General Assembly 3

Research Report
The Question of:
Guaranteeing the rights of minority language speakers

Introduction

Globalization is undoubtedly increasing in today's world. This increase in globalization has many effects on language, both positive and negative. These effects on language affect the culture of the language in many ways. With globalization allowing languages to spread and dominate on a global scale, it also leads to the extinction of other languages, the so-called minority languages.

Language contributes to the formation of culture and it is, in a sense, the substance of culture. Languages serve as important symbols of group belonging, enabling different groups of people to know what ethnic groups they belong to, and what common heritages they share. Without a language, people would lose their cultural identity.

According to Garrick Bailey and James People in their book Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, estimates for extinct languages range from 4,000 to 9,000 since the 15th century. Other estimates for the future predict that only 10 per cent of the present languages will continue into the 22nd century.

At the opposite end of the scale where languages like English are on the top, these minority languages teeter on the brink of extinction. More than half of the world's languages have fewer than 5,000 speakers, and there are many hundreds that have as few as a dozen. Languages are disappearing all the time — it's estimated that a language becomes extinct roughly every two weeks. People from across the globe tend to lack the basic rights concerning their language. Namely, they are excluded from domains such as the economic or the politic, because of their different language, and generally origin. Steps have been made from organizations such the United Nations or the European Union but the problem still exists.

In this guide, you will find information concerning the history of the problem - namely of minority speakers struggling to guarantee the recognition of their language rights -, what efforts have been made in the past and what can be done in the future in order to tackle the problem efficiently.

On the other side, what will be also discussed is the extent to which minority language speakers can benefit from the safeguard of their rights. In other words, what can be done so as not to allow them to exploit their rights to an extreme level and thus follow the path of nationalism?

The Committee

The General Assembly 3 (GA3) is one of the three GAs of LEMUN 2018. All three of them have the same rights. The GA3 talks about Social, Cultural and Humanitarian issues. This means we will talk about issues in the world from those three perspectives: bearing in mind relations, traditions and human rights. As in the United Nations the bigger part of the power lays with the Security Council, the General Assembly is only allowed to *recommend* actions and not permitted to force member states to do something. What it can do, is use less strong Operative Clauses which could have a negative fallout in the news, such as 'Draws the attention to', and it has the executive power to make new committees, groups or to send funds.

This GA will be a normal committee. This means that all delegates will have to prepare resolutions, which we will entertain as a whole at once. In order to put your own resolution on the agenda, you have to reach the number of eight co-submitters, who also want it to be talked about but are not necessarily in favour of it. These will all have to sign a form, which can be handed in at the chair's desk. If the chairs have received this form, they will send the resolution to the Approval Panel, and if it approves the resolution is likely to be debated upon if time allows us.

All three GAs will be reunited in the plenary session on Sunday. Every committee will pass forward one of the resolutions it has passed, and they will be debated and voted upon once more. Amendments are not anymore permitted though, but one can speak in favour of or against the resolution as a whole, and the main submitter gets the floor with the starting and ending of the debate. During the main part of the conference, however, we will be debating in our own committee room.

Key Terms

Minority language

Minority or regional language means language that:

1. Is different from the official language(s) of the specific State and
2. Is traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population
3. Has the status of a national language and is spoken by the majority population in at least one country, but lack recognition in countries where there is a significant minority linguistic community.

Examples:

1. Russian is the official language in Russia but lacks official status in Ukraine, Estonia, and Latvia, where, in the latter two, Russians consist more than 25% of the population.
2. Serbian is the official language in Serbia and co-official in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and has a minority status in some countries e.g. in Montenegro. The minority status in Montenegro is controversial since the majority of the population (63.5%) declared Serbian as their mother tongue.

The key criterion here is the size of the speaker population within a specific geographic context: an individual language may be a minority language in one region or state but a majority language in another. Such is the case with many immigrant languages, whose speakers may continue to be a majority in the homeland but have smaller speaker bases elsewhere.

