northern Irish problem that Bibó could not have foreseen. Róbert Surányi wrote summing up that the British and Irish governments started working out a complex solution in several steps with the assistance of the USA and the European Union that was gradually realizing the decisions of the Belfast Treaty signed on the 10th of April 1998.²¹ Of course, Bibó could not foresee the creation of the European Union and its political power, neither those ideas the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney wrote about in the early 1990s, namely that in the context of the changes Europe would opt for regions. The situation of Northern Ireland necessarily had to change.²² No doubt the weakest point of the Bibó essay is that he did not consider the Irish government in any acceptable role in the solution of the Northern Irish crisis. In the subchapter 'Conflicting standpoints' he keeps referring to it as the Irish Free State, although its name was changed to Irish Republic in 1949 when it left the British Commonwealth. It is also arguable that he believed the political ideas of the Catholics of the north and south to be the same, stating that the Irish who are mainly Catholics both

²⁰ Pál, Monika Éva: „*E pluribus unum?*” *Az 1998-as Nagypénteki Egyezmény: konfliktuskezelés Észak-Írországban*. PhD értekezés, kézirat. 127. [The 1998 Goodfriday Treaty: conflict management in Northern Ireland. MS PhD Dissertation].

²¹ Surányi Róbert: „Az északír válság politikai rendezési kísérletei: nemzeti probléma nemzetközi vonatkozásokkal (1968-2002)” In: Hartvig, Gabriella, Kurdi, Mária, Vöö, Gabriella Eds: *Mandulavirágzás Tudományos Napok 2002: Az irlandisztika nemzetközsége*. Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem, 2002. 47 [The attempts at the political solution of the Northern Irish crisis: international aspects of a national problem]

²² Richard Kearney: *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 75.

in Northern Ireland and in the 'Irish Free State' had by all appearance a fairly uniform view about the political unity of the whole of the Irish island as the desired final result and this is why they accept such seemingly accommodating solutions as the federative union of Northern Ireland and the 'Irish Free State'.²³ The standpoints were far from being that uniform or unchangeably fixed but it is also true that no solution could be achieved.

It is now a clear fact that by the early 1970s the distance between the UK and the Irish Republic, that was created by the colonial relationship and lasted for a long time even after, was considerably lessening especially after the two countries joined the European Common Market Union the same year, in 1973. Because of the paramilitary atrocities against settlement in British territory too, the British government became increasingly interested in cooperation. The so-called Sunningdale Treaty was signed in 1973 that considered the division of power between the Northern Irish Catholic (i.e. politically republican or nationalist) and Protestant (i.e. mainly unionist or loyalist) political communities and the British and Irish governments. The pact, however, proved to be short-lived because it resulted in waves of strikes and terrorist attacks on the loyalist side and the province was taken under the direct government of London.²⁴ For the re-opening of the mutual discussions about the Northern Irish question external powers were necessary, just as Bibó had presupposed, namely the European Parliament; it was only in 1981-84 that the British and Irish governments were requested to cooperate in the interest of a solution thus declining the idea that it was a solely British internal matter.²⁵ The failure of the Sunningdale agreement could be the reason why Bibó could not consider the participation of the Irish government as a partner in a successful process of solutions.

Analysing Bibó's writing about the situation of national minorities, Ferenc Eiler established that Bibó had pointed out the extreme complexities concerning the institution of referendum and its circumpect application.²⁶ In "The question of Northern Ireland' the sub-

²³ Bibó 1976:409.

²⁴ Dobrovits 2002:51

²⁵ Surányi 2002:48.

