

“Serbs” in Bela krajina: a (deliberately) forgotten minority?

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There are three constitutionally recognized national/ethnic minorities in Slovenia: the Italians, the Hungarians and the Roma. In addition, there are other ethnic groups that could perhaps be considered as “autochthonous” national minorities in line with Slovenia’s understanding of this concept. Among them is a small community of “Serbs” – the successors of the Uskoks living in Bela krajina, a border region of Slovenia. In this article we present results of a field research that focused on the following question: Can the “Serb” community in Bela krajina be considered a national minority? On the basis of the objective facts, it could be said that the “Serbs” in four Bela krajina villages are a potential national minority, but with regard to their modest social vitality and the fact that they do not express their desire for minority status, the realization of special minority protection is questionable.

Keywords: national minorities; minority rights; Slovenia; Serbs; Bela krajina

Introduction

Slovenia provides a high level of protection to constitutionally recognized Italian and Hungarian minorities and, in a different form, to the Romany minority. But these are neither the only nor the largest ethnic minorities in Slovenia. Some minorities, originating from the territory of the former Yugoslavia, are much larger; with regard to these communities, the term “new minorities” is frequently used. The differences in the state’s attitude to these two types of minority communities originate in the determination of the former groups as traditional (“autochthonous”,¹ according to the Slovene constitution) and the latter as “immigrant” communities. In addition, there are some other, smaller ethnic communities in Slovenia, which could be considered as “autochthonous” national/ethnic communities in line with Slovenia’s understanding of this concept. Among them are “Serbs”² (the successors of the Uskoks in Bela krajina, a border region in south-eastern Slovenia), Croats, German-speaking groups and Jews. If it transpired that the members of these communities in Slovenia do represent national minorities who wish to preserve their special ethnic identity and demand special protection from the state, then Slovenia, in the light of nondiscrimination against ethnic minorities with long-standing, permanent settlement on its territory, would have to think about recognizing the national minority status of these communities. But the presence and status of these communities in Slovenia are not well researched. Different data appear in public and, from time to time, individual demands, which do not always have documented or justified foundations and can thus be a source of varying interpretation and of manipulation. The Committee of Experts reporting on the application

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of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in Slovenia (ECRML 2004, 2007, 2010) also draws special attention to the existence of some of these communities. This is why it is necessary to research their situation and acquire the relevant data on the basis of which it would be possible to discuss how to meet local needs and the possibilities of a special regulation of their status. Because of these issues we decided to carry out field research in Bela krajina to gather data on the “Serbian” community living in four villages: Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči. These villages were mentioned in the Committee of Experts report on the application of the ECRML in Slovenia (ECRML 2010, 6). Furthermore, the long-term presence and “autochthony” of this population in Bela krajina is also referred to in some demands by Serbia for the recognition of the status of national minority for all the Serbs living in Slovenia, including those who migrated to Slovenia from the 1950s onwards (see, e.g. RS 2004; Srpska dijaspora – Internet novine serbske 2005; STA 2005). The situation occurred when expectations arose that the Serbian minority community of immigrant origin would acquire a certain amount of minority rights with the recognition of the status of a national minority to “Serbs” in Bela krajina.

Research in Bela krajina was carried out in order to find answers to the following questions: Is it possible to treat the population in the Bela krajina villages of Bojanci, Marindol, Paunoviči and Miliči as a national minority? Does this population possess the necessary range of objective elements that are usually taken into consideration in the process of recognizing specific populations as national minorities, both in international theory and practice, and in the Slovene context? Do the members of this community in fact wish to acquire national minority status? Do they display suitable social vitality that would facilitate the realization of minority rights? Finally, we will also briefly touch upon the question whether we can equate the status of “Serbs” of Uskok origin in Bela krajina and of Serbs who have immigrated to Slovenia since the mid-twentieth century and whether the same model of minority protection could apply to these two populations.

The research methodology

The article will present the findings we have reached on the basis of field research in Bela krajina, carried out longitudinally between 2004 and 2011. During the research, 32 semi-structured interviews with the inhabitants (16 men and 16 women) of the 4 villages were carried out, a sample that represents approximately 13% of the whole population. The age structure of the sample was as follows: 18.7% below the age of 30 years, 50% aged 31–55 years and 31.2% aged older than 55 years. The sample was created using the “snowball” sampling method. Some of the participants were interviewed upon every visit to the villages, whilst others were spoken to only once. The inhabitants of the neighboring settlements were also interviewed – we were particularly interested in their perceptions regarding the inhabitants of the villages of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči.

The responses we got were analyzed within the framework of the concept of a national minority as a combination of *objective* criteria (e.g. the existence of a population that is different from the majority, its size, nondominant position and length of settlement) and *subjective* criteria (a wish to preserve their special minority identity) for determining a group of people as members of a national minority (Benoît-Rohmer 1996, 14). It is on the basis of this type of criteria that it is possible to conclude that a specific community is a national minority and to ascertain whether on the strength of this it is entitled to a certain degree of minority protection and rights.

