

KRISZTIÁN MANZINGER

THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES
IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
BETWEEN 2014 AND 2019:
A HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: The European Parliament, due to the direct election of the MEPs, is an institution willing to represent the interests of European national minorities and regional communities, compared to other EU institutions, with the exception of the Committee of Regions. During the 2014–2019 term, various questions of national minorities were discussed in the Minority Intergroup, which is an informal but officially recognized group of MEPs, and in the Committees of the Parliament. Individual MEPs, either alone or together with other colleagues, also organized events and conferences on minority topics. Despite the EU being generally reluctant when it comes to national minorities, the plenary of the European Parliament adopted important resolutions on the matter during the term, urging the European Commission to create an EU legal framework for protecting national minorities. While the events, conferences and resolutions did not lead to a breakthrough, even keeping the issue on the agenda is a success, in a *milieu* often hostile to discuss minority problems seen as offences to national sovereignty. Altogether, important steps forward are greatly needed to secure a more just, equal and citizen-friendly Europe; this is where discussions on minority issues within the EP, for instance, could foster improvement.

Hungary is well-known regarding its interests in protecting national minorities. The country itself has a generous legal framework allowing for ethnic and national minority self-governance and is a strong advocate for the international regulation of minority rights overarching the existing system. Hungarian politicians, from both the kin-state and its neighboring countries, are also strong promoters of national minority rights within international organizations, for instance in the Council of Europe or the European Union (EU).

Hungarian politicians are not the only ones keen to deal with national minority issues on an international level in Europe. The European Parliament (EP) has also long been advocating for enhancing the system of minority protection. In early 2014, the Strasbourg Manifesto, an act of stocktaking at the end of the mandate of the EP between 2009 and 2014, was adopted by the Minority Intergroup of the EP. It provided guidelines particularly for the MEPs, during the term between 2014 and 2019, and in general for the EU to improve the situation of autochthonous minorities within the EU.

With the exception of the EP, EU institutions are mostly reluctant to address national minority issues arising in the Member States (MSs). This traditional position has even been strengthened further in the past term by particular events, such as the independence referenda in Scotland and Catalonia, the illegal annexation of Crimea and the occupation of eastern Ukraine by Russia,¹ the migrant crisis of 2015 and the attacks targeting the civilian population in Western Europe.

Nevertheless, in terms of protecting national minorities, there has been some progress in the EP; this article focuses on such developments. There have been other potentially far-reaching successes too, such as the victory of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) and the Szekler National Council (SZNT) in front of the courts of the EU concerning their European Citizen's Initiatives. They, however, lie outside the scope of our inquiry.

In this article, the term “minority” exclusively refers to autochthonous national minority groups residing in MSs without taking into account their recognition or legal situation.² Other types of minorities (i.e., sexual minorities) are outside of the focus of this article.

1 Without entering into further details, it is generally accepted that the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics could not survive without Russian support of different kinds.

2 To ensure perspicuity, we put every national minority and regional community having a distinct ethnic consciousness into the same category of “minority,” indifferent to their legal status in the respective MSs, if not mentioned in another way. It is worth mentioning, however, that Catalans for instance reject being labelled as minorities, and Swedish-speaking Finns are not considered as minorities. The political parties representing special minority interests are called minority parties hereinafter.

National Minority MEPs

The EP is one of the most well-known institutions of the EU, and due to the direct election of the Members of EP (MEP), its democratic legitimacy is particularly solid. The EP had 751 MEPs between 2014 and 2019, which is to decrease to 705 after Brexit, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. The direct election of the MEPs allows for a proper representation of the voting population of the EU, including national minorities; however, it is only a snapshot, having influence for five years after the election (i.e., until the end of the term).

There is no universal voting system for the election of the MEPs, yet the MSs are to ensure proportional representation. The majority of the MSs do not subdivide the electoral area; only Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland and the UK are split into constituencies. Some MSs also apply a threshold that might influence national minority representation. For example, both Romania and Slovakia use a 5% threshold, met by the ethnic Hungarian parties of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ), the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP) in Slovakia, and by the Slovak–Hungarian party of Most-Híd in 2014, also in Slovakia.³

There are various methods for national minority politicians to meet thresholds applied in MSs and to acquire the maximum possible number of MEP seats. For instance, in Spain, there were four minority electoral lists that were able to gain MEP seats in 2014.⁴ In Finland, however, despite the regional Swedish party pluralism, the voters of the autonomous Finnish archipelago of Åland at EP elections vote for the Swedish People's Party of Finland (SFP), the main party of the Swedish-speaking Finns residing outside of the archipelago that is not running at any other election in the autonomous region.⁵

3 Unfortunately, at the EP election of 2019, both parties representing Hungarian minority interests from Slovakia failed to meet the threshold.

4 The Coalition for Europe (*Coalición por Europa*) made up of Catalan, Basque, Galician, and Canary Island parties obtained 5.4% of the votes and three MEP seats. The Left for the Right to Decide electoral alliance was created by pro-independence Catalan leftist parties, that received 4% of the votes and sent two MEPs to Strasbourg. Pro-independence leftist Basque, Navarra, Galician, Aragonese, Asturian, and Canary Island parties making up the electoral list of The Peoples Decide (*Los Pueblos Deciden*) were able to obtain 2% of the votes and one MEP seat. Similarly, the European Spring (*Primavera Europea*) electoral list made up from several left-wing federalist parties obtained 1.9% of the votes and one MEP mandate.

5 The regional government of Åland, representing only 0.5% of the total population of Finland and less than 10% of the Swedish-speaking population of the Nordic country, has long desired in vain to secure a MEP seat for the archipelago.

Some MSs apply preferential treatment to minority parties. For instance, in Italy, parties representing linguistic minorities can enter the EP, provided that they receive more than 50,000 votes and that their lists are connected to a party that passes the national threshold of 4%.⁶ Belgium is split into three constituencies, one of which being the German-speaking electoral college, the EU's smallest constituency, allowing for less than 1% of the population of the country to elect one MEP out of the 21 provided to Belgium.

