

# What to Expect When You're a Minority?\*

## The Example of the Bunyevs of Serbia<sup>1</sup>

Bojan Belić

*[W]hen group Y states "Group X does not exist" but group X states "We do exist," the opinion of group X should be given greater weight.*

Wayles Browne<sup>2</sup>

### PROLOGUE

On May 14, 2018—exactly 73 years to the day after the order issued by the Internal Affairs Section of the Central People's Liberation Committee of Vojvodina—Mr. Mirko Bajić, the president of the Bačka Bunyevs' Alliance<sup>3</sup> (BBA), informed the general public about a request by which the alliance "demanded that, without further ado, the parliament of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (APV) adopt a declaration to pronounce" the aforementioned order "an act of forced assimilation ... and annul it."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Bajić also explained that the initiative to annul the May 14, 1945 order had been submitted to the APV parliament more than a year and a half earlier and, despite initial support by the APV government, no declaration had been adopted by the time of Mr. Bajić's statement.

---

\* I would like to thank two anonymous referees of *Acta Slavica Iaponica* for their invaluable comments, which helped make this paper better. I, however, take full responsibility for all of its shortcomings.

- 1 The term *Bunjev* is used in the present contribution in place of a much more frequent term *Bunjevci* as a modest attempt at anglicizing the latter and consequently using it in a text written in the English language; the former term can then be pluralized as necessary (i.e., Bunyevs), and also eventually made into a possessive (i.e., Bunyevs'), whereas the former is the original plural ethnonym. With all this, the hope is that English-speaking audiences, otherwise not familiar with the term, would find it at least a bit more accessible.
- 2 Wayles Browne, *What Is a Standard Language Good For, and Who Gets to Have One? and Open and Closed Accent Types in Nouns in Serbo-Croatian* (Columbus: Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University, 2002), p. 7.
- 3 The Bačka Bunyevs' Alliance (in the original: Savez bačkih Bunjevaca) is a political party established on March 10, 2006, with the goal of "representing all those goals that need to be fulfilled in order for the Bunjev national minority in the Republic of Serbia," particularly in [the Autonomous Province of] Vojvodina, to develop and survive in the short, mid, and long run [<http://www.sbb.org.rs/index.php/o-nama/program>], accessed on June 22, 2019. All translations to English are mine unless noted otherwise.
- 4 Bunjevci [<http://www.bunjevci.net/visti/saopstenja-i-konferencije>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

What took place on May 14, 2018—and not for the first time—brought to the fore the question of ethnic identity, as does the formulaic epigraph itself. Specifically, the question of Bunyev identity in Serbia, to the extent of actually recognizing the Bunyevs' existence, was raised.

The present contribution will not address that question in any way whatsoever. For an idea of a selection of the varied answers, the reader is referred to some of the already existing publications and references therein.<sup>5</sup> As will be made obvious in the subsequent sections,<sup>6</sup> the question of who, indeed, are Bunyevs is a highly debatable one (or else, it is not, but the answers given to it are in sharp disagreement; also, depending on the answer, the significance of the 1945 order issued by the Internal Affairs Section of the Head People's Liberation Committee of Vojvodina varies, as well). The present contribution, however, makes every attempt to stay away from the Bunyev identity debate altogether. Rather, it zeros in on the very concrete example of the Bunyevs of Serbia (hereafter, Bunyevs), a relatively small group of people who appear to be officially (that is, in censuses) identifying today (and for the last at least three decades) solely and exclusively as Bunyevs (and never tries to deny the fact that there are individuals who would claim their Bunyev heritage even when not necessarily identifying officially—that is, in censuses—solely and exclusively as Bunyevs first and foremost). In doing so, the contribution aims simply to offer a sketch of one of the latest developments with respect to minorities in early 21st century Europe. The issue in focus is what, if anything, might European minorities' expectations be in the days of what some refer to as an ethnic awakening or else an ethnic renaissance.<sup>7</sup>

## 1945

Not even a whole week after World War II effectively ended in Europe, the Head People's Liberation Committee of Vojvodina was apparently extremely concerned with the question of ethnic identification. On May 14, 1945, an order—now kept in the Historical Archives of Subotica<sup>8</sup>—was issued by the Committee's Internal Affairs Section to all District People's Liberation Com-

---

5 Milana Černelić, "Nastojanja da se bačkim Bunjevcima ospori pripadnost hrvatskom narodu," *Studia ethnologica Croatica* 6 (1994), pp. 85–103; Milana Černelić, *Bunjevci: migrations, traditional heritage, identities* (Riga: Scholars' Press, 2018); Martin Henzelmann, *Die Bunjewatzen* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2016); Bojan Todosijević, "Why Bunjevci Did not Become a Nation: A Case Study," *East Central Europe* 29:1–2 (2002), pp. 59–72; Petar Vuković, "Konstrukcija identiteta u bačkim Bunjevaca," in Robert Skenderović, ed., *Identitet bačkih Hroata* (Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2010), pp. 263–289.

6 See section Minorities in 21st Century Europe in particular.

7 Leena Huss and Anna-Riitta Lindgren, "Introduction: Defining Language Emancipation," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 209 (2011).

8 Call Number 14157/945.

mittees, reading as follows (the heading and the signature of the official are omitted):

It so happens that many Croats are identified as Bunyevs and Shokaces,<sup>9</sup> and not Croats, in rubrics meant for indicating nationality; for example: in IDs and lists of various kinds, which happens often, both following their explicit request or else the will and the discretion of certain clerks.

Since there are no Bunyev or Shokac nationalities, it is ordered that all Bunyevs and Shokaces are to be treated as Croats exclusively, no matter their claims.

