



INTRODUCTION

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Right at the start, one word in the title of this special topic issue requires clarification: the word “minority.” We will not try to define the term here, but it is only fair to say that some of the groups which are mentioned or discussed are not recognized as minorities or have a rather dubious legal position, as, for example, the Kashubs and Lemkos in Poland or Macedonians in Greece. As to the notion of linguistic minority: it is a term very often used but rarely defined. That it is often used has to do with the fact that most minorities in Europe speak a language or a dialect or variant which discriminates them from the majority. As a matter of fact, the nationalist traditions in Europe seem to take more or less for granted that a minority without a separate language is not a real minority. Language questions have been in the forefront of most nation-building projects or ethnic mobilizations in Europe, and so it has become more or less axiomatic that every nation or ethnic group should have its own language. As an example, the Bosnian language may be cited. The Bosnians—or rather the Bosniaks—insist on naming the language they use Bosnian instead of, as before, Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian. They also insist on their right to standardize their language in their own fashion. Another good example is the Rusyn language, or rather—to be more precise—the Rusyn languages in the Carpathian area. As Rusyns, not Ukrainians, they are now trying to create their own standard language or languages on the basis of their own dialects. The Rusyns in Yugoslavia started this process earlier; consequently, the Rusyn language of Yugoslavia is now to be considered one of the standard Slavic languages.

Thus, in most cases language is one of the most important factors for the demarcation of a minority and also one of the most important cohesive factors for the minority itself. And loss of language eventually results, in most cases, in assimilation, provided that the group is accepted by the majority.

The notion of linguistic minority is, nevertheless, as pointed out above, rather vague. In many cases the shift to the language of the majority has been on its way for some generations, and the language shift is nearly total in the youngest generation, as, for example, among the Lower Sorbs. Are, then, the Lower Sorbs still to be considered a linguistic minority? The same tendency is found in many other groups, and it is still an open question whether it is possible to reverse this development. As an example we may mention the Kashubian dialects, which are often looked upon by Polish scholars as Polish dialects. But the Kashubian intelligentsia insists on considering them as a separate language and on creating a Kashubian literary language; hence, the last ten years have witnessed a considerable

Kashubian renaissance. At the same time language loyalty is not that strong among the Kashubes themselves. We have here two interconnected problems: on the one hand, dialect versus language; on the other, the problem of language loyalty and pride.

Moreover, language rights for a minority are a very important signal of recognition. Some language rights belong to the individual human rights to which probably all countries in former Socialist Europe confess; other, more collective, language rights have to be negotiated and/or confirmed by law. In the latter area there are still enormous variations from country to country or even within countries—which is not astonishing, considering the situation in Western Europe.

The differences in the legal framework concerning minorities in the various post-Socialist countries are in part a heritage from the Socialist period, and in part probably inherited from pre-Socialist times. Although the Socialist countries confessed to the same Marxist–Leninist ideology, their interpretation of this ideology varied very much, especially in connection with their policy toward minorities. Yugoslavia had a quite acceptable minority policy concerning the so-called nationalities (*narodnosti*). The weakness in the Yugoslav minority policy was that members of the six governing peoples—the Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins and Macedonians—had no real rights outside their own republics. So it was a problem for guest-workers from other parts of Yugoslavia to get education in their own language, as, for example, in Slovenia. Besides, in Yugoslavia practice could differ from republic to republic and, given the system of self-government, even from municipality to municipality. Even among the Soviet republics there could be differences. The minority Poles, for example, had no linguistic rights in postwar Soviet Union, with one exception, Lithuania. In the Soviet Union the overall policy was, on the contrary, in the postwar period a policy of Russification which used ideology as the cover. The new ethnic entity, the Soviet people, was essentially Russian-speaking, since the language for communication between the peoples of the Soviet Union was Russian. The officially promoted bilingualism was a bilingualism only for the non-Russian-speaking peoples, who had to learn Russian while the Russians were not required to learn other union languages.

The proclamation of a Bulgarian Socialist nation in the end of the 1960s also made it possible to reduce and finally abolish all minority rights. In this area Greece may also have served as a model. In Rumania the same national or nationalistic Socialism as in Bulgaria became more and more consistent; but the minorities never became as invisible as in Bulgaria or Greece. The same also applies to Albania. The Hungarian minority policy was at the end of the Socialist period rather positive. And even in the politically very strict Czechoslovakia four minority groups were recognized: Ukrainians (Rusyns), Hungarians, Poles and Germans. In East Germany the only occurring minority, the Slavic Sorbs, had in some respects rather good resources. The overall tendency in Poland in the postwar times was towards Polonization, but the authorities' considerations for the neighbors of Poland gave Belorussians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Czechs and Lithuanians some possibilities to work.