Before we present the results of the study, let us examine the basic characteristics of the existing model of the protection of national minorities in Slovenia.

The model of protecting national minorities in Slovenia

Slovenia does not have an official definition of national minorities. The national minorities that are given special protection are listed in the Constitution (Articles 5, 11, 64, 65 and 80). The Italian and Hungarian national minorities are defined as “autochthonous national communities,” whilst the Roma are referred to as the “Romany community.” The Italian and Hungarian national minorities are the result of the shifting of borders in Europe in the twentieth century. Their area of settlement was joined to the Slovene state territory as a result of a number of historical events; the will, opinions, interest and wishes of the members of these minorities were of marginal importance. In light of this, the set of special minority rights seems to serve as compensation for the unfulfilled right to self-determination (Komac 2007a, 56). They were granted special minority status by the Slovenian Constitution of 1963 (amended in 1974 and 1989),³ when Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia. The new Slovene Constitution of 1991 preserved the tradition from Yugoslav days of protecting the national minorities, assigning special rights to the Italian and Hungarian minorities, while also adding a special status for the Roma community.

The starting point for the protection of the Hungarian and Italian national minorities is provided by the concept of ethnically mixed areas and the set of collective rights that the state grants irrespective of the number of members of a national minority in ethnically mixed areas (Komac 2002, 17). This concept represents a kind of a “reservation” type of minority protection that is in many ways incompatible with modern developmental processes, in which mobility is an important component. In Slovenia, the “reservation” model has been loosened by defining some rights that the members of national minorities can realize even outside ethnically mixed areas. These rights include the right of the members of a national community to be entered on a special electoral register for electing the deputy to represent that national community in the National Assembly⁴ and the right to learn the national minority’s language even outside the ethnically mixed area.

There is another special feature in the Slovene model that needs to be mentioned: the protection of national minorities directly concerns also the members of the national majority. For example, even the members of the majority nation living in an ethnically mixed area must have bilingual documents, learn the language and culture of the minority in state schools and accept bilingual toponymy.

Due to specific historical, cultural, political and social circumstances, the scope of protection of the third constitutionally recognized minority in Slovenia – the Roma community – is different and is only slowly approaching the level of protection enjoyed by the Italian and Hungarian minorities. Significant steps forward have been taken in the fields of education, culture, information provision and political representation.

The question of recognition and protection of minority communities is also connected with the fulfillment of the “subjective criterion,” which means that they desire the status of a national minority and also strive toward it. Only the fulfillment of such objective and subjective criteria enables a specific community to be recognized as a national minority and receive special minority protection.

As already indicated, the recognition and protection of ethnic minorities is connected with the fulfillment of both objective and subjective criteria. The main criteria used in the definition of minorities within the framework of the international regime on the protection of minorities are the preservation of long-standing, firm and lasting ties with the state;

substantial size; nondominant position; distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics; and citizenship of the country on which territory the minority resides (Roter 2007). The Italian, Hungarian and Roma communities in Slovenia fulfill both types of criteria. In this article, we shall ascertain whether the “Serbs” of Bela krajina also meet these criteria and should be recognized as a national minority.

The “Serbian” community in Bela krajina through the criteria for defining minorities within the framework of the international regime on the protection of minorities

“Maintaining longstanding, firm and lasting ties with a state” is one of the five criteria for defining national minorities specified by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (Recommendation 1201 1993). The preservation of such ties with a state signifies common historical heritage on a particular territory, which has “always” been shared by the minority and majority national communities. States additionally base their obligation regarding the protection of national minorities on the joint history or ownership of a particular territory. This also applies to the Slovene model, where the preservation of long-standing, lasting and firm ties between the members of minorities and the state in which they live is an important factor.

The ancestors of most of the inhabitants of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči are thought to have settled in the areas by River Kolpa in the sixteenth century. The Slovene historian Gruden ([1912] 1992, 586) writes that they were known under various names, among them Uskoks. The name Uskoks derives from the Croatian verb *uskočiti* (to jump in), which indicates their migrant past and a role they had in performing military defense against Ottoman invasions in exchange for some special rights (Terseglav 1996, 22; Bracewell 2010, 3). Most Uskoks were of Serbian Orthodox or Croatian Catholic origin (Gruden 1992 [1912], 586). They settled in a wider area of today’s Slovenia,⁵ but most were gradually assimilated, with the exception of Bela krajina, where to this day Uskok linguistic and cultural elements have remained present (Terseglav 1996, 7). This applies in particular to the inhabitants of the four villages mentioned earlier.