Between 2014 and 2019, there was a considerable minority representation in the EP, including of the Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Catalan, Basque, Asturian, Galician MEPs, ethnic Russian MEPs from Estonia and Latvia, ethnic Polish from Lithuania, ethnic Germans from Belgium and Italy and ethnic Turks from Bulgaria. The autochthonous Hungarian communities living outside of Hungary were also represented by MEPs, two each from Romania and Slovakia: Csaba Sógor and Iuliu Winkler (both RMDSZ) and Pál Csáky (MKP) and József Nagy (Most-Híd). Another three Hungarian minority MEPs entered onto the electoral list of the Hungarian ruling parties of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP): Andrea Bocskor representing the Hungarian community of Transcarpathia (Ukraine), Andor Deli representing the Hungarian community of Vojvodina (Serbia), and former bishop László Tőkés, the president of the Hungarian National Council of Transylvania (EMNT), representing the Hungarian community in Romania.

Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages

In general, EU institutions are reluctant to deal with national minority issues, arguing that those belong solely to MS competence. However, due to the direct election of the MEPs, the EP is the European forum to express concerns and raise awareness in this field. Within the EP, the main body for this purpose is the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages, one of the 28 intergroups of the EP. The intergroups are not permanent; they are formed at the beginning of each term. Therefore, a wide coalition overarching political parties is required to create them.

6 There were 27,448,906 valid votes cast during the 2014 EU election in Italy, meaning an average of 376,000 votes were required for gaining one MEP seat. Because of the connection with the electoral list of the Democratic Party (PD), the South Tyrol People's Party (SVP) was entitled to send a MEP to Strasbourg, despite collecting only approximately 138,000 votes. The number of eligible voters is fewer than 300,000 in South Tyrol.

The Minority Intergroup, one of the most populous intergroups of the EP between 2014 and 2019, held its meetings on the Thursday mornings of the plenary sessions of the EP in Strasbourg. In the term, there were 35 meetings, with various topics in line with current events. The Minority Intergroup had three co-chairs, the Hungarian Kinga Gál (Fidesz, European People's Party, EPP), the Swedish-speaking Finn Nils Torvalds (SFP, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE) and the Catalan-speaking Spanish Josep-Maria Terricabras (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC, Greens/European Free Alliance, G/EFA).⁷

The Minority Intergroup's work involves raising awareness of minority problems within the EU; therefore, it often invites representatives of other EU institutions, MSs, minority organizations, or research institutes. On February 12, 2015, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Astrid Thors, addressed the Minority Intergroup, highlighting that in some MSs, after their accession to the EU, there had been a regression in the level of minority rights or in the implementation of the laws. She also pointed out that the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) should play a more active role in the protection of the national minorities. During her hearing, two and a half years before the adoption of the discriminatory Ukrainian law on education, the topic of breaching minority rights in Ukraine was also discussed, since the Hungarian MEP from Transcarpathia (Ukraine) insisted on it.

On October 27, 2016, the then Serbian minister of public administration and local self-governments and current prime minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, and then deputy minister of justice, Čedomir Backović, were the invitees of the Minority Intergroup.⁸ The main topics were the opening of the 23rd chapter during Serbia's EU accession talks⁹ and the necessity of elaborating and implementing a minority action plan by the government in Belgrade. The actualities of the minority national councils¹⁰ in Serbia were also discussed.

7 Until October 2016, the Valencian-Spanish Jordi Vicent Sebastia Talavera (Compromis, G/EFA) had been the third co-chair, when he resigned his mandate due a previous agreement of the parties running in his Spanish electoral alliance.

8 The Minority Intergroup was also addressed by the ethnic Hungarian Mihály Nyilas, the vice-president of the government of Vojvodina responsible for education, regulations, governance, and ethnic communities, and Jenő Hajnal, the president of the Hungarian National Council.

9 The body of the EU law, the *acquis communautaire*, is divided into 35 chapters. Candidate countries negotiate these chapters during the process of EU enlargement in order to better adopt their legal system to the requirements. Chapter 23 is "Judiciary and fundamental rights".

10 Minority national councils, formed by 15 to 35 members, could be established by certain national minorities under Serbian law. National councils have competences in the education, culture, media, and language rights of the respective minority community. They also cooperate with the Serbian government and, in this case, the government of Vojvodina.

European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport Tibor Navracsics was heard on February 4, 2016. He emphasized the limited competences of the EU in terms of minority rights, yet accentuated his firm belief that European policies even in their current shape could enhance the situation and increase the possibilities of minority languages. On May 12, 2016, the Head of the Secretariat of the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages of the Council of Europe, Sixto Molina, expressed his deep concerns about both the halt of the ratification process of the charter¹¹ and the non-fulfilment of the commitments by the signatory states. Yet, he stressed the commitment of the secretariat for improving the situation in both cases.

On January 18, 2018, Anna Magyar, a Hungarian member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and member of the Committee of Regions of the EU, was invited to participate at the Minority Intergroup's meeting. During the event, she presented Resolution 424(2017) and Recommendation 410(2017) of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe entitled, *Regional and minority languages in Europe today*. She highlighted that, as rapporteur, her goal was not only to take stock but also to provide guidelines for signatory parties to augment implementation of the charter and increase minority rights.

The Minority Intergroup was particularly active in questions related to Hungarian minority communities; more than half of the 35 meetings during the term covered the topic. This mostly involved the presentation of current events and ongoing problems by the representatives of ethnic Hungarian parties and NGOs, such as RMDSZ, MKP, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ, Serbia), the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Sub-Carpathia¹² (KMKSZ, Ukraine) and the SZNT. One of the hottest topics of the term was the worsening legal environment for national minorities in Ukraine, which was debated during various occasions at the intergroup. As a major achievement, in late 2017, the intergroup addressed a letter to the then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, asking for the non-promulgation of the articles of the new law on education discriminating against national minorities.

