Ideas, Structural Ambiguity, and the Struggle for Bilingual Signage by Carinthian Slovenes in Austria

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The studies of human behaviour that foreground the explanatory role of exogenously given incentives and constraints give short shrift to the role of agency, or the behaviour(s) of actors, in attempting to shed light on both policy and behaviour. This article reverses the emphasis – with the example of ethnic politics in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia with respect to the preservation and/or erection of German-language and Slovenian-language inscriptions – by arguing that the behavioural strategies of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, such as national minorities, can carry significant political consequences – and thus are worthy of study. Specifically, the article looks into a politics of consensus and a politics of (political) realism, as the latter are advocated by Carinthian Slovenes in Austria. The findings serve as a wake-up call for West European states in particular, which, arguably, have grown complacent about their own minority rights records.

Introduction

Ever since Austria became an independent state in 1955, the Slovene minority at large in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia had led a political struggle for the legally-defensible allocation and/or preservation of bilingual (read: German-cum-Slovenian) road signage, which was meant to stake out the physical boundaries or limits of settlements (towns, villages, and so forth) in the area.[1] Now, if such road signage is divested of political and cultural significance, then that is all it is, namely road placards indicating both the names and boundaries of Germanophone and Slovenophone towns, or settlements, in Carinthia.[2] However, after the fall of Communism in Europe (and, in particular, in the defunct

1. It is important to mention that some of the above settlements contain fewer than 30 residents.
2. See Klemenčič and Klemenčič (2010) for a comprehensive overview of the minority-rights situation of Carinthian Slovenes in the Second Republic in Austria.

Yugoslavia) in 1989, the politics surrounding the allocation and/or preservation of bilingual signage in Carinthia, became intensified. Specifically, the following two lines of thought/argument by the Carinthian Slovene minority elite gained in salience. Some Slovene minority elites argued – and campaigned – for a certain number of bilingual town signposts that had been, ostensibly, acceptable to all the parties to the language conflict. Others called for the allocation and/or preservation of that number of bilingual town signposts which had seemed to be warranted or justified by the rule of law. This divergence – in behavioural terms – makes for the puzzle which the current article sets itself the task of addressing.

In West European states, the presence of wealth and (relative) political stability would lead us to believe that ruling elites likely pursue policies which are, so to speak, friendly towards national minorities. The 'wealth' factor, arguably, makes compromises between ethno-linguistic groups easier to achieve whilst political stability, or transparency, renders infringement of the rights of national minorities more difficult to hide. This is particularly the case if we look at the political record of West European states in general in the issue-area of the protection of (language) rights of national minorities in comparison with that of post-communist East European states in general (and, particularly, war-prone Balkan ones) (see for example Anagnostou 2005; Brubaker 1996; Csergo 2007). However, the problem of the protection of (language) rights for national minorities is pertinent to West European states such as Austria, as well, as shown by the struggle by Carinthian Slovenes in Austria for the 'fair' – or legally justifiable and/or warranted – distribution of bilingual signage in Carinthia.

Methodologically speaking, I focus on the differential influence of certain ideas on the behavioural strategies of actors, specifically those of the Carinthian Slovene minority elites. This focus stands in sharp contrast with that in the larger literature – or body of empirical research – which views the behaviour of actors in politics qua politics as being derivative, or epiphenomenal, of exogenously-given variables, say, leverage (Bates 1981; Mearsheimer 1990; Moore 1966). Instead, the current article argues – on the example of ethnic politics surrounding the protection of the rights of Carinthian Slovenes in Austria – for the potentially politically significant influence of ambiguity, in causal terms, affecting the behavioural strategies of actors.

The article is organized as follows. The first section presents the analytical discussion or argument with regard to the evidence at hand. The following section summarizes the empirical material. The third and largest section presents the results of empirical research. The concluding section recapitulates and attempts to generalize the findings.

The Argument

Following sociologist Ann Swidler (1986), I understand by 'ideas' a tool kit or a repertoire that is composed of assumption-based lines of action by which actors (often) strive for (largely) similar ends but not necessarily through similar *means*. 'Ends', in

the Austria case, are political influence and better policy performance whilst 'means' are either a politics of (ostensible) consensus or of realism grounded in the rule of law (more on this below). Therefore, to argue in favour of the viewpoint according to which ideas or interpretative frames of actors exert autonomous influence on the latter's behaviour, we must, following political scientist Craig Parsons (2007, ch. 4), be able to demonstrate that certain exogenously-given incentives and constraints facing the actors in question left room for manoeuvre in terms of how to realize sought-after political ends.