The changes in recent years have of course very much influenced both minority policy and linguistic policy. As an immediate outcome of the changes and in the euphoria that followed the changes in most of these countries, the minorities saw an opportunity to better their respective position; and it is also clear that the governments and some of the majority populations were relatively positive to this direction. This is, in our opinion, also linked with a wish to shake off the East European cachet and simply become European. In this connection it is also important to point out that the legal or semi-legal framework for the minorities on a European basis has improved in the last fifteen years. But most of the resolutions, recommendations and charters from the European Council, the European Union and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe are, as is well known, not really binding for any of the member states. It will take much more time for these superstructures to accumulate the necessary consensus and the necessary power to be able to enforce an all-European minority policy. Nevertheless, these resolutions and recommendations have influenced developments in the post-Socialist states for the better. Democratization does not, however, necessarily mean a better position for minorities. Democracy means the rule of a majority party or parties, which usually also represents the interests of the majority. The interests of the minorities are in a nation state not as marketable politically as the interests of the majority. There is also in any civil society a built-in opposition between majority rule and the considerations for the interests of various interest groups or corporations (and minorities are to be considered interest groups or corporations), that is, between democracy and corporatism. As most democracies, however, seem to be balanced between these two poles, this does not seem to be an unsurmountable obstacle.

In a way many of the post-Communist states are in the same situation as the states that were formed after the First World War. They are by definition some kind of nation state, but all of them have at the same time substantial minorities. After World War I the minority clauses were more or less forced on the states in Eastern, Central and South East Europe, and it is well known that subsequent development in most states was very negative for the minorities. Today the post-Communist states are perhaps not directly forced by Western Europe and the United States to solve their minority problems, but still there is some kind of pressure being exerted: the census in Macedonia in 1994 is one example of such pressure, as were observers from the CSSE in Estonia. There are more blatant examples of direct pressure on the part of Russia on behalf of the Russians in neighboring countries. The bilateral treaties between various countries in the area may also be used to influence the minority policy in the signing countries. Hungary has used, or is trying to use, such agreements in order to protect the substantial Hungarian minorities in the neighboring states and Germany has also used this method. But it is not necessarily so that these agreements prevent problems, as the situation among the Hungarians in Slovakia shows; but the agreements have at least some legal value.

One problem is that the return of Socialists to power in some countries, such as

Poland and Bulgaria, has reportedly slowed down the process of the emancipation of minorities. Whether this is some kind of return to the policy of Communist times, simply a kind of adaptation to the nationalism of the majority, or nothing more than disinterest in minority matters, is hard to determine. We have witnessed a similar return of Socialists to power in Lithuania, while in other countries the old *nomenklatura* still remains at least partly in power as in Belarus, Ukraine, Macedonia and Rumania. The minority policy or at least the legal framework for minorities is, however, not that negative in these countries, with Rumania seeming to be an exception.

One other problem is, of course, the weak and in some places catastrophic economic situation in the post-Communist countries. Minority policies always have costs attached to them, and in the present situation it is not easy to find the necessary funding for such policies. And even if in some countries it is possible for the minorities themselves to find some funding—for example, schools and journals in their own languages—they are often not strong enough economically to do so. The weak economic situation is also a good breeding ground for all kinds of xenophobic sentiments. The sharply negative attitude towards Gypsies in most countries does not, however, seem to be connected only with the economy.

In some respects the changes in the economic system are also a threat for minorities. State-funded television and radio networks may, for example, provide some space for minority programs, whereas private stations with their orientation towards business probably will not; they instead flood the air with American- or German-produced TV series or music.

In some of the post-Socialist countries the changes have resulted in the emergence of more or less new minority groups, or the re-emergence of groups that in the Socialist period had to live a life in the shadows. Some of these groups have been recognized as, for example, the Germans in Poland, while others still lead a semi-official or semi-recognized life in the relative freedom of recent years. There are also groups that are actively opposed by the majority populations and/or the authorities. To mention some of these groups: first, the West Polesian group with its attempt to create a West Polesian language in Belorussia; these attempts were rather severely condemned by Belarusian patriots. Second, in Poland, the Lemkos (who also consider themselves Rusyns) may be mentioned as well as (see above) the Kashubes; hitherto, for example, I have not seen any official source in Poland which counts the Kashubes as a minority. In Slovakia the Rusyn movement has led to a split of the group into Ukrainians and Rusyns, but there the Rusyns are a recognized minority as is their language. In Ukraine, however, the Rusyn movement in the Carpathian region has been met with resistance from the Ukrainian side. The Croats in Vojvodina likewise do not approve of the attempts of the Catholic Bunjevci/Šokci group to achieve recognition as a separate minority, while the Serbs seem more positive in this respect, probably in accordance with the principle “*divide et impera*.” These and similar ethnic and linguistic projects may also be seen as a result of

the same tendencies that are present in Western Europe, tendencies towards diversification and regionalization.

The changes in the former Socialist Europe have also influenced Western Europe. When the common enemy, the Socialist system and the Warsaw Pact were dissolved, the West European states seem to some extent to have lost the cement that bound them together. Although the European Union has taken steps towards a more integrated Europe and more member states have been added, this has resulted in more demands for regionalization, both over and within state borders. Italy and Spain are good examples of this. The loss of the traditional enemy has also to some extent influenced—mostly for the better—the situation for minorities in Western Europe with “mother countries” in the former Socialist Europe.

This introduction will end with a question, which only the future can answer. Some states in former Socialist Europe have had a good start, at least concerning the legal framework for minorities—even though the implementation of this framework is often rather shaky and has been hindered for various reasons, economic, nationalist or xenophobic bias in the authorities and the surrounding majorities, and so on—but will this good start hold for the future? Is one witnessing the beginning of a new era in minority policy or is this period simply a repetition of the first years after World War I? One could phrase the question in a more fateful way: did the year 1989 mean the beginning of a new inter-war period in Europe?