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Pro-Minority Policies and Inadvertent Challenges to Minorities' Ontological Security: The Promotion of Gaelic in Scotland

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Executive Summary

For the last two decades, in partnership and cooperation with multiple governmental and non-governmental bodies at national, regional, and local levels, the Scottish government has achieved noticeable and commendable success in recognising, protecting, and promoting Scottish Gaelic. The effects of language policy are most notable in such areas as language visibility and use in public institutions, education through the medium of Gaelic, as well as the availability of language learning opportunities for both school students and adult learners. However, the aspect of the policy that addresses

the preservation of the spoken language within traditional rural and island communities has posed the biggest challenge because it requires a need for a more comprehensive approach that combines language-related measures with attention to the improvement of the overall socio-economic conditions of these communities. The most current policy plans and proposed changes to the policy's legal framework seem to demonstrate greater commitment to tackling this particularly challenging task. However, going further, the policy may also need to provide additional accommodations for concerns and uncertainties associated with ontological (in)security within those remaining vernacular communities in which speaking Gaelic has been closely intertwined with lived experiences, family histories, perceptions of space, and traditional ways of living. As it currently stands, the policy framework preserves an overwhelming focus on language as the system of communication, with rather limited recognition of the unique experiences of such groups and individuals. Some policy accommodations in this area could be the inclusion of the category of Scottish Gael in future censuses and public surveys and the designation of a regional unit as a symbolic Gaelic cultural "homeland," which would also serve as an institutional nexus for closer cooperation and coordination across locally established "areas of linguistic significance" and various regional and national organisations and institutions preoccupied with the preservation and promotion of Gaelic linguistic and cultural heritage.

Ontological Security, Minority Policies, and Symbolic Concerns

Ontological security is a psychiatric term that was subsequently incorporated first into political sociology and later into international relations and political science. In this latter interpretation, it is commonly used to describe the need for individuals and groups to maintain a stable and coherent sense of self in the face of various challenges and uncertainties. Questions of ontological security "to constitute a distinct self" (Rumelili 2015) have been included in discussions on securitization, state identities (Mitzen 2006), nationalism and nation-building (Kinvall 2004, 2006), populism, migration, and protracted international and domestic conflicts. Another area where the notion of ontological security can be particularly instructive pertains to the question of national minorities and minority rights (Roe 2004). Not only do state policies towards national minorities affect the minorities' physical existence, security, and well-being, but they are also inevitably intertwined with defining, ascribing, recognising, and negotiating relevant collective identities, their content, and their boundaries. Thus, an analysis of such state policies, which in multiple ways shape the character of majority-minority relations, may also require attention to this aspect of a minority's experience. This attention is even more warranted since identity questions emerge and exist in close relationship with social, economic, cultural, and political conditions, and "concerns about instability and uncertainty of being can easily be politically mobilised and manipulated into concerns about survival" (Rumelili 2015: 60). It can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of situations when (some) representatives of national minorities, activists, and advocates for minority rights express concerns about identity and feelings of anxiety, even if the policy in question seems to be genuinely well-meaning and formulated in pro-minority terms.

Scotland's Gaelic Policy

The Gaelic language policy of Scotland is an example of a situation where state policies that are designed and implemented to protect, support, and promote minority languages and cultures can potentially heighten anxiety and feelings of insecurity among some members of the targeted minority group. Scotland, with its diverse cultural heritage, has increasingly sought to preserve and revitalise its minority languages, particularly Gaelic. Various initiatives to promote the language had been introduced over time

and eventually merged under the overarching umbrella of Scotland's Gaelic language policy. This policy turn took place when the situation with Gaelic as a spoken language approached the point at which it would be reasonable to expect the complete disappearance of the vernacular from the linguistic map of the country within the span of just a few generations. Policy development and implementation have been associated with various political, administrative, and budgetary challenges and constraints. There are also the potential unintended consequences of Scotland's Gaelic policy on the ontological security of Gaelic speakers in traditional areas, which demand some further consideration and may suggest policy amendments relevant for the Scottish case and beyond.

Efforts to institutionally recognise and support Scottish Gaelic, as well as mitigate a dramatic decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, began in the second half of the 20th century and grew particularly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in part influenced and inspired by the example of language policy developments in Wales (McLeod 2020). Important institutional changes in this area began to unfold following the process of devolution in the British Isles and the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The Scottish government expressed its lasting commitment to stopping and eventually reversing the ongoing language decline by adopting more widespread use of the language and increasing the number of Gaelic speakers and learners. The 2005 Gaelic Language Act has provided the current normative framework for these efforts. The act declared Gaelic "an official language of Scotland," dramatically strengthening its legal status. Scottish Gaelic has also received official recognition under the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages, which the United Kingdom ratified in 2001 (Council of Europe 2024).

