Minorities: South Tyrol in Italy

Italy and minorities

Italy historically has always been a linguistically and culturally fragmented society. Because of this historical development, in Italy there have always been many regional and local differences in culture, economy and policy. Today, there is an intense concentration of minorities especially in the border regions, in the northeast and northwest of Italy, where there took place the wars and conflicts in the 20th century. Other areas with a higher concentration of minorities are the two main islands of Italy and the South of Italy where there are minorities from the Balkans or Greece. In the central part of Italy the most minorities disappeared, except Sinti and Roma communities. Today, there are twelve minorities which are recognized and protected by the Italian legislation (Article 6 of the Constitution and Law no. 482, 1999, art. 2): Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, French-Provençal, Friulan, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian. About five percent of the Italian population (only territorial, regional or historical minorities; immigrants excluded) has another mother tongue than Italian (or Italian dialect).

The case of South Tyrol

The population of 463,000 inhabitants in 2001 consisted for the most part in 3 language groups: about 64% German speakers, about 24.5% Italian speakers, about 4% Ladin speakers and about 7.4% others. The conflict in South Tyrol is an expression of the main historical developments of the 20th century: After World War I, with the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919, the annexation of Trentino-Alto Adige by Italy took place. From 1922 onwards, the Fascists exercised an aggressive policy of Italianization towards the German-speaking population. Germans were forced to change their names, place names were rewritten, the utilization of German was prohibited. Speaking German was a crime and racially discriminatory laws were introduced. Furthermore, the Italianization was carried out through massive immigration of Italian people. Institutions, schools, associations and political parties were abolished and forbidden. In 1939 German speaking people were forced to choose between Italy and Germany. Over 80 per cent voted to leave Italy (about 200,000 people), but only about 75,000 actually left South Tyrol and many returned clandestinely. After World War II, in 1946 the Allies agreed that Italy should retain South Tyrol. At the peace conference in Paris took place many negotiations between Austria and Italy, the result was the Gruber - De Gasperi Agreement of September 1946, which includes a series of important rights for this minority in Italy: inter alia the equality of rights with the Italian-speaking inhabitants, the protection of the ethnical character, the possibility to teach in the mother-tongue, the parification of German and Italian languages in public offices, official documents and bilingual toponymy, the exercise of autonomous legislative and executive regional
power. Nevertheless, the formulation in many keys areas was vague and so the result of the Gruber – De Gasperi Agreement was an Autonomy Statue which was restrictively interpretive and applied. The first Autonomy Statue of 1948 ensured that the development of South-Tyrol was in Italian hands by putting South Tyrol and the Province of Trento together in one region. The new Region Trentino-Alto Adige had nearly more than a two-thirds Italian majority, what was important for the legislative and administrative powers of the Regional Parliament, which in this way had always the majority of Italian-speaking people. Furthermore, Italian continued to be the official language of the Region, German was not an official language, but German-speaking people were allowed to use their language in public life. Regarding education, there were provided separate administrative divisions for the schools of the three linguistic groups. This first Autonomy Statue was a step forward, but it was still insufficient and unsatisfactory. The post-war years were characterized by disputes and clashing interests, in 1956 for the first time, bombs were thrown by South Tyrolese activists to attract international attention. From 1955 onward, Austria interceded increasingly on South Tyrol’s behalf. In 1960, Austria referred the dispute with Italy regarding South Tyrol to the United Nations. The result of the internationalization of the conflict was a new agreement from 1969, the so-called “Package” of 137 implementation-measures to revise the 1948 Autonomy Statute in the interest of the South Tyrolese and Ladins. A second Autonomy Statute was adopted in 1972, the conflict in front of the UN was formally settled in 1992. In 2001, there took place a further extension of the constitutional reform, which amounted to a third Autonomy Statute.

The actual autonomy system maintains the Region as a roof structure: the competences regarding the most important economic and social factors were transferred to the Provinces. Furthermore, the provinces have secondary legislative powers in many areas. Some measures in favor of the linguistic minorities are the following: the application of ethnic proportions in all public bodies operating in the Province (census on the basis of the formal declaration to the language group), the implementation of a language examination for proving the bilingualism of public employees (trilingualism in Ladin areas), the recognition of German as a local official language (Ladin as third official language in Ladin areas), the creation of three autonomous school boards, each competent for the administration of the schools of its linguistic group (education in the mother tongue, language instruction in the second language; special arrangement for Ladin schools: principle of teaching parity – same number of hours in German and Italian, Ladin generally used as an assistant language), bilingual (trilingual in the Ladin areas) place names, creation of a public media board with the duty to transmit German speaking radio and TV programs.

Another important field of the autonomy statute are the finances: The majority of the taxes and duties (about 90%) collected in the province remains in the Province, about 5% of it goes to the Region and the remaining 5% is used by the state for tasks in the local area.
Social Work and minorities in South Tyrol

It seems that social work was not really involved in the question of the local minorities, on the one hand maybe because the living together “works”, at least it seems to work, and on the other hand because the living together is regulated by the legal requirements and regulations. Nevertheless, it must be said that the dominant cleavage within the society is still ethnicity. Between the groups is not much contact, on the one hand because of the segregation regarding the habitation in, strikingly, urban and rural areas, and on the other hand because of the linguistic difficulties. The reality is therefore not a “colorful” living together, but more characterized by parallel societies. Furthermore, there still exists hostility between the “other” ethnic groups. The traumatic historical experiences sometimes prevent from a reciprocal understanding, even if “the three groups have come closer in appreciating that the autonomy is for them all, and becoming aware of the contribution that each can make to life in the Province”.\(^1\)

References:


\(^1\) Alcock (2001), p. 20