The Use of the Hungarian Language in Public Administration: The Case of Minorities in Hungary's Neighbouring Countries

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Studies indicate that the use of the minority mother tongue in dealings with administrative authorities plays a key role in preserving it and endows it with a higher status than its teaching in school. The use of the minority language on the local and regional level is the best indicator of whether minority language rights are implemented in a country. The lack of public administration personnel who speak minority languages and official forms in minority languages pose great difficulties in implementing language rights. The guarantee of the right to be educated in the mother tongue and use it in public helps ensure the cultural reproduction and survival of the community.

Introduction

I deal in this study with the rights of Hungarian minorities living in neighbouring countries to use their mother tongue in dealings with administrative authorities. Experts agree that a precondition of preserving the mother tongue is that the language does not retreat into the private sphere but can maintain and strengthen its position in the public arena. They argue that: *"While teaching and learning a language guarantee its survival (or help in this respect, as oral transmission within families is the main requirement), its use in dealings with the administrative authorities reflects a higher status for the language than its teaching in school.*²¹ Studies indicate that the use of the minority language on the local and regional level in public administration is the best indicator of whether language rights are implemented.² The status of minority languages in the constitution and legislation regulating their use, and the implementation of language laws provide the framework for examining the language policy of the states where Hungarian minorities live.

The use of the mother tongue has crucial importance for the survival of ethnic minorities. For them language is not only a means of communication but has a symbolic and emotional function as the most important feature of ethnic identity. Belonging to the Hungarian language community is a key

¹ Poggeschi 2012, 163.

² Eplényi–Kántor 2012, 103–228.

Hungarian minorities are autochthonous minorities who remained in their homelands in the Carpathian basin as borders moved around them due to the 1920 Trianon Treaty under which Hungary lost about two-thirds of its territory. After World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union many Hungarian minorities found themselves in newly created nation states.

Today over 90 years after Trianon, official census registers approximately 2.4 million ethnic Hungarians who live in four neighbouring countries, Romania (Transylvania), Slovakia, Serbia (Vojvodina) and Ukraine (Subcarpathia/Transcarpathia). Smaller communities under one hundred thousand people live in Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. The data about the number of ethnic Hungarians must be treated with caution since the state authorities have an interest in keeping the number of the registered minorities as low as possible because of the implications for minority rights such as the percentage of Hungarians in each area needed to use their mother tongue. There are also methodological difficulties in interpreting the results of censuses.⁵

Collective and Individual Rights

Collective rights play a key role in the ability of minorities to use their mother tongue. There is disagreement among experts whether the use of the mother tongue is a fundamental human right and whether the language rights of minorities are construed as individual or collective rights. It is clear, however, that many fundamental rights can only be realized if wide ranging language rights are guaranteed. International treaties dealing with minority and linguistic rights fail to give a clear definition in this regard. The ambiguous formulation of the treaties allow many interpretations that makes it difficult for minorities to use them to implement their linguistic rights.⁶

With few exceptions, the states where Hungarian minorities live, the home states, regard the language rights of minorities as individual and not as collective rights. They treat language rights for minorities as privileges that can be taken away. Most home states interpret international and European agreements on linguistic rights in a way that stresses their limits and exemptions and seek to use them to restrict even existing language rights. Most conspicuous are the restrictions on the use of the Hungarian language in the official and public arena. This creates an atmosphere of mistrust between minority and majority and divides societies along ethno-linguistic lines.⁷

³ Kesserű Némethy 2013.

⁴ Kapitány 2015, 225–239.

⁵ Kapitány 2015, 225.

⁶ Eplényi–Kántor 2012, 45.

⁷ Marácz 2011, 25–53.

The 1993 Copenhagen Document, the first document of the post-Cold War era that codified minority rights, referred to collective rights by declaring that "Persons belonging to national minorities can exercise and enjoy their rights individually as well as in community with other members of their group". (Chapter IV, [32.6]) The criteria laid down in the Document are, however, soft laws that cannot be enforced, moreover the European Union (EU) controls their fulfilment only prior to and at the time of accession to the EU.⁸

Minority Language Rights in Europe

In Europe, minority rights became parts of bilateral treaties and international treaty obligations and minorities can use international documents that deal with the usage of minority languages directly or indirectly as points of reference in their struggle for language rights.⁹

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe (Framework Convention) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (European Language Charter) are the most important international treaties dealing with minority and linguistic rights.

The European Language Charter was the first document that the Council of Europe issued that defined the concept of regional or minority language rights. Under Article 1 of the Charter "regional or minority languages" means languages that are: traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and different from the official language(s) of that State; it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants".¹⁰

While as its name suggests, it protects the status of regional or minority languages, protecting languages indirectly involves protecting the rights of minority speakers. The European Language Charter takes, however, no stance on whether these rights are individual or collective rights.

The European Language Charter has been signed by most EU states including those where ethnic Hungarians live and requires the signatory states to ensure minority participation in all parts of public life. Signatories of the European Language Charter are obliged to introduce domestic legislation to comply with its criteria of cultural diversity and heritage. The European Language Charter's language is very flexible giving the participating states a great deal of leeway in carrying out its measures regarding the promotion of languages.¹¹ Under the European Language Charter, participating states can choose which commitments they will honour. Terms such as

⁸ Available: www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304?download=true (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁹ Juhász 2012, 45–66.

¹⁰ ETS 148, *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. Strasbourg, 5.XI.1992. Available: https://rm.coe.int/168007bf4b (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

¹¹ Роддевсні 2012, 163–205.