²⁶ Eiler Ferenc: „A nemzeti kisebbségek kérdésének helye Bibó István munkásságában”. In: Dénes Iván Zoltán (szerk.): *Megtalálni a szabadság rendjét*. Budapest:

chapter on 'The problems of a referendum' he treats referendum as a primarily democratic process meeting the requirements of the principle of self-determination and considers it important for the future of Ireland. He was of the opinion that it could be carried out in two steps: in step one the question would be for or against an all-Irish Federation and he believed the majority of the voters would have been against it.²⁷ We can believe that he was right in his supposition because the federative solution did not have enough supporters. In the second round the votes would be whether to stay as member of the United Kingdom or to unite with the Irish Republic (still called Irish Free State by Bibó). The result of the referendum could be predicted because of the votes of the majority of the Protestants. He adds as a new element the remark that the results would practically conform to the delineation of the demarcation line, thus the result of the voting would justify the no-win situation, territorial changes would be necessary. The aim is to lessen the number of the minorities but that would require a very winding borderline. Bibó was of the opinion that cutting through mountains, rivers and railway lines would be much less expensive in spite of its economic impracticability considering that it would cost less in human blood than to draw borders contrary to the wishes of the people.²⁸

Garret FitzGerald, a leading politician of the Irish Republic, prime minister in the 1980s, deals with the solutions of the Northern Irish crisis in his 1991 book *Towards a New Ireland*. First he sums up the various opinions about the solution and it is interesting to compare Bibó's contemporary suggestions to them. FitzGerald refers to the ideas concerning the solution by some British and Irish politicians of which the one by the Provisional Sinn Féin was the most extremist. They suggested the re-unification of the nine counties of historical Ulster i.e. to enlarge the territory of Northern Ireland with three counties with Catholic majority now belonging to the Irish Republic. Their ideas, however, would not meet the consent of the majority of those three Ulster counties now part of the Republic and would

Új Mandátum Kiadó, 2001. 81. [The position of the question of national minorities in B.I.'s oeuvre].

²⁷ Bibó 1976: 413-415.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 415-416.

endanger the position of the Northern Irish Protestants, too.²⁹ In contrast Bibó's suggestion for border modification was more circum-spect in the knowledge of the events of the early 1970s.

FitzGerard itemised the possibilities of the federation of the two Irelands and the fundamental principles necessary to surmounting the difficulties. His starting point is that by the beginning of 1972 the situation had become ripe for the discussions about a united Ireland to be re-opened. Among others because certain moderate Northern Irish unionist politicians started to consider it as a possibility. FitzGerard remarked that in case of a re-unification into a federation it is the Irish Republic that would have to introduce changes in order to be able to make it acceptable for the northern Protestants. Such is a referendum about the special position of the Catholic Church defined in the constitution of Irish Republic e.g. in connection to the possibility of legal divorce. The Protestants who are afraid of the Catholic Church's dominating power should be reassured that the new fundamental principles of a future Ireland would not violate their interests and declarations of intent of ecclesiastic heads and politicians would enhance possibility of starting the reunification processes. On the other hand the Irish Republic should consider adopting some reforms that had been introduced in Northern Ireland after 1969 in order to ensure the inhabitants of the federation-to-be their equality of treatment and rights irrespective of their religion and political convictions.³⁰

As is shown above, Fitz Gerald takes the notion of federation of the two Irelands seriously minding the details that, however, has not been realised for various reasons. During the years of 1983-84 the principles he represented re-appeared by the creation of the New Ireland Forum. Nevertheless, when FitzGerard as head of the government signed an agreement together with Margaret Thatcher in Hillsborough near Belfast in 1985, ensuring the participation of the Irish Republic in the management of the Northern Irish conflict in the frame of an inter-governmental conference, the question of

²⁹ Garret Fitzgerald: From *Towards a New Ireland*. In: Seamus Deane, Ed.: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* Volume III. Derry: Field Day Publication, 1991.p. 768.

³⁰ FitzGerard.1991:772.

re-unification lost its relevance.³¹ In time the politically separate northern and southern parts of the island got somewhat closer to one another but there have been no signs of a possible unity of them. It can be established that in the 1970s it was not only Bibó whose plans (with changes of the border as a conclusion) remained unconsidered and even a politician, the expert of the question, could not assess the possibilities and future of his plans in practice.

