Slovenian minority in Austria

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Abstract:
This paper will analyse the issue of the Slovenian minority in Austria and focus on its history, development and contemporary concerns as well as attitudes on both sides of this disputed subject. It also stresses the importance of tolerance, democracy and the respect of people’s values, which should be part of the contemporary world and especially of the European Union. If the language and culture of a minority are not adequately respected, the European Union should be concerned and act accordingly. However, in the case of the Slovenian minority this does not occur.

Keywords: Slovenia, minority, language policy, and bilingual signposts

The autochthonous Slovenian ethnic minority, which is a remnant of former Slavic groups that populated the entire south and east of today’s Austria, now lives in the south Austrian provinces of Carinthia and Styria. Although this minority has had its rights guaranteed by two international treaties – the Saint Germain Peace Treaty of 1919 and the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 – and European conventions, Austria has failed to fully implement them. The Slovenian minority in Styria is not even officially recognised, while ethnic Slovenians in Carinthia have had to fight for every benefit that should have been taken for granted. This status is also indisputably linked to the fact that the former head of the Freedom Party, who has been criticised for his xenophobic and racist statements, is currently the governor of Carinthia. Jorg Haider used the so-called bilingual signpost dispute (“Ortstafelsturm”) in the pre-elections campaign in the summer of 2006 and his actions have dramatically worsened the tensions between the two neighbouring countries. Although the economic borders have disappeared, as Slovenia became the 13th member of the Eurozone on the 1st January 2007, the cultural borders causing problems still remain.

History

Slovenes, inhabitants of the Republic of Slovenia, constitute a linguistic minority in Austria, predominantly in southern Carinthia and partly in the southern part of Styria [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006].

In the 6th century A.D. Slavs settled in the Roman province of Noricum and were called Carantanians from the 7th century onwards. In the High Middle Ages, the tribal duchy of Carantania was bilingual: German and Slovene. The language that came to be called Slovene at a later date remained the principal language of the southern part of Carinthia well into 20th century. Slovene as a written language was strongly promoted during the Reformation, particularly due to the Bible translations by P. Trubar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). The early nationalist and linguistic movement among the Slovenes initially had its centre in Carinthia where the so-called Hermagoras Brotherhood was founded in 1852 in order to disseminate Slovene literature.

Due to the rising importance of German as a progressive language of the higher class, the Slovene language group in Carinthia declined in the 19th and early 20th centuries from more than 100,000 in 1880 to approximately 82,000 in 1910 (Council of Carinthian Slovenes 2006). This development was favoured by the bilingual school system in Carinthia. Even though at least 10,000 Slovenes opted for Austria in the referendum of 1920, the First Republic was not

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favourably disposed towards minorities. During the Second World War, all Slovene organisations were dissolved and about 300 Slovene families were deported. As a result, an organised armed resistance of the Slovenes against Hitler’s Germany began. This was the only resistance movement against the Nazi regime in Austria [Council of Carinthian Slovenes 2006: 10].

After the Second World War the situation ameliorated. In October 1945, in the early days of the Second Republic, the school system was reformed. All schools in southern Carinthia were required to teach the two languages as compulsory subjects. In 1957 a Gymnasium secondary school for Slovenes was founded in Klagenfurt. However, in 1958, due to German nationalist pressure, compulsory bilingual schooling was abolished and parents had to declare whether they wanted their children to learn Slovenian at school or not. This pressure was exerted on parents to remove their children from Slovenian lessons and as a result the number of the children who attended bilingual lessons in primary schools began to fall (around 15-20%). Since the late 1980’s, however, there has been a new rise in the number, bringing it to approximately 25% (according to the statistics of 1996/7) [Busch 1997:6].

Following the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, most of Carinthia remained a part of Austria and Slovenians in the Austrian state of Carinthia were recognized as a minority and have enjoyed special rights. A recent telephone survey of 1,000 respondents indicates that the number of Slovene speakers in Carinthia amounts to 40,000. Of these 14,500 claimed to speak the language habitually as enquired in the 1991 census [European Commission 2006].

In Styria, however, the Slovenians (4,250) are not recognized as a minority and do not enjoy special rights, although the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 stated otherwise:

In administrative and judicial areas of Carinthia, Burgenland, and Styria with Slovenian, Croatian and mixed populations, the Slovenian and Croatian languages, besides German, shall be permitted as official languages. Signposts and signs in these areas shall be in the Slovenian and Croatian as well as German languages [Article 7, paragraph 3 of Austrian State Treaty].

