

ROMANIANS FROM UKRAINE – REALPOLITIK AND IDENTITY

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Abstract: *The actions of the Russian Federation resulting in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula marked a historical moment that made the Ukrainian authorities watch more carefully the Moscow's strategy on Russian ethnics. This moment has marked the beginning of a new stage of using nationality as a soft-power instrument. In this respect, we must consider that the Russian ethnic origin, as assumed by the majority of the Crimean Peninsula's residents, was the factor that allowed the annexation of that region, after a referendum where the residents declared themselves Russian citizens and asked the Russian Federation to protect their rights. Fighting back, in the battle for Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian authorities have been taking some steps to restrain the Russian Federation's influence in the region. One of those measures consisted in the limitation of the ethnic minorities' languages use in the schools across Ukraine. Such political decision affected not only the Russian minority, but also the other ethnic minorities belonging to the neighbouring countries, including the Romanian minority. Based on these considerations, this paper aims to assess how the ban on Romanian language's use in schools would affect the preservation and affirmation of the ethnic identity of the Romanians from Ukraine.*

Keywords: *identity; nationality; multiculturalism; dialogue; Romanian minority*

1. INTRODUCTION

The assumption of Russian identity by the vast majority of the Crimea's citizens was one of the most important factors that allowed the annexation of this territory by Russia, such event occurring after a referendum where a great majority of the region's inhabitants declared they were actually Russian ethnics and asked the Russian Federation to protect them. In this context, the Ukrainian authorities enacted several measures that leave the impression of a denationalization policy in respect of all minorities.

The aim of this paper is to assess whether the actions of the Ukrainian state affected or not the preservation of the ethnic minorities from Ukraine, and particularly in respect of the preservation of ethnic identity of the Romanian minority living in the neighbouring country.

2. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN PRESERVING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ethnic nationalism and isolationism has been more and more present in Europe during the past years, after a short calm period that followed the extensive identity movements and even the armed conflicts on ethnic grounds which occurred after

the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Federal Yugoslavia. In this respect, we learn from history not to deal with the nowadays nationalism and ethnic isolationism emergence in a unitary manner. If the "mass democratic nationalisms" based on the linguistic and cultural differences from the early 19th century had mapped Europe after the Treaty of Versailles, imposing "a world of nations aware of their ethnicity and willing to speak it out", „the nationalism combined with racism" resulted in the fascism, racism and antisemitism emergence (Smith, 2002:16).

The analysis of these historic realities is tightly bound to the vexed question of the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism, some authors considering "ethnicity as a splitting process" of a nation. Also, according to Anthony Smith, "ethnicity is highly important for a proper understanding of nationalism" (Smith, 2001:57). Most of ethnic minorities' leaders are supporting the pluralism model in the disputes with the majority population, in the attempt of obtaining a "peculiar, yet equal status" for their communities, although such option still seems far away, as we can notice analysing what is currently happening in Europe.

Authors like Anthony Giddens consider that "ethnic minorities are still being perceived as a threat by many people", such fear deriving from the fact that minorities have been constantly used

as a scapegoat for any failures of the society (if we consider the Western Europe) (Giddens, 2001:260). More often the “threat” of ethnic minorities cannot be overlooked, as attributes like language, ancient history (whether real or not), religion, clothing or decorations” are very actual in the everyday life. According to Giddens, out of these identity attributes, language is the most important as “none of us invents the language we are learning in the childhood and we all are bound to the standing rules of using the linguistic method”. Language is being learned throughout the life and within the group we belong to. Self-awareness cannot be shaped without the language understanding and thereof “is required for raising awareness on our individual distinctive characteristics” (Giddens, 2001:52) - this being one of the most important steps in undertaking our own **identity**.

Eric Hobsbawm shares this opinion, considering that there were numerous attempts of setting impartial criteria for nationality or of explaining why certain groups did become nations and others did not, the criteria that grounded such claim being mainly the language, but also the territory, traditions and other criteria, whenever that was possible (Hobsbawm, 1997:8).