"if it is possible", "in any given case" and "if the number of minority speakers makes it necessary" have been criticized by defenders of ethnic minority rights.¹²

The European Language Charter puts in place a monitoring system that consists of a committee of experts that evaluate the situation and requires the participating states to publish periodical reports on their progress in protecting regional and minority languages.¹³

The Framework Convention is devoted to minority rights and has a mechanism of monitoring. It requires the signatory states to ensure minority participation in all parts of public life.¹⁴ A key provision of the Framework Convention is that the signatories "recognize that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to use freely and without interference his or her minority language, in private and in public, orally and in writing". (Article 10) Under Article 16: "The Parties shall refrain from measures which alter the proportions of the population in areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities and are aimed at restricting the rights and freedoms flowing from the principles enshrined in the present framework Convention." This article has been ignored by many participating states. Many home states sought to reduce the minority/majority ratio through territorial and administrative reorganization. The reorganization cut into areas the territories where Hungarians lived as a majority and transformed them into minorities. This ethnic engineering had direct consequences on whether minorities were able to use their mother tongue in the public domain. Districts were often tailored in a way as to prevent the meeting of the threshold required for the usage of the Hungarian language. The goal was also to prevent minorities from fielding candidates in the local and national elections. (Ukraine and Slovakia for example.)¹⁵

The right of minorities to use their mother tongue in public administration in the areas where they live is diluted by the formulation that "if those persons so request and where such a request corresponds to a real need, the Parties shall endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, the conditions which would make it possible to use the minority language in relations between those persons and the administrative authorities." (Article 10[2]) This article illustrates why the FCNM has been criticized for its vague and cautious formulation that makes it easy for the participating states to ignore it. The home states often fail to fulfil their obligations under the European Language Charter and the Framework Convention.

¹² Péntek 2013, 236.

¹³ Available: www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/monitoring (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

Available: https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/ DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016800c10cf (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

¹⁵ Csernyicskó–Szoták–Molnár Csikós 2011.

European Union and the Use of Minority Languages

EU treaties recognize the right to use the mother tongue as a fundamental right which encompasses the right of minority members to use their mother tongue in private and in public, and the right to mother tongue education.¹⁶ There are, however, no provisions for implementing minority rights and the right to use the mother tongue. There is also no procedure for submitting minority complaints.¹⁷

Under the Copenhagen Document minorities have the right "to use freely their mother tongue in private as well as in public; (32.2)" The Document lays down the criteria that applicant countries must meet to ensure the respect of minority rights but its wording leaves a lot of room for interpretation and stresses the need for conformity with national legislation.¹⁸

Under EU law, language rights fall under national jurisdiction which means that their observance and implementation depend on the will of the nation states where minorities live. EU affiliated institutions can make suggestions, but these are not legally binding and therefore carry little weight. The EU lacks effective control mechanisms and means of enforcing legal commitments to minority rights among EU members. The EU was not consequent enough in endorsing existing norms for minority protection and often improvised. It has throughout the years relied on the experts of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, (OSCE) and the European Council to develop non-binding criteria for the guarantee of minority rights that can be used as guidelines.

Today, except for Serbia and Ukraine, all home countries are members of the EU and signed the above treaties as a condition for EU membership. Today they no longer feel the pressure to improve the rights of their minorities and tend to allow the concept of the monolingual nation state override their responsibilities towards them.¹⁹ One can conclude that neither international treaties nor membership in the EU can guarantee the protection of the linguistic rights of national minorities.

Scholars point to an apparent contradiction in EU policy that while the EU lacks the effective enforcement mechanisms needed when confronted with the violation of minority rights in EU countries, it requires those countries aspiring to be members of the EU to adjust their national legislation on minorities to European standards (the Copenhagen criteria of 1993). There is a conflict between the value the EU places on linguistic diversity and the practice of its member states.²⁰ One suggestion to resolve this contradiction is to integrate the two most comprehensive treaties, the Framework Convention and the European Language Charter, into the EU's legal

¹⁶ See http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Word/157.doc; for the full Convention http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

¹⁷ See Vizi 2013.

¹⁸ Horváth 2012, 176.

¹⁹ Péntek 2013, 236.

²⁰ Ноғмаnn 2017, 9–15.

Thresholds Limit the Use of Mother Tongue

Most current language laws in the home states restrict the use of the mother tongue by introducing thresholds that the share of the ethnic Hungarian population in administrative-territorial units must reach to enable the minority to use its mother tongue in official communication. The thresholds for using the mother tongue, 20% or 15% in Slovakia, 10% in Ukraine, 33 to 20% in Romania, 15% in Serbia, 33% or one-third of its population in Croatia, do not encompass Hungarians who live in areas where their ratio falls below the threshold and who struggle the most to retain their ethnic identity. In Transylvania for example, a quarter of the Hungarian population lives in administrative units in which their share is under the ratio of 20% and they cannot use their mother tongue. The linguist János Péntek suggests that instead of thresholds the "critical level of language use" should be considered "the point at which the small community would need positive discrimination, along with favourable conditions to maintain its ethnicity".22

The use of minority/majority thresholds also reduces the minority's chances of communicating in its mother tongue on the regional level. A major problem is that a threshold of for example 20% is often met on the local level in villages but not in towns where the county seats are. Thus, it can happen that in a village of 100 people 20% belong to the minority and receive language rights while thousands of minority speakers in regional capitals cannot communicate in the minority language at all because they do not reach the threshold.²³

Problems of Implementation

Legislation offering guarantees for the exercise of minority language rights is, however, only a prerequisite for widening the usage of the minority language. The implementation of the laws plays a key role in the exercise of language rights. The presence or absence of bilingual signs, the possibility to communicate orally or in writing in public administration are the most visible signs of whether the laws are being implemented.

