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From Resistance to Social Change: Ethnic Minorities' Resistance in Central Europe

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik 

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

Szczepan Czarnecki 

Palacký University Olomouc, Czechia

Łukasz Kwadrans 

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

Marianna Makarova 

Aneta Bąk-Pitucha 

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

Abstract

This paper explores linkage between resistance, empowerment, and social change among ethnic minorities (EM). EM resistance, whether individual or collective, fosters a sense of agency and awareness of rights (both to resources and civic participation), driving social change. However, its effectiveness is limited by political systems and geopolitical factors which influence conditions for EM activism. Focusing on EM in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Estonia, this study examines how resistance and empowerment can challenge power structures and lead to meaningful societal transformation. Ultimately, it questions the potential of EM resistance on four levels – micro, mezzo, macro, and international – to consolidate communities and improve their social and political standing.

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AUTHORS:

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, John
Paul II Catholic University of Lublin,
Poland

aleksandra.kuczynska-zonik@kul.pl

Szczepan Czarnecki, Palacký
University Olomouc, Czechia
szczepanpawel.czarnecki@upol.cz

Łukasz Kwadrans, University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland
Lukasz.kwadrans@us.edu.pl

Marianna Makarova
marianna.makarowa@gmail.com

Aneta Bąk-Pitucha, John Paul II
Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
anetabak@kul.lublin.pl

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Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik,
Szczepan Czarnecki, Łukasz
Kwadrans, Marianna Makarova, and
Aneta Bąk-Pitucha



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Introduction

Over roughly two decades of European Union membership, CEE countries have undertaken substantial efforts to reconstruct statehood and national identities, strengthen democratic values and institutions, and promote ideological, political, economic, and social integration with the EU. Although often grouped together, these countries exhibit substantial differences. Their approaches to ethnic minorities (EM) vary considerably, reflecting divergent imperial legacies – Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman – and distinct post-communist transitions, which have produced specific cultural contexts, nationalizing narratives, and models of ethnic integration (Brubaker, 1994; Jovanovic, 2002). The state-nation concept – meaning the “state as a core of nation” (Brubaker, 1996) – and political systems based on a mixture of liberal and ethnic approaches to democracy (Kymlicka, 2002) significantly impact minority rights and representation in CEE as well. Contrasting concepts of nationhood and statehood – ranging from civic to ethnic nationalism (Kymlicka, 2000) – produce diverse approaches to minority inclusion and rights. Moreover, differing historical memories influence perceptions of minority groups, affecting policies and societal attitudes. As a result, the region’s ethnic composition varies dramatically, resulting in diverse minority challenges.

For example, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Estonia cover such heterogeneity along geographical, historical, political, cultural axes. The selection of the four countries follows the logic of maximum variation aimed at capturing the heterogeneity of minority regimes across the region. These cases differ substantially along geographical, historical, geopolitical, and institutional dimensions, including imperial legacies (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian), models of nationhood (civic, ethnic, and hybrid), and dominant approaches to minority inclusion. While sharing a post-communist trajectory and EU membership, they represent contrasting configurations of state–nation relations and minority governance, allowing for a structured comparison of how historical legacies and political frameworks shape minority rights and representation. Additionally, they have complex ethnic structures as a result of historical processes of nation building, the securitization of ethnicity, dispersion, or migration. Furthermore, Turks, Roma, Poles, and Russians were chosen as the minorities for analysis to capture systematic variation alongside the presence or absence of an external kin-state. External homelands have had a significant impact on interethnic relations as they have actively lobbied to assume a patron role in CEE (Brubaker, 1994; Kymlicka, 2002; Smith, 2002; Wolff, 2002), but the role of the kin-state is not uniform in the examples in focus. The Russian Federation is a non-EU state with a strongly adversary position towards the EU as of late; Poland is a significant member of both the EU and NATO; Turkey is outside the EU but is a member of NATO. These represent different dynamics of both how their kin-state is perceived by the host nations, and to what extent the minorities become instrumentalised by the kin-state. This comparative design allows for systematic analysis of how access to kin-state backing – or its absence – shapes the forms, scale, and internationalization of minority resistance, thereby enhancing both explanatory depth and theoretical generalizability.