Nationalism

Nationalism is an ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests.

Regarding the issue at hand, nationalist feelings can come from both sides. Either majority language speakers, when trying to defend the sovereignty of their State and refusing to accept minority languages, or minority language speakers, because very often, when it comes to defending their rights, they tend to demand it in an extreme and patriotic manner.

General Overview

The issue of minority language speakers is a long-lasting one, an issue that has been concerning the globe for many years since antiquity. Examples from ancient cases, like the expedition of Alexander the Great in Asia and in Africa during the 4th century BC, have shown that the goal of economically and culturally developed societies was to impose their sovereignty and their power and spread their culture on weak regions. This was achieved via the imposition of their language and their culture concerning various domains, such as the economy or arts. Inhabitants of those regions were obliged to learn to communicate and work in the new language otherwise they would be punished. The result of this measure was the gradual extinction of the language of indigenous people without them being able to retain them, because of the adverse political and economic conditions.

Similar expeditions took place during the years afterwards, in Medieval Times, from nations such as the Vikings, the Mongols and later the Turks. Depending on whether indigenous people succeeded in retaining their freedom and their independence or not, their culture and their language was or was not influenced by the people of the expedition.

The most known and characteristic cases of an attempt, and in many of the following circumstances, an achievement, to dominate weaker communities, are the ones that took place in many African regions during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. When the colonialists (countries like England, France and Portugal) occupied Africa, they viewed linguistic diversity as a barrier to their hegemony and administration of their new colonies. The French, British and Portuguese particularly adopted language assimilation policies in most of their colonies. The colonial powers accorded official language status to their foreign languages. The relics of such policies are prevalent in Africa today where States are divided into English-speaking, French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking. Colonial language policies forced African people to speak foreign languages as a means of communication, a source of information and language of opportunity. As a (predictable) result, the vast majority of all those African languages and dialects began to fall off the map since the inhabitants were not allowed to use them.

After decolonization, political independence provided the former colonial territories with the opportunity to determine their own language policies. The decisions of the newly independent states were multiplex and depended on a variety of factors, like the nature of the colonial practices, the linguistic, cultural and ethnic makeup of the population, their ideological and educational goals. Most of them faced numerous problems regarding language and education. At independence, three types of attitudes to language can be discerned in Africa. "An attitude of letting things be, which translates into a continuation of colonial policies and practices." and served to perpetuate and to entrench the colonial status quo. Other countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe were eager to 'modernize' and felt that a European medium education would be the most effective way to achieve this. A final group of nations, e.g. Guinea, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Togo, Ethiopia, took a nationalistic approach opting for education in the mother tongues throughout the entire primary cycle and they were planning to expand their use also to higher levels of education.

Currently in Africa, although many mid-sized languages are used on the radio, in newspapers and in primary-school education, and some of the larger ones are considered national languages, only a few are official at the national level. Despite the existence of numerous African dialects, for many reasons (economy, information) languages like English or French dominate Africa. All these lead to the conclusion that colonialism and the post-colonial period have seen the marginalization of minority languages in Africa.

In the 21st century, minority language speakers continue to constitute large groups of people, not only in Africa (that was previously mentioned) but everywhere.

These languages tend to be marginalized within nations for a number of reasons: having a small number of speakers, a decline in this number, and popular belief of them as uncultured, primitive or simply inferior when compared to the dominant language.

What is certain is that the rights of minority languages speakers should be protected. The extreme velocity of extinction of minority languages should be controlled. This issue must be solved because of the negative consequences on societies: societies split into two, minority speakers do not have access to information, and they do not have equal treatment in politics or job opportunities.

Efforts have been made by the UN or the European Union, such as the adoption of the "Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities" (1992) by the UNGA and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992). The content of these treaties will be analyzed in one of the following parts of this guide. Since then, the improvement of life circumstances for many minority groups is noteworthy but many more steps have to be made.