In the six countries that I examined, studies revealed great problems with the enforcement of the language rights. The decades long experience with the restriction of minority language rights and the dominance of the majority language still strongly influences the attitude of the minority and the majority. There is a fear of reprisals

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²¹ Marácz 2011, 25-53.

²² Péntek 2013, 236.

²³ Gerencsér 2015, 278.

since the ambiguous formulation of laws allows for varying interpretations. Central to the success of implementation is how many ethnic Hungarians know what their rights are and use them. Studies indicate that even in areas where the number of Hungarians reach the threshold required to use their mother tongue in public administration they often do not take advantage of this right.²⁴ Since the Hungarian minorities could for decades not use their mother tongue in public administration, Hungarian lost much of its functionality compared to the majority languages. In many cases the official register of the Hungarian language is inadequate and cannot be used for reliable translation of majority language legislation and documents. Often there are not enough public servants to fulfil the requirement of using the mother tongue in public administration. Applying in Hungarian to a public servant who does not speak Hungarian involves delays in processing since he must translate the Hungarian text. Many Hungarian speakers prefer to use the majority language in public administration because they are uncertain what the official terms are in Hungarian. Often there are no bilingual forms and information sheets. The lack of modern Hungarian terminology relating to public administration poses a great challenge to Hungarian speakers.²⁵

Cultural and or Collective Rights in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia

In the former Yugoslav republics Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia ethnic Hungarians enjoy cultural and or territorial autonomy and have forms of cultural or collective rights. This provides them with extensive rights over the use of their mother tongue. Yugoslav traditions play here a role, as well as the small size of Hungarians in Croatia and Slovenia. Serbia's minority policy is influenced by its efforts to fulfil the requirements for membership in the EU.

In Croatia, 14,048 people declared themselves Hungarians in the 2011 census compared to 16,595 in 2001. 26

Hungarians have cultural autonomy and are represented by minority councils or the institution of minority representation (Constitutional law 2002, Official Gazette no. 155/2002). Article 12(1) provides that "Equality in the official use of a minority language and script shall be exercised in the territory of a local self-government unit in which the members of a national minority compose a minimum of one third of the population (33.33%)". The 33% threshold for using the mother tongue is often an insurmountable obstacle for minorities.

One minority representative is elected on the local government level if the ratio of the minority is from 5 to 15%. Minorities have a fundamental right to be represented in parliament. Hungarians as a minority can elect one representative who represents them in parliament.²⁷

²⁴ Csernyicskó–Szoták–Molnár Csikó 2011.

²⁵ Eplényi–Kántor 2012, 199–228.

²⁶ Kapitány 2015, 236.

²⁷ Tatalovic 2006, 45–59.

The lack of public officials and lawyers who speak Hungarian makes the implementation of language rights very difficult. Many majority local government leaders resist the implementation of the language law. One reason for this is that under the language law, the equal use of the minority language is optional. Many young Hungarians speak Croatian better than Hungarian and prefer the majority language.²⁸

In Slovenia in the administrative unit Prekmurje 5,544 people declared themselves Hungarians in the census of 2002 a decrease from 7,657 in the last census. Hungarians make up only 0.4% of the Slovenian population. The 2011 register-based census did not include questions on ethnicity.²⁹ Formally, the status of the Hungarian language in Slovenia is considered exemplary.³⁰ Hungarians and Italians are considered autochthonous minorities who can exercise their full minority rights regardless of their share in the population on the territory where they live.³¹ They are considered "ethnic/national communities" whose collective and individual rights are protected. In the areas where Hungarians live, Hungarian is an official language and has the same status as the Slovene.³² Bilingualism in public administration on both the local and state level is the goal but it is often not met. Minority languages are hardly used in public administration because there are few officials who speak a minority language. Many important official documents such as notifications and certificates are not translated into minority languages.³³

In Serbia, some 254,000 ethnic Hungarians, 3.5% of the population, live predominantly in Vojvodina where they make up 13% of the population. Most Hungarians live in the border region of Hungary and among the River Tisza/Tisa in an ethnic block.³⁴ The Serbian constitution defines Serbia as a nation state: "The Republic of Serbia, the Serbian people and state of all Citizens who live in it." In Article 79 it gives members of national minorities extensive rights to preserve their identity and Article 77 grants citizens the right to ask and receive information from the public authorities in their mother tongue.³⁵

Serbia is the only country where sizeable ethnic Hungarians live which grants them cultural non-territorial autonomy and collective rights. Under the Serbian constitution, minorities can exercise cultural autonomy through their own National

²⁸ Gerencsér 2015, 235–240.

²⁹ Kapitány 2015, 237.

³⁰ Available: www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Slovenia/slovenia.htm (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

³¹ Göncz 2012, 103–110.

³² Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, Article 11. Available: www.us-rs.si/media/constitution.pdf (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

³³ Lipott 2013; Gerencsér 2015, 241–246.

³⁴ Kapitány 2015, 232.

³⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 83/06.

