

Conference on Minority Representation and Minority Language Rights: Origins, Experiences and Lessons to be Learned

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Minority Language Rights in Europe: from Habsburg to the Supranational Organizations

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The European language landscape is traditionally characterized by linguistic diversity. In historic and contemporary Europe the establishment of state structures have caused the creation of all sorts of national and ethnic minorities. It has been observed that their linguistic rights have been represented satisfactorily in the modern period if within the framework of the Empire or State a concessive policy towards linguistic diversity existed, i.e. a policy allowing the inclusion of minority languages. Hence, there is a strong correlation between the granting of minority language rights by the State and a policy accommodating linguistic diversity by the same State. From this it follows that minority language rights are to be studied as a sub-case of a more general policy including linguistic diversity. Note however that even in a hierarchy of languages minority languages might be at the bottom remaining without official rights. So the recognition of linguistic diversity is a necessary condition for minority language rights but not a sufficient one.

In this paper, we will study this correlation between minority language rights and multilingual policy in the European context. In fact, two types of state structures come to mind for deeper investigation. Firstly, the multilingual federal states that go beyond the monolingual nation-state dominating the paradigm of the twentieth century, starting with the late Habsburg Empire but including federal enterprises, like former Yugoslavia and Swiss. Secondly, the supranational organizations of states that came into being with the League of Nations after the First World War. At this place, we will restrict ourselves to a discussion of minority language rights within the framework of the contemporary supranational organizations in Europe, namely the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OCSE). To compare and analyze the minority language rights' regimes in both types of state structures will allow us to receive more insights into the contents, conditions, boundaries and historical developments of minority language rights in Europe.

Key words: minority language rights, national and ethnic minorities, multilingual policy, multilingual federal states, supranational organizations