The oldest written source about the presence of Uskoks in Bela krajina dates back to 1530. On the basis of this document, the immigration of Uskoks to Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči was closely tied to their settlement in the Gorjanci and Žumberak range of hills on the present-day border between Slovenia and Croatia (Filipović 1969, 156). Uskoks thus settled in larger groups on a territory that had prior to this been abandoned by most of the population because of Ottoman incursions (Kos 1991, 114; Terseglav 1996, 22, 131). The Habsburg authorities, under the rule of Ferdinand I, who administered Bela krajina included the new settlers into the defense line against the Ottomans and therefore offered them various privileges (Štih and Simoniti 1996, 181; Terseglav 1996, 22). After 1600, the Žumberak and the four aforementioned villages were included in the *Vojna krajina* (military frontier) (Voje 1992, 326). The entire area, apart from the village of Bojanci, which was later annexed to the Duchy of Carniola, became and remained a constituent part of the *Vojna krajina* until the latter was finally abolished in 1881 (Filipović 1969, 156–157; Petrović 2006, 29; Zajc 2007, 16). Until World War II, the villages of Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči belonged to Croatia, whilst Bojanci was in Slovenia (Tomažin 2005, 223). During World War II, the first three villages were under the authority of the forces that occupied Slovenia and then, a year after the war ended, they were returned to Croatia. In 1952, the inhabitants voted almost unanimously at a referendum that the

areas should be annexed to the then People's Republic of Slovenia (Tomažin 2005, 224). (Figure 1)

We do not have detailed information about the origin of the present-day Uskok villages in Bela krajina. Terseglav (1996, 21) says that only the settlement of Marindol is supported by documents. The land registers from the late fifteenth century attest that the villages



Figure 1. The location of the military frontier.

existed even before the Uskoks. In the sixteenth century there were no other permanent Uskok settlements, apart from Marindol. The latter appeared only in the early seventeenth century out of the refugee settlements dotted around the forests (Terseglav 1996, 131).

Proof of long-standing presence can be sought in different areas in different ways, including through the study of graves, church archives, architectural heritage, etc. A concise overview of the various sources and material shows that the inhabitants of the four villages have long-standing, firm and lasting ties with Slovenia. The oldest written source about the presence of Uskoks in Bela krajina dates to 1530. The Orthodox churches in Bojanci and Miliči (from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) attest their long-term presence in this territory. The graveyards in Bojanci and Marindol are a few hundred years old (Matkovič 2000, 104) and a small proportion of the gravestones still bear inscriptions in the Cyrillic alphabet (characteristic of the Serbian language). It is possible to say that one of the fundamental conditions for the recognition of traditional national minorities is thus fulfilled. Besides, the inhabitants of the four villages possess Slovene citizenship. But the element of long-standing, firm and lasting presence in a particular area acquires its true value and importance only when it is linked to the other elements of social vitality, such as the population size.

Regarding the number, the question about the sufficient size of a community to be entitled to special protection appears (Unterberger 1994, 41). The exact number or percentage in relation to the entire population is nowhere defined; however, definitions include demands for sufficient representation, justifying the adoption of special measures for minority protection (Shaw 1992, 25; Recommendation 1201 1993).

The size of the potential minority living in the villages of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči can be found on the basis of censuses in which data on national affiliation were collected. During the last few decades, the replies to the question which national group they belong to have changed among the people living in the four villages. During the period between the 1981 and 1991 censuses,⁶ the proportion of the inhabitants of the four villages who described themselves as Serbs fell from 76% to just over 41% (SORS 2005b). This fall can probably be to a large extent explained by the higher number of people with Uskok origin opting for Yugoslav instead of Serbian nationality in the 1991 census.⁷ In 1991, the proportion of those who described themselves as “Yugoslav” grew in comparison to 1981 by over 20% (SORS 2005b). Moreover, the shares of nationally undetermined people and those who did not wish to state their national affiliation also increased. All this was probably the result of the then political situation and the anti-Serbian atmosphere in Slovenia.⁸ The reduction of the absolute number and the relative share of the Serbian population in those villages is also partly the result of the aging of the population and an increase in the number of ethnically mixed marriages, as also attested by the results of our field research. In 2012, only 237 people still lived in those villages (MI 2013). Our estimation (based on our field research) is that today approximately 10% of the inhabitants of the four villages describe themselves as Serbian. According to these numbers, the “Serbian” community in Bela krajina is practically on the edge of extinction in the demographic sense, and the obvious question is whether any form of minority protection whatsoever could reverse the process and bring about the ethnic revival of the community. Although different cases of ethnic revival of communities bound to disappear are known in the world (see, e.g. Hechter and Levi 1979), it seems that in the case of “Serbs” in Bela krajina the situation already passed the critical point when a sufficient number of community members still had the will to become actively engaged in the process of preservation of their ethnic specificities. An additional factor contributing to the poor chances of ethnic revival of this community is the poor economic viability, which is an important long-term element of the

preservation of a community's social vitality (Matthews in Mancini Billson and Mancini 2007, 388). The poor economic viability of the aforementioned community is related to the general (economic, political, etc.) marginalized status of the region.