Minority Councils.³⁶ Hungarian is one of the eight official languages in Vojvodina and is used in 31 of Vojvodina's 45 municipalities.³⁷

The National Councils have the right to promote the use of the minority language, for instance, in transaction with the public authorities by proposing, for example, the translation of legal documents and laws into minority languages.³⁸ A key problem is that the sphere of authority of the Councils in the four major areas under its jurisdiction as part of the cultural autonomy, education, information, the official use of language and correspondence is not clearly defined. Thus, while the National Councils embody the expressions of the collective rights of minorities, these rights are regarded by the home state as acquired special collective rights that can be taken away easily.³⁹

The Hungarian National Council set up a monitoring team which focuses on the implementation of language rights at the municipal level and in state institutions.⁴⁰ In 2014, the monitoring team examined 271 settlements and found that while the right of communicating with the public authorities in the mother tongue is a constitutional right, it hardly happens in practice. Often official forms and signs on government buildings in Hungarian were missing. There was a shortage of interpreters which caused problems in the translation and dissemination of legal regulations in minority languages. Many times, translations of forms and documents into Hungarian were inadequate and the content of Serbian and Hungarian texts differed.⁴¹

This is related to the fact that there is no Hungarian language law school education and there are hardly Hungarian lawyers and judges.⁴² Communication with the local authorities was possible verbally if some officials spoke Hungarian. Communication in writing was difficult because of the lack of officials who knew the Hungarian language and because ethnic Hungarians themselves felt more comfortable with using the majority language as they lacked the specialized vocabulary in Hungarian. A representative of the Hungarian National Council and of the monitoring team Katinka Beretka found that most frequently, the reason for not taking advantage of the right to use the mother tongue was that Hungarian speakers were not aware of or were reluctant to exercise their rights.⁴³

³⁶ Law on the National Councils of National Minorities, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 72/2009, 20/2014 – the Decision of the Constitutional Court and 55/2014 Law on the National Councils of National Minorities, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 72/2009, 20/2014 – the Decision of the Constitutional Court and 55/2014.

³⁷ Losoncz 2015; Zuber–Muś 2013.

³⁸ Law on National Councils of National Minorities, *Official Gazette of the RS*, No.72 /2009, Article 116.

³⁹ Beretka 2015, 41–42.

⁴⁰ Beretka 2015.

⁴¹ Szerbhorváth 2015a; Szerbhorváth 2015b.

⁴² Göncz 2012.

⁴³ Beretka 2015, 41–42.

Restrictions in Slovakia and Romania

Compared to the former Yugoslav states, the policies of Slovakia and Romania are more restrictive in the area of language rights. Neither collective rights nor any form of autonomy that would allow the official status of the Hungarian language is accepted.

As the dissolution of Czechoslovakia took place in 1993, ethnic Hungarians became the largest minority in independent Slovakia making up almost 10% of the population. According to the latest 2011 census, 458,467 people declared themselves Hungarian a minus of 62,061 compared to 2001 which reduced their share in the population to 8.5% from 9.7%. Most of the ethnic Hungarians live along the Slovak–Hungarian border where they make up the absolute majority of the population.⁴⁴

The Slovak constitution does not acknowledge that minorities live in the country and declares Slovak the sole official language of Slovakia.⁴⁵ The 1990 Law on the Official Language which was adopted before Slovakia became independent came to form the basis of language policy. The Law gave priority to the Slovak language over minority languages whose usage was to be regulated by law. In 2001, Government Decree 131/2001 laid the basis for the official Slovak language policy. It lent the Language Law legitimacy by declaring the Slovak language *"a basic identifying mark" of the Slovak nation and that it was thus logical for the 'language of the state-forming nation' to be declared as the state language. Slovak language was a means for the state to uphold domestic stability in cultural, social, and political sense.*^{#46}

The 2009 Slovak State Language Law reaffirmed the primacy of the Slovak language declaring it the sole language of official communication. It imposed fines for speaking a minority language in public without providing guidelines about what is defined as "in public". This created confusion and fear among Hungarian speakers discouraging the use of the Hungarian language in public. The law stigmatized and discriminated citizens for speaking their mother tongue which violated EU norms and the treaties and covenants of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Under the law, place names can be bilingual (a larger Slovak sign and under it a Hungarian sign) road signs can only appear in Slovak. In the health care system, one can legally communicate in Hungarian but in practice it depends on the good will of the personnel.⁴⁷

The threshold of 20% means that linguistic rights can only be practiced and implemented at the local level. In the regional capitals, communication in Hungarian is not possible since the number of minority speakers is below 20%. Although the language law allows for official forms in minority languages these are only available on the local level and are not always accepted as official documents. Public notices

⁴⁴ Fiala-Butora 2012, 144.

⁴⁵ The Constitution of the Slovak Republic. Available: www.prezident.sk/upload-files/46422.pdf (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁴⁶ Vass 2015.

⁴⁷ The Forum Institute for Minority Research. Available: http://foruminst.sk/staff/fiala-janos/; www.kerekasztal.org; http://alppi.vedeckecasopisy.cz/publicFiles/00131.pdf; http://kitekinto.hu/ karpat-medence/2009/09/14/fico_semmit_sem_valtoztatunk_a_nyelvtorvenyen/#.VxO8M_mLRD8

are hardly available in minority languages and the amount of written official communication in minority languages is very low.⁴⁸

Civil associations took up the cause of language rights in Slovakia. The Pro Civis association fights for Hungarian language rights in public administration. Pro Civis found in its annual survey of bilingualism that few local governments take advantage of the right to use the mother tongue. This was even the case for local governments in Southern Slovakia in areas where the use of the mother tongue was not only a right but also an obligation. A 2016 survey of 512 settlements where minorities live, 490 had internet pages but only 218 had Hungarian content. Official forms were available on 178 home pages but only 14 provided them in Hungarian. Local government and general decrees are posted on 345 home pages of which only 8 were available in Hungarian. Even in settlements where the ratio of ethnic Hungarians was over 75% only 101 of the 177 home pages were bilingual, basic information was available in 57.63% of the cases. The ratio of official records and decrees on line was 66 Slovak and 42 Hungarian (37.29 to 23.73%). Of the 108 local government decrees none were available in Hungarian.⁴⁹

Another study published by the Center for Legal Analyses and Kalligram Foundation also identifies the low awareness of citizens' rights, and the lack of guarantee of communication in the mother tongue even in municipalities with 20% of the minority population as major problems.⁵⁰ A key problem is that public servants are not obliged to be familiar with the law on language rights and are as a rule familiar with only the Slovak official terminology and are unable to translate Slovak texts into minority languages.⁵¹

The Pro Civis association translated several laws relating to local and regional governments into Hungarian for the use of Hungarian local governments. It set up an online database of laws "törvénytár."⁵² At the same site, a dictionary offers translation of terms frequently used in public administration to help Hungarian speakers. Slovak language administrative forms are also available in Hungarian. The goal of the association is to make the use of the mother tongue the established rule in public administration in regions where Hungarians live.