11 Only 33 members of the Council of Europe has signed, and 25 has ratified the Charter since 1992. The last state to sign and ratify the Charter was Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2005, and 2010, respectively. Chart of signatures and ratifications of Treaty 148 – European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages Available from: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/148/signatures>, Accessed 1 September 2019)

12 In Hungarian terminology, the Ukrainian region of Transcarpathia is called Sub-Carpathia (Kárpátalja).

Problems of other minorities were also raised, including the situation of the Germans and Ladins in South Tyrol, Italy, the restriction of minority language education in Latvia, the worsening situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania and the denial of the existence of the Silesian minority in Poland. A meeting discussed the French administrative reform before entering into force on January 1, 2016, and another discussed the challenges of the Papiamentu language in the Dutch Caribbean. Also discussed was the opposition of the German minority against the administrative merge of partially ethnic German-inhabited villages with the Polish town of Opole, which threatened the level of enjoyed minority rights because of the percentage of Germans falling under legal threshold.

The experiences of multicultural towns on European cultural projects were also presented, including those of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, on the Youth Capital of Europe in 2015, and the plans for the Cultural Capital of Europe of Donostia–San Sebastian, Spain. The leadership of FUEN was the guest of the Minority Intergroup several times to discuss cooperation and to provide information on the Minority SafePack Initiative. Thematic information was provided various times on different topics; for example, a representative of the International Cooperative for Research and Action on the Field of Communication (CIRCOM) informed the Minority Intergroup about the challenges and connection between minority languages and economy on several occasions.

On March 28, 2019, during the last meeting of the Minority Intergroup in the 2014–2019 period, a declaration entitled *For a Better Future of Minorities in the European Union* was adopted.¹³ In the declaration, they—again—called for a comprehensive and common European protection and monitoring system for autochthonous national and linguistic minorities. The intergroup also emphasized the need for a post of European Commissioner responsible for autochthonous national and linguistic minorities¹⁴ and a consultative body of the EP in the matter of national and linguistic minorities.

13 Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/125934977420371/photos/pb.125934977420371.-2207520000.1567347932./2982561828424324/?type=3&theater>, Accessed 1 September 2019

14 Between 2007 and 2010 existed a portfolio in the European Commission for Multilingualism to promote multilingualism for EU citizens and the institutions of the EU. The commissioner was not responsible for minority issues; however, the politician serving the post came from a Romanian–Hungarian mixed family from Romania.

Parliamentary Committees

The EP, similar to legislative branches, has many committees to help its work. These committees serve to discuss political issues, and they also prepare or comment on legal documents before the plenum of the EP discusses them. Due to the direct election of MEPs, the EP is the EU institution where minority questions are frequently debated, either in the plenum or in committees. Such issues mostly arise in the Committees on Petitions (PETI) and Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs (LIBE), but also in those of Culture and Education (CULT) or Legal Affairs (JURI). Yet, since minority issues might arise in every possible procedure of legislation, special attention and knowledge might be needed in committees dealing with agriculture, transport (infrastructure) or other spheres, too.

Committee on Petitions (PETI)

Since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the right to petition is one of the fundamental rights of European citizens and residents. They can bring forward a petition on a matter within the EU's sphere of activities directly to the PETI that hears the petition, in case of the acceptance by the secretariat of the PETI. When dealing with a petition, the committee is entitled to request information from the concerned MS and to call the Commission to elaborate on the legal situation. The PETI itself is rather a mediator; however, the acceptance and the discussion of a petition could put pressure on the MS, eventually great enough to foster a justifiable solution.

There have been several petitions at the PETI connected to legal uncertainties afflicting Hungarian minority communities. Among others, they concern the Beneš decrees, the bilingual railway signs in Slovakia,¹⁵ the state language law of Slovakia, the anomalies of the restitution process of confiscated properties by Romanian communist authorities, or the discriminative and non-consequent implementation of laws on minority rights in Romania. Some new petitions concerning minority rights also arrived during the past term. For instance, the one registered as 51/2015 complained about ethnic discrimination due to the legal uncertainties concerning the building of the Székely-Mikó College in Sfântu Gheorghe (known as Sepsiszentgyörgy in Hungarian), Romania.

15 This is not a case anymore, since the Slovakian government, having the Most-Híd as a member party, amended the respective legislation in February 2017 and allowed for the installation of bilingual signs.

The PETI has the right of consideration. For instance, it has integrated two petitions submitted by ethnic Hungarians against Slovakia on the Beneš decrees into one. It also rejected a petition of an ethnic Hungarian NGO from Romania,¹⁶ with registration no. 0957/2012, complaining about the practice of naming public schools in Târgu Mureş (known in Hungarian as Marosvásárhely), Romania, mostly after Romanian personalities despite having an elevated number of Hungarian-speaking pupils.

As vice president of the PETI, MEP Pál Csáky, an ethnic Hungarian from Slovakia, was able to contribute to keeping Hungarian-related petitions on the agenda. He also played a significant role in the organization of a public hearing on petitions on May 4, 2017. The PETI accepted petitions concerning other minorities as well, including one on the official recognition of the existence of the Vlach minority in Bulgaria and another one on the ban of the use of minority languages in Bulgarian electoral campaigns.

First Vice-President of the Commission, Frans Timmermans, has attended the meetings of the PETI several times, during which he had to answer questions on national minority issues. On May 5, 2015, he argued that although the European Citizens' Initiatives¹⁷ often denote minority problems, according to Art. 51 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EUCFR), these questions are beyond the powers of the EU and belong exclusively to MS competence. This attitude of the Commission shows a political option-based reluctance to deal with national minority issues since the mentioned initiatives and petitions point out the breach of fundamental rights and structural discrimination based on ethnic, linguistic, or cultural ground. Mr. Timmermans also tried to mix up these types of discrimination with the general anti-discrimination policy of the Commission and its quest to protect *every kind* of minority.

