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PUBLIC POLICY OBJECTIVES AND PRACTICES

Public policies regarding minority language education should ON THE ONE HAND cater to the linguistic needs of persons belonging to minorities so that they will be able to preserve/develop their identities, enjoy effective equality and be free from discrimination, AND ON THE OTHER HAND, they should contribute to integration of diverse societies (as a two-way process of mutual adaptation, learning and respect).

In the European context, neither of these two aspects has been easily achieved in practice. Moreover, the present developments (political, societal, also socio-economic) seem to present new obstacles for quality minority language public policies that would be able to achieve those goals.

In my presentation, I would like to address the broader (societal and conceptual) framework for designing public policies regarding education in minority languages – all intended to implement minority language rights in the field of education. When discussing this framework, I will try to highlight not just actual practices (i.e. policies), but also their limits. I will also suggest some of the needed changes in our thinking about and approaches to policy-making with regard to education in minority languages.

First a few words about the **contemporary societal context** and its relevance for public policies. There are certainly many issues that warrant further attention, but I will focus on exclusive nation-building (nationalism) and on changes in societies (i.e. on the dynamic nature of our societies).

Regarding exclusive nation-building (as a set of policies that promote the protection of the dominant nation and of its national/linguistic identity at the expense of protection and promotion of co-existing minority identities): it seems to be on the rise across the continent, but it is particularly intensive in states that have been (or are) experiencing a conflict/war and in states where minorities are very much understood ‘as a problem’ and a potential ‘threat’ (typically as they are ethnically linked with their so-called ‘kin-state’). Such exclusive nation-building is frequently carried out through language policies in education but also through the substance of education.

This process usually takes the form of decreasing the use of minority languages (often focusing on one – that of the minority community that is perceived as threatening the existence of the dominant ethno-national community and of the state). Such a decreasing use applies to the scope (a percentage of teaching being done in a minority language) and to the level (allowed at a lower level, in primary schools, and severely diminished or eliminated in high schools/secondary schools).

This process has been heavily criticized by the Venice Commission in the case of the Ukraine’s Law on Education.

What is very worrying, some have called it 'revolutionary', is the recently developed idea, by the constitutional court of Latvia, that persons belonging to minorities 'do not have the right to differential treatment' in the public domain as this would cause discrimination – this argument has been used regarding the 2018 educational reform (to be implemented in 2019-21) whereby in grades 10-12 only Latvian will be allowed as a language of instruction (minority languages will be taught as subjects), and in primary schools a new minimum percentages for Latvian are introduced: 50% for grades 1-6, and 80% for grades 7-9. (The same requirements are applicable also to private schools, but the Constitutional Court is yet to deliberate regarding this issue.)

The judgement relied on the idea that "minority rights must not be aimed at segregation of society or jeopardizing the unity of society." (para. 23.2 of the judgement of 23 April 2019).

Exclusive nation-building provides a damaging context for public policy making regarding minority language rights in education. It is typically aimed at the languages of 'problematic minorities' whilst at the same time upholding, for example, teaching and learning of EU languages. In this context, it is important to recall:

- historically, conflicts and instability are not caused by too many rights, but by limiting access to minority rights; HENCE: any effective public policy should cater for the existing needs that are to be actively assessed in regularly monitored and adjusted, in co-operation with persons belonging to linguistic minorities concerned (note that minority protection is a collection of norms that includes also effective participation of persons belonging to minorities in public affairs and in cultural, social and economic fields – with this being both a minority right and a principle to be applied in the implementation of other minority rights).

- societal stability will not be brought about by exclusion and minority scape-goating, but by inclusion at the level of individuals, and by integration of societies.

These two aspects warrant more attention.