Information published by the Slovak government shows that in 2012 of the 512 local governments 88% of the officials spoke Hungarian compared to 85% in 2014. Information concerning language use were visibly displayed in 77% of the offices. Office signs were bilingual in 76% of the cases. Only in 7.6% of the offices had bilingual

⁴⁸ GAHLER 2009; PALATA 2009.

⁴⁹ Nem élünk a nyelvi jogainkkal. [We do not take advantage of our language rights.] 28 July 2016. Available: www.hirek.sk/itthon/20160728114634/Nem-elunk-a-nyelvi-jogainkkal.html; https:// infogr.am/ece8150b-8379-4efd-b458-8db70d1201c8 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁵⁰ Available: www.kbdesign.sk/cla/index.htm (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁵¹ Available: www.kbdesign.sk/cla/index.htm (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁵² Available: www.procivis.sk; www.törvénytár.sk.; www.onkormanyzas.sk.; www.jogiforum.hu/ hirek/33089 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

forms and the number of bilingual documents, decrees and requests issued was 0 in 2012 and 7 in 2014 due to lack of demand. $^{\rm 53}$

Hungarian civil organizations, among others the Bilingual Southern Slovakia, and the ethnic Hungarian party Magyar Közösség Pártja (MKP), the Party of the Hungarian Community have campaigned intensively in the past five years for bilingualism in traffic signs. Civil activists put up Hungarian signs of their own which were then removed by the railway authorities.⁵⁴

Finally, a minister's decree from February 2017 allowed Hungarian place names to be placed next to the Slovak ones at 54 railway stations. In April 2017 the implementation of the decree began with the unveiling of Hungarian place names at two railway stations. These were the first tangible results of the decree which ethnic Hungarians hope will be followed by the others. Bilingual Slovakia and the MKP turned to the ethnic Hungarian Minister of Traffic Árpád Érsek, a member of the inter-ethnic party Híd–Most party, to help establish bilingualism that encompasses not only railway and traffic signs but also written and verbal communication.

Romania

In the 2011 Romanian census, 1.217 million individuals identified themselves as ethnic Hungarians which is 200,000 less than in the last census less than a decade ago. Hungarians make up roughly 6.5% of Romania's population and are spread out over a very large area many of which are not located near the Hungarian border and are often in multiethnic areas. The Hungarian enclave Szeklerland in Transylvania is located several hundred kilometres from Hungary in the centre of Romania. The Szekler, a branch of ethnic Hungarians number between 750,000 and 800,000 and make up 70 to 80% of the population in the Szekler area. In the counties of Hargita and Covászna the proportion of Hungarians is over 80% and 70%, respectively, and Hungarians make up more than half of the town or city population. In four other counties in Transylvania, ethnic Hungarians make up 20 to 50% of the population. In the remaining eight Transylvanian counties, Hungarians live in scattered communities.⁵⁵

The constitution of Romania declares that "Romania is a sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible nation state. [...] The official language is Romanian." (Article 13.)⁵⁶

⁵³ Ferenc 2016.

⁵⁴ Available: www.hirek.sk/belfold/20170421182825/Magyar-nyelvu-vasuti-helysegnevtablak-Dunaszerdahelyen-es-Komaromban.html; Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia, Bilingual Sovakia, Dvojjazyčné Južné Slovensko. Available: www.hirek.sk/itthon/20170302155932/Ketnyelvu-Del-Szlovakia-Tovabbi-12-vasutallomas-ketnyelvusitesere-van-lehetoseg.html (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁵⁵ Kapitány 2015, 228–230.

⁵⁶ The Constitution of Romania. Available: www.ccr.ro/en/constitutia-romaniei-2003 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

This aimed at strengthening the identity of Romanians and was underlined by the constitutional provision that the status of Romanian as the official language cannot be altered. (Article 152.) Under this provision, minority languages cannot be granted official status.⁵⁷ The right to use minority languages in institutions of public administration is contained in Article 120(2) of the Romanian Constitution and the usage of the mother tongue was expanded in both local and regional institutions.⁵⁸ The Constitution stipulates that "[i]n the territorial-administrative units where citizens belonging to a national minority have a significant weight, provision shall be made for the oral and written use of that national minority's language in relations with the local public administration authorities and the deconcentrated public services". (Article 120[2].)

