Words in Space and Time

Kamusella, Tomasz

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In the late communist period, there were merely three nation-states in Central Europe fulfilling all the requirements of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state, namely, Bulgaria, Norway, and Poland (Map 31). However, most of the region’s polities strove to meet the strict criteria of this isomorphism as dictated by the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism. In the Soviet bloc the non-national ideology of communism had not be an obstacle to this goal since 1956, when national communism had replaced stalinist internationalism. The subsequent fall of communism and the Soviet bloc allowed for a swift spread of the full normative isomorphism across Central Europe.

In 1990, as a foreplay to the prolonged breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the internal structure of Serbia was unified and centralized, while at the level of ideology, socialism (communism) was replaced with ethnolinguistic nationalism. As a result, the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo and the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were renamed as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, respectively. The adjective “socialist” vanished from the provinces’ names, and in the case of Kosovo the (historically) Serbian character of this province was emphasized by adding to its official moniker the indubitably Serbian name of the historic region of Metohija. From the legal perspective, both provinces’ status as entities of the federation was rescinded, and the co-official use of Albanian in Kosovo, alongside Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, and Rusyn in Vojvodina, discontinued. The autonomous status of Kosovo and Vojvodina was limited to the Serbian boundaries and made purely administrative in the interest of building an ethnolinguistically homogenous nation-state of Serbia.

However, in the context of Central Europe, the decommunization of Albanian, Hungarian, and Romanian in Serbia and Yugoslavia reinstated the full isomorphic status in the cases of the nation-states of Albania, Hungary, and Romania. In the late 1990 there were already six fully isomorphic national polities in Central Europe, that is, Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Norway, Poland, and Romania. In 1991, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia declared independence. The two latter countries had enjoyed their own official and national Einzelsprachen of Macedonian and Slovenian within federal Yugoslavia, hence, upon independence, they immediately achieved the full normative isomorphism, contributing to the further increase in the number of Central Europe’s isomorphic polities, now numbering eight. The subsequent wars in Croatia and Bosnia, the founding of ethnically Serbian republics in both polities and the de facto ethnoreligious partition of Bosnia prevented both states from meeting the criteria of the normative isomorphism.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union split along the administrative borders of its union-cum-national republics. All the Soviet successor nation-states declared their respective national languages as official, meaning that ethnolinguistic nationalism’s principle of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state became the norm of statehood creation, legitimation, and maintenance across the post-Soviet space, from Belarus to Vladivostok and from Estonia to Turkmenistan. In the case of Central Europe, Belarus with Belarusian, Estonia with Estonian, Latvia with Latvian, Lithuania with Lithuanian, and Ukraine with Ukrainian became members of the isomorphic club, now with thirteen members. This was not the case of independent Moldova, however, because in 1989, still in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Romanian-style Latin alphabet superseded Cyrillic for writing Moldavian, and this Einzelsprache was renamed Romanian. Hence, when the Moldavian SSR gained independence and became the nation-state of Moldova in 1991, this fact nullified Romania’s full isomorphic status, bringing down the number of the isomorphic nation-states by one, to twelve. Also in 1991, autonomy was returned to Crimea, which became the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, with Crimean Tatar, Russian, and Ukrainian as the official languages. This event nullified Ukraine’s full isomorphic status, decreasing the number of Central Europe’s isomorphic polities to eleven.

In 1995, the post-Yugoslav wars in Bosnia and Croatia were concluded. The Serbian republics were liquidated in Croatia and Croatian was declared the country’s sole official and national language. A similar development in the sphere of language politics took place in Bosnia, where Bosnian was declared as the polity’s (almost) eponymous official and national language. But Bosnia is an ethnic federation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with Bosnian and Croatian as the official languages for Muslim Bosniaks and Catholic Croats, respectively, and of the Republika Srpska with Serbian as its official language for Orthodox Serbs. Hence, Bosnia’s official trilingualism prevented Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia (that parted ways with Montenegro in 2006) from achieving the full normative isomorphism. But politicians sought to reinvent these three countries’ inhabitants as ethnolinguistic nations...
of Bosnians (Bosniaks), Croats, and Serbs, which necessitated splitting the Serbo-Croatian language into Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. Finally, in its second year of independence, 2007, Montenegro declared Montenegrin as its official and national language. Subsequently, Montenegro became a fully isomorphic nation-state.

Meanwhile, after the civil war in 1992, and the separation of the pro-Russian cast of the country, made into the de facto polity of Transnistria, Moldova abandoned the divisive project of any union with Romania, and in 1994 the country’s official and national language was renamed Moldovan. In this way, the full isomorphic status was returned to Romania, but on account of Transnistria with its three co-official languages of Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian, Moldova remained a near-isomorphic polity. The following year, in 1995, Belarus lost full isomorphic status due to the introduction of Russian as a co-official language, which became the country’s de facto leading language at the expense of the marginalized official and national Einstelzsprache of Belarusian. In 1993, the non-national ethnic federation of Czechoslovakia broke up yielding the successor nation-states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with Czech and Slovak as their respective national and official languages. Both polities became fully isomorphic. As a result, before the introduction of Russian in Belarus, there were fourteen fully isomorphic nation-states in Central Europe: Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 1995, Belarus dropped out of the club, while in 2007 Montenegro joined it, so the overall tally remained unchanged.