Nevertheless, support for minority languages is sometimes viewed as supporting separatism, with the most known example being the ongoing revival of the Celtic languages (Irish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic etc.). Minority speakers develop nationalist feelings. Like every other issue, this issue does not exist without its controversy. When debating upon this issue it should be made clear, that on the hand governments and organizations are obliged to guarantee to minority speakers their rights to education, politics or job opportunities. On the other hand, proportional measures must be taken in order to make sure that these groups do not take advantage of their rights and as a result, end up developing nationalist movements.

Major Parties Involved

The European Union (EU):

The EU has drafted and implemented the aforementioned treaty in order to protect the minority languages in its borders. It has further been very active to stand up for the rights of minority cultures and languages, and has thereby been able to preserve the diversity within the EU.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

UNESCO is the primary organization within the UN with regard to the preservation of cultures and human diversity plays a significant role in protecting minority languages. It aims to raise awareness for the issue, and to conduct research into the benefits of preserving minority languages. It also works together with the Human Rights Council (HRC), as both UN bodies are concerned with the protection of these languages. UNESCO also funds educational programs to be taught in the minority languages.

Generally, bodies of the UN, including UNESCO, the General Assembly, and the HRC, have made progress in this issue. The latter has given a mandate to the UN independent expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák, to promote the individual rights of cultural and linguistic minorities, and to work with governments to implement measures for preservation.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages

This is the most one of the two most notable documents of international law regarding this issue. It was adopted in 1992 by the Council of Europe and it protects numerous minority languages within each country that has ratified the treaty. Examples include West Frisian in the Netherlands, Gaelic in the UK, and Romani in a number of EU countries. The ECRML lists a number of actions, of which signatories need to implement at least 35. The treaty applies to the EU languages, and not to any minority languages spoken by immigrants.

Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (47/135)

It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992, without a vote. What is generally mentioned in this treaty is the right of minority people to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language, in private and in public, "freely and without interference or any form of discrimination".

The Future

In the future, things do not seem to be following the path of support of minority languages. Should States continue not to implement UN's or EU's treaties, minority languages will go on the decline. These people will continue not having their rights guaranteed and they will always live like being on an inferior level comparing to the State as a whole. Under these circumstances, it will be very easy for languages to disappear.

Otherwise, should governments recognize and protect minority language speakers' rights, every person will benefit from this. Namely, a general sense of unity will be formed in each society. Minority language speakers will enjoy their rights and they will be soon faced as equals to others due to the fact that they will be able to have equal opportunities in education, politics and job and employment.

However, attention should be given to what was mentioned before: the measures taken to protect minority speakers will have to ensure that equality between all members of the society is brought and not a special treatment to minority speakers. In other words, it should be made clear to them that they are free to use their own language but not without bearing in mind which is the official language in that specific region and without making an effort to also learn the official language of the region.

Important Decisions a Resolution Must Take

On this issue, there are quite some vague boundaries that will have to be defined. Amongst those, can be counted the following questions that have to be answered:

- Which will be the criteria according to which a language will gain official recognition or even a co-official one? Will this be done according to the number of people speaking this language?
- Should it be obligatory for minority speakers to learn the official language? If yes, what will be done for adults to learn it?
- If a minority language becomes recognized, what will be done in schools, in subjects such as History or Literature?
- What should be done on the political domain? After recognition, will it be mandatory for a specific number of minority speakers to take part in politics?

These are some questions that this resolution should answer in order for it to be concise and clear. However, do not limit your resolution to just answering these questions. These questions, like this report as a whole, are merely a guide and are here to help you but you should also conduct your own research concerning your country's policy upon the matter.

Further Reading

http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/47/a47r135.htm, Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (47/135)

http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001457/145796e.pdf, "The Human Rights of Linguistic Minorities and Language Policies"

https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680695175, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

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https://www.juridicainternational.eu/public/pdf/ji_2003_1_151.pdf, The Right to Use Minority Languages in the Public Sphere
https://www.jstor.org/stable/761462?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents, Minority Language Rights in International Law.