NATIONAL MINORITY AND ACCEPTANCE OF MINORITY RIGHT BY THE MAJORITY: THE CASE OF SLOVENIANS IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT. The central idea of this article is that the reasons to claim a minority right may be more important than the right itself. In other words, it might be that the majority group tends to be more reactive to the reasons put forward to claim a right than the actual content of that right. Specifically, we hypothesize that some Italian speaking might oppose the right of the Slovenians to manifest their presence in the city centre when this right is claimed on the basis of traditional *topoi* of the Slovenian national narrative. We provide empirical support for this hypothesis by analyzing a study on the Slovene minority in Italy, conducted in 2006 and 2008. Our analyses seem to show that a symbolic collective right, as the bilingual signposts are, may be more likely accepted if the argument in favour does not echo the standard national narrative. People care not only about the actual content of the right, but also the reasons put forward to claim that right. This suggests that there is room, even in a place deeply divided in the past, to develop arguments in defence of the linguistic, cultural and national pluralism that still characterizes many areas of Central and Eastern Europe that are based on liberal values and are different from those engendered by received national narratives.

Keywords: minority rights, Slovenian minority in Italy, national narratives

Introduction

The concept of national minority is one that scholars and politicians do not yet agree on, as the European Council's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the principal legal instrument designed to protect minority's rights, openly admits. The Member states of the Council of Europe differ in the way they define the communities or groups entitled to be considered a national minority. But the framework binds each state to respect the individual and collective rights of people that can be identified as part of a

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minority group. Usually the criteria of identification consider a person as a member of a national minority group if he or she is a citizen of the state but does not share the same language, culture or traditions of other citizens, and if he or she manifests in some way the will to protect his or her diversity. In Central and Eastern Europe, where the state and cultural boundaries quite often do not overlap, a supplementary criterion is often added: the minority group members should be part of a larger national community that has its own state. Thus, to be a national minority it is necessary to have a kin state, an external homeland.

Helpful as these criteria may have been in extending the protection net for people that feel to be different from their co-citizens, they are clearly inadequate to account for the politics of national minority rights. Who decides which minority rights should be claimed or accepted? Who defines the cultural boundaries separating minority and majority groups? Who defines through which institutions and procedures a minority group member will benefit of its collective rights? Who gains from the consolidation of the organization framework that claims to represent the minority's rights?

These and other questions cannot be answered unless we abandon a view according to which all actors involved in the protection/integration game (minority group, state and external homeland institutions) are conceived as unitary actors, as given entities. This was the seminal suggestion Rogers Brubaker (1996) advanced years ago. He rightly claimed that in order to grasp the dynamic nature of the triadic nexus between a national minority, the state and its kin state it was necessary to conceive each actor as:

> continuously contested political fields. (...) What we summarily call national minorities, nationalizing states, and external homeland (...) are dynamic and relational concepts and should not be reified or treated in a substantialist fashion (Brubaker, 1996:60).

The macro context to which he was referring was Central and Eastern Europe, where the consequences of the mismatch between state and cultural boundaries are still visible today. Here still now a state may be perceived by its elite as well as by the minority as a nationalizing state, "a nation state at not sufficient degree, (a state that needs) to remedy this perceived defect" (Brubaker, 1996: 63). In a similar vein the external homeland state could be perceived as a state that includes the ancestral land of the other state minority, or a state that still has to include within its political boundaries large swaths of what national narratives consider the historical settlement of its ethno-nation. In both cases the external homeland state might be expected to take responsibility for its "co-ethnics" although they are citizens of other states.

Brubaker explicitly refers the notion of political field to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu a political field was a field where different forces and stances compete with each other to transform at its own an advantage in the power relation (Bourdieu, 2000). A political field is then different from other fields, such as the cultural or the religious or the artistic ones, because the resources available for the power competition and their rules are different. The interesting point raised by Brubaker is that he claims that a national minority is the outcome of competition and conflict different as to the size, but similar as to the dynamic, to those characterizing a state. This view represents a change in respect to the primordial perspective, according to which a national minority simply represents only a periphery culture that, thanks its strong cultural identity, was able to survive the massive process of homogenization and standardization enacted by the central state. To understand how national minority survives or integrates one needs to look at its internal politics as well as at the political interplay between the minority, the state and the external homeland, as Rokkan, among others, was suggesting decades ago.