In various districts and places, in which by now they have been identified as Bunyevs and Shokaces, this is to be rectified and they are to be designated as Croats, particularly in IDs, electoral rolls, travel documents, and various other lists where nationality is relevant. In the future, they are to be identified only and exclusively as Croats. All IDs and documents issued by now, where they have been identified as Bunyevs and Shokaces, are to be destroyed and new ones are to be issued, for which the involved subjects are not to be charged again.

It is your duty now to inform all city and county committees, and through them local committees, to complete this order without any conditions and as soon as possible; you, on the other hand, are to ensure that this order is completed, about which you are to report back.

Death to fascism—freedom to the people!

It is this order, and its explicit demand to destroy any and all documents containing the nationalities of Bunyev and Shokac, that is deemed by the BBA, as shown in the prologue, “an act of forced assimilation,” whose annulment is demanded now, more than 73 years later. Despite several regime changes as well as the economic and political changes that have occurred over almost three quarters of a century, as the May 14, 2018 BBA’s statement suggests, Bunyevs in Vojvodina still consider this 1945 order as “indirectly being implemented today—its effects apparent in the obvious attempts to assimilate Bunyevs by Croats today.”<sup>10</sup> The order, an act issued by a leading political body at the time, highlights the crucial role that the power politics of the time played in the question of Bunyev identity in Serbia, something that the subsequent sections will demonstrate has not changed much, if at all, despite the aforementioned regime, economic, and political changes.

---

9 Much like the term *Bunyevs*, and following the same rationale, the term *Shokac* (plural *Shokaces*, possessive *Shokaces'*) is used in the present contribution as an anglicized variant of a much more frequent, and original, term *Šokci*.

10 Bunjevci [<http://www.bunjevci.net/visti/saopstenja-i-konferencije>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

**2018: BUNYEVs IN VOJVODINA**

The figures about to be presented here with respect to Bunyevs in the APV are all based on the latest, 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia (hereafter, 2011 Census).<sup>11</sup> The APV is Serbia's integral part in the north (roughly, to the north of the Sava river and the Danube river after the Sava joins it in Serbia's capital city of Belgrade). The territory of the APV, particularly its Bačka region, is crucial when it comes to the population of the Bunyevs in present-day Serbia.

According to the 2011 Census, there were 16,706 Bunyevs in the whole of Serbia; of them, 98.58% (i.e., 16,469) lived in the APV. Moreover, in the territorial organization of the APV, Bunyevs are primarily to be found in two of a total of six cities and thirty-nine municipalities: the cities of Subotica and Sombor, where there were 13,553 (82.28% of all of APV) and 2,058 (12.50% of all of APV) Bunyevs, respectively. The fact that Bunyevs were, indeed, represented in the 2011 Census is in and of itself extremely important to Bunyevs themselves. The 2011 Census results indicate that "there are some major fluctuations observed in the numbers of the members of some ethnic groups owing to the changes in the attitudes of the enumerated persons regarding their ethnicity, as well as the changes in the methodological approaches and classifications."<sup>12</sup> As was shown above, one of the apparent goals of the 1945 order was not to allow people, who claimed their Bunyev (and also Shokac) identities, to do so publicly. Thus, there was no Bunyev (and also Shokac) census modality in the 1948, 1953, 1961, 1971, and 1981 censuses; only in the 1991 Census does the Bunyev (and also Shokac) modality surface (or, for some, re-surface) and then it does so as well in the subsequent 2002 and 2011 censuses.<sup>13</sup>

The significant presence of Bunyevs in the APV finds its reflection in the highest law of the APV, its statute. Professing the province's citizen and national equality, Article 6 reads in part that "[w]ithin the scope of its jurisdictions and responsibilities, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina provides the fulfilment of the constitutionally guaranteed comprehensive equality of Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Montenegrins, Romanians, Roma, Bunyevs, Ruthenians, and Macedonians."<sup>14</sup> Hence, Bunyevs are both statutorily recognized (alongside eight other ethnic groups) and—as officially as it gets in the APV—acknowledged as a nationality. The Statute of the APV, itself a powerful political document, now—unlike the 1945 order—places Bunyevs on a par with several

11 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia [[http://popis2011.stat.rs/?page\\_id=2134](http://popis2011.stat.rs/?page_id=2134)], accessed on August 6, 2018.

12 2011 Census [<http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Nacionalna%20pripadnost-Ethnicity.pdf>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

13 The number of individuals identifying as Bunyevs in the 1991 Census was 21,434 and in the 2002 Census it was 20,012.

14 Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina [<http://www.skupstinavojvodine.gov.rs/Strana.aspx?s=statut&j=SRC>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

other ethnic groups, all of which have existed as census modalities in all of the above-listed censuses. With the 1991, 2002, and 2011 Serbian censuses, as well as the current provincial statute, the role that power politics has played in the question of Bunyev identity in Serbia is made clear again.

### LANGUAGE?

Despite the apparent about-face in the right of Bunyevs to freely express their ethnic identity—from the ordered annulment of 1945 to the 1991 inclusion of the Bunyev modality in the census—the BBA is still insistent on the need to declare the 1945 order null and void, which only speaks to the high significance the BBA ascribes to the order itself (and contrary to the opposing view according to which the order is essentially insignificant<sup>15</sup>). Moreover, even though Bunyevs have been placed on a par with eight other national minorities in the APV, all of which had a continuous presence in post-World War II censuses, Bunyevs themselves do not seem to think that their position is exactly equal with the positions of the other national minorities in the APV. As Ilić and Belić demonstrate, recognizing the Bunyev linguistic variety<sup>16</sup> as a language is something that is seen as completing what would then be a full recognition of the Bunyev national minority in Serbia. In 2011, Mr. Ivan Sedlak, the then-president, and now honorary president, of the Bunyev Matica,<sup>17</sup> the oldest Bunyev institution, indicated that “in order for us (Bunyevs, B. B.) to be equal to all other national minorities, we have also to resolve those two very important issues, meaning, the issue of standardization and the issue of the continuing development of education in our mother, that is, our Bunyev tongue.”<sup>18</sup> Clearly, Bunyevs are not satisfied with their statutory recognition as one of nine top national minorities in the APV; they also want their linguistic variety recognized and, at that, referred to as language.