Currently, ethnic minorities (EM) constitute approximately 23% of the population in Bulgaria and 32% in Estonia, compared to around 14% in Lithuania and 16% in Slovakia. Among them, the largest and the most distinctive are Turks (Bulgaria), Russians (Estonia), Poles (Lithuania), and Roma (Slovakia). Their status differ in legal and political representation as well as marginalisation and social exclusion. They also represent diverse classification of a group by possessing (or not) perceived or institutionalized ties to an external state. While Roma are a stateless transnational ethnic groups (Jenne, 2000; Wolff, 2002), Turks in Bulgaria, Poles in Lithuania, and Russians in Estonia are kin-state minorities (Brubaker, 1996), and may be subject to kin-state actions (made by Turkey, Poland, and Russia, respectively) which claim rights and responsibilities towards minorities in the states where EM live. Particularly – in the case of Estonia and Bulgaria – the proximity of Russia and Turkey may further influence national policies, creating a complex interplay of internal and external pressures on the treatment of ethnic minorities.

On the one hand, contemporary national minorities have benefitted from Europeanization processes (Delanty, 2000; Hoch Jovanovic, 2014) and support from international and European bodies (Legvold, 1997; Pehe, 2002; Sasse, 2009; Magazzini, 2024). These include most notably the Council of Europe, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the provisions enshrined in the EU Treaty Articles 2 and 49 of the Treaty on the EU as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon (Bak-Pitucha, 2021). In terms of the international protection of minority rights, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 4 November 1950 remains highly relevant, as do two documents adopted by the Council of Europe: the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. On the other hand, significant challenges remain in the implementation of these provisions within the constitutional practice of member states, as well as in the absence of basic mechanisms ensuring their effective operation.

Our starting point is that, despite the fact that CEE states have introduced mechanisms to protect the rights of EM and to promote their civic and political participation following their accession to the EU, EM still face challenges that prevent them from adapting and succeeding in societies. They still suffer from political, cultural, social, and economic inequalities and experience prejudice, discrimination, hate crimes, and many different forms of victimisation (or they perceive themselves as being discriminated against and victimised on the basis of their ethnic and national origin), which have increased the dissatisfaction and resistance of these groups. Moreover, the situation of some minorities has even deteriorated compared to what they could enjoy even a decade ago, due to geopolitical developments, security concerns, or the socio-economic situation in the host countries. EM operate in asymmetric contexts and, as often weak groups with limited resources, their ability to act through traditional forms of opposition is more constrained. Moreover, their agency may be reduced even further if their democratic opposition is hijacked by the kin-state, or is disregarded due to being perceived as orchestrated by the kin-state. In cases when kin-state activism is directly linked

with territorial revisionism, this may lead to the increased securitization of minority relations in host societies and consecutively alter minority policy, possibly leading to deterioration of minority position (Csergő, Kallas & Kiss, 2025).

This paper focuses on three broad themes: resistance, empowerment, and social change. The term of *resistance* has been described and processed in a variety of ways. In political science, the term mainly refers to protests or contentious politics such as marches, picketing, or the formation of organizations and other forms of physical resistance that challenge, oppose, or subvert existing power relations (Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995; Azani, 2009; Della Porta, Mattoni, 2014; Jasper, 1997). By building collective identity, political consciousness, and organizational capacity, acts of resistance often generate *empowerment*, through which individuals or groups gain the ability, resources, and agency to make choices. We argue that EM resistance, as an individual or collective action, can foster a sense of EM empowerment and agency. It can lead to an increased awareness not only of the right to access existing resources, but also of the right and responsibility to actively participate in society and to eliminate inappropriate or ineffective conditions. Thus, EM resistance is an important means by which EM representatives can participate in the democratic process and drive social change (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). By *social change*, we denote durable transformations in social structures, institutions, norms, or power relations that alter how resources, rights, and opportunities are distributed within a society. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ethnic minority resistance remains constrained. While resistance brings empowerment that affirms the group's distinctiveness and expresses a sense of group identity, favourable or unfavourable conditions for EM activity are created by the political system – the regional minority rights system as well as the vulnerability of a particular state to change. In fact, it is EM resistance resources, domestic conditions, and the geopolitical dynamics in Central Europe that create an opportunity or a barrier for group representatives to push through progressive social change (Hjelmar, 1996). The changing security context may add complexity to these dynamics. When the kin-state is perceived as hostile and the minority is securitised, minority mobilisation or resistance may become associated with security threats, leading to suppression and disempowerment, making the task of minority integration more complicated.

