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Language and National Identity: A Source of Conflict in Post-Communist Europe

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INTRODUCTION

On 14 April 1978 thousands took to the streets of Tbilisi to demonstrate against a new draft constitution for the (Soviet) Republic of Georgia that omitted reference to Georgian as the state language. It is reported that, in view of the potential for bloodshed, the internal security authorities suggested that it would be prudent to yield on the language issue. The offensive clause was amended and similar changes were made in the draft constitutions for the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan..

In December 1992 the Mayor of Moscow decreed that foreign language billboards and signs would have to carry Cyrillic transcriptions just as big as the Latin script - in Moscow, at least, Cyrillic letters would stand on an equal footing with Latin letters. Yuriy Luzhkov's ruling was clearly designed to answer criticisms that Moscow was being defaced by foreign linguistic and cultural influences. In early 1994, various media in Moscow announced that their Russian-language services would revert to the Russian rendition of place names, geographical areas, and so forth, that were formerly part of the Soviet Union (eg Kirgiziya, Alma-Ata, rather than Kyrgyzstan, Almaty, na Ukraine rather than v Ukraine) in order to "protect the Russian language as a national asset." On 7 December 1995 Boris Yel'tsin established a presidential council for promoting and developing the Russian language, which is "Russia's state language, the cultural property of the peoples inhabiting Russia".

On 31 August 1989, in a highly charged atmosphere of rallies, strikes and demos, Moldova became the first Soviet republic to pass a law that declared the language of the titular nation to be the official language of the republic. The language law also formally proclaimed the identity of Moldovan and Romanian, and restored the Latin alphabet. (Following their annexation of Moldova in 1940, the Soviets insisted that Moldovan, written in Cyrillic script, was a different language from Romanian in order to promote the idea that Moldovans and Romanians are separate nations.) So important was the adoption of the Language Law within the context of the flowering of a non-Soviet, Moldovan national identity, that 31

August, Language Day, was subsequently declared a national holiday. Despite the fact that the law provided for Russian to be the language of inter-ethnic communication, 100,000 ethnic Russians went on strike in support of retaining only Russian as the official language. The language reform was also unpopular with the Ukrainians and Gagauzi, who now had to study a third language, Moldovan/Romanian. Indeed, language was the trigger for secession in Transnistria and Gagauzia. The issue of what to call the language was hotly debated prior to the adoption of Moldova's new (1994) Constitution, which defines the state language as "Moldovan," rather than "Moldovan (Romanian)" or "Moldovan which is identical to Romanian," the other options considered. In March and April 1995, thousands of students took to the streets chanting "Romanian is the official language."

In April 1997, Ukrainian President Kuchma opened a meeting of the Council for Language Policy with the following words: "To assert one's language is to assert one's statehood." He continued: "This [language] law will become an important component of the state's strategy in the spiritual sphere... It must represent, to the maximum, the spiritual needs of all the citizens of Ukraine. The state must ensure the comprehensive development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all areas of community life, and this must be based on the requirement of due respect for other national languages... Any wrong and unbalanced action in such a delicate sphere as language policy and excessive politicization of the problems related to it might incite confrontation and spiritual conflict among people." (Our stress) Leonid Kuchma should know: he has demonstrated a canny grasp of the importance of language in practical politics. When he came to power in 1994, his command of Ukrainian was poor and his electoral support derived mainly from Russian-speaking voters in the eastern and southern parts of the country. He has since made a point of mastering the Ukrainian language, has encouraged its use in education, the media, official business and public life, and there are indications that he now enjoys a larger measure of support in the mainly Ukrainian-speaking west. In April 1997, the Ukrainian Defence Ministry announced measures to reduce the use of Russian in the Ukrainian armed forces; only those with a good command of Ukrainian will be appointed to the top posts.

Preoccupied with the dangers posed by "anti-national forces" and determined to make Romanians "masters in their own house," in late 1992 Gheorghe Funar, Romanian mayor of the Transylvanian city of Cluj, banned the public display of placards and signs in foreign languages, removed Hungarian-language street signs, banned some Hungarian publications, placed restrictions on the teaching of Hungarian (despite the fact that it is the first language of 22% of the city's inhabitants) and issued an instruction that on the eve of Romania's National Day, 1 December (1992), a Romanian inscription be attached to the statue of King Matthias, the popular fifteenth century Hungarian monarch known as "Matthias the Just." Such was the breakdown in public order that the army was called in and Funar had to abandon his attempt to change the inscription.