In *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment* (2007) Erin Jenne looks into the support (or a lack thereof) extended to ethnic minority elites by the latter's kin-states, international organizations, or lobby actors in general. She argues (Jenne 2007, 44) that the relative moderation/radicalization by ethnic minority elites owes its genesis to variable bargaining – or power – positions that are such because of external (political, economic, military) support. I advance a different argument. In particular, I suggest that the presumed or the actual ambiguity in the given obstacle course made up of resources and constraints can – in principle, or in actuality – throw off balance ethnic minority elites.[3] In this scenario (which, again, can be factual or hypothetical), elites are at a loss with regard to which courses of action will be optimizing or satisficing, for themselves. Correspondingly, they find it necessary to draw upon their assumptions or cognitive priors with regard to how to proceed (Berman 1998; Blyth 2001; Parsons 2002). To be sure, the behaviours of actors are subordinate to the given configuration of apparent salient exogenously-given incentives and constraints, given that these actors need to think through how to (assemble the ways in which to) negotiate the obstacle-course composed of the above (Biernacki 1995). Nevertheless, we can argue that the range of possible ways in which this would be likely to occur is fairly large. The main reason, as Parsons (2007, 101) cogently argues, is that 'complex assumptions [might] lie behind even the simplest political actions' (cf. Berk 1994). So there may well be more than just one way in which actors can arrive at the realization of particular, sought-after, ends. Following others (see Hollis and Lukes 1982), Parsons (2007, 98) characterizes the potential multitude of certain means – to certain ends – as being based on the presence and operationability of 'multiple rationalities'. In fact, Parsons himself uses a different term, which is 'a-rationality'. In other words, rationality qua rationality does not organize human behaviour.

The Evidence

According to the 2001 census of the population across Austria, the Slovene minority in Carinthia comprises 2.38% of the local population, which adds up to 12,554 people.[4] This reflects a very drastic decline relative to 1951 when Carinthian Slovene speakers made up nearly four times as large a population (De Cillia *et al.* 1998, 23). The decline

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3. The phrase 'obstacle-course' is Parsons's. See Parsons (2007).
4. Available at https://www.statistik.at/web_de/static/bevoelkerung_mit_oesterreichischer_staatsbuergers-chaft_nach_umgangssprache_022886.pdf (accessed 22 August 2019).

is in large part due to the historic assimilation of Carinthian Slovene speakers into the German-speaking population together with the partial denazification of the Carinthian German-speaking elite since after the Second World War (Knight 2007). In this light it is understandable why Tom Priestly (1999, 111) calls the present Carinthian Slovene minority a 'museum curiosity'. Still, the Carinthian Slovene minority claims for itself representation in at least two political organizations or umbrella-groups, as will be evident from the empirical analysis. So, two lines of thought or argumentation by the Carinthian Slovene minority elite come into use by actors.

On the one hand, some Carinthian Slovene minority elites called for the pursuit of a politics of interethnic consensus. Specifically, this entailed a trade-off between (1) the particular number of bilingual town signposts – to be preserved and/or created throughout Carinthia; and (2) the (expected) promptness with which the historic language conflict in Carinthia would be addressed. To back up the argument in favour of a politics of interethnic consensus, some Carinthian Slovene minority elites emphasized the possibility of a nationalist backlash.[5] And there was, in fact, a historic nationalist backlash in Carinthia in the 1970s.

On the other hand, other Carinthian Slovene minority elites based the argumentation in favour of an affirmative action policy towards the Carinthian Slovene minority on both moral and legal claims.[6] In particular, they called for the particular number of bilingual town signposts to be preserved and/or created throughout Carinthia as justified and/or warranted in a 'new' Europe. Hence, if recourse had to be taken to a means that would put the powers-that-be in Austria under political pressure in order to enforce a policy aimed at protecting the rights of the Carinthian Slovene minority, then so be it. Should the envisaged strategy or tactic not achieve the sought-after policy modification, the Carinthian Slovene minority would be still on the higher moral or legal ground.

Note on the Data

The analysis of ethnic politics in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia, presented below, draws upon a variety of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include occasional work written by those involved in the language dispute in Carinthia and interviews conducted by the author in Austria.[7] The secondary sources include the area literature proper (in the German language) and press reports (the latter

5. The *assumption* underlying the moderate thinking by some of the Carinthian Slovene minority elites was that while the Carinthian Slovene minority *deserved* to be treated well (by the Austrian national as well as local Carinthian ruling elites) the overall state of the protection for this minority (such as financial support, both from Austria and Slovenia) had not been abject.