Unlike the nationality modality Bunyev, which has been used in censuses in the Republic of Serbia since 1991, the language modality Bunyev has only appeared in the latest, 2011 Census. In that census, 6,835 people claimed Bunyev

---

15 Mr. Slaven Bačić, at the time the president of the Croatian National Council, in early 2018 regarded the document as “legally absurd” and “not a formal act (order).” [<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a362746/HNV-Moguće-nove-tenzije-Srbije-i-Hrvatske-zbog-Bunjevaca.html>], accessed on June 22, 2019.

16 Marija Ilić and Bojan Belić, “Eine neue Sprache entsteht: die bunjevakishe ‘Sprache’ oder ‘Mundart’ in serbischen Grundschulen,” In Christian Voß and Wolfgang Dahmen, eds., *Babel Balkan? Politische und soziokulturelle Kontexte von Sprache in Südosteuropa* (München – Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2014). It also provides a brief description of the Bunyev linguistic variety; describing it here would go beyond the scope of the present contribution.

17 The Bunyev Matica (in the original: Bunjevačka Matica) is a “not-for-profit organization—a unique Bunyev institution” tasked with “expressing, cultivating, and preserving Bunyev national identity” [<http://www.bunjevacka-matica.org/statut/>], accessed on June 22, 2019.

18 Ilić and Belić, “Eine neue Sprache entsteht,” p. 110.

as their mother tongue (again, the vast majority of them in the APV—99.80%, exactly 6,821—of which in Subotica 92.55% (exactly 6,313) and in Sombor 5.67% (exactly 387) of all who claimed Bunyev as their mother tongue). However, despite the Bunyev nationality's statutory recognition in the APV, the Bunyev linguistic variety has not been recognized as language at the time of the original writing. Article 24 of the Statute of the APV lists languages in the official use "in the bodies of AP Vojvodina"—in addition to the Serbian language and Cyrillic alphabet, which are constitutionally accorded the highest status in the whole of Serbia, the APV included—and mentions the following five: Hungarian, Slovak, Croatian, Romanian, and Ruthenian<sup>19</sup> Three additional (and highly relevant) legal acts also do not make any mention of the Bunyev language: the language is not in the Serbian Law on the Official Use of Languages and Alphabets;<sup>20</sup> it is not listed among the languages for which Serbia passed the Law on the Ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (only Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romani, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Croatian are listed);<sup>21</sup> and it is not found in the APV's Provincial Parliamentary Decision on the Closer Arrangement of Various Issues of the Official Use of Languages and Alphabets of National Minorities on the Territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.<sup>22</sup>

What came close to recognizing the Bunyev linguistic variety as language, but actually never went that far, took place in 2007. This was the year when, in the Official Bulletin of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, it was announced that the Handbook for the Educational Curriculum "Bunyev Speech/Lect with Elements of the National Culture"<sup>23</sup> for the first, second, third, and fourth elementary school grades (as an elective school subject) had been adopted.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the handbook, and consequently the whole educational system, did not refer to the Bunyev linguistic variety as language, but as speech/lect. Thus, while Bunyevs did get something when it came to what they themselves see and think of as their language, they did not get everything, certainly not what they actually wanted. The political system, in which Bunyevs do exist as an officially recognized national minority, is only partially satisfactory to

---

19 Statute [<http://www.skupstinavojvodine.gov.rs/Strana.aspx?s=statut&j=SRC>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

20 Law on the Official Use of Languages and Alphabets [<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/reg/viewAct/851a5795-db47-4360-87dc-70f7f514930a>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

21 Law on Ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages [<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/viewdoc?regactid=408456&doctype=reg&findpdfurl=true>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

22 Provincial Parliamentary Decision [[http://www.puma.vojvodina.gov.rs/dokumenti/odluke/Odluka\\_sluzbene\\_jezika.pdf](http://www.puma.vojvodina.gov.rs/dokumenti/odluke/Odluka_sluzbene_jezika.pdf)], accessed on August 6, 2018.

23 In the original: bunjevački govor sa elementima nacionalne kulture.

24 *Official Bulletin of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina* 63:12 (2007), pp. 655–663.

Bunyevs when it comes to the Bunyev linguistic variety: it is only the latest census—hence the Census Bureau of the Republic of Serbia—that explicitly uses the notions of “Bunyev” and “language” together; in the rest of the political system, the educational system included, at the time of the original writing, there is apparently no such thing as the Bunyev language, only the Bunyev speech/lect. The importance of the political system for, as well as the role power politics play in dealing with the Bunyev linguistic variety are again crucially relevant.

### MINORITIES IN 21ST CENTURY EUROPE

The Council of Europe, a leading European institution concerned with issues of human rights, democracy, and rule of law,<sup>25</sup> promotes—among other things—the rights and freedoms of national minorities in Europe. Two of the Council of Europe’s conventions (specifically, one convention and one charter) are crucially relevant for the question of Bunyev identity in the Republic of Serbia as it has been outlined thus far: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (hereafter, Convention)<sup>26</sup> and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (hereafter, Charter);<sup>27</sup> Serbia is—as it is officially referred to—a state party both to the Convention and to the Charter.

