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Unity, Brotherhood and Manipulation

Language and Minorities in Yugoslavia

Viewed as a mere means of communication, language has no intrinsic value; as an indicator of cultural conflict, however, it can become a political issue.

Yugoslavia is the first Socialist nation in which language emerged as an issue. This happened during the 1970-71 Croatian upheavals, culminating in the forceful removal of the republic's top Communist leadership. The intensification of regional ethnic identity in modern Yugoslavia brought to the surface linguistic and cultural differences that Tito long ago declared had been "settled along the lines of Lenin's teachings." Social scientists tell us that language has no intrinsic value as a political goal, but is rather an indicator of cohesiveness in multiethnic communities. My attempt is somewhat different: to see what language can tell us about basic political goals pursued by various elites. My concern is the use of language in domestic politics, without any intent to underestimate its significance as an instrument of foreign policy.

Constitutionally defined as a federation of "voluntarily united nations and national minorities," Yugoslavia is "based on the power of the people and in accordance with principles of equality among various ethnic groups." One of the rights guaranteed the ethnic groups is the use of their own languages and scripts in all forms of communication and cultural expressions. There is no official language defined as such in the constitution, even

though the variant known as Serbo-Croatian is used by the federal government. Spoken by almost four-fifths of the population, Serbo-Croatian is viewed as the de facto means of communication by the vast majority of the Yugoslav people. Its knowledge is essential for any social or political advancement. In itself, this contradicts theoretical interpretations of language.

Socialist theoreticians traditionally viewed language as only one of the characteristics that could be used to identify a nation or national minority. Other characteristics that in their view are equally valid in differentiating ethnic groups and in attributing to them the title of nation or national minority are culture, religion, or race–all of which are determined by economic relations. There is a practical application of this claim in Yugoslavia. For example, the Muslim religion (not the Serbo-Croatian language) makes Bosnia-Hercegovina a nation, but culture and tradition distinguish the Montenegrins, even though they share the same religion and language with the Serbs. A combination of religion, language, and race characterizes the Albanians, an ethnic minority, while only language has been stressed as the main differentiating element for the Macedonians.

For many years after World War II, Yugoslav political and intellectual elites viewed language as a mere means of communication. As such, language has no intrinsic value and is overshadowed in importance by the cultural content it expresses. The Communist elites of Yugoslavia argue that language cannot be a source of conflict among the various ethnic groups, which are to be fused together by a new value system. Like the nation, language reflects objective material conditions; its significance would diminish when nations are fused into a higher Socialist community. Prior to that linguistic differences will exist, but they will only be nonantagonistic ones.

The Communist party of Yugoslavia—the norm-setting elite—committed itself to guarantee the rights of nations and national minorities to use their own languages and scripts. This commitment was made as early as 1943 and had a political objective: it was one of the incentives offered to minorities by Tito in order to gain their support in the struggle against the German occupiers and his domestic class enemies. Taking into consideration the geographic concentration of ethnic groups, the postwar Yugoslav leadership divided the country into six republics and two autonomous regions. The republics were to exercise authority over linguistic and educational matters and to contribute in the creation of a new society. The Communist party (renamed the Yugoslav League of Communists in 1953) was to be the unifying force and the vanguard of the masses in their road toward a Socialist community.

There were, however, contradictions in the party's state policies on linguistic matters and their application. The constitution guaranteed the right of national minorities to use their language and scripts, while at the same time party spokesmen urged them to abandon their local "primitive ethnic identity" and share in the cultural treasures of their "brothers." In practice, this meant that linguistic minorities had to learn Serbo-Croatian, the dominant means of cultural expression. Cultural fusion was, therefore, a de facto party policy that paraded under the slogan of unity and brotherhood. This policy was the brainchild of Edward Kardjel, who produced several theoretical works on the Socialist conception of nation, culture, and linguistics and offered Yugoslavism as an alternative to local "primitive nationalism." Yugoslavism, according to Kardjel, wwas the only ethnic ideology not in contradiction with the principles of unity and brotherhood or Marxism-Leninism. If accepted by all ethnic groups, it could be a major step in the creation of a community in which "language and national culture become secondary."

The policies of unity and brotherhood and the higher form of nationalism (Yugoslavism) left serious doubts in many circles. Questions were raised by intellectual elites and academics from all republics concerning their meaning, above all concerning the methods envisaged for their implementation by the party and the state. Yugoslavism, in particular, had acquired a negative meaning during the interwar period, and Croat intellectuals viewed the concept as another Serbian attempt to politically dominate them and other ethnic groups.