3. THE ROLE OF IDENTITY DIMENSION IN MOSCOW’S GEOPOLITICAL PLAY IN UKRAINE

Vladimir Putin regards „Russians and Ukrainians as the same people” such assertion highlighting the Kremlin’s policy in terms of protecting the Russian ethnics from Ukraine. In respect of Crimea, Vladimir Putin declared that the importance of this Black Sea peninsula is not defined just by geopolitics for the Russian Federation, as “the destiny of millions of Russians, millions of compatriots that needed our help and support” is at stake (Putin, 2015). Such affirmations are confirmed by the Russian National Security Strategy, a document stating that Russia has demonstrated the ability to protect the rights of compatriots abroad, reciting the existence of a Russian world and civilisation which Kremlin must defend, notwithstanding whether by such actions it harms or not the sovereignty, independence and indivisibility of other states, as it happened in Ukraine.

History of Ukraine, or Little Russia as seen by the Russians, is tightly bound to the history of the Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union, which is why the Russian public opinion rejected the existence of an independent Ukrainian state, the

Ukrainian linguistic and cultural particularities being considered a threat for the unity of the Russian Federation. While Ukraine gained independence in 1991, after the fall of Soviet Union, based on a rebirth of Ukrainian nationalism, later on Ukraine’s political class considered that “any highlight on ethnicity might be a divisive factor in the state building process” (Resler, 1997).

The truth contained hereinabove is also attested by the fact that, after the anti-Yanukovych protests in November 2013, which climaxed in the flee thereof, the Ukrainian Parliament repealed, in February 2014, the law on “*the principles of State language policy*”, such decision resulting in an escalation of inter-ethnic tensions both in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine (Matcovschi, 2014). The above-mentioned law, which had been passed in 2012, granted to other languages than Ukrainian the status of a “regional language” in the areas where the members of ethnic communities represented more than 10% of the population, Russian thus becoming a regional language in 13 out of 27 regions of Ukraine. Consequently, invoking the risk of losing the Russian identity for the Crimean population, the members of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea voted the scheduling of a referendum on the region’s statute and its secession from Ukraine, on March 2014, followed by the annexation to the Russian Federation (Matcovschi, 2014). In respect of the newly occurred position, also given the evolution of the ethnic conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian authorities considered further actions to limit the Russian influence, one of which being the ban on the use of the language of ethnic minorities in Ukrainian schools.

4. USE OF ROMANIAN LANGUAGE BY THE ROMANIAN MINORITY IN UKRAINE – FIGHTING FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY?

Romania’s position, at the confluence of the geopolitical interests of the Eastern and Western Europe, corroborated with the Russian neighbouring in its Eastern part, caused compact groups of Romanians to remain outside the national territory, Ukraine being the country with the largest historical community of Romanian ethnics. An incursion to the history of Romanian schools and communities from Ukraine (geographically located in Transcarpathia – historical Maramureș, Bucovina, Southern Basarabia, Odessa region, the area between Dniester and Bug) reveals that the national identity

preserving process was an extremely stiff one for them, despite all bilateral treaties and agreements.

Following the Trianon Treaty, Czechoslovakia received several communes in Transcarpathia area, located on the right bank of Tisa, inhabited almost exclusively by Romanians: Apșa de Jos (Nizni Apșa), Apșa de Mijloc (Stredni Apșa), Biserica Albă (Bila Cirkev) and Slatina (Selo Slatina). Therefore, the total number of Romanians from Czechoslovakia was around 15,000 persons, the official Czechoslovakian statistic reporting, in 1920, that there were 10,810 Romanians who kept alive their national consciousness, language, apparel and customs. The Czechoslovakian state agreed to the establishment and maintenance of 4 primary schools with 20 teachers for the Romanian population, the entire teaching being carried out in Romanian (Blenche, 1935:79-80).

In Bucovina, the national consciousness had developed, as the Austrian Empire observed the nations' right to ethnic identity. An important Romanian cultural centre grew at Cernăuți and the population in this area participated actively to the actions meant to raise awareness on national consciousness (Nistor, 1938:21-22). Southern Basarabia came back inside the borders of Moldova Princedom in 1856, after the defeat of the Russian Empire in the Crimean War, the inhabitants thereof participating to the process of Romanian identity creation, as the region was an integrant part of the United princedoms since 1859, and subsequently belonged to Romanian Kingdom, according to the Constitution published on the 1st of July 1866.