This paper draws on academic literature, media articles, analytical reports, and official state documents. We begin by presenting some theoretical reflections on the concepts of resistance and empowerment in order to demonstrate their link to social change. We then look at the contexts of EM under the national legal status of EM in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Estonia, providing insight into the different conditions and challenges they face. These countries represent different numerical and spatial distribution of EM within a country. They also represent different approaches to the concept of social inclusion and levels of effectiveness of participatory democracy. Third, we critically reflect on the forms of resistance mobilisation of four marginalised EM groups acting in and against an asymmetric situation. Finally, we identify the range of EM effectiveness to answer the question of whether resistance can challenge and transform the position of EM in relation to power and indeed influence social change.

Resistance, Empowerment and Social Change

Based on a rich body of literature (Scott, 1985; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Baaz et al., 2017; Lilja, 2022), we define “EM resistance” as both collective and individual actions aimed at advocating positive change in minority rights at the political or societal level. Such actions seek to improve the conditions of the minority group as a whole or to enhance its collective status when it is threatened (Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Louis, 2009). EM resistance is psychologically motivated by emotions such as anger, moral outrage, or guilt (Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007), by dissatisfaction with economic, political, and social conditions (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), as well as by moral and cultural factors (Jasper, 1997). Collective resistance does not take a single form – it has many different expressions, such as demonstrations, protests, marches and rallies; participation in petitions to defend minority rights; and engagement in critical dialogue with authorities and online engagement (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online forums). Other examples of resistance have involved individual, covert acts of dissent (Scott, 1985; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). So-called everyday resistance includes singing songs, writing poems, telling jokes, or using humour to mock state authorities and political elites (which can be broadly described as negative oral stereotyping), art installations, wearing symbols or displaying EM colours to draw attention to the situation and aspirations of minorities, and others. Including both collectively and individually-organized resistance regardless of covert and public elements, those activities may also involve “avoidance”, “breaking”, and “constructing” power relations (Baaz, Lilja, Schulz, & Vinthagen, 2023). The last form of contestation is particularly interesting in the process of EM empowerment as it focuses on building new alternatives such as constructing identities, institutions, communities, and practices. We would like to follow this logic of “constructing” resistance and go further in order to propose four levels of resistance based on criteria of the audience of resistance, including the issues of self-perception and intra- and inter-relations. This framework includes micro, mezzo, macro, and international levels (Table 1). As EM use various resources and tools to project power strategies such as self-narratives, beliefs, images, as well as political and institutional instruments of power such as political parties, NGOs, and networks, these resources may be a capacity that can be used not only in the process of constructing their own perception but also build a common group identity and finally, shape minor-major relations in order to transform the conditions of the struggle for power. They are used in proportion to the conditions under which minorities operate so that they can be adjusted in relation to political opportunities.

Table 1: Levels of resistance based on criteria of the audience of EM resistance

Levels	Types of acts of resistance	Audience	Aim	Practices
Micro	Resistance as an act of ethnic identification, individual perception, and intrapersonal judgment	• An individual	• Self-esteem, self-efficacy	• Self-narratives • Personal recognition
Mezzo	Resistance as an act within the minority community	• EM community	• Social connectedness • Consolidation of ethnic community • Preservation of culture and identity	• Using EM language • Cultural festivals • NGOs • Memory commemorations • Social media
Macro	Resistance as an act toward the ethnic majority and/or other ethnic groups within the country	• National majority • State authorities	• Negotiation of EM position within a state • Changing minority-majority relations	• Protests and demonstrations • Political parties • Voting • Foundation of institutions • Art performances • Court cases
International	Resistance as an act toward the global community	• Global community • Diaspora networks	• Self-positioning in a global context • International recognition when there is no kin-state	• Close relations with kin-state • International organisations

Source: The authors.