Another legal basis of minority rights includes the Ethnic Groups Act of 1976 which was passed twenty-one years after the signing of the State Treaty. It was passed above the protest of the minority group organisation and without any consultation with the signatory powers of the State Treaty. The Yugoslavian government even sent the Austrian government an aide-memoire in which it said that making the much reduced minority rights of the Slovene and Croat minority groups dependent on the ascertaining of their numerical strength is a deviation from the spirit of the State Treaty. Slovene as a legal and administrative language was intended only for the court jurisdiction in less than half of the settlement areas [Council of Carinthian Slovenes 2006: 6,12].

None of the legal acts – the Austrian State Treaty, the Ethnic Group Act or the Constitutional Law – contain any direct guarantee of protection of the ethnic group itself, but to some extent do regulate language use. Nevertheless “the absence of any coordinated language planning and language policy in Austria very often leaves questions of language use and language planning to party politics” [Busch 2006:7]. The result is that there are numerous different laws and regulations on local and regional levels and issues such as topographic signs are in the centre of political struggle.

Currently, the problem is at the centre of attention mainly due to the topographic signposts. The Article of the State Treaty does not define the area of criteria for the setting-up of signposts, which allows different interpretations. This can vary from 94 up to 394 signposts. In July 1972, Austria adopted the Bilingual Signposts Act, which defined 205 localities in South Carinthia where bilingual signposts should be set up. The Slovenian minority was, however, dissatisfied with the status as only slightly more than a quarter of the localities in the bilingual areas were included. It also caused strong reactions among the German nationalist forces and all the bilingual signs were violently taken down after only a few nights [Information on Austrian State Treaty 2006].

The Austrian government subsequently succeeded in concluding a three-party agreement (Ethnic Minorities Act of 1976), which envisaged an Ethnic Minorities Advisory Board. The act stipulated that in areas where the Slovenian population is at least 25%, bilingual signs should be set up. The total amounted only to 92 signposts. Thus, two Slovene associations in Carinthia boycotted it (the Council of Carinthian Slovenes/Narodni svec koroških Slovencev, with Christian leanings, and the Central Association of Slovene Organisations/Zveza
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Slovenskih organizacij na Koroškem, which was committed to the traditions of the partisan fighters until 1989) [Council of Carinthian Slovenes 2006:10].

In the last 15 years, the Austrian Constitutional Court played an important part with regard to minority rights. On the basis of Constitutional Court decisions (13th December 2001 and 28th December 2005), the 25% Slovenian population requirement was reduced to a minimum of 10% for the setting up bilingual signposts [Council of Carinthian Slovenes 2006:10]. However, the federal government disregarded the Court’s decision and has been unable to fulfill its requirement until now. Thus, it has not set up the signs yet. Although at the consensus conference in 2002 the preliminary agreement on the setting up of 148 signposts was reached, the agreement failed due to the demand for a statement that this would constitute the fulfilment of the obligation. At the 2005 continuation of the consensus conference, consensus was reached only on the setting up of the 21 missing bilingual signposts stipulated by the 1977 Decree. Professor Karner presented a proposal for a staged resolution of the setting up of signposts in 2005, 2008 and 2010 and according to his proposal there would be 158 signs on Carinthia. Austria should also undertake to finance the Slovenian minority media and cultural institutions systematically. The Association of Carinthian Slovenians, however, requested the setting up of a total 394 bilingual signs, i.e. in all localities with a more than 10 percent Slovenian-speaking population. Thus, even though the new coalition government stated that it would make attempts to settle the issue by July 2007, so far there are no clear signs of future improvement [Regierungsprogramm 2007-2010: 29].

Slovenian perspective and language policy

The educational system in Austria is based on an emphasis on public schooling. Education in Slovenian is integrated into the Austrian school system. At the primary level, public schools in the bilingual area in Carinthia offer the possibility of bilingual education: German and Slovenian “function simultaneously as languages of instruction” [Busch 1997:8]. However, according to Brigitte Busch, characteristics of the public school system reach back to the times of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

School was considered as a means of homogenizing the heterogeneous population. Lessons in mother tongues of the different language groups were only introduced in the first three grades of primary schools in order to enable pupils to follow lessons in the German language as soon as possible [Busch 197:9].

Nevertheless, the education system is currently not the issue of contention. There have been several functioning bilingual kindergartens and two more are being created. The issue of Slovenian language radio has been resolved as well. Some issues such as bilingual topographic signs are, however, still open. This issue became a symbol of political disputes in the Austrian parliamentary elections in the summer of 2006. The dispute has a human dimension as well – perceptions of the Slovenian minority in Austria are not generally perceived positively. This is not only linked to historical aspects but also to the current high percentage of immigration from the former Yugoslav republics.