Taking the Romanian constitution as the basis, the Romanian majority language can be described as the "political symbol of Romanian national fulfilment." Minority languages can, however, be used in specific situations which are specified by law.⁵⁹ In other words, "Romanian is viewed as the natural basic language of the Romanian state, public sphere and services, and the Romanian state also makes occasional concessions so that minority languages can also be used."⁶⁰

Romanian legislation recognizes that some Romanian citizens have cultural needs that differ from that of the majority and agrees to provide facilities to meet these needs. Under the Law on Local Public Administration 215/2001, the Hungarian language is to be used as an official language in those administrative districts in which the minority represents at least 20% of the population. (Public Administration Law [215/2001, Governmental Order 1206/2001], under the law's provisions where "the authorities of local public administration, the public institutions subordinated to these, as well as the deconcentrated public services shall assure, in rapport with these [i.e. the minorities], the use of the mother tongue, as well". [Article 19.])⁶¹

Under the legislation, public administration is to create the institutional framework for the use of the minority language both verbally and in a written form. Local and county governments are obliged to publish general decrees in minority languages and individual decrees upon request. Minority languages can be used at local and regional council meetings if one-fifth of the deputies belong to an ethnic minority. (Public Administration Law [215/2001, Governmental Order 1206/2001].) In local public administration where the ratio of the Hungarian population is higher than 20%, members of minorities can use their mother tongue and are entitled to receive an answer in Romanian and their mother tongue. [Law Article 76(2).] Local authorities are obliged to ensure that street signs and other public signs on public institutions

⁵⁷ VARGA 2006, 30.

⁵⁸ The Constitution of Romania. Available: www.ccr.ro/en/constitutia-romaniei-2003 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁵⁹ Kontra-Szilágyi 2002, 3–10.

⁶⁰ HorvÁth 2012, 176.

⁶¹ Balázs–Schwellnus 2014.

Practice shows great problems with the implementation of minority language legislation especially in written communication. Even in localities where the proportion of Hungarians exceeds 20%, it depends on the good will of the authorities whether the laws and commitments are observed. The case of the town Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș in which 42% of the population is made up of ethnic Hungarians illustrates the arbitrariness of the local authorities. The city authorities allowed only Romanian monolingual signs as street signs and signs on public buildings such as post offices, the mayor's office and police stations. In 2015, two volunteers of the Civil Commitment Movement (Cemo) Civil Elkötelezettség Mozgalom were fined by the local police 5,000 RON (1100 EUR) for installing bilingual street signs on some buildings. The local police argued that the bilingual street signs were "advertisements" whose display needed the permission of the municipality.⁶³ The same argument was used in attempts to outlaw regional symbols in Szeklerland such as the display of the Szekler flag. (See below.)

Large Hungarian communities who live in towns but do not reach the 20% threshold cannot use their mother tongue in communicating whith the authorities and have no topographic signs in Hungarian. A case in point is Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca where 50,000 Hungarians live which is 16% of the city's population according to the 2011 census. For decades Hungarians in Kolozsvár sought to have multilingual signs in the city which has a rich Hungarian, German and Romanian tradition. The civil action group Musai–Muszáj was set up two years ago in order to propagate the use of multilingual signs in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca. Musai–Muszáj launched advertising campaigns for bilingual street signs and was also present on facebook. Some 3.7 million people read its advertisements. In April 2017, the mayor of Kolozsvár/ Cluj-Napoca agreed to replace Romanian place names with trilingual ones, Latin, Romanian and Hungarian. This was a great success for the Hungarian community in the city which has for many years been asking for place names in Hungarian in accordance with Romania's commitments under the Language Charter.⁶⁴ Another civil initiative which promotes bilingualism puts up signs "Igen, tessék!" "Da, poftiti! "Yes, Please" at the entrance to shops where Hungarian is spoken. This addresses

⁶² Balázs–Schwellnus 2014.

⁶³ Available: https://dailynewshungary.com/5000-ron-fine-for-bilingual-street-signs-in-romania (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁶⁴ Available: https://kronika.ro/erdelyi-hirek/ musai-muszaj-akad-meg-tennivalo-a-valos-multikulturalitasert (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

not only ethnic Hungarians but also shops and businesses which seek to attract Hungarians in Transylvania. 65

A research team of 5 social scientists conducted a survey between May 2014 and February 2015 in 323 local governments. They found that only 52 of the 132 local governments which responded to the survey questions translate the agenda of the council meetings into Hungarian and only half of them have information in Hungarian on their home page. Only 37% were able to answer Hungarian language requests in Hungarian. While 46% of the surveyed local governments claimed that they translate their regulations into Hungarian, such translations could be found on only 6% of the home pages. Bilingual forms were available also on only 6% of the home pages despite claims by 15.4% of the home governments that they use bilingual forms.⁶⁶

The number of written Hungarian language applications that are submitted to local governments is very low. Many Hungarians are unsure what the official terminology is in Hungarian and feel that their applications will be processed more quickly if they submit them in Romanian. Even public servants who speak Hungarian prefer to receive applications in Romanian because they also feel uncertain about the usage of Hungarian terms. Often ethnic Hungarian mayors do not post information in Hungarian or even exclude Hungarian as a language of communication in public administration. The civil association Our Rights Association (Jogaink Egyesület) helps Hungarians who have difficulty understanding the Romanian legal language. It provides legal aid on a regular basis and publishes booklets which explains legal norms to Hungarian speakers.⁶⁷

The largest ethnic Hungarian party, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, RMDSZ, (Romániai Magyarok Demokratikus Szövetsége) admitted that some local government officials elected under its banner also failed to observe language rights. Under a new rule, the party introduced prior to the 2016 local elections, that elected officials must oblige themselves to promote bilingualism and can be called to account if they fail to meet their commitments.⁶⁸

In 2016, with two and a half years of delay, the Romanian Government submitted a report to the European Council concerning the fulfilment of its commitments to the Charter of Regional and Minority Languages. Hungarian organizations criticized the report for failing to mention fundamental problems of implementation of the Charter. The RMDSZ submitted its own shadow report on the question.

