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# Intolerance that disgraces the European Union

By Marko Attila Hoare, 30th December 2009

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- 1. Recent discriminatory measures against national and religious minorities on the part of some EU and NATO members are disgracing the EU and threatening its security.**
- 2. A military alliance such as NATO cannot remain solid if some member states are violating the human rights of the co-nationals of other member states, at a time when hostile parties outside the alliance are set to exploit all such divisions.**
- 3. Pressure must be brought to bear on all EU and NATO members to cease all violations of the human rights of their minorities.**

The recent ban on the construction of minarets in Switzerland, following a referendum, was, in the [words](#) of one commentator, ‘a reflex of the Swiss tendency for self-isolation’. It is evidence that, for all its long tradition of prosperity and stability, Switzerland would be a less than ideal member of the European Union, were it to join. [Switzerland](#) did not permit women to vote in national elections until 1971; it was not until the 1990s that women achieved the right to vote everywhere in Switzerland at the cantonal level. We may lament rich, stable Switzerland’s unwillingness to join the EU, but it has come with a definite silver lining. For with the forces of intolerance on the upsurge in many parts of Europe, the last thing we need is to strengthen their ranks within the EU.

In Slovakia, legislation came into force on 1 September of this year that [criminalises](#) the use of non-Slovak languages in the public sphere, including Hungarian, which is the first language of Slovakia’s Hungarian minority, comprising nearly ten percent of Slovakia’s population of just over five million. The legislation means that an ethnic Hungarian train-conductor responding to an ethnic-Hungarian passenger in Hungarian or a Roma doctor addressing a Roma patient in Romani could face prosecution. The legislation is the work of Robert Fico’s governing coalition, which includes the racist and far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) of Jan Slota. It was passed in a context, in the [words](#) of the European Council’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, in which ‘the rise of anti-Hungarian discourse by some political figures has created a negative public climate which has led to an increase in intolerance against the Hungarian minority in Slovakia as well as acts of racially motivated crimes against members of this group.’ Not coincidentally, Slovakia is one of only five EU members that refuse to recognise the independence of Kosova; in Slovakia’s case, because it fears that Kosova’s independence from Serbia sets a precedent that its own Hungarian minority could follow. Since Kosova’s independence was the result of the brutal persecution and ethnic cleansing of Kosova Albanians by the former regime of Slobodan Milosevic, this suggests that Bratislava sees itself as following in Milosevic’s footsteps so far as minority rights are concerned – which, to an extent, it is.

The response from the ranks of the EU has, however, been muted. Fico's 'Direction – Social Democracy' party had its membership temporarily suspended in the Party of European Socialists – which includes Britain's Labour Party – in response to its alliance with the SNS, but this suspension has now been lifted, the language law notwithstanding. In other words, Slovakia's mainstream Social Democrats are allied to fascists and promoting chauvinistic, anti-minority legislation, and this is being tolerated by the Social Democratic mainstream in Europe.

The implications for regional stability are potentially dangerous. The language law is **poisoning** Slovakia's relations with neighbouring Hungary, which recently **dropped** its support for Bratislava's bid to host the Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER). Like ethnic Serbs and Albanians, ethnic Hungarians are dispersed among several Central European and Balkan states; a reopened Hungarian question would have potentially grave implications for regional stability. Former Hungarian Foreign Minister Janos Martonyi **stated** recently that ethnic Hungarians outside of Hungary must always remain a determining element of Hungary's foreign policy; this sounds reasonable given Bratislava's current behaviour, but it is uncomfortably reminiscent of the 'concern' expressed by Serbia's politicians in the early 1990s for the Serbs outside Serbia.

Slovakia's is not the only government in the EU that has promoted anti-minority legislation in order to appease fascist elements. Earlier this month, Bulgaria's prime minister, Boyko Borisov, announced the holding of a referendum on the abolition of Turkish-language news broadcasts on Bulgaria's BNT1 public television channel. Nearly 10% of Bulgaria's population of nearly eight million is ethnic-Turkish, and the minority has a long experience of persecution, most notably at the hands of the Communist tyrant Todor Zhivkov in the 1980s. Borisov announced this move in a joint news conference with Volen Siderov, the leader of the fascist party National Union of Attack ('Ataka'), with whom his own inappropriately named Citizens for European Development in Bulgaria (GERB) party is in coalition. According to **Borisov**, 'This is a very delicate situation and we don't want the matter being exploited against Bulgarian Muslims or by them.'