It is a longstanding Bulgarian claim that the Slavophone population of Macedonia has no distinctive national identity, speaks a Bulgarian dialect, and is, in reality, Bulgarian. For all that, within the first Yugoslavia when Macedonia was regarded as a part of southern Serbia, Belgrade determined that Macedonian was merely a dialect of Serbian. In the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the (now defunct)

second Yugoslavia, language planners created an official written Macedonian language in order to foster the idea of a Macedonian national identity. The new standard was based on Macedonian dialects that resembled literary Bulgarian but it was considerably influenced by Serbo-Croatian during the Tito era. From the start the Yugoslavs maintained that Macedonian was a language distinct from Bulgarian - a claim that Bulgaria has vigorously disputed ever since. In the period following the Greek civil war, the Slavs of Greek Macedonia were forbidden to use the Slavonic forms of their names; only Greek forms could be used for official purposes. On occasion Slavophone villagers were asked to confirm publicly to officials that they did not speak Macedonian; many emigrated as a result. Greece later refused to recognize academic degrees awarded at the Kiril i Metodija university in Skopje on the ground that teaching at that institution was in a language, namely Macedonian, that was not internationally recognized. Ethnic Albanians were by far the largest minority in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Language featured prominently in the Macedonian authorities' campaign against Albanian nationalism during the 1980s. Albanian names for individuals, cities and towns were banned, teachers were sacked for not insisting on the use of Macedonian, and legislation was introduced which severely reduced the number of Albanians who were able to attend schools in which Albanian was the language of instruction. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) became independent following a referendum in September 1991. Bulgaria recognizes FYROM as a sovereign state, but not as a nation, and nor does it recognize Macedonian as a language. The President of Macedonia urges that "every nation has the right to give the language it speaks its own name," while Bulgarian diplomats, following talks with their Macedonian counterparts, continue to report that they have spoken "in our language."

By autumn 1997, laws which discriminate against the use of minority languages (notably Hungarian) still had not been amended in Slovakia. As a result, hundreds of teachers had been fined, and a number of headmasters had been fired, because they had issued school reports in both Slovak and Hungarian, or made out a special report in the Hungarian language.

The purpose of the above introductory remarks is to provide some initial support for the following contentions.

(1) Language, culture, national identity, statehood (and much else besides) are clearly and inextricably linked, both in the external world and in the human mind.

(2) Language can be, and frequently is, a source of conflict.

(3) Conflict over language, or conflict in which language plays a part, is both an indicator of, and driver of, instability.

The present paper seeks to explore the above contentions in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Race, religion, nationality, citizenship, culture and language are factors which both divide and unite mankind. Clearly these factors are not mutually exclusive.. Typically there will be associations between, say, culture and language, between race and religion, between language and nationality, and so forth. The American anthropological linguist, Edward Sapir, has pointed out "that the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language. The psychological significance of this goes far beyond the association of particular languages with nationalities, political entities, or smaller social groups... The extraordinary importance of minute linguistic differences for the symbolization of psychologically real as contrasted with politically or sociologically official groups is intuitively felt by most people. 'He talks like us' is equivalent to saying 'He is one of us'."

At all levels of social grouping, language functions as a symbol of in-group identity, fosters a sense of fraternity, encourages solidarity, and promotes social cohesion: from the intimacies of family talk, through the shared and often convivial resonances of the regiment, the sports-field and the club, to the workaday utterances of the sociolects of occupational and professional life; from the chanting of the liturgy by religious sects, through social-class, social-caste, and regional dialects, to the characteristically human uses of language which mark it as a species-specific trait which distinguishes man from other animals and from alien creatures. But nowhere have the consequences of the function of language as a symbol of identity been as mischievous, as disruptive of the social order, as in those mid-to-upper level groupings which focus on the notion of the nation and on the notion of the state.

The politicization of language, and in particular the identification of the language group with the nation, is a legacy from the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and German romanticism. The statesman and polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt went as far as to say that every language has its own distinctive structure which significantly constrains its speakers' understanding of the world. Fichte (1762-1814) roundly declared: "Wherever a separate language is found, there is also a separate nation which has the right to manage its affairs... and to rule itself."

Recent European history certainly shows that the development of national consciousness has been accompanied by a rapid growth in the number of national, official, autonomous, and standard languages. As the sociolinguist Karl Deutsch has pointed out, in 1800 there were 15 sovereign states in Europe, in 1914 there were already 21, and by 1937 the number had increased to 29. In 1800 there were 16 recognised, standard languages spoken in Europe, in 1900 30 official tongues could be distinguished, and by 1937 this number had increased to 53. It is, moreover, the close association of nationality with language which underpins the more recent wholly artificial, yet enforced separation along ethnic lines of Serbo-Croatian into Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian.