Resistance outcomes include not only the psychological and personal outcomes for individual participants, but also for the wider social system: EM resistance actions increase the consolidation of identification, the sense of being part of the group, as well as collective self-objectification, and in fact bring about the collective empowerment of minority communities. Resistance refers to the micro-level act of creating a social-psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination, both for the individual participant and for the collective as a whole. Next, resistance activity may allow for the formation of a single, unified self-category within a group, which brings a sense of community and creates the conditions for an emergent sense of collective empowerment among participants. It is formed on a mezzo level when a shared social identity leads to the expectation of common goals and hence, mutual support in achieving these goals. It involves awareness not only of the right to access existing resources, but also of the right and responsibility to participate in the creation of resources and the elimination of inappropriate or ineffective resources (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Then, on a macro level, resistance takes into account the awareness of the social and political context and the development of skills needed to bring about social change. This approach, which is initiated by individuals or groups, implies a bottom-up process, as opposed to a top-down one in which power is given to individuals by an authority (Malloy, 2014). In that sense, resistance becomes a form of "societal resilience", meaning flexibility of adaptation in the face of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000), strengthening the ethnic ability to assess the challenges as well as respond to and recover from them. Finally, the international strategy of resistance is to negotiate power with the dominant majority on a global level. This strategy leverages external support from international actors to challenge the existing power imbalance, promoting a globalized minority identity. It is a form of collective action that transcends national boundaries, seeking enhanced minority rights through transnational advocacy and mobilization.

Different levels of resistance overlap and various combinations of these forms of resistance may support each other (Baaz, Lilja, Schulz, & Vinthagen, 2023). The greater the number and unity of the ingroup, the greater the potential for self-imposition and hence social change (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Thus, resistance made on different levels can become a practical concept explicitly adopted by EM as active actors for their empowerment, as a framework within which they can develop strategies and policies to bring about social change. Social change can be described as challenging existing structures that create inequality, oppression, and injustice, while encouraging the development of critical awareness, alternative perspectives, and collective action to create positive change. However, only certain features of collective action can lead to empowerment, which is relatively permanent in nature. For empowerment, Naila Kabeer (1999) identifies the intersection of agency, resources, and required outcomes. Agency describes the ability to define goals and act on them, while resources include material and non-material assets such as effective leadership, organisational structure, and money, as well as ideological and tactical considerations. According to Kabeer, empowerment is an appropriate combination of agency and resources

that constitute capacities and generate social change (achievement). Thus, engagement in resistance may create a shared social identity, but it may not transform oppressive experiences and may even increase EMs' vulnerability to social adversity. This is the case when the political system is characterised by low vulnerability to social mobilisation pressure and relatively high vulnerability to counteraction by the authorities (Louis, 2009). Of particular relevance in this context seems to be the theory of political opportunity structure (Labanino et al., 2021) which assumes that the pattern of forming organizations of interest which represent a particular issue is related to, among other things, the general openness of the political system, the importance and legitimacy of the issues of concern, and political support for the issue. In the absence of an opportunity structure to pursue progressive social change, people in less-democratic societies also turn to micro-activism to bring about attitudinal change in their immediate environment (Bennett, 2012; Chan & Mak, 2021). In addition, EM may refrain from any resistance activity, as these actions may entail personal costs for participants, such as economic loss, imprisonment, or even death (Wright, 2009).

It is important to note that both forms of resistance and political opportunity depend on historical and social context. As norms change over time and new balances of power are created, social change reflects the effectiveness of EM in deploying appropriate resources, strategies, and tactics that operate within favourable rule structures. Thus, we analyse how temporal conditions such as the process of Europeanisation and the Russia-Ukraine war affect the EM position, and explore if those circumstances have transformed EM resistance in Central Europe. The theoretical model of resistance, based on criteria of the audience of resistance and time tracking, create the framework for our analysis of various EM acts and strategies. In the following sections, we elaborate EM resistance by looking at EM self-perception, inter-group relations within the community and, finally, power relations in Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. Further, we diagnose how these particular conditions have transformed EM resistance over time and created political opportunities for social change.

Legal and Practical Framework for Ethnic Minorities in Central Europe

Most of the analysed groups – Turks, Roma, Poles, and Russians – have experienced impoverishment and marginalization which has influenced their current legal and social status. They are highly diverse, such as Roma communities in Slovakia who are divided into various groups with different traditions, languages, and levels of integration. The legal frameworks also differ: Bulgaria's post-communist legislation aimed at the democratization of minority rights, while Estonia's policies focus on naturalisation, integration, and societal cohesion: both Estonia and Lithuania emphasise language restrictions and the protection of the Estonian or Lithuanian language respectively. However, they have gained some legal recognition and political representation through parties, such as in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