Among the general criteria for defining groups as minorities is also their nondominant position. Here we must stress that "non-dominance has been understood not only as relating to political power, but also to economic, cultural, or social status" (Pejić 1997, 671). In modern times it would make sense to supplement the discussion on nondominance by including social marginalization and discrimination.

In our study of the perceptions on the nondominant position and discrimination of the inhabitants of the four villages, we came across two themes in particular: first, claims by external subjects about discrimination against and subordination of the inhabitants of these villages, and second, the rejection of these claims by the inhabitants of the four villages themselves. Prior to Slovenia's independence in 1991, certain Serbian political actors from other Yugoslav republics wanted to show the population of Uskok origin in Bela krajina "as suffering day after day the pressures of forcible assimilation, nationalism, even genocide by the majority population over a minority" (Bezek-Jakše 1990a, 2). In some Serbian newspapers there appeared articles describing Bojanci as a backward village and its inhabitants as oppressed by the majority Slovene nation (Bezek-Jakše 1990b, 12). The inhabitants of the four villages in Bela krajina publicly denied these allegations (Bezek-Jakše 1990a, 2).

When, during our study, the inhabitants of these villages were asked about whether they felt discriminated against and ignored by the Slovenes and the Slovene state, they gave negative replies. An interviewee from Paunoviči said: "We have never been discriminated against in any way. If anyone says we have, there must be something wrong with him." An interviewee from Bojanci stated: "Everyone treats us as real Slovenes. We have no problems. They did everything for us, the road, the water supply. We don't need special protection. Serbia is not our kin state." But it is possible to read between the lines of the answers to some other questions that some people do feel "treated differently" because of their ethnic background. An inhabitant of Miliči answered the question of whether Miliči could be called a Serbian village by saying:

Sadly yes. I thought that our Serbian and Orthodox background would be forgotten, that my children would no longer be burdened by it. But a certain dislike can be felt from the others in the village. These aren't Serbian villages. We've never been to Serbia. Most of us don't have relatives there either.

The villagers also experienced different treatment at the time when Slovenia was in the process of gaining independence, when they were not called up into the Slovene army or, rather, were called up with a slight delay. They perceived this act by the state as an expression of doubt in their loyalty to it and as a form of discrimination. Irrespective of this, most of the inhabitants of the four villages claimed that due to their ethnic, religious or cultural affiliation they did not feel discriminated against in any way. It would also be difficult to talk about subordination, since some members of these villages have held important positions in the municipal administration.

Another criterion on which the definitions of the concept of national minority are based is differentness, that is, special ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious characteristics of members of the minority that set them apart from the majority population in a particular country. The next section of this article will attempt to answer the question of which are the elements of ethnic identity that define individuals as members of the Uskok community in Bela krajina and at the same time separate them from the majority population.

The sense of a common background and historical memory are usually of crucial importance for the shaping of ethnic identity (Smith 1995, 57). Roosens (1994, 83, emphasis in original) writes that “the reference to origin is / ... / the primary source of ethnicity which makes a *socio-cultural* boundary into an *ethnic boundary*.” Written sources about the settlement of “Serbs” in the four villages are rare and say little about their origin. According to the known sources, the Bojanci–Marindol “Serbs” originate from different Serbian locations and had, during their migrations, spent quite some time on the territory of Western Bosnia and Northern Dalmatia. A comparison of the written sources and the villagers’ knowledge shows certain discrepancies. Oral tradition, particularly among the villagers of Bojanci, claims that their ancestors came from Montenegro, from the banks of River Bojana. No data on this can be found in the written sources (Filipović 1969, 158–159).⁹ Widespread oral tradition in connection with the “Serbs” in Marindol says that they moved there from the nearby Žumberak mountain (Croatia) in order to escape Greek Catholicism and preserve the Orthodox faith (Filipović 1969, 170).

During the field research, it was established that most of the interviewees had certain knowledge – historical memory – about the Uskok background of the inhabitants of the four villages. The interviewees mostly emphasized that there exist various suppositions in connection with this. In addition to the already mentioned assumption about origins in Montenegro, according to yet another supposition they originated in “the village of Rogulja in Bosanska krajina.” Although we do not have the exact information on the (common) region of origin of the Uskok population in Bela krajina, this is no obstacle for the community to define a common ethnic identity. As Chandra (2012, 71–72) writes:

The region in which one’s ancestors resided is simply one of the several descent-based attributes that might define an ethnic identity, not the only one – we can have identities that we count as ethnic which have nothing to do with a region of origin.