The influence of language as a symbol of group identity is astonishingly powerful as the following historical, politico-linguistic, and linguo-cultural phenomena so clearly reveal. Lest it be thought that the conflict that is all too frequently

associated with this symbolic function of language is a feature solely of far-away countries of which we know little, some examples are offered that are closer to home. Alexander II placed the use of the Ukrainian language unter Verbot and Strafe by means of the "Emser Erlass" of 1876; the westernization of Turkey under Kemal Atatürk included the dismantling of the traditional Osmanlija, the language of the Ottoman Empire, and the abolition of the Perso-Arabic script ; since independence, attempts to make Hindi the sole national language of India have met with bitter opposition from non-Hindi groups and frequently led to linguistic riots in which many people have been killed; the revival, modernization, and revitalization by the Zionist movement of Hebrew, the ancestral language of the Jews, was a powerfully motivating factor in the foundation of the modern Jewish state; in rural Wales holiday homes belonging to Englishmen have been set on fire as part of a campaign to preserve the Welsh language; in Canada a provincial directive that French should be the only language used for air traffic control at Montreal airport was one of the (happily shortlived) reforming achievements of the séparatistes québécois; in schools in Texas, children have been made to kneel in the playground and ask to be forgiven if they were caught talking to each other in Spanish; in Europe the refusal of the French government to recognize Breton, the repression in Spain of Catalan and Basque, and in Greece of Macedonian, animosities and feelings of resentment among the Flemings and Walloons in Belgium, have all led to rioting and a breakdown in the social order. The Cymric triad, ein hiaith, ein gwlad, ein cenedl (our language, our country, our nation) and the saying Cenedl heb raith; cenedl heb galon (A nation without a language is a nation with out a heart) remind us of the potency of language as a focus for national identity. "The nation lives in its language," as a Hungarian writer has said.

CIVIC-TERRITORIAL AND ETHNIC-GENEALOGICAL MODELS OF THE NATION

The eighteenth century philosophers of the Enlightenment defined what may be termed the western, or civic, model of the nation as a community of people obeying the same laws and institutions within a given well-defined territory. The "native soil" cannot be just anywhere, however; it must, in fact, be the ancestral "homeland," the "cradle of the nation," ie historic land that the people have in some way made their own. A sense of legal and political community in which members enjoy civil, legal and political rights, and incur legal duties and obligations, together with a sense of equality before the law among members of the community, in short, the notion of citizenship - these are vital elements in the western, civic model of a nation.

A rather different concept of the nation - the so-called "ethnic" model - emerged in Eastern Europe. Its distinguishing feature is its emphasis on a community of birth, ie a community of common descent. The nation is construed as a diachronically extended family whose members enjoy a common ancestry. Eastern European intellectuals have, on occasion, produced scholarship of rare fantasy in their striving to establish pedigrees and genealogies for the nation. This emphasis on (presumed) common descent and family ties goes some way towards accounting for the strongly demotic nature of the ethnic concept of the nation. According to the western model the "people" are viewed as a political community subject to common laws and institutions, whereas in the ethnic

conception they constitute the very object of nationalist aspirations - the people's will is the ultimate rhetorical court of appeal. (The use of the term narodniy front is instructive in this respect. People's fronts were associated with nationalistic movements within the Soviet Republics and among ethnic groups which sought greater autonomy, or indeed complete independence, from Soviet rule; eg the People's Fronts of Estonia and Latvia, Lithuanian Sajudis, Ukrainian Rukh, and Uzbek Birlik.) The central place of law in the western civic model is usurped by vernacular culture, language, customs and folklore, in the ethnic model. Philologists, poets, lexicographers, folklorists and ethnographers have all played an essential role in establishing, or reviving, in Eastern Europe the idea of an ethnic nation. Their linguistic, historical and ethnographic researches into the past and present nature of the people (narod, nep, porpor, Volk, etc.) created a widespread awareness of the distinctive myths, memories, symbols and linguistic traditions of the nation. And "the people" - according to the East European ethnic model of the nation - were precisely those individuals who spoke the same language. For language had come to be regarded as the essential, or at least as the central, if not indeed ultimately the only, boundary marker for the nation.

There is, that is to say, a widespread presumption in the Eastern European folk consciousness that language is both a necessary condition for a nation, and also a sufficient one. Both assumptions are, however, clearly false. The German nation and the Austrian nation share a common language for both national groupings speak German, yet that does not encroach upon their clear sense of belonging to different nations. Again, it is evident that a Swiss nation exists, yet within this relatively small country German, French, Italian and Romansch are all spoken, and, indeed, some Swiss speak only one of these.