The Convention entered into force in Serbia on September 1, 2001. Since then, the country has gone through three monitoring cycles, the last two of which were incomplete in that there was no follow-up dialogue at the end of the monitoring cycle (that is, following state report, Advisory Committee delegation visit, opinion, government comments, and resolution).

Already in its first report submitted on October 16, 2002, Serbia explicitly described its thirteen minority communities (as well as less numerous minority communities), one of which was the Bunyevs (variously referred to in the report as Bunjevci and Bunyevtsi); the report, among other things, made a note of “the traditional debate about their (Bunyev, B. B.) origin,” though it did not indicate anything as to what the essence of the debate was. As was explained earlier with respect to the 1945 order, the debate must have been about the question of Bunyev identity in Serbia, specifically, whether Bunyevs are in fact Bunyevs or actually Croats.

Indeed, on March 2, 2004, the Advisory Committee confirmed this supposition, noting “that there have been debates in Serbia ... on the inter-relation ... between Croatian and Bunyevtsi identities ... The Advisory Committee un-

---

25 Council of Europe [<https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/values>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

26 *The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* [<https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/home>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

27 *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* [<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

derlines that ... there should be no attempts to impose one or the other identity on the persons concerned." During the second monitoring cycle, on June 25, 2009, the Advisory Committee noted that "[i]n practice, the [Serbian, B. B.] authorities enabled both the Croats and the Bunjevtsi to form their own national councils,"<sup>28</sup> while at the same time recognizing "that there are still debates as to whether ... the Croats and the Bunjevtsi ... have distinct identities." Finally, there was a note on how "representatives of the Bunjevtsi complained ... that there have been instances of census-takers registering persons belonging to the Bunjevtsi [sic] minority as Croats because the persons concerned had declared themselves as such in the previous census."

The third and latest monitoring cycle was interesting in that Serbia's report, dated March 13, 2013, now contained supplements provided by the national councils of national minorities, including both Bunjevs and Croats. And while the Supplement of the National Council of the Croatian National Minority<sup>29</sup> made no mention of Bunjevs, the Supplement of the National Council of the Bunjevtsi (as Bunjevs are referred to in the report) National Minority<sup>30</sup> frequently mentioned Croats in Serbia, as well as various different aspects of the relationship between Bunjevs and Croats in Serbia. The Advisory Committee, on the other hand, on June 23, 2014, once again noted "that debates about the Bunjevci and Croat identities ... are ongoing," adding that "the President of Serbia declared on November 25, 2013 that Bunjevci should be recognised as a distinct group and that more should be done to preserve their identity." This time around the Advisory Committee also encouraged the Serbian authorities "to take steps—while maintaining strict neutrality as to outcomes—to promote constructive dialogue ... between persons identifying themselves as belonging to the Croat and Bunjevci national minorities." Finally, significant sections of Serbia's third submitted report spoke of—from the point of view of the Serbian authorities—the Bunjev dialect, which was—in the supplement submitted by the National Council of the Bunjev National Minority—frequently and curiously enough referred to as the Bunjev language, itself the focus of the other relevant Council of Europe's convention, the Charter.

At the time of the original writing, Serbia is in the midst of the fourth monitoring cycle on the implementation of the Charter—which entered into force in Serbia on June 1, 2006—having submitted, on November 15, 2017, its fourth periodical report. Unlike the issue highlighted by the Convention, here

---

28 According to the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government of the Republic of Serbia, national councils of national minorities are tasked with the goals of "fulfilling the rights to self-governing in [the fields of] culture, education, [providing] information, and the official use of language and alphabet" [<http://mduls.gov.rs/ljudska-i-manjinska-prava/nacionalni-saveti-nacionalnih-manjina/?script=lat>], accessed on June 22, 2019.

29 In the original Serbian: Nacionalni savet hrvatske nacionalne manjine; in the original Croatian: Hrvatsko nacionalno vijeće u Republici Srbiji.

30 In the original: Nacionalni savet bunjevačke nacionalne manjine.



the issue was whether the Bunyev (referred to in the Charter as Bunjevac) linguistic variety was a language or not. It is therefore significant that the first monitoring cycle report, submitted on July 11, 2007, did not even mention the Bunyev linguistic variety in any way whatsoever. The Committee of Experts, however, noted in its evaluation report of September 12, 2008 that “[w]hile most speakers consider Bunjevac a language in its own right, some regard it as a variety of Croatian,” adding later that “[t]he Serbian authorities declare that they at present do not apply the Charter to Bunjevac because it ‘has not yet been standardised.’” This will become a recurring theme in both subsequent Serbian periodical reports and the Committee of Experts’ evaluation reports: the periodical reports, starting with the second one, began to use the phrase “the Bunyev (referred to in the reports as Bunjevac) Speech,” while the evaluation reports, already from the very first one, continued to comment “that the lack of standardisation is not by itself an obstacle to the application of Part II to a regional or minority language.” This back-and-forth between periodical and evaluation reports has lasted until the most recent, fourth periodical report. In it, however, it was clear that, in the section still entitled “Bunjevac Speech,” the phrase “the Bunyev (referred to in the report as Bunjevac) language” was almost six times as frequent as the phrase “the Bunyev (referred to in the report as Bunjevac) speech” (respectively, 23 to 4). The following examples are but an illustration of what must have been a conscious decision on the periodical report’s authors. In the third periodical report, submitted on February 2, 2015, a chart presented in the report is explained as such: “Projects from the following fields of culture relating to the *Bunjevac speech* (italics for emphasis, B. B.) have been supported from the budget of AP Vojvodina.” The sentence, “The Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities AP Vojvodina has supported projects from the following areas of culture, pertaining to the *Bunjevac language* (italics for emphasis, B. B.)” explains a similar chart presented in the fourth periodical report.<sup>31</sup> Thus, at least in this political document, it seems as if the Bunyevs’ request for their linguistic variety to be referred to as language has come to be regarded ever more favourably. The fourth periodical report went so far as to contain almost oxymoronic sentences of the following sort: “Education for speakers of the Bunjevac language is organised at the elementary school level, by studying Bunjevac speech with elements of national culture.” All along Bunyevs have, nevertheless, been encouraged to work on their linguistic variety’s standardization. Still, the fourth periodical report concluded its section entitled “Bunjevac Speech” by making it explicit that “introduction of Bunjevac in official