Regarding the historical dimension, there is an undercurrent of thinking amongst parts of the population that Slovenian involvement in the partisan war against the Nazi occupation force was a bad thing, and indeed "Tito partisan" is a not an infrequent insult hurled against members of the minority. Many Carinthians are afraid of Slovenian territorial claims, pointing to the fact that Yugoslav troops entered the state after each of the two World Wars. The current governor of Carinthia, Jörg Haider, uses this historical argument for his own benefit. He regularly “plays the Slovenian card when his popularity starts to dwindle, and indeed relies on the strong anti-Slovenian attitudes in many parts of the province for his power base” [Encyclopaedia Wikipedia 2007]. Another interesting phenomenon is that some German speakers refuse to accept the minority as Slovenians, referring to them as the so-called Windische, an ethnicity distinct from Slovenians (a claim which linguists reject on the basis that the dialect spoken is by all standards a variant of the Slovenian language).

Some Austrian authorities even suggested that Slovenia is not a party to the Austrian State Treaty. President Janez Drnovsek responded in February 23 2006 to these statements that Slovenia is an undisputed successor to the former Yugoslavia and thus party to all of its treaties. In his own words,
...the point of departure in each bilateral discussion with top Austrian politicians has been that Slovenia is a successor to the former Yugoslavia; we have always been drawing attention to the position of the Slovenian ethnic minority: we have always been working in the spirit of the Austrian State Treaty [Government public relations and media office 2006].

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia stated it regrets that the issue of bilingual topographic signs remains unresolved. It also points out that such a situation within the European Union where all languages are equal, the compromise has not been reached. The government of Slovenia fully supports the Slovenian minority representatives and for them the so-called ‘Kärner paper’ was not acceptable. The greatest discrepancies concern the ‘openness clause’, which is a key factor when it comes to ensuring the continuation of the process of setting up bilingual signs and the realisation of minority rights. The openness relates to the fact that percentages of population can rise and fall, thus, the number of bilingual signposts should be open to future development.

Concerning the Slovenian minority bodies, the Association of Carinthian Slovenians is the main institution in Carinthia that represents the needs of the Slovenian minority. Of paramount importance for this Association is the preservation of the Slovenian language and culture in Carinthia. According to this body, all Carinthian Slovenian political and cultural organisations should consider professional help on the existential issues of the national community [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006].

Recently, Slovenians have observed the increasing changes of the linguistic image of the bilingual area of Austrian Carinthia. As the Association of Carinthian Slovenians states in its position, ...

...while the number of children registered with bilingual schools and preschool institutions is, increasing encouragingly, youngsters’ knowledge of the Slovenian language is nevertheless becoming poorer. In our bilingual villages, in everyday life, the Slovenian colloquial language, dialects and written language have been disappearing [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006].

Furthermore, Carinthian Slovenians are organised in cultural and sports societies in bilingual municipalities that especially unite people who perhaps have not been interested in politics for a long time. Slovenia’s support should be intended above all for programmes that ensure the positive development of the Slovenian language and culture and that respect peaceful coexistence in our municipalities. This is especially important because they address children, youngsters and their parents who decided on bilingual education for their children. Diverse publications also belong to this category.

Concerning political affiliations, Carinthian Slovenians associate themselves with different political parties: The Social Democratic Party of Austria, the Austrian People’s Party, the Greens, the Austrian Communist Party or the Alliance for the Future of Austria and the Freedom Party of Austria and as well the Unity List, which is the only independent party of Slovenians in Carinthia. The establishment of a “national” party of Slovenians in Carinthia became necessary because the majority party in Carinthia would not allow Slovenians to take leading positions, nor did elected representatives fight strongly enough for the rights of the Slovenians in Carinthia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). In recent years more and more German-speaking Carinthians have supported the UL which is growing into a South-Carinthian regional party based on three focal points: - regional policy, language policy (equality of the Slovenian language) and neighbourhood policy (cross-border cooperation between Austria and Slovenia) [Ministry of For. Affairs 2006].