He reiterated this opinion in his letter, which was addressed to the chair of the PETI after his hearing on April 25, 2017. In that, he argued that the Commission has no general competence over the status of minorities, in particular over issues relating to the recognition of the status of minorities, self-determination and autonomy, and the regime governing the use of regional or minority languages.

A major document elaborated by the PETI in the past term was the *Resolution on protection and non-discrimination with regard to minorities in the EU Member States*, adopted

16 Civic Engagement Movement (*Civil Elkötelezettségi Mozgalom*, CEMO).

17 At that moment both the Minority SafePack Initiative of the FUEN and the Cohesion policy for the equality of the regions and sustainability of the regional cultures Initiative of the SZNT had been declined by the Commission.

by the plenary of the EP on February 7, 2018.¹⁸ The resolution called on the improvement of the EU's legislative framework to protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities in a comprehensive manner inevitable. It also instructed Antonia Tajani, the president of the EP, to forward the resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the MSs. It was MEP Cecilia Wikström, the president of the PETI, who submitted the motion for the resolution to the plenum, yet the drafting had been done mostly by MEP Pál Csáky, who also relied on the amendments of other MEPs intending to improve the text.

The resolution insisted that the protection of national minorities and the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of language and membership of a national minority are enshrined in the treaties and the EUCFR (Art. 8), this way obliging the EU to protect and promote the rights of minorities in a comprehensive manner (Art. 4). Since the EU lacks effective tools to monitor respect for minority rights, the document considered that the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) should carry out an enhanced monitoring of discrimination against national minorities in MSs (Art. 7). It found that the situation and legal status of non-EU citizens permanent residents in the MSs need to be addressed (Art. 12).¹⁹ It aimed at sustainability too, arguing that the natural and cultural heritage resources of national minorities are key pillars of social cohesion and must be considered assets to be fully preserved for future generations, including by putting a stop to polluting activities (Art. 13).

The resolution invited all MSs to sign, ratify and enforce the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, the *Protocol No. 12 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* and the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, or to update their commitments towards the relevant international agreements, stressing that linguistic and autochthonous minorities should be treated in accordance with the principles laid out in those documents (Art. 14). The EP also called on the Commission and the Council to revise the *Racial Equality Directive* and the *Equal Treatment in Employment Directive* before the end of the legislative term in 2019 (Art. 15).²⁰

18 A resolution on protection and non-discrimination with regard to minorities in the EU MSs (2017/2937(RSP)) Available from: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2018-0064_EN.html, Accessed 1 September 2019

19 The focus of this article was the non-citizen Russian-speakers that have been living permanently in Estonia and Latvia since the independence of the two Baltic countries in 1991.

20 The Commission and the Council failed to revise the documents.

The resolution encouraged the MSs to ensure that the right to use a minority language be upheld and to protect linguistic diversity within the EU in accordance with the EU's treaties (Art. 16). It also expressed the EP's strong belief that linguistic rights must be respected in communities where there is more than one official language without limiting the rights of one compared to another, in line with the constitutional order of each MS (Art. 17). Furthermore, it called on the Commission to strengthen the promotion of the teaching and use of regional and minority languages, as a potential way of tackling language discrimination in the EU (Art. 18).

Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)

The LIBE, which had MEP Kinga Gál as vice-president between 2014 and 2019, is the standing committee of the EP responsible for protecting civil liberties and human rights. Still, it is generally reluctant to promote minority rights, despite the argumentation of the FRA that most cases concerning the violation of fundamental rights in the EU are related to ethnicity and religious affiliations. For instance, during the LIBE-held debate on rule of law in Romania on October 1, 2018, there was not a single mention of the breach of minority rights; however, the improper implementation of laws on minority rights is a threat to the rule of law.

In a stocktaking, LIBE-requested document²¹ outlining the EP's activity on protecting fundamental rights in the 2014–2019 term, the focus was put on rule of law and democracy in general and on the Article 7 TEU procedure²² against Poland and Hungary in particular. Addressing the problems of “minorities,” and not autochthonous or national minorities, was also mentioned in the text among the “traditional issues of interest” of the EP, even in the first place. Yet, in the parts dealing with rule of law in Romania or Slovakia,

21 The document titled *The protection of fundamental rights in the EU: European Parliament achievements during the 2014–2019 legislative term and challenges for the future*. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/621911/IPOL_BRI\(2019\)621911_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/621911/IPOL_BRI(2019)621911_EN.pdf)

22 According to the Art 7, 1. of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), “On a reasoned proposal by one third of the Member States, by the European Parliament or by the European Commission, the Council, acting by a majority of four fifths of its members after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, may determine that there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2. (...)” According to Art. 2. of TEU, “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

there was not a single mention of the legal problems that national minorities encounter in these countries, arising from the selective execution of laws protecting minority rights or a lack of such a piece of legislation.

The document mentioned national minority rights with connection to the annual reports on the fundamental rights in the EU and the resolution of November 13, 2018, on the minimum standards for minorities in the EU, initiated by MEP József Nagy. A member of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, MEP Nagy, as rapporteur of the report on the situation of fundamental rights in the EU in 2015, consciously stressed the importance of protecting national minority rights within the document. This resulted in a text adopted by the plenary of the EP on December 13, 2016, having a separate chapter (Articles 96–104) on the rights of national minorities for the first time in history. The wording in official documents is always of outmost importance; the report used the generally recognized form of “persons belonging to minorities;” however, it also spoke about “minority communities” and “minorities,” outlining the community feature of these people.