Starting with Bulgaria, the coexistence of various ethnic groups (of which Turks predominate, at least according to the official data (Natsionalen statisticheski institut, 2021), significantly influenced the legislative process during the period of political

transition, both as a parameter of its quality and as a response to the state's previous assimilation policy. During the communist era, oppressive assimilation policies dominated, aiming to eradicate the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of ethnic minorities, most notably Turks, but also other Muslim communities as well as other minority groups (Bates, 1994). The political transition that began in Bulgaria after 1989, which was triggered in part by large-scale protests by ethnic minorities, opened a new chapter in the state's ethnic policy. Democratic changes led to a gradual departure from the previous policy of assimilation, the so-called "Revival Process", which had been directed mainly at Turks and other Muslim minorities in the country. Already on 29 December 1989, the Bulgarian Communist Party decided to restore the original first names and surnames of Bulgarian Turks, marking a reversal of earlier assimilation policies. This shift was institutionalized in early 1990 through the *Declaration on the National Question*, which condemned assimilation and prohibited ethnic or religious political parties (Szyszlak, 2015). Following the first multiparty parliamentary elections in June 1990, the new Bulgarian authorities declared an end to the anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim policies of the previous regime and committed to guaranteeing religious freedom. During the early 1990s, state policy focused on reversing the effects of forced assimilation through the rehabilitation of victims of repression, facilitating the return of Turkish emigrants, resolving property claims, and gradually restoring language and cultural rights (Vassilev, 2002). The cornerstone of this shift was the 1991 Constitution, which established guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, religious freedom, and protection against forced assimilation, while simultaneously reinforcing the unitary character of the state, including the primacy of the Bulgarian language and a ban on ethnic or religious political parties – an inherent tension that has continued to shape Bulgaria's ethnic policy since 1989. However, reality has shown that new legislation has not always been accompanied by substantive social change, as ethnic minorities in Bulgaria have continued to experience multiple forms of discrimination, including linguistic, cultural, and social marginalization. Moreover, during the transition period, Bulgaria did not develop a legal framework dedicated exclusively to ethnic minorities. Instead, all issues related to minorities have been addressed through legislation that has shaped various specific policies (Czarnecki, 2021). Adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 12 July 1991, the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria established a number of rights for ethnic minorities, including guaranteed political pluralism and religious freedom, but also introduced a ban on political parties based on ethnic or religious identity (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991). This had significant consequences, as it limited the formal political representation of ethnic minorities within the political system.

In turn, the Roma community is visibly internally divided based on levels of their adherence to tradition and linguistic practices, as well as their distinct lifestyles. The largest collective is the Slovak Roma (approx. 80% of the total Roma population). A distinctive attribute of the Roma community is the historical development of attempts to quantify it in the 20th century, albeit with considerable variability in the estimates obtained. Prior to this,

authorities were unable to effectively conduct a census of the Roma population and were unable to provide even approximate estimates of their numbers. Moreover, their geographical distribution gives rise to a diverse array of political perspectives, which often appear to be in direct opposition to each another. Consequently, the Roma population is confronted with the imperative of establishing a unified political space that can serve as a collective platform for the pursuit of shared aspirations on the global stage (Kwadrans, 2017). As post-communist countries aspired to join the European Union, Slovakia began to design programmes, projects, and activities to improve the situation of the Roma. This was the result of pressure from the European Union, which set standards to be applied to its future members. Special attention was paid to acts of intolerance and discrimination in the spheres of education, services, and labour. The emergence of programmes for the Roma community, national integration programmes, was the result of international and bilateral obligations, as well as the situation in which the Roma found themselves at the end of the last century (e.g., the migration of Roma to EU member states, especially to Great Britain; critical reports of the European Commission to Combat Racism and Intolerance (ECRI); the European Roma Right Centre; ratification of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities). The Law on the Use of the Language of National Minorities, adopted in September 1999 by the Mikuláš Dzurinda government was significant as well. According to it, representatives of minorities could require that they be allowed to use their language in offices.