That's why I support the idea of solving the issue on a referendum as this is the most democratic way.' He added, 'We don't want other minorities to feel neglected. Soon we might have the Roma asking for news in their language', enlightening his audience by pointing out that Bulgarian was the country's official language.

This move nevertheless provoked strong opposition in Bulgaria itself, including on the part of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party (MRF), which is predominantly ethnic-Turkish. To its credit, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the European parliamentary liberal bloc to which the MRF belongs, then **threatened** to raise the issue of the referendum in the European parliament. Bulgaria also came under pressure from Turkey, with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan **raising** the issue in a telephone conversation with Borisov. Indeed, a return to the persecution of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria would further complicate the already difficult relations between Turkey and the rest of the Western alliance. Turkey is, of course, itself long guilty of persecuting its Kurdish minority, something most recently manifested in the Turkish Constitutional Court's **ban** of the Democratic Society Party, the country's principal Kurdish party. But Turkey at least has the excuse that it is not in the EU, and that its patchy human-rights record is partly responsible for keeping it out. Unlike Turkey, some EU members appear to be given an undeserved clean pass by the Union and by their allies.

In Bulgaria, nevertheless, the forces of intolerance appear to have suffered a defeat, with Borisov retreating from his plan to hold the referendum. But while Bulgarian resistance to the anti-Turkish measure is heartening, encompassing as it did the president and the parliamentary opposition, less edifying has been the muted response from Europe. GERB's adoption of an anti-minority measure to satisfy a fascist parliamentary ally did not, apparently, provoke any opposition in the ranks of the European People's Party, the conservative Euro-federalist bloc in the European parliament of which GERB is a member. Nor, indeed, have the European People's Party or other EU bodies reacted much to earlier instances of persecution of minorities in Bulgaria. Sofia lost **two cases** in the European Court of Human

Rights (ECHR), brought by Omo Ilinden Pirin, the party of the ethnic-Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Both times, the ECHR ordered Sofia to permit the party to register legally and to pay it damages; while the damages were paid, Sofia continues to refuse to allow the party to register.

Indulgence toward anti-minority chauvinism in the EU is nothing new. Greece has for decades pursued a policy of forced assimilation of its ethnic minorities; it refuses to recognise the existence of the ethnic Turkish and Macedonian minorities on its soil, and persecutes and harrasses their political and cultural organisations. Athens has been found by the ECHR to be in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights with regard to **both minorities** as regards freedom of expression, association and self-identification, yet has disregarded the Court's verdicts. Thus, over **ten years** after the ECHR found Greece in violation of human rights for its refusal to permit the registration of the ethnic-Macedonian society 'Home of Macedonian Culture', it has continued to refuse, without suffering adverse consequences from the EU. Greece's policy of trying to force the neighbouring Republic of Macedonia to change its name is closely linked to its programme of forced assimilation of its own Macedonian minority; the EU, through recognising the Greek right to veto Macedonia's EU accession, enables this chauvinistic policy as well.

So far as Greece's Turkish minority is concerned, Athens violates its human rights both in national and in religious terms; it denies the right of organisations bearing the appellation 'Turkish' to register themselves, and denies the right of Muslims in Greece to elect their own imams and muftis. Religious officials elected by Muslims in Greece on their own initiative have been prosecuted and imprisoned, over which Greece was **again** found by the ECHR to be in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights as regards freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Greco-Turkish relationship is a permanent potential source of discord within NATO ranks, and as Turkey moves to define a new geopolitical role for itself, continued Greco-Turkish cooperation cannot be taken for granted; indeed, there are **indications** that it is already fraying. Athens's mistreatment of its Turkish minority may aggravate an already dangerous situation.



Such instances of intolerance toward minorities, on the part of states that belong to both NATO and the EU, are a disgrace to the Western alliance. They are also a threat to our security. With Moscow pursuing an aggressive policy aimed at derailing NATO's eastward expansion, and with several states of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe already concerned by our apparently lukewarm commitment to their security, this is not a time for creating new divisions within our ranks. Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece are all NATO members, and it is reasonable to question just how solid a military and political alliance can be while some members are violating the human rights of co-nationals of other members.

We must bring pressure to bear on those EU and NATO members that violate the human rights of their minorities, and make it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable, both because it violates the principles of civilisation and democracy that underpin the EU, and because it threatens our common security. Before these minority issues grow into regional crises, they should be nipped in the bud.

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