In the preamble, the document named the respect for the “rights of persons belonging to minorities” as one of the EU’s founding principles, and it called for the effective protection of minorities to be strengthened (point AI). Furthermore, the articles referring to the protection of national minorities argued that to preserve Europe’s cultural heritage there is a need for establishing minimum standards for the protection of the rights of minorities and for providing education about cultural diversity and tolerance. The document urged the MS to take action to prevent administrative and financial obstacles that could delay linguistic diversity at the European and national levels, to exchange good practice and to ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The MEPs called for the Commission to establish a policy standard for the protection of minorities, “as protection of these groups is part of the Copenhagen criteria, both for the candidate countries and for the Member States.” They also called on the FRA to continue its reporting on discrimination based on membership to a minority and to continue to collect data in this regard. The document also called on the EU to implement PACE Resolution 1985 (2014), the so-called Kalmár report, on the situation and rights of national minorities in Europe. As a practical piece of advice, the report stressed that all emergency hotlines and any official helplines operated in the MSs should be accessible not only in the country’s official languages but also in its minority languages and the main EU languages by redirecting calls.

Another report drafted in the LIBE by MEP Nagy touched upon the minimum standards for minorities in the EU, no. 2018/2036(INI), adopted by the plenary of the EP on November 13, 2018.²³ The text built on the findings and proposals of the report adopted in 2016. It stressed that MSs have the obligation to guarantee minorities full enjoyment of their human rights, whether as individuals or as a community, and that the protection of minorities is a part of the Copenhagen criteria, for both candidate countries and Member States. Therefore, the EP considered that there was a need for a legislative proposal on the minimum standards of the protection of minorities in the EU.

The text, dealing with cultural and language rights and the right to education and combating discrimination, called on the Commission to set up an organization at the EU level (either within existing structures or a separate body) for the recognition and protection of minorities in the EU and to draft the following:

- Guidelines reflecting good practices within the MS, in cooperation with different stakeholders involved in minority rights protection;
- A Commission recommendation, taking into consideration existing national measures, subsidiarity and proportionality; and
- A legislative proposal for a directive in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality on minimum standards for minorities in the EU, including clear benchmarks and sanctions.

The document also called on the FRA to draft an opinion on how to create means to protect and promote the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, in line with CJEU decision no. T-646713.²⁴

As shown, establishing an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights was a focal point for the EP in the past term. Nevertheless, putting national minorities' rights in the core of this desired achievement was not at all a mainstream goal. Yet, the necessity of a connection between minority rights and the rule of law mechanism was expressed not only in the mentioned documents but also at events, for instance, during

23 The *Report on minimum standards for minorities in the EU* (2018/2036(INI)) is accessible at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0353_EN.html

24 The CJEU's decision in case T-646/13 (Minority SafePack—one million signatures for diversity in Europe v Commission), is accessible at <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?jsessionid=94DC2EBBA43598286528826BC43EB90B?text=&docid=187422&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=572569>

a meeting held in March 2016, on national minorities' rights to ensure the proper implementation of the legislation of the MSs. Such a need was stressed again in September 2017, when the participants at a public hearing emphasized that national minority NGOs often exercise such activities for the benefit of members belonging to minorities that are provided by the state institutions to citizens belonging to the national majority.

Culture and Education (CULT)

Since in 2013 the EP adopted the CULT-initiated report entitled *Endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union (2013/2007(INI))*, the so-called Alfonsi report, many were convinced that there would be no room for another major document in the CULT in the 2014–2019 term. On the contrary, the committee, vice-chaired by the Transcarpathian Hungarian Andrea Bocskor, managed to adopt important papers related to national minorities.

On March 23, 2017, the self-initiated paper titled *Minority Languages and Education: Best Practices and Pitfalls*²⁵ was presented in the CULT investigating autochthonous minority languages. The document used a similar approach to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (i.e., it focused on minority languages connected to certain regions). The languages covered were Basque, both from France and Spain, Frisian (the Netherlands), German (Italy), Hungarian (Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), Irish (Ireland),²⁶ Polish (Lithuania), Romani and Beash (Hungary), Sorbian (Germany), Swedish (Finland) and Welsh (United Kingdom).

The report emphasized that:

- There is no common European practice suitable for all minorities.
- The states are self-committed to take concrete measures to protect and promote minority languages if recognized as co-official or official state languages.

25 The report can be accessed at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/585915/IPOL_STU\(2017\)585915_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/585915/IPOL_STU(2017)585915_EN.pdf)

26 Irish, despite being the national and first official language of Ireland and a recognized minority language in Northern Ireland, is not the main vernacular in the territories where it has traditionally been spoken. According to the data of the Irish census of 2016, some 40% of the country's population speak Irish, and only 10% use it for oral communication at least once a week. *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 10 Education, Skills and the Irish Language*, Available from: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/>, Accessed 10 April 2019. The Government of Ireland has been implementing a decades-long program to revitalize Irish, the success of which has not been clearly seen.

- Institutional support and language planning are of fundamental importance when it comes to minority education.
- A widely recognized problem regarding minority language education to be addressed is the unavailability of high-quality teaching materials and skilled minority language teachers.

The document calls for the EU to stimulate MSs to ratify the legislative frameworks for proper legal language recognition; to stimulate MS to provide a continuous learning line for minority languages; to raise awareness for multilingualism throughout Europe; to stimulate the development of qualitative teaching material in minority languages for all educational levels; to maintain and promote programs focused on the exchange of experiences and best practices concerning regional and minority languages in Europe; to promote EU-wide research on education, language learning and instruction models in a multilingual context and to promote stable relationships between countries, especially in border regions where both languages are spoken.

While the vast majority of the above-mentioned goals should be accepted and supported from a Central European perspective as well, those concerning a strengthened multilingual education do not belong. The reason for this lies in the prevailing existence of ethnically determined nation-states in the region where multilingual education would have one single goal: the assimilation of linguistic minorities without creating language equality and promoting the minority language for the majority.

The document, composed by the Dutch Frisian, Fryske Akademy, and its Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, was obviously one-sided and focused on the experiences of the Western European minorities facing completely different state policies in terms of multilingualism, finance and recognition than Central European national minorities do. Andrea Bocskor, the initiator of the report, and Csaba Sógor, an ethnic Hungarian MEP from Romania, both pointed this out, adding that the lack of proper involvement of Central European experts and MEPs resulted in factual inaccuracies and wrong conclusions, undermining the credibility of the whole report. For instance, such a major factual inaccuracy was the statement that by being above the 20% of the population threshold, Hungarian (or any other minority language in Slovakia) is considered an official language according to Slovak legislation (page 70).