---

31 That this was not an error of any sort is confirmed by consulting a different chart explained in the third periodical report as: “Projects from the following fields of culture relating to the Bunjevac speech have been supported from the budget of the Republic of Serbia”; a similar chart in the fourth periodical report is explained as: “The table below contains an overview of projects from the field of culture pertaining to the Bunjevac language, co-funded from the budget of the Ministry of Culture and Information [of the Republic of Serbia].”

usage has not been supported by the law, taking into account the fact that in no units of local self-government the number of the Bunjevac national minority members does not [sic] exceed 15%." In the end, whether the Bunjev linguistic variety is eventually referred to as language will be yet another political decision to be made.

### MORE ON BUNJEVS AND POLITIC(IA)NS

As indicated above, the Advisory Committee on the Convention, in its third opinion on Serbia, noted the ongoing debates about Bunjev and Croatian identities and then, albeit in a footnote, also noted that "the President of Serbia declared on 25 November 2013 that Bunjevci should be recognised as a distinct group and that more should be done to preserve their identity." It appears that even for the Advisory Committee the word of a powerful politician at the time stood as, if not the strongest, then certainly a very strong argument.

At the end of 2013 and in 2014, the then-president of Serbia, Mr. Tomislav Nikolić, was apparently extremely closely involved—and on three different occasions—with the question of Bunjev identity in Serbia as has been outlined in the present contribution.

On November 25, 2013, in the city of Subotica, Mr. Nikolić attended the Bunjevs' celebration of one of their national holidays. There, the then-president declared that Bunjevs "are neither Serbs, nor Croats," and that "the standardization of the Bunjev Ikavian dialect should have concluded long ago, just as more should have been done in the area of allowing more Ikavian classes in schools, as Ikavian is the everyday Bunjev speech."<sup>32</sup> To this, a prominent local Bunjev, Ms. Nevenka Bašić Palković, Librarian Advisor at the City Museum of Subotica, reacted by saying that the president was the most important guest at the celebration, adding that "Serbia will defend Bunjevs from any assimilation (Ms. Nevenka Bašić Palković, personal communication)." The event was reported on in both Serbian and Croatian media, the latter adding in their reports that "the Croatian minority in Vojvodina has been warning about the artificial division among Bunjev Croats into Bunjevs and Croats supported by certain Serbian state agencies."<sup>33</sup> Mr. Tomislav Nikolić met with Ms. Suzana Kujundžić Ostojić, the then-president of the Temporary Executive Office of the National Council of the Bunjev National Minority, and at the time of the original writing the president of the institution, in the capital city of Belgrade

32 Mr. Tomislav Nikolić 1 [<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/124/%D0%94%D1%80%D1%83%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE/1453856/%D0%9D%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%9B%3A+%D0%91%D1%83%D1%9A%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%86%D0%B8+%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BE+%D0%B0%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%85%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8+%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4.html>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

33 Hrvatska radiotelevizija [<https://vijesti.hrt.hr/227477/tomislav-nikolic-bunjevci-nisu-hrvati>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

on February 26, 2014. Mr. Nikolić then “promised that he will do everything he can to allow Bunyevs to fulfil their minority rights” and added that, “if it were so necessary, the Nikolić family itself will finance publishing books in the minority languages.”<sup>34</sup>

This latest event most likely led toward what took place as the academic year 2014/2015 was commencing. This time, in addition to Mr. Nikolić and Ms. Kujundžić Ostojić, Mr. Ivo Josipović, the then-president of Croatia, and Mr. Zoran Milanović, the then-prime minister of Croatia, as well as Mr. Gordan Markotić, Croatian ambassador to Serbia, and Ms. Ruža Tomašić, Croatian representative in the European Parliament were also involved. In early September of 2014, Mr. Nikolić donated teaching materials to be used in the elective subject of Bunyev Speech/Lect with Elements of the National Culture, published in both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, to the Bunyevs in Subotica. Mr. Josipović immediately reacted by stating that what had happened reflected “politics which wants to assimilate Croats in Serbia,”<sup>35</sup> while Mr. Milanović called the event “not quite the most scrupulous.”<sup>36</sup> In Mr. Nikolić’s response, he repeated what he had already stated in 2013, notably that Bunyevs are neither Serbs or Croats, but their own nationality. Ms. Tomašić offered her own take on the verbal war involving two presidents and a prime minister. She saw Mr. Nikolić’s move as something that “intends to destroy the Croatian language and cultural identity in Vojvodina.”<sup>37</sup> Ms. Kujundžić Ostojić reportedly regarded Ms. Tomašić’s reaction as exaggerated and Mr. Nikolić’s gesture as Serbia’s helping the Bunyev national minority. In an interview given a few weeks later, Mr. Markotić proclaimed that “the right to education for the Croatian minority in Serbia is not fulfilled by Serbia’s not providing financial resources.”<sup>38</sup>

All of the examples presented in this section only further confirm the extremely high level of involvement of powerful political figures in the ever so personal question of identity. In the specific examples described above, the relationship between both Serbian and Croatian politicians on the one hand and the Bunyev (as well as, necessarily, Croatian) national minority, on the other is, in some way, reciprocal: the highest ranked politicians, and also those of a lower rank, feel called upon to make moves and offer statements (which are apparently also given high prominence even in the opinion of the Advi-

---

34 Mr. Tomislav Nikolić [https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-manjine-moraju-da-uzivaju-sva-prava/pj7e3jj], accessed on August 6, 2018.