A similar non-substantialist as well as non-romantic perspective is at the bottom of the Laitin (2007, 1999) cascades or tipping model of language shift. Laitin developed his model to explain under what conditions a minority group member, in his case a monolingual Russian speaking resident in a non-Russian ex-Soviet republic after the Soviet empire's collapse, may shift to the majority language. It is a model helpful to understand the process of integration between two former distinct linguistic groups. But its analytical core might also be applied to explain how the political game of minority rights protection works. The two games are often conceived to obtain two opposite results: on one hand integration or, even worse, assimilation, and on the other hand survival of the minority's cultural peculiarities through separation. But this may be a sort of misconception based on the assumption that between integration and protection there is always a zero sum game, which may not be the case if we consider how and why individuals in both camps advance their claims making salient one or another aspect of their diversities or similarities. In the end, as again Brubaker claimed, the true opposite pole to the minority rights protection claims is the idea that minority members should be forced to be similar to the majority, not the idea that they might eventually become similar, preserving what they want of their diversity (provided that they have the right to do that), but also sharing other traits with the majority. In Brubaker's notion, each collective actor is in itself a political field.

The Brubaker notion and the Laitin model share two things. In both cases each collective entity (state, external homeland and national minorities) can be analytically conceived as the outcome of a coordination game based on interdependent choices by individuals. Individuals coordinate their action on

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the basis of what they perceive is the action of others, within each collective entity and between them. Secondly, in both cases the role of political entrepreneurs is decisive since they define the size of the payoff between different choices. To use the example of David Laitin (2007: 55-56), a nationalizing state elite can increase "the cost of out-group acceptance", as for instance the Italian fascism regime did in the interwar period prohibiting the use of German, Slovenian or Croat even in church. But minority political entrepreneurs might also manipulate the payoff costs related to the "in-group status". For example, minority families willing to improve their children's linguistic competence in the majority language may be stigmatized as betraying their national roots if they decide to send their children to post-school activities with curricula in the majority language. Or political entrepreneurs might manipulate the in-group status favouring a protection system where individuals can benefit from the collective rights only if they accept to share a corporate definition of their group, a situation that inevitably increases their power.

Political entrepreneurs are then crucial because they can alter the payoff costs of each individual choice. They can make the choice to integrate more likely. In the same vein, they can also influence which aspects of the cultural diversity should be protected and how it may be transformed into a right claim. But they are even more decisive, since they provide the reasons why particular minority rights should be protected.

This brings us to the central question of this paper. We think that the reasons to claim a minority right may be more important than the right itself. In other words, it might be that the majority group tends to be more reactive to the reasons put forward to claim a right than the actual content of that right. The evidence comes from a survey study on the Slovene minority in Italy, conducted in 2006 and 2008. Before illustrating the data, some words on the context.

Historical context and problem statement

The Slovene minority in Italy
Slovenians became part of the Italian state, as the Germans of South Tyrol, the Croats in Istria and the Italian speaking population of what Italians call Venezia Giulia after the First World War, as a consequence of the collapse of the former Habsburg empire (for a analysis of the two minorities see Segatti and Gugliemi, forthcoming, 2013). Slovenians and other minorities were severely repressed during the Fascist period. Starting from the 1920s, the fascist regime adopted linguistic school policies aimed to turn all minorities into Italians. As to the ambition itself, the fascist policies were not different from the linguistic homogenization policies adopted by other Central European states at that time. The real difference was as the degree of violence applied.

After World War Two, Italy lost large part of the Venezia Giulia. The communist regime in Yugoslavia "convinced" a few hundred thousand Italians to move from Istria to Italy or elsewhere. A significant part of them settled in what remained of the interwar Venezia Giulia, the Trieste and Gorizia provinces, intermixing with the resident Slovene minority.

In the decades after the World War Two a system of protection of the German and Slovenian national rights was slowly built. But differences between the two systems were large from the beginning, and they remained quite different. In South Tyrol the model of protection is based on a self government (the Autonomous province of Bözen/Bolzano) that enjoys significant margins of autonomy from the central state. According to some scholars the system of minority rights developed in South Tyrol is a *de facto* multinational state (Toniatti, 1994). Within this model, the most important institution is the so-called "ethnic census". Every ten years, every resident in South Tyrol has to declare which linguistic group he or she belongs to (German, Italian or Ladino, a small alpine minority). As a consequence, all public sector jobs are strictly allocated according to the proportional size of the three groups. This implies that we know exactly how many residents in South Tyrol have declared to be part of the German minority over the year. In 2011, for example, they amounted to 314,604 persons.