⁶⁵ Available: https://igentessek.ro/; www.hirek.sk/belfold/20160222172322/Ketnyelvusitokuzdelmek-a-gyakorlatban-es-a-digitalis-terben.html; Magyar civil jogvédelem Erdélyben. [Hungarian Civic Legal Defence in Transylvania.] Available: http://kronika.ro/szempont/ magyar-civil-jogvedelem-erdelyben (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁶⁶ Toró 2015; Ferenc 2016.

⁶⁷ Magyar civil jogvédelem Erdélyben. [Hungarian Civic Legal Defence in Transylvania.] Available: http://kronika.ro/szempont/magyar-civil-jogvedelem-erdelyben (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁶⁸ Available: www.maszol.ro/index.php/ belfold/67300-nyelvi-jogok-ervenyesitese-valtozast-remel-az-ujratervezest-l-az-rmdsz (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

Its chairman, Hunor Kelemen told the experts of the EC that there is a continuous and coordinated violation of minority language rights in several areas of usage. He recalled that when Romania became a member of the EU in 2007, it was no longer obliged to prove that it was promoting the language rights of minorities. Since then "in the absence of sanctions and emboldened by the certainty that the European integration was irreversible the implementation of minority rights suffered a setback." Kelemen objected that Romania failed to monitor whether the implementation of language rights was in accordance with the Charter's provisions. He reproached the Romanian state for failing to provide the financial and human resources to make the implementation of the Charter possible, this was the case for all fields but was most conspicuous in the justice system.⁶⁹

The Hungarian National Council of Transylvania and the Szekler National Council, two civic organizations which represent the interests of Hungarians in Transylvania, submitted their own shadow report. The report underlined the lack of guidelines and financial support from the Romanian Government for the implementation of minority language rights. It gave examples of ad hoc interpretations of the Charter's provisions by Romanian officials which resulted, for example, in removing bilingual signs from local government buildings. The civic association Cemo also regularly prepares shadow reports on the implementation of the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages which calls attention to violations of the Charter's provisions by the Romanian administration.⁷⁰

In Szeklerland, the display of Hungarian regional symbols such as the Szekler flag is often punished. In many cases the flag is removed by the authorities and fines are imposed for hoisting the flag claiming that the flag served commercial purposes and needed official approval.⁷¹ These measures increased the flag's popularity a great deal advancing it to a symbol of resistance toward monocultural Romania.⁷²

Caught in the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict

In Ukraine, the relationship to the large Russian minority determines the language policy and the Hungarian minority is caught in the Ukrainian–Russian conflict. The struggle around minority language use revolves around the most widely spoken languages, Ukrainian and Russian. According to the 2001 census, those with Ukrainian and Russian mother tongue make up 97.1% of the population. The largest

⁶⁹ Available: www.maszol.ro/index.php/belfold/64293-kelemen-hunor-romania-modellertek-a-kisebbsegi-jogok-be-nem-tartasaban; https://eurocom.wordpress.com/2016/05/13/ujabb-arnyekjelentest-nyujt-be-az-rmdsz-az-europa-tanacshoz-maszol-ro/ (Downloaded: 19 October 2016.)

⁷⁰ Available: http://emnt.org/archivum/admin/data/file/20170627/hnct-sznc-shadowreport_final.pdf (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁷¹ Szilágyi 2016

⁷² Available: https://444.hu/2017/01/06/toke-legyozte-a-csikszeredai-csendoralakulatotlengetheti-a-szekely-zaszlot (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

ethnic minority in the Ukraine is the Russian (17.3%) and 30% of the population have Russian as their mother tongue. 77.89% of those citizens who belong to a minority have Russian nationality. The language policy of the Ukrainian Government aims at securing the dominance of the Ukrainian language against the Russian language. Other ethnic and linguistic minorities play a marginal role. According to the 2001 census, ethnic Hungarians make up 0.3% of the total Ukrainian population.⁷³

Hungarians are, however, the largest officially recognized minority group in Subcarpathia (Transcarpathia from the Ukrainian perspective). According to the latest 2001 census 152,000 people or 12% of the total population of 1,255,000 people identified themselves as Hungarians.⁷⁴

The number of Hungarians is probably less than indicated in the census since many fled the civil war. Deteriorating economic circumstances also fuelled the emigration of ethnic Hungarians from the region.⁷⁵

While the Hungarian minority is relatively small, it is a regional national community because over 92% of the ethnic Hungarians is concentrated in 124 settlements which are located in a strip about 20 km wide along Ukraine's border with Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.⁷⁶ The level of assimilation of the minority is very low. The latest census figures show that 95.4% of the ethnic Hungarians regard their mother tongue as the language of their nationality and 60.1% stated that they only knew Hungarian.⁷⁷

While article 10 of the Ukrainian Constitution declares Ukrainian the state language, it also states that *"In Ukraine, the free development, use and protection of Russian, and other languages of national minorities of Ukraine, is guaranteed*."⁷⁸

The 2012 Law *On the Principles of the State Language Policy* created opportunities for a wider use of minority languages. The Law was an improvement compared to previous legislations that allowed room for European norms and the spirit of international legislation on language rights. Under the law, in regions where the proportion of those who speak a minority language reaches 10%, the minority language acquires the status of official language. Hungarian thus became a regional official language in Subcarpathia and could be used in administrative units (provinces, districts, cities, town and villages) as well as in public administration and judicial proceedings. The regional status of the Hungarian language provided a wider framework for Hungarian speakers to use their mother tongue and raised the prestige of the Hungarian language. This was the case even if some passages of the law are

⁷³ Ferenc–Tóth 2014, 165–174.

⁷⁴ Kapitány 2015, 236.