With the introduction of the 2005 Gaelic Language Act, the government undertook obligations to promote the use of Gaelic within the country's central and regional authorities and public bodies, as well as in the system of education. The act also established *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*, the principal actor responsible for developing and updating Gaelic policies. The Board has been tasked with preparing national Gaelic language plans and reviewing Gaelic plans adopted by various Scottish institutions and organisations. From the outset, the new language policy approached the subject of language protection and promotion as a matter of nationwide significance. Statements like "Gaelic belongs to the whole of Scotland" (Scottish Government 2010: 3) and "Gaelic is an integral part of Scotland's heritage, national identity, and current cultural life" (Scottish Government 2016: 5; Scottish Government 2022: 5), which are found in the texts of Gaelic language plans adopted by the Scottish Government, are some examples of such framing. These references illustrate the importance of Gaelic cultural heritage and history to modern Scottish national identity and nation-building. However, as the policy focus remains language-centred and national in scope, policy documents tend to define their recipients in rather broad and ambiguous terms and pay comparatively limited attention to the importance of regionally and locally salient links between a spoken language, space, and minority communities.

The most recent National Gaelic Language Plan states that the policy aims to ensure that "Gaelic is used more often, by more people, and in a wider range of situations" (*Bòrd na Gàidhlig* 2018: 15). Given the sociolinguistic situation on the ground, the awareness, positive image, and visibility of the language, as well as the increase in the number of language learners, are the most realistic policy targets at the national level. However, none of these targets directly addresses or improves the situation with language maintenance within traditional vernacular communities, which make up a tiny minority of Scotland's overwhelmingly Anglophone population. While nationwide goals should be commended, the overall focus on language has inadvertently relegated the Gaelic-speaking rural and island communities to the relative margins of the broader language revitalization discourse. Critical opinions about the character and direction of the nascent Gaelic language policy have highlighted the precarious situation of these communities and argued that the policy "is primarily focused on the dominant culture's interest in the

civic appeal of Gaelic cultural capital, rather than on the social capital or the societal salience of the Gaelic group" (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021).

More Opportunities to Recognise a Complementary Group Identity?

As it currently stands, the policy framework avoids any explicit references to "Gael" as Scotland's distinct ethnolinguistic category that may require special attention and protection. Instead, while there are references to Gaelic culture as "the traditions, customs, heritage, and identity of those who speak or understand the Gaelic language" (UK Legislation 2005: 8), the policy framework relies on such categories as "Gaelic speaker", "learner", "user", as well as "speech communities" when formulating policy goals and priorities. In doing so, it fails to emphasise the contribution of associated language to identity building and maintenance, not only as a system of communication but also as a symbolic marker. The importance of the latter aspect is recognised in scholarly discussions on language policy and planning (Edwards 2009). Recent Gaelic language policy documents pay more attention to the unique nature and special situation of some Gaelic speech communities and acknowledge that "a particular emphasis must be given to maintaining and strengthening Gaelic in the island and rural communities where it remains relatively strong and is the first language for a sizeable proportion of the people" (*Bòrd na Gàidhlig* 2018: 37). Nevertheless, such "island and rural communities" remain essentially nameless and only vaguely defined.

Likewise, whereas the Scottish census questionnaire (Scotland's Census 2022) contains a dedicated question about the respondent's ethnicity and provides a range of pre-formulated answers that complement it, none of those include references to Gaelic identity. Gaelic is only found in the question of language proficiency. Self-reported language proficiency, as important as it may be for monitoring the overall sociolinguistic situation and measuring the degree of success or failure concerning language revitalization efforts, seems insufficient when symbolic connections to language and group identity are considered. It does not capture the range of possible attachments to language as an identity marker and fails to differentiate between those individuals and groups whose family histories and living memories are strongly influenced by the Gaelic linguistic heritage and those with a more generalized interest in language and language learning. An emphasis on proficiency can also create additional pressure on those community members who experienced a break in the intergenerational transmission of the language, which is a common occurrence associated with language shifts in advanced stages.

Thus, it seems reasonable to incorporate an option to declare one's Scottish Gaelic identity into public surveys and future censuses. In addition to the positive effect of such incorporation on the visibility and continuity of group identities, new data would also be helpful for future policy adjustments, considering that the recognition of community heterogeneity and the need for policy differentiation at national, regional, and local levels are already present in more recent policy documents. The introduction of such an ethnocultural category and its integration into official policies for language revitalization and promotion could also help alleviate the feeling of insecurity among those who identify themselves more closely with traditional Gaelic-speaking communities and Gaelic cultural heritage by recognizing and naming their situations and lived experiences in explicit rather than implicit terms.

There are legitimate concerns that the incorporation of an ethnolinguistic term into the overall minority protection framework in Scotland could harbour grounds for exclusion, open ways to the racialization of identity boundaries, as well as weaken nationwide support for language promotion and revitalization. The phenomenon of ethnocultural groups is indeed closely associated with collective belief in common descent (Weber 1978) and the delineation and maintenance of boundaries (Barth 1969) and distinctions

between insiders and outsiders. In this sense, a group's ontological security necessitates differentiation and the existence of the other. This differentiation should not be equated with perceptions of threat, hostility, permanent exclusion, xenophobia, or discrimination, as it can also be positively constructed in terms of friendship, amity, cooperation, and complementarity (Jutila 2006; Browning and Joenniemi 2013; Rumelili 2015). Constructed in such terms, a complementary collective identity can serve as an anchor that reaffirms feelings of belonging and creates a reference point for inclusion and acceptance of new members, as well as providing structure to discussions on connections between culture, space, and language preservation efforts. To an extent, awareness of such differentiation, connection, and complementarity is already found both in current policy documents and within the public discourse at large. For example, the results of a survey about the attitudes of the Scottish population towards the Gaelic language (Paterson et al. 2014) demonstrate that while there is an overall moderately positive attitude, Gaelic is largely perceived as a regional minority language, and the language policy's primary recipients should be in the areas where the language is already spoken.