6. The *assumption* underlying the radical thinking by some of the Carinthian Slovene minority elites was that the Carinthian Slovene minority had been *entitled* to the comprehensive protection of 'its' rights solely by virtue of the fact that this minority found itself to be on the brink of extinction.

7. The interview sample includes 46 interviews (including some high-ranking officials, for example the vice head of state and several ministers, and many key political figures amongst the Carinthian Slovene minority elites). The interviews were conducted in the German language. The interviews were recorded by the author. The anonymity of interviewees is preserved.

are accessed predominantly at Factiva and Lexis-Nexis Academic). The interview material aims to buttress rather than inform the empirical analysis throughout.

The Case of Intractable Ethnic Conflict: Evidence from Austria

According to Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty – which made Austria formally an independent state in 1955 – Slovenian-language (and German-language) town signposts are to be used in ethnically mixed areas in Carinthia.[8] This Article, then, forms the basis for the demands by Carinthian Slovenes for the equitable allocation of bilingual signage in Carinthia.

Arguably, a serious effort on the part of the ruling elite in Austria to address the question of de facto bilingualism in Carinthia was made by former Chancellor Bruno Kreisky in 1972. At that time the Austrian parliament had requested that bilingual town signposts be allocated in some 200 municipalities or localities throughout Carinthia. This, however, caused indignation amongst the German-speaking population there. Hence, once the new bilingual town signposts were set up, they were quickly torn down by a mob (Freund 2012, 134–141). The governing elite in the Austrian capital backed down, and the language conflict in Carinthia simmered until the collapse of the Communist regime in rump Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, Carinthian Slovenes invoked the 1976/7 Austrian legislative act(s) according to which bilingual signage had to be put up in areas in Carinthia in which the Slovene minority comprised more than 25% of the local population – which in practice affected some 90 municipalities or localities. However, these acts did not begin to be implemented by the Austrian state until the 2000s, as we will see.

In brief, the Carinthian Slovene minority elites were in limbo – in no small part because of the influence of right-wing populism in contemporary Austrian society[9] – with regard to how to induce the Carinthian German-speaking elite to oversee the allocation and/or preservation of the 'fair' – or legally defensible – amount of bilingual signage in Carinthia. Therefore, the ultimate resolution of the language dispute in Carinthia was the result of both activism for policy modification on the part of the Carinthian Slovene minority elite at large and contingent circumstances.

Phase One: The Fall of Communism and the Rise of Right-wing Populism in Austria

When Slovenia became an independent state in 1991,[10] the Slovenian governing elites attempted to assert for themselves the right to speak on behalf of the Carinthian

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8. Available at https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20217/v217.pdf (accessed 22 August 2019).
9. On populism in Austria in general, see Heinisch (2003).
10. The Slovenian political elite moved to pronounce Slovenia's independence from then the rump Yugoslavia on 25 June 1991.

Slovene minority in Austria. In particular, they held that Slovenia was the legal successor to the defunct Yugoslavian state with respect to the Austrian State Treaty (Pirker 2010, 86–87). The Austrian governing elites, however, contest the presumed right of a new Slovenia to claim the status of the co-signatory of the Austrian State Treaty (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 501, 574). Notwithstanding the unclear legal status of Slovenia in this respect, the declared intent of the Slovenian governing elites to speak on behalf of Carinthian Slovenes served to stoke populist sentiment amongst the Carinthian German-speaking elite at large (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 413). Specifically, the latter held that Slovenia harboured designs on Carinthia's territory (Pirker 2010, 226).[11]

Before we can proceed with an analysis of ethnic politics in Carinthia, a note is in order about those groupings, or organizations, that claim the right to speak on behalf of the Carinthian Slovene minority in domestic politics. The two main umbrella organizations that assert for themselves the right to speak on behalf of the Carinthian Slovene minority in politics, namely the National Council of Carinthian Slovenes (NSKS) and the Association of Slovenian Organizations (ZSO), were both founded in the wake of the Second World War. The NSKS adopted a 'pro-Austria' stance during Communism. The ZSO adopted a 'pro-Yugoslavia' stance (Pirker 2010, 39, 227).[12] The NSKS is Christian-cum-conservative. The ZSO is – so to speak – liberal – the historical predecessor of the ZSO was a pro-labour movement.[13] There later emerged a third umbrella organization that, as well, claimed the right to speak on behalf of the Carinthian Slovene minority in politics.