As well as a sense of common background, language creates special connections among the members of a community and creates awareness of belonging to that community. Language as one of the constitutive elements of group consciousness is the essence of ethnic affiliation (Fishman 1977; Edwards 1985). Safran and Liu (2012, 279) write that “the functional as well as symbolic role a language plays in ethnonational collective identity is reflected in the very name assigned to it.” Naming is a matter of collective self-legitimation (Safran and Liu 2012, 279). It is interesting to note that the label used for their language by the villagers of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči is not unified. They defined it differently: Serbian, Croatian, Serbo-Croatian, mixed language, local language, Bojanci language, along-the-Kolpa¹⁰ language and “strange” mother tongue. In their opinion, the language they speak differs from Slovene, but at the same time is not Serbian. In addition they emphasize that even the Bela krajina dialect (which is a Slovene dialect) has many Serbo-Croatian words. The fact is that the language that has for nearly five centuries been preserved in the four Bela krajina villages is a mixture of different kinds of speech characteristic of the places from which Uskoks are said to originate, as well as places with which these villages are most connected today (or were connected to in the past).

In the use of their language, the villagers adapt to each communication situation. Some still speak “Serbian” among themselves at home (particularly the older generation), with other Bela krajina people they speak in the Bela krajina dialect and with other Slovenes they use the (standard) Slovene language. Intergenerational differences in the use of the language can also be observed, as children mostly speak Slovene and learn the “local” language by simply picking it up in communication with the older villagers. Petrović (2006, 24) found that nowadays only the oldest generation of the “Serbs” in Bela krajina

is truly fluent in the Serbian language. The middle generation uses Serbian in communication with the oldest generation, whilst the youngest generation understands Serbian, but mostly does not speak it. After nearly five centuries of the great vitality of the local idiom, the process of language change that is currently taking place in the Serbian Orthodox villages in Bela krajina has been prompted by the significant social changes since World War II (Petrović 2006, 24). The villagers, who were previously mainly involved in stock rearing, began to acquire jobs in the surrounding towns, where they used exclusively Slovene. As a result of greater mobility, ethnically mixed marriages occurred, which also contributed to the increased bilingualism.

In previous centuries, the most important media for language preservation were the family, the village environment, school and to some extent the church. For a while, school was an important medium that preserved the Serbian language. In Marindol and Bojanci, the pupils were taught in Serbian until the mid-twentieth century (Štrumbil 1991, 48; Tomažin 2005, 224). After the war, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, when the schools in both villages were closed down due to the small number of children, the language of instruction was Slovene (Tomažin 2005, 225; Petrović 2006, 53). Our interviews indicate that most villagers do not wish for a Serbian language school, even though some of them perhaps support the learning of Serbian as an elective subject, but even they emphasize the practical advantages of knowing the language rather than the need for language knowledge as an ethnic element.

The last census from which we can obtain data about mother tongue for individual settlements is the 1991 census. In this census, approximately two-thirds of the inhabitants of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči gave one of the minority languages as their mother tongue: 49.5% Serbian, 8% Serbo-Croatian and 6.6% Croatian. Slightly under a third (29.5%) of the villagers gave Slovene as their mother tongue, even though about 10% fewer declared themselves to be ethnic Slovenes.¹¹

The next important factor in the shaping of ethnic identity is religion. The expression of the relationship between religion and ethnicity varies, but finding an example where there is no connection between ethnicity and religion is rare (Kumpes 1991, 366). Orthodox religion is typical of the successors of the Uskoks in Bela krajina. With regard to religion, even during the early postwar years the four villages were almost homogenous (Tomažin 2005, 230). The fact that, even prior to World War II, priests prevented marriages between the Orthodox “Serbian” population and Catholics from nearby villages also greatly contributed to the preservation of the Orthodox religion (Bezdek-Jakše 1989, 2). The inhabitants of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči were able to marry Orthodox “Serbian” inhabitants of the neighboring villages or the “Orthodox villages in Lika and Kordun in the neighboring Croatia” (Petrović 2006, 24). After the war, the strict rules regarding endogamous marriages were slowly relaxed and nowadays there are many ethnically mixed marriages in the four villages.

In the 1991 census, 135 (47.4%) inhabitants of Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči declared themselves to belong to the Orthodox religion, and 40 (29.6%) to the Roman Catholic religion (SORS 2005c). If we compare these data with the declaration of national affiliation, we notice that more people declared themselves to be Orthodox than Serbian. From our research we can draw the conclusion that the Orthodox religion is still perceived as an important element of the villagers’ ethnic and cultural identity.

Today, the inhabitants of Uskok background in the four Bela krajina villages do not have their own associations in which they unite on the basis of their ethnicity and act with the goal of preserving their special cultural features. There used to be a folklore group in Bojanci, but it fell apart during the 1990s. In spite of this, some special cultural

features of the Uskok population in Bela krajina have been preserved. Modern ethnological research shows that the Uskok population left its mark in the cultural identity of the inhabitants of Bela krajina. Terseglav (1996) studied the poetic tradition of the Uskok population. In addition to poetry, Uskok elements can also be found in numerous Bela krajina folk dances still present in the region, and their costume was also special (Dražumerič and Terseglav 1987).