UL supports the Austrian state, governed by the rule of law. It condemns the disregard of Supreme Court decisions and questions the independence of the jurisdiction of executive power. “The actions of the Carinthian governor and relevant advisor in the case of Bleiburg/Pliberk are a dangerous precedent and a threat to the basic legal regulations of Austria”, said UL President Smrtnik, adding that Austrian citizens are also asked to support the basic regulations of the Austrian state, governed by the rule of law, since such behaviour is allowed by the Austrian Federal Government [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006].
Austrian perspective

Although the Austrian State Treaty clearly stated that “language and culture, existence and preservation of these national minorities must be respected, secured and promoted” (Article 8.1 and 2 of the Austrian Constitution), it does not seem to be the exact description of the current situation. Topographic signposts have become the main issue in the Slovenian minority struggle for the realisation of their rights. However, some Austrian politicians remain persistent in using such an issue for their own benefit. Jörg Haider’s actions in Carinthia and his demonstrative public removal of some signposts are the most obvious examples. His actions are, however, permitted and neglected not only by the Austrian political community but also by European politicians. Despite the fact that in 1999 there was attempt to warn the Austrian government to allow the coalition with the Freedom Party, judicial interpretation did not send the appropriate signal. Since the autumn of 1999, there has been a clear general tendency toward a more restricted interpretation of freedom of expression versus the increased protection of individuals against alleged libel or defamation. Many courts have been occupied by cases filed by Jörg Haider and other FPO leaders against journalists, political scientists and journals. One of these cases was a case with Professor Anton Pelinka, a leading political scientist and former chair of the Austrian Helsinki Committee, who was surprisingly found guilty by the Viennese Criminal Court for having “defamed” the character of Jörg Haider. Pelinka was fined the amount of 60,000 ATS in a case that was originally brought by Haider’s then lawyer Dieter Boehmdorfer. The basis for the conviction was Pelinka’s statement to the Italian television station RAI on May 1, 1999:

In his career, Haider has repeatedly made statements which amount to trivialising National Socialism. Once he described death camps as penal camps. On the whole, Haider is responsible for making certain National Socialist positions and certain National Socialist remarks more politically acceptable [IHF FOCUS 2006: 54].

Although Haider’s statements are allegedly close to National Socialism, disregarding the fact that both of Haider’s parents were Nazis and were involved in NSDAP, a leading political scientist acted according to the Court against the law. After the court decision, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights stated “the court is in effect helping Haider’s political programme, intimidating any citizen who tries to expose his views for what they are”. It emphasised that the ruling was inconsistent with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which has repeatedly ruled that politicians and public figures do not enjoy the same protection against criticism as private individuals. Although at the consequent case Pelinka was acquitted of the charges, the IHF noted that something was seriously wrong with the judicial interpretation of libel [IHF FOCUS 2006: 54].

Another example of a negative step from the Austrian side happened at the beginning of this year and brought another blow to the Slovenian minority. The round-the-clock radio programme, Radio dva, which had been funded by the Austrian national radio and television station ORF, was left without financial resources. The official argument for this was the difficult financial situation faced by ORF, but in fact the decision had political reasons. Reportedly, the minority radio did not get financial funds because the minority did not accept the government’s proposal for bilingual signposts [Wakounig 2006: 2].

The most recent event happened on November 22nd 2006 when the Carinthian Landeshauptmann replaced a bilingual signpost in Žvabek (Schwabegg), Austrian Carinthia, with a signpost in German, to which he attached a smaller sign in Slovenian. This had already occurred numerous times, especially before the election in the summer of 2006. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ response was indignant and they are particularly concerned since this was one of the bilingual signposts put up in May 2005 in the presence of Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel.

The above act is unacceptable, as it is contrary to the Austrian State Treaty. Article 7, Item 3, binding Austria in terms of international law to put up bilingual signposts and signs of topographic character in districts of Austrian Carinthia with Slovenian or ethnically mixed populations. Such incomprehensible acts undermine the policy of peaceful co-existence of two cultures and languages in Carinthia. Instead of promoting respect for applicable European principles and international standards in the area of the protection of the rights of ethnic communities, they create an unnecessary atmosphere of tension and intolerance. [Min. of For. Affairs 2006].
The Austrian federal authorities, however, have not condemned the act and have not restored the signpost to its former condition. This is probably due to the fact that Austria has not succeeded in setting up the new federal government and thus, it is hard to expect any action promptly. The Slovenian government expects the future Austrian government to carry on all efforts, in dialogue with the minority, towards the implementation of Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty.

Conclusion

The Slovenian minority in Austria is currently struggling in order to improve its rights and position. This has resulted from the fact that Austria was not able to fully implement national and international laws and protect the human and minority rights of its population. Currently, the main point of contention, which became a political symbol of the dispute, is bilingual signposts. This issue has not been resolved yet due to the post-election situation in Austria and the unwillingness of local and federal politicians. Austria should be conscious about the fact that its economic and political prosperity in the new European Union will partly depend on good relations with its southern neighbour Slovenia. Thus, the quality of these relations will certainly depend on Austria’s attitude towards the Slovenian minority.

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