Unlike the ZSO, the NSKS had no scruples about taking recourse to unconventional tactics in order to induce the Carinthian (and national) governing elites to address the problem of bilingualism with regard to road signposts throughout Carinthia. In 1994, lawyer (and future head of NSKS) Rudi Vouk was fined for exceeding the speed limit in St. Kanzian. In court Vouk argued that the ticket he had received was against the law because St. Kanzian, which according to Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty could be considered an ethnically-mixed area or settlement, was signposted in German only (German Press Agency 2001). Vouk's case went all the way to the Constitutional Court, where it was upheld in December 2001. The Court's 2001 ruling overturned the 1976/7 regulation (according to which bilingual signage in Carinthia had to be present in areas in which the Slovene minority comprised more than 25% of the local population, remember) and recommended instead a 10% threshold – whereby the number of Slovene speakers in Carinthia was to be determined based on an extended period of time. If we consider the number of Slovene speakers in Carinthia in 1955,

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11. Carinthia as it exists today became a part of Austria in 1920, as a result of the plebiscite, in which the Carinthian Slovene minority had tipped the popular vote in favour of Carinthia's joining of Austria rather than the Slavic-Kingdom.

12. Both the NSKS and the ZSO came out of a pro-Slovenian opposition front that had operated as the liberation-movement for the Slovenian people (Osvobodilna fronta slovenskega naroda) in the Second World War.

13. It would be misleading to view the ZSO as a Western-type left-oriented social democratic political organization or grouping. The main reason for this is that the ZSO had been the direct descendant of a classically-*communist* left- (or pro-labour-) oriented Yugoslav (political) movement.

the above would be commensurate to the allocation and/or preservation of some 800 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia (Hämmerle 2006, 38).

The 1999 Austrian parliamentary elections brought to power a coalition of the (conservative) Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the (populist and far-right) Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Wolfgang Schüssel, who headed the ÖVP, became the (new) Chancellor of Austria. Jörg Haider, who headed the FPÖ, embarked on a new stint as the governor of Carinthia.[14] The FPÖ, which rode on a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, lashed out at Slovenia for the latter's presumed threat to Slovenize Carinthia (Austria Press Agency 1999). Given the entry of an openly anti-minority party into the government, the European Union (EU) moved in 2000 to impose diplomatic sanctions, and sent a group of human-rights experts charged with assessing Austria's record in the issue-area of the protection of minority rights. The EU's intervention in Austria's domestic political affairs elicited divergent reactions amongst the Carinthian Slovene minority elites. While some Carinthian Slovene minority elites (particularly, within the NSKS) placed their hopes in EUs monitoring of Austria's human rights record as a deus ex machina, others (particularly, within the ZSO) entertained no political illusions as to the ability – and readiness – of some German-speaking elites to exploit international scrutiny of Austria for populist ends (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 464–467; Pirker 2010, 245, 258).[15] In a few months the EU's sanctions were recalled as the group of human-rights experts found no obvious violations of minority – and/or human – rights (*International Herald Tribune* 2000).

To conclude, we can already see that, as political scientist Mark Blyth (2003) puts it, constraints do not arrive at the scene 'with an instruction sheet'. Stated differently, it is up to agency as what to make of varying sources of leverage, as in the case of Austria.

Phase Two: The Start of the Debate about Bilingual Signage in Carinthia

The 2001 Constitutional Court's ruling or recommendation to apply the 'ten-percent-rule' with respect to the allocation and/or preservation of bilingual signage throughout Carinthia was to be carried out by the local Carinthian authorities by the end of 2002. Haider himself threatened to defy the above ruling or recommendation (German Press Agency 2001). This defiance on the part of the Carinthian governing elite at large prompted some Carinthian Slovene minority leaders (particularly, within the NSKS) to call for the legal transfer of rights – from the defunct Yugoslavia to an independent Slovenia – with regard to the Austrian State Treaty (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 535). Presumably, Slovenia would then be in a position to represent, or fight for, the rights of Carinthian Slovenes in the

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14. Haider served previously as the governor of Carinthia in 1989–1991.
15. Also, see author's interviews with: a very senior official from NSKS, winter 2011, Klagenfurt; a very senior official from ZSO, winter 2011, Klagenfurt.

arena of bilateral, or international, politics (Pirker 2010, 231). Yet, not all Carinthian Slovene minority leaders adopted such a political attitude. For instance, then-head of NSKS Bernard Sadovnik and Marjan Sturm, head of ZSO, likened the possible internationalization of the language dispute in Carinthia to a dead-end course in view of the preponderance, in Carinthian politics proper, of ethnic (or right-wing) populism (Die Presse 2002a).