The Slovene minority's protection system did not develop as self-government, but as an array of legal instruments that only the 2001 law, (No. 38/2001, "Norms for the protection of the Slovene linguistic minority of the Friuli - Venezia Giulia region," February 23, 2001) made coherent across the boundaries of the province of Trieste, Gorizia, and Udine. The law protects the minority's rights: a) without any self-declaration of being Slovenian, and b) according to the residence of the citizen in the municipalities included in the area of Friuli of the Venezia Giulia region, where most of the Slovenians actually live. According to the 2001 law a municipality can be included in this area on request of at least 15% of the citizens inscribed in the electoral lists, or at the proposal of one third of the local councilors.

Given the lack of any census-based information, any count of how many Slovenians are in Italy is tentative. Rough estimations indicate between 60,000 to 100,000 Slovenians, which means between 5% to 10% of the total population of the Friuli - Venezia Giulia region.

Differences between the German and Slovenian minority protection system produces even more important consequences. Differently from a German living in South Tyrol, everyone who feels Slovenian and wants to protect their diversity does not need to declare themselves as Slovenian. In addition, the Slovenian community is a political field where parties and groups compete about the best policies to defend Slovenian rights and about what the cultural boundaries of the minority are. In the case of the South Tyrolean minority only one *rassemblement* party (the SVP) has the monopoly of representation.

All in all, the Slovene minority looks like a set of individuals whose in-group membership is not a pre-condition to benefit from collective rights, since identification with the group is the outcome of a private choice. On the contrary, the German minority appears to be similar to a corporate body whose membership is indeed the precondition to benefit from the collective rights, since identification with the group is the outcome of a formal decision.

The difference between the two minority protection models seems to impact how minorities' group members interact with the rest of Italians. According to a few survey studies (Segatti and Guglielmi, forthcoming; Susič et al. 2010), the number of Slovenian speakers who declare having dual identities (Italian and Slovenian) is increasing, while in South Tyrol integration is made possible only on the basis of a strict separation between the two groups, a sort of ethno-linguistic pillarisation (Palermo, 1994).

These results, coupled with others showing an increase of Italian speaking families and mixed families that send their children to Slovenian schools, are to some extent remarkable, considering how tense the relations between Slovenians and Italians in Trieste and Gorizia were in the decades immediately after World War Two (Sivini, 1970). Many Italians living in Trieste and Gorizia were actually refugees from the small cities of what is now the Slovenian seashore. They were expelled between 1945 and 1954, when the London agreement ended the partition of part of pre-war Venezia Giulia in two zones, one under Allied Military Government administration (Trieste and six small municipalities) and the other under Yugoslav administration (Capodistria/ Koper, Isola/Izola, Pirano/Piran and the Quieto/Mirna valley in Istria).

In this context of divisive memories an issue remains unsettled: Slovenians' right to signal their presence through signposts that are also in Slovenian, in the city centre of Trieste and Gorizia. Bilingual signposts are everywhere, even in the urban periphery of Trieste and Gorizia, but not downtown in the two cities. Many Italians, and maybe half of the Italian speaking inhabitants of Trieste and Gorizia, do not accept bilingual signposts, although only a portion of them seems to care about the issue. According to two studies conducted by Segatti and Guglielmi in 2006 and 2008 (Segatti, 2009) one out five Italian respondents in Trieste and Gorizia declared to have bad feelings when someone was talking in Slovenian in a bus and, not unpredictably, one out of four when someone was talking in a postal office or in some local government office.

Bad feelings and opposition are clearly rooted in the past conflicts and the enduring collective memories of them. But there are some interesting aspects of this opposition that are worthwhile to underline, since they highlight the main argument of this paper. We think that some Italian speaking might oppose the right of the Slovenians to manifest their presence in the city center when this right is claimed on the basis of traditional *topoi* of the Slovenian national narrative.

