Nation-building in post-Soviet Ukraine: educational policy and the response of the Russian-speaking population
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in state-minority relations was born during my Human Geography studies at the University of Amsterdam. I remember having writing about the growth of Walloon consciousness in reaction to the ascension of Flemish national sentiment and about the rise and decline of ethnic parties in several West European countries. However, not only have problems of sub-state nationalism in Western Europe been so well documented that there is not much new to write about them, they also appear to have subsided over the last two decades making them more or less a non-issue (the Scottish case being the exception). For these reasons, my attention shifted to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where post-communist chaos has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for the resuscitation of long-dormant ethnic hatreds. My MA thesis pondered on the question of why some ethnic tensions in this region had escalated into armed conflict while others were resolved peacefully. Two of my case studies were in former Yugoslavia: Croatia (violent conflict) and Macedonia (until now peaceful).

After my graduation in April 1994 I still had to do military service. As there was the opportunity to volunteer as a UN soldier in Bosnia, I decided to take the risk and join the forces, although I had serious doubts about the army as an institution. My time as a truck driver transporting goods for UNHCR from the Dalmatian coast to the Bosnian interior allowed me to see what the ethnic conflicts I had examined in my thesis actually looked like in reality: destroyed homes, roadblocks, bad roads, people dressed as lumpen proletariat.

Upon returning home I found that a Ph.D. position had become vacant on the fate of the Russian minority in Ukraine. I considered this right up my alley, applied for the job and got it. In joint consultation with my supervisors I decided to confine myself to nation-building policies in the educational sphere and the reaction of the Russian-speaking population, as one particular aspect of state-minority interaction. My first acquaintance with Ukraine in May 1996 was disillusioning: everyone I interviewed in the capital Kyïv felt that ethnic problems between Ukrainians and Russians were non-existent and that it would be much more productive to devote my attention to the serious economic problems Ukraine has faced since independence. I came back full of doubts. Were the Russians in Ukraine just as much a non-issue as for instance the Bretons in France? Only after my visits to L’viv, Donets’k and Odesa did I become convinced that the interwoven issues of ethnic identity and language reflected powerful divisions in society after all.

I was also surprised by the lack of detailed academic literature on minority and language policies when I started my research project in January 1996. Reviewing the literature I got the impression that much was written about only a few sides of contemporary Ukrainian society while many other aspects were left completely unexplored. One very positive exception to this pattern was Dominique Arel's 1995 article in Nationalities Papers, which provided an extensive overview of the language politics in the first few years following Ukraine’s independence. This experience convinced me that a sound empirical study is just as valuable as some prestigious theoretical exercise, if not more so.

Despite initial doubts and a limited knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian I am glad I persevered and completed the project successfully. Not only have I gained more
insight into state-minority relations and in problems of developing societies in general, my fieldwork experiences in Ukraine have also made me a more complete person. Whether I have made a valuable contribution to the pool of scientific knowledge is of course for others to decide. Personally, my greatest satisfaction was to be operating right on the frontier of empirical knowledge and to uncover hitherto non-researched areas of Ukrainian society.

I would not have been able to carry on with this project, had it not been for the support of my friends, colleagues and supervisors both here and in Ukraine. Special thanks go to Dominique Arel who was indispensable in my becoming acquainted with the scholarly circles on Ukraine. My colleagues Judith and Frank with whom I shared an office were invaluable mediators between me and my computer, with which I was constantly at war. More importantly, they shared with me a sense of seeing things in perspective and not taking everything too seriously. The atmosphere in room 3.55 I will probably – and regrettably – never experience again in a future workplace.

In addition, I would like to thank the many Ukrainians whose unconditional help was crucial in producing good results in my fieldwork activities. Special thanks go to Tetiana Antoniuk, Nina Tchaikovs’ka, Svitlana Gomeniuk, Ilona Podolian, and Andrii Hraban and his parents in Kyiv; Yuri Demura, Nelli Kamennova, Irina Radianova, Alexander Tumanov and Yulia Bahilova and her mother in Donetsk; Marina Maskaleva, Vladik and Ira, Marat Yakupov and his wife Zhanna in Odesa; Serhii Kudelia, Anatolii Romaniuk, Yuri Kluchkovs’kyi, Vladimir Kravchenko and the Kushnirets’kyi family in L’viv; and Tamara Yakovleva in Simferopol.

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My parents and my dear friends Peter, Niels, Radboud and Daniël I admire for their support, suggestions and patience. They have generously put up with my endless monologues on issues concerning Ukraine. Being persons I could always rely upon, they made me feel that I wasn’t working on the project all alone.

Last but not least I would like to thank my supervisors Herman van der Wusten and Hans Knippenberg for their solid encouragement, especially in the initial period of my project when I had strong doubts about the salience of the national and the language factor in post-Soviet Ukraine. Without their direct no-nonsense guidance, my doctoral research would most certainly have dragged on well into the first decade of the third millenium.