The 2001 census revealed a substantial decrease in the number of Slovene speakers in Carinthia. In fact, over the preceding decade the number had dropped to 10% (Slovenian Press Agency 2002a). Partly because of this, Schüssel in 2002 convened the so-called consensus conference, or roundtable discussion, aimed at finding possible ways in which to carry out the 2001 Constitutional Court's ruling or recommendation (see above) (Austria Press Agency 2002). The positions of all parties then became clear with respect to the language conflict in Carinthia.

The Austrian Green Party declined to take part in the consensus debates. It justified its position with the argument that the several Carinthian patriotic organizations (whose raison d'être is to commemorate Carinthia's historic struggles over territory with the Slavs) had been permitted to take part in the conference (Slovenian Press Agency 2002b).[16] The Carinthian Slovene minority elites called for the allocation and/or preservation of some 390 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia, a number based on the 1971 census (Pirker 2010, 65). Still, they consented to lowering the number to 200. Anything less was unacceptable even to the moderate or consensus-oriented Sadovnik (Die Presse 2002b). At the time the status quo was 74 bilingual town signposts in place in Carinthia. Finally, the Schüssel-led government or coalition called for allocating and/or preserving 148 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia, twice what was then in place. Further, the government called for financial aid to be given to the Carinthian Slovene minority in the issue-areas of cultural development and (preschool and secondary/post-kindergarten) education. It also tied the implementation of all this to the hypothetical declaration by the Carinthian Slovene minority elite at large that Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty had been fulfilled (for all times) (Glantschnig 2006, 46).

Not surprisingly, even the moderate or consensus-oriented Sturm rejected the Schüssel–Haider deal out of hand. Specifically, Sturm held Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty dynamic in nature, given that it contains no reference to bilingual kindergartens even though they do exist in Carinthia.[17] Thus, the first attempt by all the parties to the language dispute in Carinthia to reach a consensus ended in a stalemate.

To conclude, the politics surrounding the allocation and/or preservation of bilingual signage in Carinthia in a sense 'showed' that one could not have any number of German-language and Slovenian-language town signposts preserved and/or erected as justified and/or warranted by the rule of law without somehow clearing, or negotiating, the obstacles to inter-ethnic reconciliation between the two main

16. On the Carinthian patriotic organizations, see Pirker (2010, 205–224).
17. Non-disclosable source.

ethno-linguistic groups in Carinthia – German-speakers and Slovene-speakers – thrown up by right-wing (populist) politics in Austria. This being said, some Carinthian Slovene minority elites (particularly, within NSKS) had not been mistaken or misled in toto in that they had sought to internationalize the language conflict in Carinthia even if several Carinthian patriotic groupings had emphasized that they wanted to avoid such possible internationalization (Glantschnig 2006, 45). Thus, the Carinthian Slovene minority elites opted for particular divergent courses of action because of their cognitive priors or interpretative frames rather than from the given configuration of structural conditions.

Phase Three: The Persistence of the (Un)Conventional Politics of Minority Rights in Austria

In the 2002 Austrian parliamentary elections, the ÖVP emerged victorious but because of unresolved issues in negotiating a coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) it had no other choice other than to enter into another coalition government with the FPÖ, even though the latter came out of the elections much weaker than before. Thus, Chancellor Schüssel continued to struggle with centrifugal pressures when trying to broker a consensual agreement between all the parties to the language dispute in Carinthia.

In the meantime, several Carinthian Slovene minority leaders urged Carinthian Slovenes to follow the example of Vouk, namely to 'exceed' speed limits in those towns that were eligible for bilingual signage – but that did not have it – and then to bring their 'speed ticket' à la Vouk to the court in order to elicit Constitutional Court rulings or recommendations on a case-by-case basis (Slovenian Press Agency 2005a).[18] Yet, not all Carinthian Slovene minority leaders adopted such a political attitude. For instance, Sadovnik held that the intentional 'speeding' on the part of some members of the Carinthian Slovene minority would only raise political tensions between the German-speaking and Slovenian-speaking populations in Carinthia.[19] Haider, of course, exploited what he called 'reckless driving by Carinthian Slovenes' for populist ends (Slovenian Press Agency 2005b). Sadovnik at the same time gave as his opinion that political tensions between German and Slovene speakers in Carinthia in all likelihood would have lessened if the proposal of the previous government with respect to the number of bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia (148, remember) had been upheld by the Carinthian and national ruling elites (Die Presse 2003). As a result of this 'unorthodox' position of his, Sadovnik had to resign as head of NSKS.[20] Then, in 2003, he founded the third umbrella organization – the Community of Carinthian Slovenes (SKS) – in order to nurture

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18. Also see author's interview with a very senior official from NSKS, winter 2011, Klagenfurt.
19. Sadovnik had been, *in general*, against the possible polarization amongst the German-speaking and Slovenian-speaking populations in Carinthia, which was no doubt engendered through the speeding tactic of some Carinthian Slovene minority elites (e.g. Die Presse 2003).
20. Non-disclosable source.