Unfortunately, the conquest of Romanian independence towards the Ottoman Empire resulted again in the loss of the territory between Danube and Dniester in favour of the Russian Empire, Russia aiming to regain geopolitical influence in the region. Later on, the presence of a numerous Romanian communities on the Ukrainian area represented the grounds for the establishment of the Autonomous Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, in October 1924, at the Eastern border of Romania. After the annexation of Basarabia to USSR, the Romanian schools remained functional both in Moldavian soviet republic and in Ukraine, writing in Cyrillic, until the 90's when the Soviet Union broke up (Heitmann, 2014:74).

After 1944, in Ukraine were active 114 schools teaching in Romanian, located in Transcarpathia, North Bucovina, North Basarabia and South Basarabia, (Cubreacov, 2015). After the Ukraine's declaration of independence, there were 86

Romanian schools in 1999, decreasing to 77 in 2010 (Broască, 2018).

In 2012, Ukraine had adopted the law "on the principles of State language policy" which recognized the status of Romanian as a regional language in the areas where Romanians represented more than 10% of the population. This situation was changed by the article 7 of the Ukraine's Education Act, promulgated in September 2017, which affects the Romanian minority from Ukraine, particularly that from Cernăuți region, where Romanian had a "regional language" statute as well, and the "Moldavian" language from Odessa region (Southern Basarabia). Practically, this law transforms Romanian schools into bilingual schools, provides that the persons belonging to the national minorities in Ukraine may study the minority's language at the pre-school, primary and secondary school only together with the state's official language (Matcovschi, 2014).

The first stage of this reform wanted that, starting on 1 September 2018, the Romanian teaching should be made only for the primary school (1st – 4th grades). Such restriction of the minorities' right to learn in their own language in Ukraine resulted in a postponement of the visit of the Romanian President in Ukraine, scheduled for October 2017. Also, the Parliament from Bucharest has adopted, on September 2017, the „Declaration on the amendment of the Ukraine's Education Act”, establishing at the same time a delegation to visit Ukraine in order to discuss with the Kiev authorities such occurred situation.

Other actions on this issue was the visits of the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs in Romania and Hungary and, respectively, of the Romanian Minister of Education in Ukraine in October 2017, followed by the talks on the education law in Ukraine from the Parliamentary Meeting of the European Council, on December 2017. Moreover, the representatives of ethnic minorities from Ukraine sent a notification to the Venice Commission, on November 2017, emphasizing the negative impact that the enforcement of the above-mentioned act would have on the preservation of ethnic minorities' identity in the neighbouring country. Following the decision of the Venice Commission from December 2017, which states that such provisions of the Ukrainian Education Act does not observe the minorities' rights, The Ministry of Education and Science from Ukraine extended until 2023 the transition period for the implementation of the "language article" from the new Ukrainian Education Act (Brândușă, 2018).

The new Ukrainian Education Act provides a step-by-step implementation of the new system and, at the same time the replacement of the courses taught in Romanian with disciplines to be taught in Ukrainian. Also, it is worth mentioning that, in March 2018, the Ukrainian Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the law “on the principles of State language policy” adopted in 2012, which recognized the status of Romanian as a regional language in the areas where Romanians represented more than 10% of the population.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The nationalist and identity-based policies of the Ukrainian state aiming to safeguard and save its own identity against Russia’s aggressions, from the Ukrainian identity preservation perspective, affected indirectly the Romanian community living in the neighboring state. The actions of the Ukrainian state following the enforcement of the Education Act affect the right of Romanian ethnics to study in their mother-tongue in the schools from Ukraine, which violates the international conventions on human rights and the bilateral treaties between Romania and Ukraine.

From the analysis of the Ukrainian state’s policies on the Romanian community, in terms of the role of language and culture factors, we can see that it affects the affirmation of the ethnic identity as a value of multiculturalism, which is largely promoted within the European Union.

The necessity of providing security in terms of safeguarding the rights of the Romanians from the neighbouring areas entails an inter-disciplinary approach of this issue and setting new priorities of the state’s demarches by the connection of bilateral relationships with the states where Romanian communities exist from in terms of reciprocity and by enforcing European and international laws.

Notwithstanding those communities or the period they emerged, the safeguarding of cultural and ethnic identity is a moral duty towards the past and an obligation for the future, each of these communities being actively involved, either directly or indirectly, in the promotion of national values and of the state where they are located, facilitating the relations between the host state and the origin state.

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