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The Adriatic Eastern coast was a linguistically and culturally fragmented area, but linguistic fragmentation reflected a partially uneven spatial distribution. Most of the Italians used to live in the cities, although many of them were also peasants. Most of the Slovenians and Croats used to live in the countryside, although at the beginning of the last century Trieste was the largest Slovenian city. This different territorial distribution was also coupled with a different cultural perception of the political meaning of the urban-rural cleavage. Italians thought, as it is usual in many Mediterranean cultures, that the land surrounding the city belongs to the city. Slavic culture-based spatial representation insists, on the contrary, that it was the land surrounding the cities that owns the city (Ara and Magris, 1977). Secondly, under the Austrian empire the national conflict between Italians, and Slovenian and Croats very soon developed around the control of the municipalities that were in charge of the school system and its curricular language. Claus Gatterer, an Austrian journalist, said that every school at that time became quickly a "national bulwark" of the national conflict (quoted in Ara,1991: 269). These patterns of conflict deeply influenced the respective national narratives and identities.

According to Worsdörfer (2004: 56), from the very beginning many Slovenian national precursors characterized the idea of a Slovenian identity with reference to a territory defined by clear *etnična meja* (ethnic border). In the past century, one of the leaders of Yugoslav communism, the Slovenian Edvard Kardely, restated the argument with stronger overtones. Refreshing old romantic stereotypes, he claimed that "the nationality of a territory is rooted on the peasants' language, culture, independently from what the cities' inhabitants used to think" (Worsdörfer, 2004: 69). On the other side, Italians of the Eastern Adriatic coast developed a national identity based on a notion that being Italian is a matter of personal choice, not of ethnicity or religion or territorial roots (Ara and Magris, 1987). Thus the nationalistic argument (Worsdörfer, 2004) that Italians in Trieste and in the region were devoid of any real territorial roots, and the Italian presence in the Eastern Adriatic coast was only a sheer invention of Fascism appeared and still appears frightening. Anecdotal evidence suggests that similar arguments are still aired in some quarters of the Slovenian ideological spectrum, while among Italians survives the old stereotyping of Slovenians as mostly a rural nation.

Research hypothesis and data

Given this background, our hypothesis is that opposition to the specific right to have bilingual signposts in the center of Trieste and Gorizia might depend less upon the actual content of the right, than upon the reasons given to this clam.

Data for this paper were collected within the framework of the project "Identità, culture civiche e politiche a confronto. Una ricerca sull'Euroregio adriatica/ Identity, civic and political cultures compared: A research on Adriatic Euroregion" co-financed by the Community Initiative Programme INTERREG IIIA Italy-Slovenia, Structural Funds 2000-2006 (Segatti, 2009).

A telephone survey was administered in 2006 and then in 2008 in the Italo-Slovene borderland. The target population was composed of the residents in Friuli Venezia Giulia in Italy and in the administrative Slovenian areas close to the interstate border. A stratified random sample was designed to represent the target population by age, gender and geographic areas, while quota sampling was used to select members of Slovene minority in Friuli Venezia Giulia, through a question regarding the language the respondents' mother was using with the respondent.

Analyses presented in this article are based on a subset of the Italian sample (2006 wave), inhabitants of Provinces of Gorizia and Trieste, members of Italian majority who declared their mother-tongue was Italian; they amount to 581 respondents.

Analysis

The study contains information on the attitudes of Italian speakers towards Slovenians and *vice versa*. On the basis of this survey we were able to observe that a significant portion of respondents whose mother-tongue is Slovenian want *more* integration with Italy, and half feel Slovenian as well as Italian, although they are attached to the Slovenian identity to the same degree as the Slovenians of Slovenia. The study finds that almost half of the sample of Italian speaking inhabitants of Trieste and Gorizia were against the right of Slovenians to have signposts also in Slovenian in the center of the two cities. As we say previously, our expectation is that this opinion might be linked to the narratives frames legitimating the minority's rights claims. In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted a split-ballot experiment.

As it is well known, the main advantage of experimental design consists in the possibility to manipulate the independent variables to analyze their effects on the dependent variable. Various techniques have been implemented to combine the framework of experimental designs with the inferential power of population based sampling, like split-ballot-experiments, scenario-technique, and factorial survey. In our split-ballot experiment, we randomly selected subgroups from our 2006 Italian mother-tongue respondents subsample. Then we asked their opinion about how important it was for them to have or not bilingual signposts (in Slovenian and in Italian) in the centre of Gorizia and Trieste. Afterwards, one half of the subsample, randomly selected, was asked:

"Bilingual signposts should be allowed in the city centre of Trieste/Gorizia *to indicate that also the centre of the city is part of the Slovenian ethnic territory*. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?" (Version A). The other half of the subsample was asked: " Bilingual signposts should be allowed in the city centre of Trieste/Gorizia *to guarantee to every Slovenian speaking Italian citizen the visibility of own language.* Do you agree or disagree with this statement?" (Version B). At the end of the split ballot experiment we asked the respondent to tell us how important the issue was for them.

