

Diversity and tolerance versus national homogeneity

This paper wants to put the discussion about the status of minority languages and especially of Silesian in the broader context of the debate about language and nation-state.

6 January 2005 the *Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages* has been promulgated by the then President of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski. This law clarified the way the Third Polish Republic interprets the *Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of the Council of Europe*, which was ratified by Poland in 1999.

This Act makes a clear distinction between national and ethnic minorities. Examples of the first group are Czechs, Germans, Slovaks and Jews, whereas among others Roma and Tartars are considered to belong to ethnic minorities. The languages spoken by these two groups of minorities are called minorities languages. The speakers of these languages have the right to use their language in public life, the authorities have the duty to support these languages.

Next to these minority languages the Act (art. 19.2) also recognizes a regional language, Kashubian. The rights and obligations associated with this recognition are similar to that of the minority languages (Pisarek 2011).

Although the enumeration of regional and minority languages in this Act seems to be exhaustive, there is one group which is not happy with it, since their vernacular, Silesian, is not recognized as a regional or minority language so far. Their case has been raised in Parliament a few times without success (Kamusella 2012 and Kamusella & Nomachi 2014). At the moment experts are asked to give their opinion about the possible status of Silesian.

The European Charter is a result of a long and bitter debate about the official acceptability of regional and minority languages next to national languages. To understand the problem of recognition of languages next to a national or official language it may be useful to present a brief overview of the discussion about national languages which started during the French Revolution (Barrère and Abbé Gregoire (1794) who both stressed the importance of a national language for democratic processes) and that was explicitly linked to the pursuit a homogeneous nation-state by German nationalistic philosophers such as Herder and Fichte (Haugen 1966, Hroch 1994). As a consequence of this identification of nation and language other, non-national, languages should be destroyed. However, the different European governments were hardly successful in this, which led to several violent language conflicts in the 20th century.

The Charter has been introduced to make an end to these conflicts and to celebrate linguistic diversity. However, since the national authorities may define the non-national languages of their countries, social and political appreciation and depreciation of groups play a role in the process of recognition. Non-recognition may lead to new conflicts in which the Charter often is used as support for identity politics by minorities. However, it would be much more profitable to read the Charter in the way as it was intended: as a plea for diversity, thus as a plea for tolerance by the majority.

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