1) At the level of individuals, inclusion means seeking ways to achieve EFFECTIVE EQUALITY (minority rights, including language rights in education, are needed to help persons belonging to minorities to enjoy effective equality – they are not a sign of discrimination – so as to be able to express and develop their identities). In terms of public policies, this may require different forms of organization of education – from so-called minority-language schools to (in some cases increasingly so) integrated education. The model will depend on the context, the needs and state of affairs on the ground. But it is important to bear in mind the following: language needs cannot be used as the basis for ethnic segregation. It would be useful to recall the importance of terminological and practical need to move away from primordial terminology of individuals' origin to their affiliation, including linguistic affiliation. Individuals can freely affiliate, also in linguistic sense, they may have multiple affiliations and they may affiliate situationally. All this requires flexible policy-making that will cater to linguistic needs of individuals without pre-defining those needs based on their 'origins' or their 'mother tongues' (as opposed to affiliations and first languages).

2) Regarding SOCIETAL INTEGRATION: the core issue is how to balance the needs and interests of everyone, while seeking to achieve effective equality of everyone, and not to view education in minority languages as a form of disintegration and disunity?

It is important to remember that any discussion about public policy regarding minority language education should be composed of two mutually related considerations:

- a) what type of education and use of language could best address the needs on the ground (whilst following the principle of proportionality); Here, however, it is important that public policies are dynamically adjusting to the changing societies: migrations (including intra-state migrations, often due to the process of urbanisation) create new language-related circumstances – from different languages being present to different language repertoires of individuals, and thus also new educational needs. (Unless those are addressed, persons belonging even to ‘traditional minorities’ who have moved to big cities are likely to face assimilation.)
- b) how to provide educational substance that will enable intercultural respect (not just tolerance), interactions... i.e. that will ultimately lead to education that will follow the principle of **teaching all students**, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliations, of societal diversity, and exposing all students to interactions across differences (to diminish ethnic distance). This may be achieved in integrated education or through student and teacher exchange programmes, depending on composition of populations in a particular area. Furthermore, educational substance that promotes societal integration should be mainstreamed and supported with appropriate teaching methods – from multiple perspectives in history-teaching, to focus on commonalities rather than differences in language repertoires or on common spaces when teaching about geography. Public policy objectives cannot underestimate the significance of societal integration that is based on the understanding of **minorities forming an integral as well as a valued part of diverse societies**. AGAIN - this will be based on all students acquiring intercultural and also multilingual competences (public policy should be ready to discuss not just bilingual but also multilingual education – the case of Moldova). All this requires a change of political will (i.e. the end of exclusive nation-building) and a focus on training teachers, using appropriate methods and developing appropriate teaching and learning materials, also based on minority rights as human rights and in co-operation with persons belonging to minorities.

And my final suggestion:

--- A discussion about minority language education is nowadays often focused on the scope of minority language teaching and on the need to learn also the official language (and just to be sure: teaching and learning in and of minority languages has never come to replace official language learning, but in addition to it – if minority students do not acquire

proficiency in that language, one needs to wonder about the quality of teaching methods, rather than 'unwillingness of students'). Minority language education nowadays **rarely focuses of access to languages and language learning for everyone in a certain geographical area.** Perhaps an example of good practice offered here could be from Slovenia, with respect to two ethnically-mixed areas where the Italian and the Hungarian national communities reside, and where a respective minority language is official alongside Slovenian and where all students have to learn both languages – in monolingual Italian/Slovenian schools and in bilingual Hungarian-Slovenian schools. The system may not produce the most effective results, but the idea of sharing spaces and acquiring multilingual competences by everyone, regardless of their linguistic affiliation, is certainly worth considering.

Minority language education cannot be viewed through the lenses of societal threats, disloyalty, disproportional demands or unnecessary costs. For individuals concerned, it cannot be a year-to-year struggle with interruptions on the educational vertical, or a decision at the level of kindergarten that will affect a child's life-long professional development. Public policies and above all policy makers cannot fall in such traps and they should focus, with speakers concerned, on what education programmes could best cater for individuals' needs and for integration of societies, but in a way that minorities are views as their equal and valued parts.

Thank you for your attention.