In their written contributions, MEP Csaba Sógor and MEP Pál Csáky expressed their concerns about the incorrect understanding and description of the Romanian and Slovakian legislation in the matter. They also pointed out that the aim of Hungarian-language education in Romania is not for preparing Romanian citizens to enter the Hungarian labor market but to allow for education in their mother tongue in their homeland. They also denounced the narrow-mindedness of the authors on questioning the decision of ethnic Hungarian Slovak citizens to send their children to Hungarian-language schools instead of Slovak-language ones, arguing that the children already speak Slovak.

The report showed not only the serious conceptual differences between the situation of Western and Central European national minorities embodied in dissimilar MS policies and legislation, but also the lack of intent to understand Central European circumstances. Nevertheless, the report contained important findings from the Hungarian point of view. The document pointed out that applying a 20% threshold for minority language rights creates tension. The authors concluded that the narrower minority rights for Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia compared to Slovenia result from the size of the Hungarian community and the complicated bilateral relations. Unfortunately, this latter argumentation is again seriously erroneous since it interchanges the effect (i.e., the more complicated bilateral relations), with the reasons (i.e., the lack of proper legislation and defected implementation of minority rights).

Advisory bodies: Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee

The two advisory bodies to the EP are made up of Member States' government-appointed members. The Committee of the Regions (CoR) has 350 members, representing elected local and regional authorities, while the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) consists of three groups, representing "Employers" (Group I), "Workers" (Group II) and the "Diversity Europe Group" (including, for example, farmers, professionals and consumers; Group III). Due to the composition, it is mainly the CoR that deals with national minority issues; however, the EESC could also play such a role in connecting to sectoral policies. In the CoR, another feature strengthening the focus towards national minorities has been Karl-Heinz Lambertz's presidency since July 2017. Mr. Lambertz himself, former minister-president of government of

the German-speaking Community of Belgium, has been devoted to national minority issues.²⁷

The CoR has been active in national minority issues even before Mr. Lambertz's election as president. For instance, in June 2017, the CoR held a conference on multilingualism in border regions, discussing the experiences of the German-speaking Community of Belgium and the German constituent states of Saarland and Saxony. The focus of that meeting, however, was not minority-centered multilingualism but multilingualism as a factor increasing market penetration. After Mr. Lambertz took the presidency, on November 30 and December 1, 2017, an event titled *Deeply Rooted in the Regions*, focusing on the development of regions inhabited by national minorities, was organized at the CoR. Prior to the event, both the Greek and Romanian Permanent Representations²⁸ and the CoR national delegations protested against the conference.²⁹

National minority-related events of MEPs

In addition to the work within the institutions, there were several events dealing with various aspects of national minority-related questions organized by MEPs. We do not wish to enumerate every such an event in this article; however, our intention is to outline the distinguishing features of such events in general.

These events mainly target “inland” audiences; they intend to prove the preparedness of the organizer MEP or MEPs for the voters and press and to put pressure on the respective MS or MSs. Yet, there is solidarity among MEPs since they know that on their own they hardly can make a difference even in Brussels. Mutual participation in events or even their joint organization helps not only to deepen knowledge and strengthen solidarity but also to allow for Europe-wide cooperation on sensitive political topics.

27 The 70,000 member-strong German-speaking community of Belgium is entitled to elect a parliament and form a government to act in the spheres transferred to the community by the Belgian constitution. Karl-Heinz Lambertz was elected as the president of the CoR in July 2017, for a mandate of two and a half years.

28 Each EU and NATO MS has three different embassies in Brussels: a Permanent Representation to the NATO, an Embassy to Belgium and another Permanent Representation to the EU. The latter works with EU institutions.

29 Romania protested against mentioning the word “Transylvania” in the program, arguing that no administrative unit called Transylvania exists in Romania.

As a second general characterization, we shall highlight that the issues of Scottish and Catalan independence, calling into question the respective MSs' territorial integrity, marked a significant change from the previous terms. This shift found the EU institutions unprepared. Between 2014 and 2019, there were several events dealing with the latest developments connected to these processes, yet representatives of EU institutions, and not explicitly pro-independence MEPs, mostly avoided such events due to political risks.

European topics

The decisions of the Court of Justice of the European Union on the repeal of the decisions of the European Commission on rejecting national minority-related European Citizens' Initiatives (ECI) were of outmost importance in the 2014–2019 term. The first ECI, called the 'Minority SafePack Initiative' (MSPI) and initiated by the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) after the decision of the General Court in February 2017, became the subject of the various events mostly in the European Parliament, reaching even to top officials. For instance, in May 2017, EP President Antonio Tajani patronized an event discussing the future of the MSPI.

The second ECI, called the "Cohesion policy for the equality of the regions and sustainability of the regional cultures" and coordinated by the Szekler National Council (SZNT) from Romania, was rejected first by the Commission in July 2013. The action brought against the Commission's decision was again dismissed by the General Court in May 2016. Finally, in March 2019, the Court of Justice set aside the judgement of the General Court and annulled the Commission's decision. However, this decision came too late to organize events dealing with the consequences in the 2014–2019 term.

Some ethnic Hungarian MEPs were especially active in organizing events on the European perspectives of national minority-related issues. In February 2015, Csaba Sógor, together with MEPs from Wales and South Tyrol, Italy, arranged a meeting on the future of European minority languages. The participants pointed out that Catalan, despite being the everyday language of some 9–11 million EU citizens, was not an official tongue of the EU; however, Maltese, spoken by some 400,000, enjoyed that status. After discussing regional, national and European questions and realities, the speakers of the event concluded that the fate of minority languages greatly depends on legal equality and reasonable financial and social support. In February 2016, it was also Mr. Sógor who organized an event on the decay of the national minority protection system of some of the MSs after joining the EU

in 2004 and 2007, respectively.