35 Mr. Ivo Josipović [http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/josipovic-asimilacija-hrvata-u-vojvodini], accessed on August 6, 2018.

36 Mr. Zoran Milanović [http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/milanovic-nikoliceva-donacija-bunjevcima-nije-korektna], accessed on August 6, 2018.

37 Ms. Ruža Tomašić [https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/245911/ruza-tomasic-nikolic-unistava-hrvatski-jezik-i-kulturu-u-vojvodini-josipovic-nekorektan-nastavak-asimilacije-bunjevaca], accessed on August 6, 2018.

38 Mr. Gordan Markotić [http://rs.seebiz.eu/markotic-srbija-uskracuje-hrvatima-pravona-obrazovanje/ar-95616/], accessed on August 6, 2018.

sory Committee on the Convention and, by extension, the Council of Europe) regarding an individual's or group's identity, while all along individuals or groups of individuals look up to powerful politicians, seeing apparently that theirs is the ultimate and decisive power in matters of concern to those same individuals or groups.

In light of this, one of the latest examples of a similar nature happened in early 2017. On February 17, 2017, less than two months before, at the time of the original writing, the most recent presidential election in Serbia, the BBA issued a statement to the general public in which it explicitly endorsed presidential candidate Mr. Aleksandar Vučić. At that time, Mr. Vučić was the prime minister of Serbia, but after his electoral victory on April 2, 2017, he eventually assumed the role of president. In the statement, the BBA expressed its certainty that Mr. Vučić would continue to pursue the sorts of policies that had been favoured by the Bunyevs for quite some time. The BBA also supported Mr. Vučić's political party, the Serbian Progressive Party—also the most numerous Serbian parliamentary party—with the argument that its “policy guarantees stability and equality in fulfilling the rights of national minorities in the Republic of Serbia.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the BBA and, thus, the Bunyevs it claims to represent continue to place their faith in the highest and most powerful political levels in the Republic of Serbia to ensure a satisfactory resolution of what they see as the still not fully addressed question of Bunyev identity in Serbia.

### STANDARDIZED YET?

The almost oxymoronic statement from the fourth and, at the time of the original writing, most recent periodical report, submitted by the Serbian authorities on November 15, 2017, discussed in the earlier section on minorities in 21st century Europe and repeated here for convenience—“Education for speakers of the Bunjevac language is organised at the elementary school level, by studying Bunjevac speech with elements of national culture.”—is also extremely telling with respect to how the Serbian authorities, or at least the authors of the periodical report, view the Bunyev linguistic variety in particular and understand language in general. Apparently, while there is a language (in this instance—Bunjev), it still can be studied within the subject that does not call it a language, but, rather, speech/lect (hence the elective school subject “Bunjev Speech/Lect with Elements of the National Culture”). What is revealed in all of the periodical reports, as well as in a monograph<sup>40</sup> dedicated to the Bunyevs themselves is that this linguistic variety will only be worthy of the label language if it is standardized. In fact, Žarko Bošnjaković explicitly stated: “[C]onsidering the fact that the Bačka Bunyevs do not have a standardized language,

---

39 Mr. Aleksandar Vučić [<http://www.sbb.org.rs/>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

40 Žarko Bošnjaković and Biljana Sikimić, *Bunjevci. Etnodijalektološka istraživanja 2009* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2013).

the idiom that they use can only be called speech/lect."<sup>41</sup> It is with this sort of attitude toward the Bunyev linguistic variety—which Bunyevs refer to as language and regard it as a crucial part of the overall question of Bunyev identity in Serbia—that Bunyevs had been contending until early 2018.

Just how crucial for Bunyevs themselves the attitude toward the Bunyev linguistic variety is was expressed in the supplement submitted by the National Council of the Bunyev National Minority to Serbia's report for the third monitoring cycle on the Convention. In the supplement, the council stated that "[t]he fact that the Bunyevtsi language is not linguistically recognised as a language but as a speech is extensively used in practice to maximally reduce the rights of this national minority," which, in addition to the lack of standardization being the reason for the lack of recognition, made Bunyevs initiate in 2009 "a project of the standardisation of the Bunyevtsi language."<sup>42</sup> At the time, the National Council of the Bunyev National Minority turned yet again toward the powerful political system within which Bunyevs operate by asking "for support from the institutions of the Republic of Serbia as well as material support for the language standardisation project."<sup>43</sup>

On February 26, 2018, three days after the fifteen-year anniversary of the National Council of the Bunyev National Minority, three high representatives of the council—Ms. Suzana Kujundžić Ostojić, president of the council; Mr. Mirko Bajić, president of the executive board of the council; and Mr. Nikola Babić, vice-president of the council and president of the Committee for the Official Use of Language and Alphabet—held a press conference in order to declare the process of standardization of the Bunyev linguistic variety finished and consequently presented what they referred to as the Standard of the Bunyev Language. According to Ms. Kujundžić Ostojić, "[s]tandard is whatever we prescribed in the dictionary of the Bačka Bunyevs with an orthographic and grammatical manual." Also, in addition to briefly explaining the results of the process of standardization and, not unexpectedly, referring to a more-than-three-hundred-year-long Bunyev presence in their current locale, Ms. Kujundžić Ostojić reminded the audience that "[l]anguage is essential and extremely important as a sort of identification of any community, the Bunyev community included, [which is why they] tried to put their community on a par with others." She then offered her own uncertain view of just how the Bunyev linguistic variety would be treated in the future: "[I]t remains to be seen through institutions, debates..." The president of the council then revealed the politics behind it all:

---

41 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

42 According to the authors of the supplement, the project of standardization consisted of the following: "field research of the language was carried out in 2009 and 2011, and then, additions to the Bunyevtsi dictionary made, whereas preparation of the Bunyevtsi grammar is in progress."