The Novi Sad Gathering

To sort out misunderstandings, a conference of intellectuals, writers, and artists was convened in the neutral city of Novi Sad. Its purpose was to discuss the desirable areas of cultural unity and to identify the potential problems to be faced by those who sought to fuse a new culture. Prior to the Novi Sad gathering, the Assembly of Cultural Educational League of Yugoslavia (ACELY) was formed with the explicit purpose of coordinating exchanges among ethnic elites and cultural circles. Often discussed by members of ACELY was the waste incurred by the state in publishing textbooks separately for the various republics, either in Serbian (Cyril alphabet) or Croat (Latin alphabet), when they could have been published jointly in the Serbo-Croat language.

Given the commitment of the party and the constitution that every nationality could use its own scripts and languages, the question arose whether Croat and Serbian could be considered one and the same language. This was essentially the subject of the Novi Sad conference. Because they use the same vocabulary and have the same structure, the two languages are fundamentally the same. During the period of agitation for the union of Croatia with Serbia (1870-1914), efforts were made by Croat literary people to expel Western (primarily Ger-

man) words from their language in order to reinforce their national similarities with the Serbs. However, given the fact that significant literary wealth has been produced by Croat intellectuals using the Latin alphabet, it would have been impractical, if not impossible, to abandon the alphabet and adopt the Cyrillic (used by the Serbs) when they entered the union at the end of World War I. They retained the alphabet and have adopted the then Serbian slogan of unity.

The experience of the Croats between the two wars raised suspicions about the motives of those who spoke of unity again. This term had acquired a negative connotation among the Croats not easily erased by party proclamations or constitutional guarantees. During the interwar period it came to signify cultural assimilation and Serbian domination. Similar fears were expressed during the Novi Sad gathering but were brushed aside by promises of Socialist consciousness and the absence of exploitation by the Serbian bourgeoisie.

Under existing political centralization and the still-prevailing Stalinism in Yugoslavia, the Novi Sad cultural gathering produced the desired (on the part of the party) results. The Serbian, Croatian, and Montenegrin languages were declared one and the same, and a commission was formed to produce a dictionary, which was put into use in 1960. This party-inspired action did not seriously alter the cultural patterns of the three republics. Linguistic differences among them were minimal (almost none between Serbia and Montenegro) and cooperation in cultural and scientific affairs lasted for many decades. The Novi Sad linguistic decisions had a direct impact on national minorities residing within each republic. They were expected to abandon their "narrow ethnicity" and learn the language of the larger groups in order to benefit from their culture. To facilitate the learning of majority languages, minority schools within the republics merged with the schools of the dominant ethnic group. This meant that Serbians residing in Croatia were to use the Latin alphabet, while Croats residing in Serbia were also expected to accept the Cyrillic scripts.

Cultural vs. National Unity

During the period of emphasis on the uniformity of the Serbo-Croat language, however, the Macedonian and Slovene languages were promoted as distinct (which, in fact, they are), and efforts were made to preserve the unique local cultures of these republics. This was an apparent contradiction, but it was a useful one for foreign policy objectives. Preferential treatment was accorded the Macedonian and Slovene languages, because they were supportive of the ethnic claims of Yugoslavia vis-à-vis Bulgaria-Greece and Austria-Hungary. Macedonians and Slovenes are divided with neighboring countries (Austria and Hungary in the first case, and Greece and Bulgaria in the second). Language, then, is a confirmation of their kinship and of their desire to unite with their kinsmen. The linguistic policy followed by the League of Yugoslav Communists in the Macedonian and Slovenian cases was contradictory to unofficial policies toward the remaining ethnic groups. For the remainder of the population, "unity and brotherhood" and "sharing of culture" by means of Serbo-Croatian was the unwritten linguistic policy between 1945 and 1964. In the case of Slovenia and Macedonia, the strengthening of their linguistic identity was the practice, since in both cases language was the key characteristic of their nationhood.

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The linguistic politics of the Yugoslav Communist elites, which aimed at the creation of a uniform Socialist culture, came under criticism when political and economic decentralization was introduced in 1959. After the Eighth Congress of the League of Yugoslav Communists (1964), the whole idea of unity was denounced by non-Serbian elites and even non-Serbian party leaders. As a result of criticism, in a special Plenum of the Central Committee in 1966 (the Brioni Plenum), "unity and brotherhood" became a suspect slogan and unitarianism was defined as a harmful form of nationalism. The Serbians, the major proponents of unity, were accused of misusing its meaning to their own advantage. Arising immediately after the decision by Tito and his colleagues to federalize the party and to introduce market laws in the economy, anti-unitarianism became a new faith among the academic elites. A favorite topic after 1966 was linguistics, culture, ethnicity, and the new Yugoslav reality.

Cultural unity became synonymous with unitarian nationalism. The Novi Sad agreement had concluded that Serbo-Croatian was the best vehicle for the dissemination of Socialist culture. Slovenia, a culturally advanced republic, did not object to the designation of that language as a cultural vehicle because the party did not wish to expand the use of the language there. As a matter of fact, Slovenia was left alone to promote good will with the Slovenes on the other side of the borders (Austria and Hungary). But in the south, Bosnia-Hercegovina and Kosovo—two areas subjected to pressures to adopt the dominant culture—suffered ethnic repression. When attacks on unitarianism became fashionable after 1966, elites of these two regions seized the opportunity to promote their national identity. In the case of the Albanians, national identity meant emphasis in the use

of their language, demands for an expanded curriculum in Albanian at the University of Prishtina, and a reduction in the number of Serbs studying there.