In April 2015, at the European Parliament, Pál Csáky, Kinga Gál, József Nagy and Csaba Sógor organized a public hearing to address the needs of the autochthonous national minorities to strengthen democracy and increase the stability of the EU. In March 2017, Andrea Bocskor, Pál Csáky, Andor Deli and Csaba Sógor held a conference on the relationship between state and minority languages, arguing that the EU's existing institutions and programs provide adequate tools for cooperation and knowledge sharing to protect minority languages, even without strong legal competences for the EU in this matter.

In November 2018, MEP László Tőkés together with Flemish and Transylvanian Hungarian politicians discussed the question of self-determination, arguing that self-determination might be embodied in various forms depending on the situation and the goals of the respective communities. In November 2014, MEP József Nagy organized a seminar on examining reconciliation with participants from Slovakia, Hungary, Northern Ireland (UK) and Latvia.

Due to the influx of migrants to national minority-inhabited regions and the changing ethnic proportions and social configuration in those regions, the correlation between migration and the autochthonous minorities' situations was also a topic of several events. Today, due to economic reasons, this problem is almost non-existent in minority-inhabited regions in Central Europe, but it creates considerable social challenges in Western Europe. The question of linguistic integration is a hot topic especially in Catalonia and South Tyrol, where linguistic regional competences are strong and language is often over-politicized. In such regions, newcomers can easily find themselves in a crossfire due to their choice on the language they consider more useful for social integration, since the co-existing communities could find their decision to be a threat to the existing ethnic balance.

As mentioned already, the emergence of pro-independence events created a new challenge for all. The moderation impact of the European politics, however, was evident: the events organized by pro-independence forces highlighted their devotion to the EU and European cooperation in general. This was also visible on January 25, 2017, during what was probably the most attended press event in recent years. That day, in front of the European press, the then incumbent Catalan pro-independence leadership argued for the necessity of a Catalonian referendum on independence and the possible future of Catalonia as a MS.

Presenting Hungarian minority communities

Separating Hungarian-focused events from those Europeans is neither consistently desired nor always an easy task. This is so because of the personal overlap, in terms of MEPs, and the obvious intention to present minority problems as European challenges. Although there is a considerable difference between legal systems concerning national minorities in Western and Central Europe, as we have stressed several times in this article, it was not a burden for organizing joint events.

There were, however, events to solely present topics related to Hungarian minority communities. In February 2016, MEP József Nagy had an event on the situation of Hungarian-language schools in Slovakia, while in April 2016, MEP László Tőkés organized another on the interdependence of minority autonomy and state stability. Also in April 2016, PETI vice-chair Pál Csáky and Mr. Tőkés held a public hearing in the EP to discuss the state of the return of “nationalized” (i.e., Communist regime-confiscated) properties in Romania and Slovakia. Again, Mr. Tőkés held an event in October 2018, together with Romanian and ethnic Hungarian intellectuals from Romania, on the necessity of a federalized Romania based on regional autonomies,³⁰ and in March 2019, on the situation at the legally bilingual University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș/Marosvásárhely, Romania (UMFT in Romanian and MOGYE in Hungarian).³¹ A special event was held by Mr. Csáky dedicated to the general situation of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, in January 2016.

In June 2017, Andrea Bocskor, Pál Csáky, Andor Deli, Tamás Deutsch, Csaba Sógor and László Tőkés organized a debate on the state of Hungarian-language media in the neighboring countries of Hungary. They argued that minority-language media benefits

30 The event represented the “European” presentation of the process started in Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, Romania, on October 12, 2018. On that day, Romanian and ethnic Hungarian intellectuals from Romania expressed their devotion to the cooperation of the Hungarian and Romanian nations and states and declared the idea of minority autonomy legitimate. The declaration is accessible (in Hungarian) at <http://emnt.org/2018/10/13/kozos-roman%E2%80%92magyar-centenariumi-nyilatkozat/>

31 At the university, founded as a Hungarian-language Romanian state university in 1945, the Romanian communist state forcefully introduced bilingual education in 1962. After the Revolution of 1989, the Romanization of the university continued, even contrary to Law 1/2011 on education, which declared the institution to be bilingual. In September 2018, the University of Medicine and Pharmacy absorbed the Petru Maior University, and became the George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș, further decreasing the proportion of Hungarian students and degrading the status of the Hungarian language within the university structure. Since the law on education names the university as a bilingual institution, the legality of the decision of the universities might be dubious.

European diversity, and therefore its protection is a common interest. Such a comparison between all of the neighboring states and Hungary on minority questions was not unique; in April 2018, the legislation on minority language of the five countries with a sizeable Hungarian minority community—Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine—was discussed.

In May 2018, Hungarian minority political leaders, experts and EU-officials examined the question of creating an EU minority protection framework during an event hosted by Mr. Csáky. As a follow-up to that event, on November 29, 2018, he organized a conference called Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. European Future. There he argued that a stocktaking and its delivery to the institutions starting with a new mandate in 2019 would be necessary to conclude the results of the 2014–2019 term and to stress the necessity of a comprehensive EU national minority policy.

Due to the progress in the Serbia–EU talks on accession, Andor Deli, an ethnic Hungarian MEP from Vojvodina, Serbia, elected on the Hungarian national list, could successfully advocate for Serbia and for Hungarians and Serbians in Brussels. Mr. Deli participated and co-hosted minority-focused events and allowed for the representatives of the Hungarian minority in Serbia and the Serbian minority in Hungary to present themselves and their views for EU institutions. He organized events to show the functioning of the national minority self-governance in Serbia.

