Words in Space and Time

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Isomorphism of Language, Nation, and State in Central Europe, 1931

After the Great War the Allies transformed Central Europe in accordance with ethnolinguistic nationalism's principle of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state. In 1910 (Map 14), there were only three isomorphic polities in this region, namely, Bulgaria, Norway, and Romania. In 1918, when the political shape of the region was in flux, as many as five further nation-states joined the isomorphic club, that is, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, for a total of eight countries. German-Austria and Germany might have joined this group of fully isomorphic nation-states had the Allies not banned any union between these two countries. In addition, Vienna was required to drop the adjective “German” from the country’s preferred name. Obviously, even if the Allies had not stood in the way of Vienna’s and Berlin’s desire of unification after 1918, the official use of German in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Luxembourg would have continued to undermine the status of full ethnolinguistic normative isomorphism for such a hypothetical common “Greater German” (Großdeutsch) nation-state of Germany and Austria.

Interwar Greece and Turkey found themselves in a similar situation of near isomorphism. Only in Greece, Greek was the sole official and national language, as was Turkish in Turkey. But the isomorphic status of both nation-states was undermined by the fact that Greek was employed as a co-official language in Italy’s Aegean Islands and the British colony of Cyprus. Likewise, in Cyprus, Turkish was in co-official use, alongside English and Greek. In 1924, the isomorphic status of Poland was cancelled by the adoption of Polish as a co-official language in quadrilingual Soviet Belarus (Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic), side by side with Belarusian, Russian, and Yiddish. Uniquely in interwar Europe, Soviet Belarus was an officially tri-scriptal country, where Cyrillic was used for writing and publishing in Belarusian and Russian, the Hebrew script for the same in the case of Yiddish, while the Latin alphabet for Polish. The founding of a Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, in the southwestern corner of Soviet Ukraine could have deprived Romania of its isomorphic status of long standing. However, the Soviet authorities dubbed the autonomous republic’s Cyrillic-based ethnic Einzelsprache “Moldavian” in order to distance it from Romania’s national and official language of Romanian. This name was retained for Moldavian, even though in 1932 this Einzelsprache was Latinized, making Moldavian largely indistinguishable from Romanian, but for some lexical Sovietisms. The 1938 reintroduction of Cyrillic for writing and publish-
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As “Yugoslavian.” At this moment, for all practical reasons, Yugoslavia became a fully isomorphic nation-state. But the sociopolitical reality on the ground was even more complicated than in Czechoslovakia. In statistics and administration, the two national categories of Serbo-Croats and Slovenes were in use, instead of a single category of Yugoslavs. The Slovenian variety of Serbocroatoslovenian was used in Drava (today’s Slovenia), the Latin alphabet-based Serbo-Croatian variety (“Croatian”) of this language in the historically Croatian area of Yugoslavia and in Bosnia (that is, in Drina, Littoral, Sava, and Vrbas), while the Cyrillic-based Serbo-Croatian (“Serbian”) variety of Serbocroatoslovenian on the territory of pre-1918 Montenegro and Serbia (that is, in Danube, Morava, Zeta, and Vardar). Numerous Croatian parties questioned the project of making Yugoslavia into a unitary ethnolinguistic nation-state, which they interpreted as identical with the imperial project of Greater Serbia. Hence, these parties pushed for a separate Croatian language and nation. Their wish was tentatively granted in 1939, when an autonomous Banovina of Croatia was founded. Two years later the ravages of World War Two reached Yugoslavia; the Axis powers and their allies attacked Yugoslavia, which subsequently was partitioned among Albania, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Montenegro. The late interwar Banovina of Croatia and Bosnia were made into a wartime nation-state, officially named the Independent State of Croatia.

Albania, founded in 1912, was the first-ever straightforwardly ethnolinguistic nation-state in the Balkans. It was internationally recognized a year later, in 1913. Following multiple occupations by Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, France, Italy, Montenegro, and Serbia during the Great War and in its immediate aftermath, Albania was recreated as a fully isomorphic nation-state in the interwar period. The status of full isomorphism was retained, because despite the sizeable Albanian minority in southwestern Yugoslavia (or today’s Kosovo), no official status was granted to the Albanian language in this country during the interwar period. Belgrade and Ankara entered agreements that provided for “transfer” (that is, expulsion) of Turks from Yugoslavia to Turkey (see Map 19b). In reality, each non-Slav Muslim was counted as a “Turk.” The majority of such “Turks” were Albanians who, despite Tirana’s protests, were expelled to Turkey rather than to Albania. From the Yugoslav point of view, Turkey was located beyond the “buffer” of Bulgaria and Greece, while Albania, with a growing population could turn out to be a potential geostrategic threat if the country’s population became strongly anti-Yugoslav. The arrival of tens of thousands of expellees from southern Yugoslavia to Albania would have surely radicalized the Albanians’ stance toward Belgrade overnight.

No similar challenges to the isomorphic status were observed in the interwar Baltic nation-states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A certain exception to this rule was Latvia with its legal recognition and protection for the Latgalian language in the easternmost region of Latgalia (Latgale) on the border with the Soviet Union. However, rather than a separate Einzelsprache in its own right, Latgalian was construed as a “historical variant” of the Latvian language. Hence, in practice, in Latvia, in emulation of the Norwegian and Czechoslovak examples, Latvian was construed as consisting of two varieties, namely the national and leading one of Latvian and the historical and regional one of Latgalian. But this officially composite character of Latvian was short lived since this recognition was accorded to Latgalian only between 1920 and 1934. Afterward, from the legislative and political vantage point, Latvian became a unitary national and official language, like Estonian in neighboring Estonia, and Lithuanian in Lithuania.