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Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe

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18 Which principles help pre-empt the conflict potential of ethnic and linguistic differences?

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Ethnic, linguistic or religious differences may lead to conflict when individuals and groups compete over power, material and symbolic resources. However, language (or any component of culture) itself does not *cause* conflict. Rather it constitutes a “fault line” along which conflicts can crystallise when linguistic or cultural differences translate into incompatible political claims or unequal access to socio-economic opportunity within states. This entry focuses on the causal factors leading to the development of conflicts along ethno-linguistic lines.

What does research tell us?

The rules and practices governing language in administration, law, education, media, public signage and communication with the authorities and public service providers affect the interests and identities of people. Language is, therefore, unavoidably politicised in multilingual societies.

Conflicts between language majorities and minorities are nurtured by the logic of the territorial nation-state and the power asymmetries encoded in it. Modern nation-states, particularly since the 19th century, have almost systematically privileged ethnic majorities (“titular” nations). Majority and minority perspectives often conflict over the interpretation of realities and/or the desired model of state-minority relations.

The dynamics of conflict vary due to differences in historically formed administrative structures, power constellations and the relational position of minorities and majorities at different levels. The self-perception of many European societies as monolingual nation-states continues to shape policy choices, and even official multilingualism does not necessarily eliminate conflicts between linguistic communities.

The macro environment is not always helpful: international minority rights norms are often contested and subordinated to geopolitical interests; without a robust and common European minority rights regime, EU member states remain unaccountable for the non-implementation of minority protection commitments; and the primacy of domestic party politics often overpowers the influence of EU conditionality.

Illustration and evidence

Conflict patterns vary both among and within states. Field research in The Serbian region of Vojvodina shows that some places display harmonious co-habitation of ethnic and linguistic communities, and multilingualism in practice is reflected by almost unnoticeable shifts from one language into another (e.g. in Belo Blato/Nagyersébetlak/Biele Blato). Conversely, conflict has flared up in other areas, following the influx of a large number of Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina after the wars of the early 1990s. Manifestations of conflict included an increase in ethnically motivated incidents (graffiti, damage to private property, to religious and memorial objects, as well as verbal and physical attacks) against minorities. Generalising from these findings, and taking account of tensions observed in other contexts, we may identify several conflict-inducing processes. They are summarised in the table in the opposite page.

Policy implications

The historical multiethnic and multilingual make-up of European states should be adequately reflected in legislation. Ethno-cultural fairness and loyalty towards the common state requires a combination of group-neutral and group-sensitive regulation and policies, the inclusion of national minorities' identity in the common concepts (e.g. inclusion of their language in public institutions), and institutional guarantees for their cultural reproduction. Non-secessionist minority claim-making should be regarded as a legitimate part of contestation about the terms of political inclusion in a multiethnic democracy.

Ethnic and linguistic pluralism should be reflected in policy solutions that exploit different tiers of government (national, regional and local), fine-tune the allocation of competencies between these authorities, and build in asymmetries in favour of languages most in need of protection. Policy solutions related to multilingualism should also reflect a complementary ("additive") approach, instead of an exclusionary ("subtractive") approach, enabling the learning of the state's official language as a second language essential to employment and social mobility, while reinforcing the mother tongue as a first language essential to identity, psychological and security needs.

References and further reading

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CONFLICT-INDUCING PROCESSES IN CASES OF ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC "FAULT LINES"

Unwarranted securitization of ethnic and language issues: interpretation, by majority elites, of culturally framed minority claims as threats to state integrity; mistrust of separate minority institutions as sites of counter-state nationalism;

1. from a minority perspective, the notion of a shared identity designed by the nationalising state and the imposition of ethno-cultural neutrality and group-neutral regulation become suspect as codes for assimilation. E.g. among many other examples, Estonia, France, Greece, Romania, Slovakia
2. Violation of, restriction of the use of, or reduction of the scope of vested minority (language) rights: undisguised downgrading of the status of the language of the minority in administration, education, etc. E.g. Ukraine
3. Ethnic gerrymandering: redrawing of administrative or electoral district borders in ways that divide territorially concentrated minority population, reverse minority-majority status, and/or minimize minority communities' voting power and/or chances to enjoy minority rights. E.g. Slovakia (administrative reorganisation, 1996)
4. Contested markers of identity between majority and minority peoples coexisting on shared territory: competing efforts to associate a territory with one language and imposing an artificial territorial continuity in the marking of physical space and the operations of public institutions (possibly with an overemphasis on language as a marker of national identity over language as a means of communication). E.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia
5. Unilateral kin-state activism and extra-territorial nation-building practices: efforts to reinforce the links with the kin state in a way that downplays minorities' sense of belonging to their country of residence. E.g. Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia (vis-à-vis neighbouring states)
6. Competing nation-building efforts exposing claimed co-ethnics/co-nationals or "in-between" minorities to irreconcilable loyalty pressures. E.g. Bunjevci, Čams, Csángós, Goranci, Pomaks, Torbeši, Vlachs (South-Eastern Europe)