When confronted with the technical problem of the unavailability of textbooks in the Albanian language, party elites offered a solution in the form of a demand: the government should import textbooks from Tirana. This is currently done by the Yugoslav government. But the Albanians did not stop there. There were numerous demands that their territory be recognized as a republic because they are a linguistically distinct nation, larger than at least two other republics in population. Mahmut Bakali, a young and locally powerful party leader of the Albanian region, asked for more automony, more books in Albanian, and more jobs for the people he represented. When criticized for being a "narrow" nationalist, he cited the evils of the period of unitarianism, as implemented in the Albania region by a Serb—former secret police chief Alexander Rankovic.

The emphasis on local identity and linguistic variations appeared elsewhere. At the University of Sarajevo, Professor Muhamad Filipovic formulated the notion that the Bosniaks were also a different nationality—Muslims—and that they, too, demanded cultural autonomy from the Serbs and Croats. Professor Filipovic based his assertion on the fact that the Bosniaks were of another religion, using scripts in Arabic for the exercise of religious rights (as prescribed by the constitution). This gave rise to a unique culture. Language and culture are closely linked and the basis for the claim of nationhood in Bosnia-Hercegovina.

The most acute linguistic conflict occurred in Croatia. Immediately after the Brioni Plenum, Croat intellectuals, who traditionally viewed their capital city as the center of cultural life in Yugoslavia, interpreted the policy of unity and brotherhood as a euphemism hiding Serbian aims at cultural domination and an attempt to make Belgrade the cultural center of the country. Increasingly, Croat intellectuals concluded that the Novi Sad agreement of 1954 was a mistake. It is likely that this conclusion was reached much earlier, but under the "unitary party-state system" they could not have voiced their complaints openly. When decentralization was introduced and the symbol of unitarianism (Rankovic) was removed, Croat intellectuals, students, and party bureaucrats made the protection of the republic's cultural heritage their duty.

On March 27, 1967, the literary magazine *Telegram* published a declaration signed by 19 Croat associations calling for official recognition of the Croat language as a separate language having equal status with the Serbian. The editor of the magazine, a member of the Central Committee of the Croat League of Communists, was summarily removed from both posts, but the 150 intellectuals who signed the declaration and expressed fears of cultural genocide had already presented the document to the parliament of the republic, making it an official matter. The response of Serb intellectuals was swift. Forty-five members of the Association of Serbian Writers demanded that Serbs residing in Croatia be taught in the Cyrillic alphabet, rather than in the Latin used by the Croats. For good measure, they also attacked their Croat colleagues for their cultural chauvinism and bourgeois tendencies.

Tito called the declaration of the Croats a "stab in the back" and ordered an investigation to discover its source. To the surprise of many, he concluded that the Serbs had been behaving hegemonistically toward the Croats and other ethnic groups and offered to rectify the situation by introducing a quota system for governmental positions and public institutions. With the admission by Tito that errors had been made by the Serbs, the demands from Zagreb increased. Students became more involved and demanded many things, especially control over their economic and cultural lives. Furthermore, the students demanded to be trained only in the Croatian language while in the military, to serve only within their own republic, and to expel Serbians working in Croatia. To emphasize their point, the students went into the streets. Party leaders Milko Tripalo; and Savka Dabcevic-Kucar and the mayor of Zagreb led the protest, ostensibly to control the situation. All three were forcibly removed from office, but their removal raised additional demands for complete national independence. In the heat of the protests, cries of Serbian "occupation" were heard.

Croat intellectuals and even military men abandoned the debate on language and began what is known as the war of statistics. General Janko Bobetko, a Croat, demanded quotas in the army high command and officer corps, which statistically consisted of 85 percent Serbs and Montenegrins. He also protested the unusual power of the association of retired officers, "in all 500,000 members and overwhelmingly Serbs." General Bobetko's demands were opposed by three active generals—Nenezic, Puca, and Bulat—all of them Serbs commanding units in Croatia. The latter demanded action against the reactionaries, but they were branded by Croat intellectuals as the "political-military underground of Serbia" in Croatia. Such demands and accusations continued until the summer of 1972 when Tito, at the suggestion of the Serb-dominated High Command, stated that he would use the army to put down the counterrevolution. This he did, in fact, only to demonstrate that Croatia was the Yugoslav Czechoslovakia. The linguistic-cultural conflicts did not stop with the occupation. Language continues to be an issue debated in intellectual circles, yet these debates are symptoms underlying political conflicts between the two major nations of Yugoslavia—Croatia and Serbia. □