

SOME COMMENTS BASED UPON COMPARISONS WITH THE SITUATION OF STYRIAN SLOVENES

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This commentary poses specific questions to the papers' authors through comparison with the situation of autochthonous Styrian Slovenes, which I have studied over the past decade. I have been particularly interested in historical changes regarding German-Slovene bilingualism in the southwest of Styria, identity constructions among people residing in the border region, Austrian and Slovene nation building and assimilation, and the denial of minority rights in Styria due to local political circumstances (Hermanik 2007). In his paper, "Slovenes of Carinthia and Their Fight to Retain Their Identity With/Against Post-World War II Austrian Governments,"¹ Matjaž Klemenčič provides insight into various kinds of the Carinthian Slovene identity constructions (Keupp et al. 1999) during recent decades. The sources used range from census data to mass media and demonstrate the complexity of the subject at hand. I wish to discuss two points:

1) We may distinguish between German and Slovene ethnic identities in contemporary Carinthia, but the national identity of each group is Austrian. Hence, the Slovene minority has been increasingly subject to Austrian nation building dominated by the German ethnic group, especially following the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. Alongside socio-psychological and socio-economic factors, this process has led to non-coerced assimilation (Suppan 1983). Census material shows a decreasing number of Slovenes who explicitly recognize themselves as Slovene. But the reasons for this are diverse and suggest that we might look more closely at what lies behind census data. For one thing, we might correlate census data with socio-economic changes in various Carinthian localities. As a second step we might employ more intensive fieldwork to elicit a more concise understanding of self-identification among individual members of the minority.

The autochthonous Slovene-speaking minority in Styria has encountered much greater pressure to assimilate. Minority rights have been denied, bilingual schools and media, as well as bilingual parish priests, have been absent. Above all, Styrian Slovenes have faced greater discrimination

¹ The title of the abbreviated Klemenčič paper submitted for publication here has been revised to: "Territorial Implementation of article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty, with Special Emphasis on Bilingual Topographical Terminology and Inscriptions in Southern Carinthia."

in everyday life. Many members of the minority have emigrated and those who have remained in the region began to hide their Slovene identity from the public. They speak Slovene only at home. In all public settings they have emphasized their Austrian national, that is, German Austrian identity. Styrian Slovenes have been in fact hidden from Styrian government authorities; their overall situation made them a “hidden minority” (Hermanik 2007, Sikimić 2004, Promitzer 2005).

2) The enduring conflict over local signage in Carinthia (Pandel et al. 2004, Winkler 2002, Hauer 2006) is in many ways symptomatic of the current political climate in both Carinthia and on the domestic political agenda of greater Austria with regard to minority issues. In addition to Klemenčič’s explanation, we might raise three short questions: Does the signage issue represent a real conflict between German and Slovene Austrians or is it a means for politicians and identity managers on both sides of the ethnic divide to seek legitimacy? Is not this conflict frequently (mis)used in order to keep the “game of minority politics” in play?

No efforts have been made to install bilingual local signs in Styria. The few members of the hidden minority of Styrian Slovenes prefer to remain hidden as best as they can. Visible signs, therefore, would be counterproductive. Even the self-proclaimed identity managers of the Styrian Slovenes² have not raised this issue; rather, they have sought to avoid conflict with political authorities upon which they depend for financial support.

In his paper, “The Economic Situation of Carinthian Slovenes after World War II,” the Slovene geographer Jernej Zupančič outlines social changes within the Carinthian Slovene minority during the last decades of the twentieth century. His text emphasizes the relative importance of the social prominence and economic strength of a minority group. Nevertheless, every minority is threatened by emigration for social-economic reasons. And Zupančič’s material shows that emigration has reduced the Carinthian Slovene minority to a greater extent than the majority group.

We might supplement Jernej Zupančič’s discussion with a short commentary on a central theme of his paper, cross-border cooperation. Such cooperation can only be a successful alternative for vitalizing the economy and inhibiting emigration if it becomes embedded in Austrian and Slovene concepts of nation building. Both of these understandings of nation building remain ambiguous regarding cross-border cooperation (Kert 2006) because

² Most of them are not affiliated to the ethnic group; they are Slovene speakers and other minority-sympathizers from the outside. They founded a society named *Article-VII-Cultural Society*, which officially represents the Styrian Slovenes.

Slovene minority issues seem to interfere with good economic relations between the respective countries.

In Styria, socio-economic changes following World War II had no effect on those poor areas close to the Yugoslav border inhabited by the autochthonous Slovene-speaking minority. Besides assimilation pressures, mentioned above, members of this minority emigrated for economic reasons, too.

In his paper, "Political Participation of the Slovene Ethnic Minority in Carinthia," the Slovene political scientist Boris Jesih analyzes political praxis as well as the political options (Feldner 2007) of the Carinthian Slovene minority.

1) Boris Jesih does not hesitate to take issue with disagreements between the minority's political organizations. I agree that Slovene minority organizations should join forces to better position their common political interests for the minority in Carinthia as well as for Austrian minority politics in general. I would point out especially that not only the two main organizations, *Zveza slovenskih organizacij* (Association of Slovene organizations) and *Narodni svet koroških Slovencev* (National Council of Carinthian Slovenes),³ are responsible for the political concerns of the Carinthian Slovenes. Currently two other political organizations, *Skupnost koroških Slovencev in Slovenk* (Association of Carinthian Slovenes) and *Enotna Lista/Einheitliste* (United List),⁴ are also very important to the political representation of the minority.

Slovene-speaking inhabitants in Styria are without political representation since the Government of Styria decided in 1997 through a subcommittee (*Landtagsunterausschuss*), that Styrian Slovenes are not "officially" a minority. But since 2003 Styrian Slovenes have participated in the Austrian *Volksgruppenbeirat* (*Advisory Council*). And this representation is based upon an informal agreement: One seat in the *Volksgruppenbeirat* situated in the federal government has been transferred to a member of the Article-VII-Cultural Society at the initiative of the Carinthian Slovene representatives in this body. This was not a decision of the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria that established the *Volksgruppenbeirat* (Hermanik 2007).

2) In conclusion, allow me to comment on the political participation of minorities in Austria in general and that of the Slovene minority in particular: Political discussions in Austria regarding ethnic groups of non-German mother-tongue speakers are nowadays dominated by

³ See: www.slo.at/zso/index_sl.php; www.nsk.at/aktualno.php.

⁴ See: www.skupnost.at/1slov/odbor/fs_odbor.htm; www.elnet.at/start.

the discourse on migrants and migration. As a result, autochthonous minorities are increasingly excluded from public fora where they can express their interests regarding current political issues. And I fear that this development will persist.

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