Interviews with people from all four villages lead us to believe that if there is anything that differentiates them from the rest of the Bela krajina population, it is the Orthodox religion and partly their language. The customs connected with the Orthodox religion are still preserved in many families.

Our study also wanted to ascertain with which name the inhabitants of the four villages identified themselves. They were asked what their community and village should be called. The range of names they would use is wide. The replies indicate that they wished to address some of their special ethnic and cultural features through the name, whilst at the same time they felt that the name could limit their multiple identities. Nonetheless, very few objected to calling their villages Serbian, but added that they are Orthodox villages as well. Some believed that the best solution was to simply use the name of the villages: "Villages should be called by their names: Bojanci, Miliči, Marindol, Paunoviči" (interviewee from Bojanci).

They were also asked what they thought about the label "Uskok successors" or "Vlachs".¹² Most did not mind the label "Uskok successors." An interviewee from Miliči said: "Uskok successors? Yes, that's not problematic. But 'Vlachs,' now that is more of an insult." Another interviewee (from Bojanci) said: "We don't consider ourselves Uskoks ... we are Serbs."

In Marindol and Bojanci ethnic affiliation is often linked to or exchanged for religious affiliation. As stated by Dražumerič (1990, 77), the first response of the inhabitants of these villages to the question about their ethnic affiliation is often "We're Orthodox." We also asked them how they would describe their ethnic affiliation. Some declared themselves to be Serbs, some were Orthodox Slovenes and others Uskoks or Uskok successors.

In addition to the objective criteria that a community has to fulfill in order to be determined as a national minority, most definitions of the term national minority include subjective criteria. In other words, members of a minority must want to or strive to preserve their special characteristics. From a theoretical point of view, one of the subjective criteria for determining a community as a minority is freedom of choice. From this stems the idea that the members of minorities can freely decide whether they wish to be recognized and/or treated as members of a minority or do not want this even though they fulfill all the objective criteria.¹³ Our research among the inhabitants of the four villages in Bela krajina tried to establish whether there is a desire for special minority protection and the acquisition of the status of a national minority. The results show that most of the interviewees in the four villages do not want the minority status enjoyed by the Italian and Hungarian minorities in Slovenia. An interviewee from Marindol said:

I don't know if I'd agree with that. We're all tied to Slovenia, we don't want to be treated differently. We lack nothing, we in Marindol aren't deprived of anything ... it's a rather sensitive issue, people won't like talking about it ... maybe the older generation would be in favor, but not the younger one.

Another interviewee from Marindol cautiously expressed the following opinion: "It would be good if we had some kind of protection; this isn't unconstitutional, is it?" Yet another interviewee from the same village was more decisive: "Yes, they need the same status as

the Hungarians and Italians. If they were given the status of a minority, they wouldn't be asking for anything special. Some older people in the village don't understand Slovene." We found most people in favor of the idea in Marindol. A villager from Bojanci thought this was the result of "frustrations with the backwardness of the village [Marindol]." In the other villages there were few opinions on the theme of special minority status. Our interviews showed that they had thought about special minority protection, but the prevailing view was that the process of the formulation and adoption of special protection legislation would cause much antagonism and, as stated by an interviewee from Bojanci, "would do more harm than good."

It is also interesting to note the reasons why they did not need a special minority status, such as the thought that the status of a minority would somehow "put them outside" Slovene society and mark them in a special way. A special protection law would, in their opinion, lead to de-integration. It would place them in an entirely new situation, the position and status of a minority; it would condemn them to an "inferior" status which they have never had throughout history.

Conclusion

What are the possible answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this article? The first question was: can the populations of the Bela krajina villages of Bojanci, Marindol, Paunoviči and Miliči be treated as national minorities? The inhabitants of these villages define themselves as a community which with regard to certain indicators differs from the majority Slovene population. Thus, for example, at the family level they preserve and transfer to the younger generations the historical memory and knowledge of the Uskok origin of their ancestors. The Orthodox religion is also preserved, whilst the language is transferred to the younger generations rather randomly. Field research has shown that the preservation of special ethnic and cultural characteristics does not go beyond the family, which means that they do not have an association or some other kind of organization through which they could preserve and develop their ethnic and cultural characteristics, and renew and strengthen their affiliation and solidarity.

However, it is not only self-determination which is important for those involved in a national (ethnic) collective identification, but also how they are defined by "others." There is a twofold understanding of identity: on the one hand, it is the self-construction or self-determination of an individual or community and, on the other hand, the identity is determined on the basis of how others (individuals or communities) see and describe them (Eriksen 1993, 4; Jenkins 1997). The research has shown that the inhabitants of the four villages in question are recognized by the majority population as Uskok successors, Serbs and/or Orthodox.