Transcarpathian MEP Andrea Bocskor, after the validation of her mandate (which she obtained from the Hungarian national list), immediately started to play an active role in presenting her home region, belonging to Ukraine, in the EP. In spring 2015, she organized the first Transcarpathian Days in Brussels, an event having been repeated in the following years. Unfortunately, the Hungarian minority's situation, contrary to Serbia's, considerably worsened in Ukraine between 2014 and 2019. This unfortunate development motivated Ms. Bocskor to organize events on the new law on education, severely restricting the national minorities' rights in Ukraine in September 2017. MEP Bocskor also organized meetings for the representatives of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Sub-Carpathia (KMKSZ) with the president of the European Parliament or officials of the Commission to give first-hand information on the situation in Ukraine from a minority perspective.

The vast majority of the EP itself has been mostly reluctant to acknowledge the importance of condemning the breach of minority rights if geopolitical preferences appear; the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament (AFET) rejected the proposition on debating the situation in Ukraine on the plenary of the EP in September 2017,

immediately after the adoption of the law on education. In May 2018, during a conference on the ongoing social transformation in Ukraine and the churches' role as promoters for social dialogue, which was held with the participation of the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Filaret, the question of legislative discrimination against national minorities was not even mentioned. Ethnic Hungarian MEPs were not involved into the organization of this event, which had Commissioner Johannes Hahn and EP Vice-President Mairead McGuinness as speakers, and even MEP Sógor's question on the problems encountered by national minorities in Ukraine remained unanswered.

The commemoration of notable dates also played a role in organizing events. In November 2016, MEP Tőkés celebrated the 120th anniversary of Transylvanian Bishop Áron Márton's birth as an event connected to the Áron Márton Memorial Year in 2015 and 2016. In October 2017, together with other MEPs, MEP Sógor and MEP Tőkés held an event dedicated to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In January 2018, the Transylvanian ethnic Hungarian MEPs, Mr. Sógor, Mr. Tőkés and MEP Iuliu Winkler, celebrated the 450th anniversary of the emission of the Edict of Torda.³²

Various events

Some MEPs belonging to national minorities co-organized several events for minorities outside of the EU. Among the ethnic Hungarian MEPs, Mr. Sógor was particularly active in hosting events on the problems of the Tibetan, Uyghur and Inner-Mongolian minorities of China. For instance, in October 2017, he became a co-chair of the Friends of Uyghur Friendship Group in the EP, together with MEP İlhan Kyuchyuk, who belongs to the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. Mr. Sógor was also the host of an event in March 2016, debating the problems of the non-recognized Turkish minority in Greece.³³

Although all of the ethnic Hungarian MEPs involved in national minority-related topics belonged to the European People's Party (EPP), it was not the only political group active in minority issues during the past term. Those MEPs belonging to the Catalan and Silesian ethnic groups were mostly members of the Greens–European Free Alliance (G/EFA), a

32 The Edict of Torda (today Turda, Romania) was a decree that authorized local communities to freely elect their preachers in the medieval Hungarian Kingdom of Transylvania in 1568. Despite not acknowledging the right of individuals to religious freedom, the decree was an unprecedented act of religious tolerance in contemporary Europe.

33 This event almost turned into scandal, as Greek MEPs belonging to the far-right Golden Dawn tried to impede the meeting threatening Mr. Sógor.

political group to which the non-EP member Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania (EMNP) from Romania and the Hungarian Christian Democratic Alliance (MKDSZ) from Slovakia are also adherents. In January 2016, MKDSZ together with Catalan MEPs and MEP Tamás Meszerics from Hungary held an event emphasizing that without a formal apology for the deportation of the members of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia in 1946–1948, there is no room for reconciliation.

In the left-wing Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), Basque, Irish and Cypriote MEPs advocated for the national minorities' rights, while the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group due to the membership of the pro-independent New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) from Belgium, played a role in organizing minority-related events. There were MEPs with national minority backgrounds in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group as well, for instance the Swedish-speaking Nils Torvalds from Finland, a co-chair of the Minority Intergroup, or Croatian Istrian Ivan Jakovčić.

Occasionally MEPs belonging to majorities also hosted national minority-related events, mostly with firm political messages and aims. Romanian MEP Siegfried Mureșan for instance held an event called German Minority in Romania: an Example of Multiculturalism in a United Europe on June 27, 2018, with the participation of the German Ambassador in Bucharest and the leadership of the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR). A similar event propagating the “exemplary” legal framework created by Romania for national minorities was the conference on the 100th anniversary of the creation of Greater Romania in September 2018, which, however, was not able to address other audiences aside from Romanians.

Conclusions

Although there was no chance for a breakthrough in creating a national minority framework protection for the EU during the past term of the EP, some progress was made. The ECJ's decisions on two national minority-related ECIs might have opened the way for drafting such a framework, a development urged by the Parliament several times between 2014 and 2019.

Minority problems were frequently discussed at the EP, proving that while such events could draw attention to problems and even foster progress in resolving issues, they are

usually not able to change the situation from one moment to the other. Similarly, policies on national minorities depend on the MSs, and EU institutions are mostly reluctant to engage. However, they could grow and ease pressure on a MS if considered necessary.

Hungarian communities living in the neighboring countries suffer from many legal and social hurdles; unfortunately, there was no progress in their situation induced by EU institutions during the past term. The events that were organized in Brussels or Strasbourg and discussed such questions caused some pressure, but the main progress (i.e., the placing of bilingual railway signs in southern Slovakia) was the result of a deal within the Slovak government, not meetings in Brussels. Despite various events in the EP, there was no progress in other issues, such as the Beneš decrees, the restoration process of Communist-regime confiscated properties in Romania and Slovakia or the discriminative legal environment on language and national symbol use in some countries. The lack of progress shows clearly the limited efficiency of events held in Brussels or Strasbourg.

Furthermore, from the national minority perspective a major setback came in Ukraine, an important partner country for the EU that adopted a new law on education in September 2017. That piece of legislation was not the only proof of a state-driven restriction of minority rights. Yet, its international reception, including that of the EU, clearly showed that fundamental minority rights are still subordinated to political preferences. This is a major threat to the credibility of the EU, a community labelling itself as a guardian angel of fundamental rights and democratic values, however, discretionally looking in the other direction when it comes to the rights of national minorities.