'moderate and peaceful' points of contact with the Carinthian German-speaking elite at large (Slovenian Press Agency 2003).

In May 2005, the 50th anniversary of the Austrian State Treaty served as a prod for the Schüssel-led coalition government to convene yet another consensus conference on the language conflict in Carinthia. This time, it was the NSKS's leadership that at first did not consent that its representatives sit at the same 'consensus' table with those of the several Carinthian patriotic organizations or groupings. Eventually, though, they relented. Still, the consensus debates continued to be stalled. The participants in the conference did agree to oversee the allocation of 19 bilingual town signposts which, based on the 1976/7 Austrian legislative act(s), should have been set (Slovenian Press Agency 2005c), but of which by then only a few had been actually set up, and this amidst exorbitant attention from local mass media (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 505). The Carinthian German-speaking elite at large trumpeted the erection of the several missing bilingual town signposts in Carinthia as a major political breakthrough for which this elite claimed credit (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 505).

Two more rounds of consensus debates followed. In the first round, the government called for the allocation and/or preservation of 158 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia. Moreover, the door was opened for the allocation of 'additional' bilingual town signposts after 2010. The latter date was only intended as the formal 'deadline' for the preservation and/or erection of the initial (158) bilingual town signposts (Karner 2012, 52). Both the ZSO and the SKS went along with the suggestion of the government, although the NSKS gave only partial consent (Der Standard 2006; Karner 2006, 102). Nonetheless, Haider backpedalled and called for a special census of the Slovenian-speaking population in Carinthia (Slovenian Press Agency 2005d). For his part, Vouk counter-claimed that he would 'make the rest of Europe aware of how minorities are treated in Austria' by, for example, lodging official complaints with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (Die Presse 2005). Other Carinthian Slovene minority leaders disagreed. Sturm called taking recourse to international institutions such as the ECHR an 'act of desperation' especially at a time when Austria had been about to assume the presidency of the European Council in Brussels (Slovenian Press Agency 2005e). Given the emergence of this new rift, Schüssel postponed any further debates.

In spring 2006 the debates about the allocation and/or preservation of bilingual signage in Carinthia were picked up again. This time, the Schüssel-led coalition government called for the preservation and/or erection of 141 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia. The door was still left open for 'additional' bilingual town signposts at some future date. Both the ZSO and the SKS, grudgingly, consented. The NSKS refused to negotiate on such terms (Hämmerle 2006, 45; Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 539). Haider backpedalled again and pressed for giving the Carinthian German-speaking elite the right of exercising veto powers with regard to the preservation and/or erection of bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia in the future. Intense negotiations between Schüssel and the Haiderites ensued. The final suggestion of the government reserved the right for the

Carinthian Slovene minority elite to lodge an official petition with the national government for 'additional' bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia at a specified date in the future. At the same time, such an official request was not meant to be binding for the powers that be. Sturm and (even) Sadovnik then began to distance themselves from this suggestion. Given the increasing discontent amongst the Carinthian Slovene minority elites with regard to the Carinthian (and national) ruling elites' tackling of the problem of the de facto presence of bilingual signage in Carinthia, the SPÖ and the Greens withdrew support in the legislature in summer 2006 for the bill which had been favoured by Schüssel and which aimed to resolve the language dispute in Carinthia on the level of an amendment of the Austrian Constitution (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 544).

To conclude, it seems that neither the conservative nor the liberal representatives of the Carinthian Slovene minority acted irrationally regarding the possible ways in which to facilitate the resolution of the language conflict in Carinthia. While the liberals considered the unconventional politics of minority rights ('the speeding tactic') to be ineffective in view of the influence of right-wing populism in Carinthia, the conservatives considered the conventional politics of minority rights (standard inter-ethnic negotiations) to be ineffective in view of the mockery of the Carinthian Slovene minority by the Carinthian German-speaking elite. Hence, it stretches plausibility to suggest that the divergent courses of action pursued by the Carinthian Slovene minority elites were the result of the latter's reaction(s) to structural conditions, such as variable leverage.