43 Convention [<https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/home>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

The distinction between language and speech/lect is huge and is not only a scholarly matter. For example, national councils are financially supported by the Republic of Serbia, and we (the National Council of the Bunyev National Minority, B. B.) have no other sources, for [different] spheres [of interest]. For the sphere of the use of the standard language, we have zero dinars, which has been the case for the last fifteen years. Such is the case in education, too, because what is studied is speech/lect, and not language, for over 400 children, we get from the state 86,000 dinars (slightly over 700 USD, B. B.) per year. Some other national minority, numerically smaller than us, has a language, nobody knows when it was declared, and it receives around one million dinars (slightly less than 8,500 USD, B. B.). Money can't do it all, there are many possibilities to do a lot even without resources, but is it necessary to create such a difference, for us to be ranked lower than other minorities.<sup>44</sup>

It is abundantly clear from the words just quoted why it was extremely important to declare the completion of standardization of what the council and Bunyevs themselves have always seen as the Bunyev language: what is expected to follow is a set of different political steps taken by the leadership of the Republic of Serbia as the ultimate political authority, notably, allowing for the elective school subject to replace the word "speech/lect" with the word "language"; possibly beginning to include the phrase "the Bunyev language" in all relevant legal acts; and, eventually, providing more financial support for everything done with and concerning the Bunyev linguistic variety. This might also be part of the reason why Ms. Kujundžić Ostojić stated at the same press conference that "[s]tandardization is a never-ending process, which we will continue."

## 2018 ELECTIONS

The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government of the Republic of Serbia informed the public on July 25, 2018<sup>45</sup> that elections for the national councils of national minorities would be scheduled in early August and held in the fall, with no specific date announced at the time. Vague as this may have been (and actually is), it also seemed to have served as a trigger of sorts for yet another statement issued on August 7, 2018, by the BBA.<sup>46</sup>

---

44 Bunjevci [<http://www.bunjevci.net/visti/najnovije-visti?start=50>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

45 Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government of the Republic of Serbia [<http://www.mduls.gov.rs/aktivnosti-saopstenja.php>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

46 Bunjevci [<http://www.bunjevci.net/visti/saopstenja-i-konferencije>], accessed on August 6, 2018.

Enough is enough!

We demand that the act, in the shape of an order from 1945, by which Bunyevs are to be considered Croats no matter their personal claim, is urgently considered by the Parliament of the APV and finally declared null and void.

It has been almost two years since an official request was submitted to the Parliament, and six months since the Government of the APV gave an official support for a declaration on the nullity of the act to be passed, yet nothing has been done.

Still today, those who represent the Croatian minority in the Republic of Serbia ... represent us Bunyev as Croats, depriving us of our language, culture, and tradition, and calling us some "Bunyev Croats," while the state observes everything in silence.

Therefore, as we near election for the new national councils, we have the right to ask for this question to be answered finally, or else for the state to tell us openly whether it does not want to answer this question because of some sort of a "trade" with Croats, using Bunyevs.

The issues appear to be the same, as well as the actors. The BBA, on behalf of all Bunyevs it claims it represents in Serbia, still speaks of unanswered questions and unresolved issues, the prime example of which is, to the Bunyevs themselves, the lack of a clear reaction on the part of the Parliament of the APV—and, by extension, the Republic of Serbia—to their almost two-year-old request. This seems to make the Bunyevs feel uneasy, which is why a more decisive reaction by powerful politicians is sought by Bunyevs themselves. It is as if no self-declared completed language standardization can still replace a political decision in the form of a legal act.

### INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Leena Huss and Anna-Riitta Lindgren suggest that the late modern era "has brought about ... a world-wide ethnic renaissance" in which "minorities all over the world have supported and given inspiration to each other."<sup>47</sup> Also known as an ethnic awakening, it is characterized by the understanding that "a minority should have the right to its own culture and to its identity without stigmatization or discrimination,"<sup>48</sup> achieved through "the efforts of minorities to gain certain rights for their own group."<sup>49</sup> The Bunyev minority of Serbia finds itself in the midst of this ethnic renaissance, though—as the present contribution has demonstrated—despite the minority's own efforts, the question of its identity has not yet been fully resolved.

---

47 Huss and Lindgren, "Introduction," p. 11.

48 Huss and Lindgren, "Introduction," p. 9.

49 Huss and Lindgren, "Introduction," p. 10.

A slightly less enthusiastic picture of what Nirvana Bhatia refers to as the current international human rights regime when it comes to language is painted by the remark that the regime “does not recognize an individual’s right to language choice; instead, it promises freedom from linguistic discrimination. The implications are not quite the same and, as a result, states have successfully repressed minority populations by controlling their language options.” Bhatia is particularly critical of the European Union, because it “demonstrates an inconsistent approach toward linguistic minorities; it attempts to promote language diversity at an institutional level, but refuses to influence a Member State’s domestic language policy.” While the Republic of Serbia is not an EU member state, it is a candidate country, and candidate countries, according to Bhatia, do not receive the same treatment as the member states: “[E]ven though the European Union itself supports several linguistic recognitions, language policy is ultimately implemented by each state; this paradox is best manifested by the discrepancy in minority language protections between European Union candidate states and full member states.”<sup>50</sup> Still, at the time of the original writing, Bunyevs seem to continue to struggle in Serbia for their linguistic variety to actually be fully recognized, and consequently referred to, as language.