⁷⁵ CSERNICSKÓ-FERENC 2012, 199–236; CSERNICSKÓ 2016, 74.

⁷⁶ Ferenc 2015; Tóth 2012, 143.

⁷⁷ TANDEM 2016 – Kárpátaljai szociológiai felmérés. Available: http://bgazrt.hu/npki/ rendezvenyeink/a_tandem_2016_karpataljai_szociologiai_felmeres_eredmenyeinek_bemutatasa/; http://hodinkaintezet. uz.ua/a-tandem-2016-karpataljai-szociologiai-felmereseredmenyeinek-bemutatasa (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁷⁸ Constitutional Court of Ukraine. Available: www.ccu.gov.ua/en/doccatalog/list?currDir=12083 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

not formulated clearly and there are also ambiguities in the regulations that guide its implementation. (See for example, the controversies over the status of the Hungarian language in Csap/Chop and Beregszász/Berehove).⁷⁹

Studies that examined the reception of the law among the Hungarian population showed that legal uncertainties as well as the resistance of the local authorities hindered its implementation. In 46–53 local governments the verbal usage of the Hungarian language was close to 100% in 2010 and 2015. In 2010 almost half of the local governments refused written communication in the mother tongue. In 2015, one-quarter of the local governments hindered the implementation of minority language rights or had no information about the 2012 language law and ignored minority language rights. Many ethnic Hungarians failed to take advantage of their language rights because they feared that they would be at a disadvantage vis-á-vis the majority population, for instance, by slowing down the processing of their application or relied on mediators who filled out their forms against a fee.⁸⁰

Since 2014, there have been attempts to abolish the law and replace it with one which is more restrictive in the use of minority languages. Several draft laws were submitted to parliament to this effect. This reflected the wish of the Ukrainian political elite to establish the dominance of Ukrainian over Russian after decades of domination by Russian under the Soviet rule. The national language became an expression of Ukrainian independence and was to play a key role in the creation of the Ukrainian political nation.⁸¹

Ukrainian MPs submitted draft laws to the Ukrainian parliament on minority education that aim at ending education in the mother tongue and a draft language law which would make the use of the Ukrainian language obligatory in every field of life. Under the draft, supported by more than 30 MPs, "disrespectful behaviour towards the Ukrainian language" could be punished with criminal prosecution and imprisonment of up to three years. This evoked protest from the Hungarian Government and from ethnic Hungarians in Subcarpathia. Hungarian organizations gathered 65,000 signatures against the draft laws which they presented to the governor of Subcarpathia/Transcarpathia.⁸²

In January 2017, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (ET) adopted a resolution after a debate held on Ukraine's country report, in which the Council of Europe declares that the rights of national minorities in Ukraine must

⁷⁹ Available: https://m.nyest.hu/hirek/nem-lesz-hivatalos-nyelv-a-magyar-csapon; www.nyest.hu/ hirek/regionalis-nyelv-lett-a-magyar (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.); FERENC 2015.

⁸⁰ Ferenc 2016; Ferenc 2015; Csernicskó 2006.

⁸¹ CSERNICSKÓ 2016, 74.

⁸² Hatvanötezer aláírást gyűjtöttek Kárpátalján az ukrán nyelvtörvény ellen. [Sixty-five thousand signatures were collected in Transcarpathia against the Ukrainian language law.] Available: www.maszol.ro/index.php/ kulfold/78202-hatvanotezer-alairast-gy-jtottek-karpataljan-az-ukran-nyelvtorveny-ellen (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

not be restricted. Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szíjjártó called on the Ukrainian Government to "guarantee the rights of ethnic Hungarians living on its territory."⁸³

Conclusion

The experiences of all Hungarian minority communities which I examined show that Hungarian speakers face obstacles when they seek to use their mother tongue in communicating with the public authorities. Even in countries where legislation offers a high level of protection of linguistic rights there is a discrepancy between the laws and their implementation. The shortage of staff who speak the minority language is a common problem in all countries. There is also a discrepancy between the language rights laid down in international treaties and the extent that minorities use these rights.

The number of ethnic Hungarians who take advantage of their language rights is very low. Hungarians feel that they are second class citizens in their own homeland. The enormous loss of prestige Hungarian culture and language suffered under communism still exerts great influence on minority/majority relations. In recent years, ethnic Hungarian civil movements and parties took up the issue of language rights. They seek to induce the minority communities to take advantage of the rights that they have under existing legislation and to inform them where and how they can use their mother tongue in public administration. Information booklets, database containing the Hungarian translation of legislation, dictionaries with appropriate legal terminology help orient the Hungarian speaker.

Language rights in public administration would be greatly expanded if Hungarian was given the status of a regional language in the areas where ethnic Hungarians live in blocs.⁸⁴ This would raise the prestige of the Hungarian language and culture in the Carpathian Basin and help the survival of Hungarian communities.⁸⁵

⁸³ Hungary's Foreign Minister Expects Ukrainian Government to Protect Hungarian Minority Rights. Available: http://hungarytoday.hu/news/ hungarys-foreign-minister-expects-ukrainian-government-protect-hungarian-minorityrights-32922 (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.); NÉMETH 2017; Kopogtató: tűzzel-vassal-nyelvtörvénnyel az ország ellen. [Knocker: With fire, sword and language law against the country.] 29 January 2017. Available: www.karpatalja.ma/karpatalja/nezopont/ kopogtato-tuzzel-vassal-nyelvtorvennyel-az-orszag-ellen/ (Downloaded: 18 February 2018.)

⁸⁴ Horváth 2012, 176; Marácz 2011.

⁸⁵ Gerencsér 2015, 246.

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