Phase Four: The Resolution of the Bilingual Signage Conflict in Carinthia

The 2006 Austrian parliamentary elections resulted in the coming to power of the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Alfred Gusenbauer from the SPÖ became the new Chancellor. After the elections, the NSKS together with the ZSO and the SKS urged the new (grand) coalition government to resolve the bilingual signage conflict in Carinthia, at last. In particular, they called for the allocation and/or preservation of 173 German-language and Slovenian-language town signposts throughout Carinthia. The idea of the Gusenbauer-led government or coalition had been to resolve the bilingual signage controversy (in Carinthia) by the end of the summer of 2007. In spring 2007 the Gusenbauer-led government started consultations with the municipal authorities about the question of de facto bilingual signage in Carinthia. Subsequently, it put forth a plan that excluded the possibility of 'additional' German-language and Slovenian-language town signposts throughout Carinthia in principle. Instead, it called for the allocation and/or preservation of 163 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia – for all times. The Carinthian SPÖ continued to insist on the allocation and/or preservation of 141 bilingual town signposts.

The NSKS leadership was, at best, lukewarm towards the plan of the government. Specifically, it was not satisfied with the criteria by which bilingual signage in

Carinthia had been intended to be preserved and/or erected (Klemenčič and Klemenčič 2010, 558–559). Sturm, of ZSO, saw 163 bilingual town signs as a 'bitter pill', which however he was willing to swallow (Der Standard 2007). Finally, Sadovnik, of SKS, considered the number of bilingual signposts suggested by the Gusenbauer-led government (163 signposts) to be 'essentially better' than the previous suggestion of the Schüssel-led government (141 town signposts) (Slovenian Press Agency 2007).

Gusenbauer then issued an ultimatum to all the parties to the language dispute in Carinthia to the effect that if there was no solution to this dispute by the end of July 2007, individual rulings or recommendations – pertaining to individual town signposts in Carinthia – of the Constitutional Court would continue, as with 'the speeding tactic' case. Haider did not wait to lash out at the Gusenbauer quasi-ultimatum as bullying par excellence (*Salzburger Nachrichten* 2007). In late June 2007, Gusenbauer in a televised address laid out the key aspects of 'his' plan on bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia. The Haiderites likened Gusenbauer's 'road map' to a declaration of (political) war. For its part the ÖVP was piqued by the fact that it had not been consulted by the SPÖ ahead of Gusenbauer's address – and so it withdrew support (in an evident tit-for-tat) for the legislative initiative of the SPÖ to amend the Constitution in order for the language dispute in Carinthia to be settled (Hämmerle 2007, 52).[21] Given the blockade, some Carinthian Slovene minority leaders (particularly, within the NSKS) threatened anew to turn for guidance to the ECHR (Hämmerle 2007, 53).

In the fall of 2008, Haider suffered lethal injuries in a car crash. Gerhard Dörfler – who had been more conciliatory than Haider on the bilingual signage conflict in Carinthia – became the new governor of Carinthia. Also in the fall of 2008, Austria held snap legislative elections that resulted in the formation of a new grand coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Werner Faymann of the SPÖ became the new Chancellor. The Faymann government called for the allocation and/or preservation of German-language and Slovenian-language town signposts throughout Carinthia in the areas in which the Carinthian Slovene minority constituted more than 17.5% of the local population; this number in percentage terms fell exactly between the 10% and the 25% threshold(s), as the latter two had been recommended and/or decreed by the Constitutional Court in 2001 and by Austria's legislative act(s) from 1976/7, respectively. In practice, the above threshold in percentage numbers added up to a maximum of 164 bilingual town signposts. The possibility of 'additional' bilingual signposts was ruled out. In the summer of 2010, the initial (minor) political breakthrough occurred. Dörfler assented to the distribution of several individual bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia, as demanded by at least 17 separate decisions of the Constitutional Court (Slovenian Press Agency 2008). The denouement was then coming. In the winter of 2011, the NSKS leadership called for 273 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia, in spite of the fact that the moderate or consensus-oriented Valentin Inzko, a diplomat by calling, acted as head

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21. Also see author's interview with a very senior official from ÖVP, winter 2011, Vienna.

of NSKS. Later, however, the NSKS leadership consented to 175 bilingual town signposts. The two other Carinthian Slovene minority umbrella organizations or groupings adopted a more consensual political position. Sturm of ZSO and Sadovnik of SKS were by and large satisfied with the suggestion of the Faymann government. At this point the political climate in Carinthia had undergone far-reaching changes, which were that an overwhelming majority of the Carinthian German-speaking population wanted to see the language dispute settled and that one of the several Carinthian patriotic groupings had made a U-turn on bilingual town signposts (Der Standard 2011).