As one can see, we manipulated the reasons that justify the right of having bilingual signposts in the centre of Gorizia and Trieste. Version A was designed to prompt reasons close to the Slovenian national narratives, and focused on the idea that national rights are rooted in the supposed ethnicity of a territory, independently of what people living there think of themselves. Respondents to Version B were prompted with a liberal reason, since it justified the right of having bilingual signposts on the basis of individual rights that are recognized to every Italian citizen regardless of their language. Table 1 shows the experimental results, distinguished between those who care about the issue and those who do not.

Table 1.

Opinion about allowing bilingual signposts in the city centre, by reason and importance attributed to issue

(%, respondents with only Italian mother–tongue, Trieste & Gorizia, 2006)

	Reason of bilingual signposts			
	To indicate Slovenian ethnic territory		To guarantee the visibility of minority language as individual right	
	Issue important	Not important	Issue important	Not important
Agree	31.2	40.4	45.0	39.0
Disagree	64.5	51.2	52.5	53.2
Don't know	4.3	8.4	2.5	7.8
Total (N)	100% (93)	100% (203)	100% (80)	100% (205)

The story is simple to tell. Among those who do not consider this issue important, talking about Slovenian ethnic territory rather than about individual rights makes no difference. On the contrary, among those who feel that this topic is important, providing different reasons for the right to have bilingual signposts makes a difference. While the difference is not very large, it is large enough to suggest that our argument that people care not only about the actual content of the right but also about the reasons put forward to claim that right holds.

In fact, different reasons determine different reactions. Respondents are more likely to accept the bilingual signposts in city centres when they are exposed to reasons that emphasize individual rights than when they are prompted by "ethno-national" reasons. The experiment does not provide evidence that a more liberal justification is able to modify the balance between opposite opinions. Italians still harbour past mistrusts. As a consequence of the liberal justification that Slovenians have a right to claim bilingual signposts as Italian citizens, positions in favour of bilingualism increase by 14 percentage points, from 31% to 45%. The increase suggests the reasons proposed by those who speak on behalf of a minority are not interchangeable. In the context of the relationship between the Italian majority and the Slovene minority, attempts to argue about the minority's rights in terms of ethnic territory may backfire.

Perhaps this happens because the notion of ethnic territory has played such a central role in the national narratives that nurtured the conflict between Italians and Slovenians. Talking about rights on the basis of ethnic territorial claims may frighten Italians to a greater extent than the idea that Slovenians have the right, as individuals, to make their presence and language visible.

Conclusion

Brubaker, in his seminal work from the 1992, laid down the conceptual basis of a political theory of minority rights. The core of it was the notion that all entities involved in the nexus between state, national minority and external homeland should be thought of as political fields, where different agents act on what others are doing or saying. From this perspective, the minority is not simply a hostage of the interstate policies and politics. Its internal forces - the argument they use when they claim their rights - can make a difference, at least in the case of a democratic regime. The case of Slovenians in Italy seems to fit this model. Slovenians were severely oppressed by the Fascist regime that wanted to assimilate them, turning with violence a Slovenian into an Italian. The attempt was a complete failure, and it also backfired after World War Two, when the communist regime in Yugoslavia -- in Soviet style -- "persuaded" many Italians to abandon their homes. After the war, majority and minority were deeply divided by opposite memories, constantly nurtured by their respective national narratives. The Slovenian narrative was often based on the notion that Italians in the region were completely alienated from the territory. Most of them were told that they were former Slovenians assimilated in the Italian culture, or immigrants from Italy when the Italian State came in 1918. In contrast, the narrative went, the territory itself was a land marked by self-evident signs of Slovenian ethnicity.

Our survey experiment seems to show that a symbolic collective right, as the bilingual signposts are, may be more likely accepted if the argument in favour does not echo the standard national narrative. People care not only about the actual content of the right, but also about the reasons put forward to claim that right. If our results should be confirmed in other studies one could say that there is room, even in places deeply divided in the past, to develop arguments in defence of the linguistic, cultural and national pluralism that still characterizes many areas of Central and Eastern Europe that are based on liberal values and are different from those engendered by received national narratives.

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