The second question was: does this population possess a range of objective elements that are usually taken into consideration in the process of recognizing specific populations as ethnic/national minorities, both in international theory and practice and in the Slovene environment? On the basis of the field research results, it is possible to say that the population in the four villages has all the objective elements that other "autochthonous" national communities in Slovenia possess. However, it must be stressed that the current social conditions, particularly the mobility of the population and the lack of any organization among the inhabitants of the four villages, are causing serious erosion in the individual elements of their special ethnic identity. It must also be added that ethnic identities and identifications, their context and meaning at the level of the individual and the community are constantly a subject of verification and reinterpretation. This means that the preservation of ethnic

indicators such as culture, values and norms and language is closely connected with the perception of the status of individuals and the community into which they are born, in comparison to the status of the community in contact with them. This means that it is difficult to define an ethnic community according to objective criteria that are supposed to apply to all its members (Phinney 1996a, 1996b). Moreover, possessing a range of objective elements does not signify that a specific minority status is automatically assigned. It must be desired and demanded.

This is why the key question remains: do the inhabitants of Bojanci, Marindol, Paunoviči and Miliči actually want the status of a (“autochthonous”) national minority? Affiliation to a certain community is a matter of individual choice, no one can decide on their behalf about their status. On the basis of objective facts, the inhabitants of the four villages are a potential (“autochthonous”) national minority, but without their conscious choice of minority status any discussion on this subject is pointless. The results of our research showed that at this particular point, majority opinion in these villages opposes special minority status. Most inhabitants do not seek the kind of status enjoyed by the Italian and Hungarian national communities in Slovenia. According to some of the interviewees, it would be pointless since they are not convinced that anyone would want such a status. Nonetheless, reading between the lines of the opinions shows that the idea of special national minority protection does have some life in it, but the opinions on this differ from one village to another.

Whichever direction the discussion of the Uskok populations in the four villages takes in future, in the implementation of a protection model and a range of special minority rights it will be necessary to take into account the extent and depth of what is possible demographically and socially. It will be necessary to find the answer to the question which parts of the written (hypothetical) model of the protection of the “Serbian” minority could be realized in practice. It is possible that the gap between theory and practice will be (too) large. As was said in the section on demography, these communities are on the verge of extinction.

The social potential of this population is modest and our interviewees were aware of this. But the will for the preservation of inherited special features is still smoldering away in some, particularly older villagers, although there is no real idea as to how to realize these desires.

Finally, let us consider another question: can the population of “Serbs” of Uskok background in Bela krajina and the population of Serbs who have in large numbers moved to Slovenia from the mid-twentieth century onwards be equated and could the same minority protection model apply to both these populations? There is a pronounced time discontinuity between the settlement of one and the other group on the territory of the present-day Slovenia. The “Serbs” of Uskok background living in Bela krajina have through the centuries of separate development in a fairly isolated rural environment preserved some of their ethnic and cultural characteristics, and at the same time developed a special collective identification that differs from the identity of the immigrant Serbian community in Slovenia and the Serbs now living in Serbia. They are united by their religion and language, even though the language of the Bela krajina “Serbs” nowadays differs considerably from the standard Serbian language. With regard to the results of our research, we can say that the Uskok successors in the four villages today mostly do not feel connected with the Serbs who have moved to Slovenia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or with the current Serbian state. Some explicitly reject such connections. Only a small proportion of our interviewees voiced different opinions.

But regardless of the recognition or nonrecognition of the unity of the ethnic origin and affiliation of the two communities, we can state that even if the Uskok successors in the four Bela krajina villages were granted the status of an “autochthonous” national community, this status would not be extended to all the Serbs in Slovenia. As already noted, the Slovene model of national minority protection is based on the concept of “autochthony” and the concept of nationally mixed areas. If the inhabitants of the four villages were granted the status of an “autochthonous” national community, the implementation of special minority rights would, in accordance with the Slovene protection model, be limited to the population in the nationally mixed area, that is, the four villages in Bela krajina. Of course, this is no reason for the state not to consider a different way of creating the conditions for and providing opportunities for any of these communities to preserve their special ethnic identity.

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Notes

1. In Slovenia, there is no official definition of this concept. Roter (2005, 199–200) connects “autochthony” in Slovenia to the European criterion of the preservation of long-lasting and firm ties with the country of residence, which was introduced precisely in order to differentiate traditional national minorities and immigrant communities; she describes autochthony as a Slovene expression for firm ties between the minority and the state in which the minority exists.
2. We use the expression in quotation marks because there is no unified opinion on how to name this community.
3. For more on the development of the constitutional protection of national minorities in Slovenia between 1945 and 1991, see Komac (2007a, 38–46).
4. Voting Rights Register Act (Uradni list RS, no. 1/2007), Article 22:

Citizens members of the Italian or Hungarian ethnic communities who do not reside permanently in the areas where those communities live shall be placed on the electoral register of citizens members of the Italian or Hungarian ethnic community at their written request directed at the appropriate self-governing ethnic community.