The fact that the early 21st century era in the European human rights regime can be seen in both more positive as well as less positive lights is—indeed—detected in the current state of affairs with respect to the example of the Bunyev national minority of Serbia. On the one hand, the Bunyevs have achieved official recognition on a par with that of the eight other minorities given the highest status of all in the APV. On the other hand, however, their linguistic variety has not been granted the label “language” yet, something that Bunyevs have been attempting to achieve for some time now. The brief sketches of the Bunyevs’ latest efforts offered in the present contribution show that the age of minorities’ gaining certain rights is not a straightforward, obstacle-free path.

There is apparently no epilogue as yet to the question of Bunyev identity in Serbia. Only time, of which not enough has passed since the events sketched in the present contribution, will tell what the epilogue will be; though if time and past events are any indicator, guessing the actual epilogue is a fruitless endeavor. The example of the Bunyevs of Serbia demonstrates both extremes over the period of only 46 years: from the 1945 order for the Bunyev identity to be annulled, to the 1991 Census with the Bunyev national minority included in it. Since 1991, the trend has been favourable to Bunyevs, though as shown above—at least from the Bunyev national minority’s point of view—there remain concerns regarding recognition of both the minority and its linguistic variety.

---

50 Nirvana Bhatia, “Lost in Translation: Linguistic Minorities in the European Union,” *Topical Research Digest: Minority Rights* (2013) [<https://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/minority/MinorityRights.pdf>], accessed on August 6, 2018, p. 16.



While at the time of the original writing there is as yet indeed no epilogue to the Bunyev identity issue, the example of the Bunyev national minority in Serbia offers an insight into what the present contribution's title asks, which is what should minorities expect in this day and age of ethnic awakening. Through their elected leaders, Bunyevs appear to have chosen the path of requesting support from the most powerful political actors: they have welcomed the second-to-last president of Serbia on various occasions and have supported the current one; they have appealed to the leadership of the APV and have not minced words with respect to their own requests; they have also availed themselves of opportunities to make their case before the Council of Europe. Even though not all of the Bunyevs' efforts have borne fruit, the approach of asking for help from the political elites may not be all that unconventional after all. As Zoltán Kántor, Director of the Research Institute for Hungarian Communities Abroad, pointed out at the 2015 conference *Language, Identity and Power: What Future for Minority Languages in Europe?*, "power is a key issue, it matters who has the power to institutionalize, to bring the laws (create laws, B. B.), who recognizes the minority, who has the power to set in which case the minority may use their mother tongues," adding that "the language can be protected only when the political system takes into account the special needs of national minorities."<sup>51</sup> To be sure, power (or—power politics), as seen by Kántor, is a complex notion. As the example of Bunyevs demonstrate, the political elite, upon whose ultimate decision national minorities depend, is a multilayered entity: the APV, the Republic of Serbia, and the Council of Europe were the major layers highlighted in the present contribution, but there are certainly others, as well (Bunyev own; local; the Republic of Croatia, itself a European Union member state, to name a few). The various layers of the political elite may not always coordinate their interests or else their interests may not coincide with those of national minorities, which is precisely why there is never any utmost certainty in what the ultimate decision may be. Again, as in the example of Bunyevs, the ultimate decision in 1945 was apparently to annul Bunyev identity as such in Serbia, whereas in the 1991 Census Bunyev identity in Serbia was officially recognized. Thus, the example of the Bunyevs of Serbia also demonstrates that—logically—national minorities should hope for power (or—power politics) that is favourable to all national minorities, as well as not of easily changing attitudes. With their current as relentless as possible appeal to the political elites, as well as the public, the Bunyevs of Serbia seem to be on the right path; it is just not quite clear at the moment what their ultimate destination looks like, for there are countless ways to reach it and just as many not to.

---

51 Zoltán Kántor, "Language policy in constructing national narrative," *Language, Identity and Power: What Future for Minority Languages in Europe?* (2015) [<https://ideasforeurope.eu/activity/paper/what-future-for-minority-languages-in-europe/>], accessed on August 6, 2018, p. 19.

## EPILOGUE?

Elections for the national councils of national minorities, tentatively announced in late July 2018, were eventually scheduled for and took place on November 4, 2018. According to the official report,<sup>52</sup> there were 7,849 registered Bunyev voters, of whom 2,022 participated in the elections. Out of two sets of candidates, those under the name Bunyevs Together<sup>53</sup> were eventually awarded thirteen seats (having earned 1,355 votes) on the National Council of the Bunyev National Minority, while those under the name of Association of Citizens “Bunyev Kolo” Sombor<sup>54</sup> were awarded six seats (having earned 632 votes) on the council.

On December 17, 2018, the Official Bulletin of the Republic of Serbia’s Educational Bulletin, in its volume 67, issue 18, reported on the December 6, 2018 decision by the Minister of Education, Science, and Technological Development, Mr. Mladen Šarčević, that the name of the Elective Program “Bunyev Speech/Lect with Elements of the National Culture” is to be replaced by the name of the Elective Program “Bunyev Language with Elements of the National Culture.”<sup>55</sup>

---

52 Cf. [<http://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/latinica/izbori-za-nsnm-neposredni-2018-ukupni-rezultati.php>], accessed on June 22, 2018.

53 In the original: Bunjevci zajedno.

54 In the original: Udruženje građana “Bunjevačko kolo” Sombor.

55 Cf. [<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/arhslgl/PGARHSTARO/archiveOverview>], accessed on March 5, 2019.