

## **Candidate members of the European Union must work on restoring language rights in their own country**

If Ukraine and Moldova really want to become members of the European Union, they must start taking the rights of the linguistic minorities in their own countries seriously.



**Tiraspol, the capital of the independent state of Transnistria, located on the eastern bank of the Dnjestr-river. In the surrounding language area, the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Transnistria are an absolute majority. Image Wikipedia**

When I called 112 in Romania, the operator didn't speak Hungarian, while I spoke to her in Hungarian and called from a Hungarian-speaking village. Officially, I

have to be connected to a unit where they do speak Hungarian, but it didn't come to that, since I spoke to her in English.

But what would happen if my 9-year-old daughter calls and tries to explain what's going on? My daughter only speaks Hungarian (and Dutch) just like the children from the village. From the first grade they only learn Romanian.

A 2016 report by the European Language Rights Foundation shows that EU member Romania is not doing well in observing the language rights of the Hungarian minority. The problem of discrimination on the basis of nationality in Romania is unfortunately, unresolved to this day.

### **Discrimination**

The European Commission is still discussing the fact that the rights of European citizenship do not apply to Hungarian-speaking Romanian citizens. This is an act of discrimination in black and white.

That is why it is so important that EU candidate members Ukraine and Moldova already recognise the language rights of their autonomous minorities. After all, compliance with language rights by the Strasbourg Convention of 1996 was the hard accession requirement for the European integration of the former Soviet satellite states.

North Macedonia was only allowed to become a NATO member in 2020, after it recognized the language rights of its autonomous Albanian minority. Slovakia but also Romania only became EU and NATO members after guaranteeing the language rights of historical Hungarian language minorities.

**Candidate member Ukraine has already proven that it takes European values with a grain of salt.**

If Moldova becomes a member of the EU, speakers of Russian and Gagauz in Moldova, which, like neighbouring Romania, has only Romanian as its official language, will become an absolute minority of less than 5% in the Romanian-speaking area of the EU.

Now they form the majority within Moldova in their own breakaway state of [Transnistria](#) and the autonomous province of [Gagauzia](#) and can use their language freely in public administration.

Candidate member Ukraine has already proven to take European values with a grain of salt by adopting a language law in April 2019, which deprives speakers of minority languages of existing rights to use their language freely in healthcare, trade, culture, education and justice.

By opposing its Russian-speaking Soviet past, Ukraine is also undermining the very delicate balance between the rights of speakers of the majority language and those of minorities.

**A family from the Ukrainian [village of](#) Szelmenc may have lived in eight different countries between 1920 and 1996 without leaving the [village](#).**

Although the Ukrainian language law is directed against mutually intelligible Russian with the aim of strengthening the Ukrainian language, it also makes the languages of vulnerable [historical minorities](#) such as Polish, Hungarian and Romanian collateral [damage](#) of the war with Russia.

The history of the Ukrainian village of Szelmenc is a striking illustration of the tragic history of minorities in Central Europe. A family may have lived in eight different countries between 1920 and 1996 without leaving the village. ( [Austria-Hungary](#), [First Czechoslovak Republic](#), [Hungary](#), [Soviet Union](#), [Ukraine](#), [CSSR](#), [CSFR](#), [Slovakia](#) ).

The [Hungarian-speaking](#) inhabitants of Szelmenc are now threatened by the Ukrainian language law. Pursuant to [Article 30](#) of the Ukrainian language law, a mother behind the counter of a village shop must first address a fellow villager or even her child in Ukrainian. Such laws are disastrous for vulnerable historical linguistic minorities, because they lead to self-censorship.

### **Restoring language rights**

Just like with a probationary period in an employment contract, the accession procedure is the time in which an EU candidate member such as Ukraine and Moldova [must prove beyond doubt](#) its commitment to European values.

This is exactly where the shoe pinches, the EU should not take basic human rights seriously out of a vague kind of idealism, but rather out of strategic importance for [peace, security and reconciliation](#) .

The EU's moral right to exist will come under pressure as long as Europeans, who belong to vulnerable historical minorities, cannot live in [safety](#) in the candidate country or member state where the graves of their ancestors are located.

Candidate member Ukraine can immediately meet its obligations by restoring language rights to the situation before the large-scale protests in Ukraine in November 2013. These arose in response to President Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Moldova can immediately prove its commitment to European values by becoming trilingual, just like Belgium.

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