Members of the Italian and Hungarian national minorities have what is referred to as a “double voting right.” This means that they elect their own representatives for the national parliament and local governing bodies, while they also have the general voting right. Their influence on the composition of the parliament and municipal councils is thus “greater” than that of the members of the majority nation (positive discrimination). In Slovenia, the “double voting right” of the members of the Italian and Hungarian national communities is frequently the subject of criticism, although this right is based on the constitutional regulation which ensures a high level of protection of the two national communities and does not signify a violation of the principle of equality of the right to vote (Ribičič 2004, 33–34).

5. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire resulted in migrations from the Balkan Peninsula to the wider area of the Habsburg monarchy, the Republic of Venice and other parts of the present-day Italy. Numerous groups of Albanians immigrated to the territory of the present-day Italy. It is estimated that the current number of the members of the Albanian minority in Italy is around 100,000. They live in the Italian regions of Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise and Sicily (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2014). From Herzegovina and Southern Croatia, a group of Croats also crossed the Adriatic Sea in flight from the Ottomans. In the Italian region of Molise, they lived beside the Albanians. Today the “Croatian” language (or “our language,” as the Croats refer to it, is alive in only three villages (Acquaviva

- Collecroce, Montemitro and San Felice del Molise) (Komac 1979; Sujoldžić 2004, 264). Between 1530 and 1560, Croats also moved from different regions of Croatia and Bosnia toward the north, to the territory of the present-day Burgenland in Austria. Since 1922, they have been known as the Burgenland Croats (Gieler and Kornfeind 2003). During roughly the same time, Croats also settled on the territory of what is now Slovakia. Today, they live in four municipalities around Bratislava. Some Croats from central Croatia moved to the territory of the Czech Republic, settling in Southern Moravia, which is why they were called Moravian Croats (Lipovac 2009). Because of the Ottoman territorial expansions, Serbs also emigrated to the present-day Bosnia and the frontier regions of the Kingdom of Croatia, as well as to central Hungary (Poth 2001).
6. Due to personal data protection, it is impossible to gain this information with regard to the 2002 census.
 7. The 1961 census introduced the category of “Yugoslav” for the first time. The greatest number of the inhabitants of Slovenia declared themselves to be “Yugoslavs” in the 1981 census (1.39%), while later their share decreased in 1991 to 0.63% and in 2002 only 0.03%. In the four villages dealt with in this article, the proportion of inhabitants declaring themselves as “Yugoslavs” was highest in the 1991 census (when Slovenia gained its independence) (Komac 2007b, 510–511).
 8. The census was carried out only a few months prior to Slovenia’s independence in what was still the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
 9. The publication *Krajevni leksikon Dravske banovine* [Local Lexicon of the Drava Province] (1937, 120) says in connection with the appearance of the name Bojanci that the village was given this name because inhabitants of the village of Bojna had moved there. Most probably this refers to the village of Bojna in Croatia, which lies on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina and was traditionally inhabited by Serbs.
 10. The Kolpa is a border river between Slovenia and Croatia.
 11. If we compare the data according to individual villages, we can see that Serbian prevailed in Marindol (67.3%) and in Miliči (78.1%). In Paunoviči, the percentage of the population stating Serbian as their mother tongue was much smaller (36.4%), but in this village the proportion of those who declared their mother tongue to be Croatian was considerably higher (27.3%). Among the inhabitants of the other three villages, a notably smaller proportion (between 0% and 4.7%) stated that their mother tongue was Croatian. In Bojanci, the proportion of Serbian-speaking population was the smallest (27.5%), but here the share of those who gave Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue (17.6%) was much higher in comparison with that in the other villages (SORS 2005a, 2005b).
 12. Today, the Vlachs are an ethnic group scattered as a minority in countries of the Balkan Peninsula (Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania). They are also known under various other names such as Aromanians, Morlachs or Tsintsars. Vlachs have pastoralist origins and lived on the territory of the Balkans before the Slav settlement in the Middle Ages. Their language and ethnic identity have traditionally adapted to geopolitical and social situations in the past, such as the Ottoman invasion in the sixteenth century (Šatava 2013, 71; Winder 2013, 121–122). Thus, the term “Vlach” evolved into a social and economic designation in the medieval period and the different meanings of the term became difficult to separate. Hence, the occasional confusion or equation between Uskoks and Vlachs, since both rendered military service against the Ottomans to the Habsburgs in exchange for autonomy and tax concessions (Bracewell 2010, 24–25). Their pastoralist origins probably had an influence on the pejorative meaning of the label “Vlachs.”
 13. The freedom of choice to be treated or not treated as members of a minority was mentioned by the United Nations in 1950, and is contained in all the international documents pertaining to the protection of minorities from the 1990s.

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