In the spring of 2011, all the parties to the language conflict in Carinthia affixed their signatures to a Memorandum, which spoke favourably of the allocation and/ or preservation of 164 bilingual town signposts throughout Carinthia (Beclin 2012, 66). It was Inzko himself who had consented to this document, apparently on behalf of the NSKS at large (Beclin 2012, 66). However, soon after the signature of the common declaratory statement, the NSKS called for ten 'additional' bilingual town signposts. It thereby withdrew support for the bill of Faymann, which had been intended to amend the Constitution. Notwithstanding, the legislature approved the bill by an overwhelming majority. By the spring of 2012, all 164 German-language and Slovenian-language town signposts had been set up across Carinthia. Thus was the long drawn-out language conflict in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia with respect to the de facto presence of bilingual signage resolved.[22]

To conclude, had ZSO and SKS withdrawn support for the Faymann-initiated consensus process, the latter would still be on the political agenda (Die Presse 2011). In other words, the Carinthian Slovene minority elite at large had had, after all, at least some power or influence over the ways in which the possible resolution of the language conflict in Carinthia could be swayed. It is highly unlikely that the powers-that-be in Austria could have gone over the heads of the Carinthian Slovene minority elites or, alternatively, that they could have postponed the settlement or resolution of the above conflict indefinitely. Contrariwise, it does not seem improbable that the Carinthian Slovene minority elites could have in principle induced the powers-that-be to give consent to a larger number of sought-after bilingual town signposts had they spoken with a single voice (Slovenian Press Agency 2005f). So, the factual outcome in the language dispute in Carinthia boiled down, above all, to the ideas or interpretative frames that the Carinthian Slovene minority elites brought to bear on the particular divergent courses of action; the latter were either a politics of ostensible consensus (advocated by ZSO and, later, SKS) or a politics of quasi-realism grounded in the rule of law (advocated, predominantly, by NSKS).

22. It bears notice that provincial local governments in Carinthia still could exercise the right to the presence of bilingual town signposts; indeed, a group of Austrian citizens turned for help to their provincial local government, in a certain locality, in 2014.

Conclusion

My contention in this article has been that the salient apparent obstacle course composed of exogenously-given resources and constraints, such as (variable) leverage, left an optimal or satisficing course of action for the Carinthian Slovene minority elites underdetermined. Accordingly, it is argued that the above elites drew upon their cognitive priors – or ideas – in order to arrive at either a politics of (ostensible) consensus or a politics of realism grounded in the rule of law, so that they could effect the sought-after changes in Austria's (or Carinthia's) language policy toward the Carinthian Slovene minority with respect to the allocation and/or preservation of bilingual signage throughout Carinthia.[23]

Now, what is the added value of the theoretical and empirical analysis presented in this article? Or, to put it otherwise, how generalizable are the findings? My answer to the above question is that national minorities in other states likely face similar dilemmas, namely how to elicit sought-after changes in state policies toward these (vulnerable or disadvantaged) groups when their host governments are either opposed to those changes or not spontaneously inclined to carry out the latter.[24] Such a conundrum, I deduce based on the Austrian case, is likely to be two-pronged. On the one hand, ethnic minority elites can come to exert, for whatever reasons, no significant political influence on the powers that be, and so the latter face few incentives to consent to the given sought-after changes vis-à-vis those elites and the groups that they aim to represent. On the other hand, ethnic minority elites can come to exert, for whatever reasons, excessive or politically dangerous pressures on the powers that be, such that the latter face the apparent salient need to go on the offensive. Therefore, the key task of ethnic minority elites (or of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, say, labour migrants) is to find the particular course of action that would steer clear of the above extremes (cf. Gurowitz 1999).[25]

Acknowledgements

23. See Berman (1998, ch. 2) and Parsons (2002, 51) for a discussion or analysis of why it is scientifically sound or valid to study separately 'ideas' as dependent and independent variables. ('Ideas' are treated herein as the latter.)
24. Critics may suggest that the Carinthian Slovene minority leaders want, above all, to please their political constituencies. Such a possible counter-argument to the analysis, presented in this article, however, is beside the point. The Slovene minority umbrella-organizations in Carinthia do not act as political parties; rather they are *cultural* associations. Furthermore, there exist – for that matter – hardly any constituencies amongst the small-sized Slovenian-speaking population in Carinthia.
25. In line with philosopher Nicolas Malebranche, I have elaborated the above argument or assertion by drawing on the empirical evidence. See Malebranche (1997 [1674/75]).

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