There is also a widespread assumption - and not only in Eastern Europe - that a nation, qua nation, has the right to constitute its own state. Fichte, we recall, spoke of a "separate nation" (based on a "separate language") "which has the right to manage its affairs... and to rule itself."

NATION, STATE, AND NATION-STATE

The 'nation,' like the 'state', is an abstraction. The state, however, is a legal, sovereign entity which has no concrete existence at all, while the nation - according to both models - signifies a cultural and political bond which is manifested in the individual human beings who comprise it. Sometimes, however - especially in the West - the terms 'nation' and 'state' are used as though they were synonymous. This can only lead to confusion, particularly when we seek to come to terms with nationality and statehood as they are understood in the East.

This is not to say that there is no overlap between the two concepts, but rather that their content and focus are very different. However, most contemporary states are "plural" states and exhibit a lack of congruence between the state and the nation. The number of "nation-states", in the sense that the state's boundaries coincide with the nation's and that the total population of the state shares a single ethnic culture, is very few today. It is far more commonly the case for the people within the frontiers of a given state to comprise more than one nation (eg English, Scots, Welsh, Irish in UK). But not only is there frequently more than one nation within a state, but a given nation may be dispersed over many states: nineteenth-century German and Italian nationalism, which clearly

posits a German and an Italian nation, was instrumental in bringing into existence the German and the Italian states. Moreover, the Jewish nation existed for some nineteen centuries after the diaspora until a Jewish State was created in 1948.

Nor can a nation be identified in terms of race. Not only are there cases where nations have emerged from racial admixture (as in the West Indies and Brazil), there are also instances (like the Czechs and the Slovaks) where two nations exist, but where it is impossible to identify any racial distinctions.

Nor, as we have shown above, is language a uniquely defining feature: Germans and Austrians both speak German; four different languages are spoken by the Swiss nation. And religious criteria are equally insufficient for religions span national borders, and many nations contain adherents to more than one religious faith.

None of the above criteria - race, language, religion etc - taken in isolation, will serve to differentiate one nation from another; all of them, however, may contribute to the sense of nationhood.

Linguistic conflict in Eastern Europe derives, in significant measure, from the imprecise and often arbitrary definition of borders, in association with the identification of individual national groupings, at the time of the often artificial creation of (nation)-states in the region during the collapse of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. Partly because in many areas of Eastern Europe members of different nations are, geographically speaking, inextricably intermingled, and partly because the only way of determining which people were members of which nations would have been by asking them, what was in fact created, in most instances, and par excellence in the case of the former Soviet Union, was not so much a nation state as rather a state of nations.

Members of an ethnic minority may participate in the state structure only if they fulfil the duties enjoined upon them by state institutions, and typically in Eastern Europe one of their most demanding duties is to learn the language of the majority, the language of the state. All too infrequently do Eastern European states containing significant minorities accept their minority language(s) for official business, while also granting local cultural and political autonomy, ie include the minority, or minorities, in the task of state-building.

The majority population regards the ethno-linguistic minority as different. A Hungarian living in Transylvania, for example, thinks of himself as a Hungarian with Romanian citizenship. Romanians, however, consider that members of minority ethnic groups are, or should be, Romanians first, and members of a minority second.. The Hungarian living in Transylvania should therefore think of himself as a Romanian whose mother-tongue happens to be Hungarian. A prior commitment to a language or minority ethnic group tacitly challenges the state's right to exist within its current borders. Tensions such as these are generated throughout Eastern Europe by the presence of ethno-linguistic minorities whose historical claim on a territory is invariably as old, and therefore as uncertain, as that of the majority group. This is often a reaction to an insistence by the majority on a centralized, exclusive state. All too frequently this leads to a vicious circle in which the minority, just because it is excluded, gives prior commitment to its language and ethnic identity.

LINGUISTIC CONFLICT - INDICATOR AND DRIVER OF INSTABILITY

Language, as we have shown, is clearly a source of conflict, and linguistic conflict, if sufficiently intense, can be a driver of instability, as we have seen. Moreover, if the precise nature of a given linguistic conflict were to be properly understood, it could form a useful addition to those other more familiar indicators of instability, the economy, crime, illegal migration, religious strife, border disputes, and so forth. The notion of 'Linguistic Conflict' is perhaps a somewhat artificial abstraction, but so, then, are those other more familiar indicators of instability, the economy, crime, the ethnic factor, etc. The data, factors and considerations which form the background to any conflict will necessarily, in any assessment of instability, be considered rather artificially under the various headings outlined above. In the real world of social, political and military affairs, however, they are mutually reinforcing, and it is their combined impact and influence on attitudes, mind set, public opinion, and policy making which, though often subtle and diffuse, is great indeed. Language, and linguistic conflict, should be added to that list.

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