When Bibó starts discussing the problems of a referendum in Northern Ireland he mentions an aspect that proved to gain importance later. He remarks that in the referendum the question is not only about the division of territories but also about solving the conflict of two confronting unrealistic political goals.³² That the solution can be achieved through referendum is proved by the fact that the 1998 Belfast Treaty was confirmed by referenda in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic. In the latter the citizens were asked to vote about the amendment of the constitution too (with 94% support), because two articles of the constitution had to be modified accepting that the consent of the citizens of Northern Ireland is necessary to a reunification of the Irish island.³³ It meant an enormous step forward that the Irish renounced their demand of the whole territory of the island. Even if he had not formulated everything in detail and had not dealt with the ways of practical realisations, judging from the above descriptions, it seems that Bibó had foreseen that the Chimera must and can be overcome, but history took twenty years after the conclusion of his essay to prove him right. Formally for the time being because it will take a long time to put an end to the spiritual heritage of animosity fed by the consequences of the special methods of British colonisation and the long process will be just as complicated as the borderline Bibó suggested as the remedy.

In the small library full of writings on the Northern Irish crisis and civil war there are other countries and parts of regions mentioned as parallels. Already in 1988 there appeared a book about Northern Ireland with comparative strategies treating the tensions between indigenous people and settlers from the American Southern states to

³¹ Surányi 2002:53.

³² Bibó 1976: 413.

³³ Surányi 2002:55.

French Algeria offered as wider contexts of the Northern Irish situation and as reference to it. In his work the author, Frank Wright, a historian of English origin teaching at the University of Belfast contemplated the most humane solution.³⁴ Later, at the time of the wars of the Balkans when the controversies based on religion received especially severe role several authors compared them to the tensions in Northern Ireland. Richard Kearney writing about the post-nationalism in Ireland presented the case of the Istria Peninsula as a positive example for the Northern Irish the events, showing a way out of conflicts because that area was exempt from the Yugoslavian turmoil in spite of the fact that Croatians, Slovenes and Italians have been living there together. The Democratic League of Istria was the winner with a majority against the party called Croatian Democratic Community and its leader gave expression to his hope that Istria could serve as a research area for Europe in a socio-political sense.³⁵ In his essay mentioned above, Mihály Aladár Dobrovits, too, refers to the Balkan region in this connection and with ethnic maps of Northern Ireland and pointing out the special complicated ethnic situation he offers analogies by the case of Bosnia and Serbia³⁶

Bibó, too, points out the obvious parallels to other regions and peoples in his essay. It is unusual, he said, that in the case of the Northern Irish the religious *criterium* is the defining element of a *national* opposition, but, he adds, only where Western Europe is concerned. The situation of Northern Ireland shows similarities to the external problems of faraway regions. That it is the Church that offers the organising form to the opposing ethnicities or nations and the religious identity is the sign of difference has been a very well-known fact in the Near East, Middle East, and in Europe in Transylvania and in the Balkans.³⁷ All considered Bibó's train of thoughts are can be considered as a kind of advance on the reconsidered future and ideal perspectives of Irish studies that was the topic of a 2005 forum with Irish, Eastern and Western European participants. It was decided that it is necessary to find ways to put the post-imperial

³⁴ Frank Wright: *Northern Ireland: a Comparative Analysis*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1988.

³⁵ Kearney 1997:79-80.

³⁶ Dobrovits 2002:52.

³⁷ Bibó 1976:408.

standpoints in the focus instead of postcolonial ones as before, and to find analogies between the dissolution of the British Empire and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy because there are important possibilities in comparative studies.³⁸ With his thought-provoking references and observations on details concerning the quality of life treated with empathy, Bibó laid down the foundations of further research about small countries of Europe (among them Ireland and Hungary) and some other regions that become increasingly topical in our times and suggest comparisons resulting in novel conclusions.

³⁸ Christina Hunt Mahony et al., Eds.: *The Future of Irish Studies*. Charles University, Prague: Centre for Irish Studies, 2005.12.