Belgrade’s 1998–1999 ethnic cleansing of Kosovo’s Albanians was followed by the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia and Montenegro (then both constituting the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, before it became a State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003), which allowed for the largely unprecedented return of the majority of expellees in the summer of 1999. Afterward, Kosovo found itself under international protection before it was granted independence in 2008, which entailed the acceptance of both Albanian and Serbian as the new country’s official languages. This decision deprived Albania of full isomorphic status, yielding the 2009 situation presented in Map 36, which registers thirteen fully isomorphic national polities.

Meanwhile, the ethnolinguistically defined autonomous status was returned to Serbia’s Vojvodina in 2008, when Kosovo gained independence. However, in practice, the return of Hungarian, Rusyn, Slovak, and Romanian to the province’s administration, alongside the post-Serbo-Croatian Einstelzsprache of Croatian, was not complete before 2010, while the first elections under this new autonomous regime took place only two years later, in 2012. These developments nullified the full isomorphic status in the case of Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania, pushing down the membership of the isomorphic club to ten polities. In 2014, in blatant breach of the Helsinki Final Accord, Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed the latter country’s Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In reaction Ukraine reinforced the legally enshrined position of Ukrainian as the country’s sole official and national language in order to prevent a Belarusian scenario, or any co-officialization of Russian that would marginalize Ukrainian overnight. Two years earlier, in 2012, a Belarusian scenario of this kind had been attempted in Latvia, but three-quarters of the votes in the respective referendum had been cast against making Russian co-official in this country.

Although not a single European country recognizes Russia’s illegal annexation (not even Belarus, which together with Russia formed a common Union State in 1996), de facto, Ukraine became almost a fully isomorphic nation-state but for the tenuous complication of the co-official use of Ukrainian in Transnistria. Interestingly, despite its non-isomorphic character, as a country with numerous official languages (between fifteen and thirty-five, depending which of several differing statuses is considered as official) employed in twenty-two national republics, in 2014, the Duma (Russian Parliament) adopted a new citizenship law that offers swift naturalization to all Russian native-speakers. As a result, Russianness has been equated with the Russian language in a standard fashion of Central Europe’s ethnolinguistic nationalism. However, in this case the ideology seems to have become part of resurgent Russia’s imperial package, for instance, to extend its power and influence to Israel, where 15 percent of the population, or 1.2 million people, are native Russian-speakers.

The situation of the spread and observance of the normative isomorphism of language, nation and state may look different yet again, should the fact of the eastward enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 1995, 2004, 2007, and 2013 be taken into account. By definition the European Union is a multilingual organization-cum-polity with twenty-eight member states and twenty-four official languages. Should membership in the polyglot EU be seen as abolishing the full normative isomorphism of its member states, then Central Europe’s isomorphic club would now (in 2018) be limited to a paltry three nation-states, namely, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Norway. Nevertheless, ethnolinguistic nationalism remains Central Europe’s sole leading ideology of statehood creation, legitimation, and maintenance. After Russia threw in its political lot with ethnolinguistic nationalism in 2014, Europe’s sole ideologically non-ethnolinguistic polities are the autonomous multinational republic of Mount Athos, San Marino and the Vatican City State, with the combined population of 36,000.

Unsurprisingly, given the continuing, and presently unparalleled influence of ethnolinguistic nationalism, this ideology has mainly informed the current rise of anti-establishment and anti-EU populism across Central Europe since 2015, often leading to anti-Semitic, anti-Tsigan, and xenophobic excesses. Typically, the unwanted Other is defined as a speaker of a non-national (foreign) Einstelzsprache. A century after replacing Central Europe’s empires and non-national polities with ethnolinguistic nation-states in the wake of World War One, despite half a century of the overbearing existence of the non-national Soviet Bloc and a quarter of a century of the presence of the similarly non-national European Union from Helsinki to Athens, and from Berlin to Bucharest, the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism rules supreme across the region. It continues to shape the inhabitants’ ideas about what
legitimate ("normal") statehood and politics are about, while the majority of Central Europe’s politicians unreflectively concede and conform to the ideology’s requirements. They follow the tenets of ethnolinguistic nationalism as long as this secures votes, notwithstanding the possibility of flaring up internal and even international conflicts. It appears that in the interest of a short-term electoral gain, most present-day politicians are ready to abandon the postwar moral compass of doing politics in such a way that peace and stability would be ensured and fortified for all across the entire continent of Europe.

Are we to fast forward back to the past, to the 1930s of national egoisms, anti-Semitism, anti-Tsiganism, xenophobia, repressions, censorship, dictatorships, and totalitarianism? Are continent-wide war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide around the corner, again? I hope not. I would sincerely like to be mistaken in this most worrying conclusion.