More Ways to Demonstrate Connections Between Communities and Spaces?

Increasing attention has been drawn to unique challenges associated with language maintenance and revitalization in those communities in which Gaelic is still used on a daily basis by sizeable shares of the population. The dwindling number of fluent speakers, diminishing rates of intergenerational transmission, the fragile state of traditional local economies, and migratory pressures originating from associated socioeconomic challenges have all contributed to the increasingly precarious position of Gaelic as a vernacular language. Sometimes also characterised as a sociolinguistic "crisis" (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020), this picture contrasts with the moderately positive outcomes of language policy at the national level, such as an increase in the use of Gaelic in public institutions and a growing number of language learners in Scotland's major urban centres. The situation calls for the development of a dedicated policy track tailored to the needs and problems of such traditional vernacular communities, which would integrate support for language and culture into more encompassing socioeconomic policy measures.

Partly in response to this situation, the Scottish government contemplated the idea of establishing *Gàidhealtachd*, a linguistic and cultural autonomy modelled after the Irish example (*Bòrd na Gàidhlig* 2022: 23), which would aid in situating language policy revitalization efforts within specific social-territorial contexts. However, the most recent piece of legislation, the Scottish Language Bill (Scottish Parliament 2023a), which was submitted to the Scottish Parliament on the 29th November 2023, does not contain such a provision. Instead, the draft introduces the concept of "areas of linguistic significance". Such an area, "which has a significant number of people with Gaelic language skills, is historically connected with the use of Gaelic, has Gaelic educational provision, or has significant Gaelic activity" (Scottish Parliament 2023b: 4), is to be designated by local authorities. From a symbolic standpoint, an array of localised solutions that bear no explicit references to anything Gaelic-related in their names or the names of associated institutions may still be considered suboptimal. It may be reasonable to treat the creation of such designated areas of linguistic significance as a transitory step towards border demarcation and the establishment of some form of a wider cultural region.

Recommendations

The creation of a *Gàidhealtachd* region could provide a geographical, socio-cultural and political framework for collaboration between the national government, local authorities, and existing regional institutions and bodies, such as *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* and the Highland Council, in cultural and

linguistic matters. A regional layer, complementing local efforts, would allow for a more efficient allocation of institutional and material resources in those policy areas where the economy of scale would make the most sense (i.e. the training of Gaelic-speaking staff, schooling, and various socioeconomic initiatives). The existence of such a unit would also allow for the coordination of various non-territorial components of language policy, such as academic research, corpus planning, and promotion of the language in the media and the online environment, around a regional nexus. Equally importantly, such a region, bearing some references to Gaeldom in its name, would also have the potential to act as a symbolic "homeland" for those for whom Gaelic linguistic and cultural heritage is an important part of their identity, provide a secure base for identity construction and maintenance (Kinnvall 2004: 747) both within and outside of the region's borders, and help to foster connections between local and national language revitalization activities and alleviate the perception of abandonment and neglect within vernacular communities.

Recognising complementary ethnocultural identities and connecting but not confining them to territorial settings can also be beneficial if a form of nationwide non-territorial cultural autonomy and an associated representative body for Scotland's Gaelic-speaking minority are to be introduced in the future (Smith 2023). Despite potential challenges and inherent limitations, such an arrangement could contribute to increased minority visibility and serve as another institutional hallmark for the national majority's continued recognition of the minority's status. It would also provide a platform for the Gaelic-speaking minority to express their distinct cultural identity, ultimately strengthening minority-majority trust and social cohesion.

Conclusion: Policy Impact – Gaelic in Multicultural Scotland

Scottish Gaelic remains a critically endangered minority language whose position as a vernacular is especially precarious. Continuing efforts for language maintenance and revitalization, combined with greater formal recognition of the Gaelic minority identity, cannot guarantee the survival of the living language in the future but can increase the likelihood of this positive outcome. Going further, Gaelic policy in Scotland may also face additional challenges in maintaining a political and societal consensus on the promotion of the language and when addressing criticisms about preferential treatment for some linguistic and cultural groups within a territorially defined multicultural Scottish nation. Tackling such challenges may be necessary when communicating future policy goals and framing policy objectives. Integrating the idea of indigeneity and the need for additional protection and assistance for particular ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities into a larger multicultural discourse is one potential answer. Such multicultural nation-building policy frameworks with minority protection already exist in a number of countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Sweden, and can provide models for future policy adjustments at both discursive and practical levels.

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