When characterizing Poles in Lithuania, it should be underlined that they constitute the second largest ethnic group (after Lithuanians) in Lithuania and make up 6.5% of the total population (183,400 individuals – Statistics of Lithuania, 2021). They are concentrated in the capital, Vilnius, and the southeast of the country, which is considered to be the historical centre of Lithuanian statehood. The Polish community in Lithuania is notable for its strong linguistic, historical, cultural (Catholic), and territorial or regional identification as well as its high level of activity and organisational capacity within the wider Polish diaspora. The Polish community's challenging circumstances have been compounded by profound discord between Lithuania and Poland, notably the occupation of the Vilnius region (1920) and its subsequent incorporation into the Republic of Poland (1922). During the 1980s, Poles were often perceived as adversaries of the Lithuanian national renaissance and as proponents of the former Soviet system. The establishment of an autonomous Polish region, termed the Polish National Territorial Region (*Polski Kraj Narodowo-Terytorialny*) in 1990, was met with significant opposition due to its contravention of the principle of a sovereign and independent Lithuanian state. There are two main documents covering Polish minority issues in Lithuania: the *Treaty on Friendly Relations and Good Neighbourly Cooperation of the Republic of Lithuania and Republic of Poland* (1994) and the *Law on National Minorities* (2024). Despite the fact that the parties in question declared their intention to protect minority groups and ensure that their rights were upheld, it was inevitable that the use of minority languages in public spaces would be limited in view of the strong protection of the titular language. Such languages cannot be used in local administrative institutions, topographical names, or in the electoral

process. Thus, the current issues faced by the Polish minority in Lithuania can be distilled into three fundamental concerns, all pertaining to the realisation of linguistic rights: the utilisation of the native language in education, the implementation of bilingual place names, and the spelling of names and surnames in accordance with Polish linguistic conventions.

Finally, in the case of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia, it is worth emphasizing that ethnic relations are currently going through significant changes due to the changing security context and the role of the Russian Federation. Estonia's historical experiences, especially in the 20th century, have also previously strongly impacted inter-ethnic relations. World War II and Holocaust, Soviet occupation, and mass repressions targeting opponents of the regime among both Estonians and minorities (including local Russians) substantially decreased the original population of Estonia from around 1,120,000 inhabitants in 1939 to barely 850,000 in 1945 (Estonia's Victims of Communism Memorial 1940-1991, 2018), creating a massive cultural trauma. The USSR's strategy of forced migration increased the Estonian population again to 1,565,662 inhabitants in 1989 (Tiit, 2013). The ethnic composition of Estonian society thus changed from around a 10% minority population in 1941 (Tiit, 2013) to around 40%. The restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 caused an initial wave of emigration, especially when the Soviet military left the country. By the end of 1990s, approximately 35% minority population remained which was ethnically diverse, Russians being the largest group and the Russian language was the one used most frequently among EM. With the right for Estonian citizenship based on direct descentance from citizens of the Estonian republic before the 1940s, the model of legal continuity of the Estonian state strongly impacted the ethnic and civic landscape of Estonia after 1991 (Vetik, 1993; Kalev & Ruutsoo, 2005). All other former citizens of the no-longer-existing USSR were automatically granted the status of "undetermined citizenship" (approximately 32% in 1992), which allowed political participation only in municipal level elections. The possibility to apply for Estonian citizenship through naturalisation or become a citizen of any other state remained. Such a decision was aimed at reducing the risk of the Russian Federation of using the substantial Russian-speaking minority to interfere with Estonian state-level politics during the vulnerable transition period, but it also significantly decreased minority political and social participation and negatively impacted their trust towards political institutions, being largely perceived as an injustice. For Russians, who previously enjoyed a status of a majority ethnic group in the USSR, becoming a disempowered minority was a stark contrast. Estonia ratified the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1996 and it came into effect on 1 February 1998. The first official policy formulating the principles of integration of ethnic minorities in Estonian society was approved by the Estonian parliament in June 1998, followed by four integration programs in the following decades. The Estonian integration model, initially quite one-sided and conceptualised around a strong focus on minorities learning the Estonian language and obtaining citizenship, while supporting minorities to maintain their ethnic differences based on recognition of the

cultural rights of ethnic minorities, gradually shifted to paying more attention to state identity and inclusion, as well as considering Estonians as significant target groups for societal cohesion policies.

Practices of EM Resistance

This section identifies four distinct levels of resistance, organized across micro, mezzo, macro, and international contexts. It explores how ethnic minorities deploy a variety of resources and strategic tools including personal recognition, language, cultural events, institutions, media, political representation, and international actors.

Micro level

The phenomenon of resistance gives rise to a social-psychological state of ethnic belonging, as well as an awareness of existing relations of domination. It is defined by personal recognition, meaning the individual-level acknowledgment of minority members as equal, dignified citizens whose identities and sense of belonging are socially and institutionally respected (Tylor, 1992). Personal recognition can be understood as a form of resistance when dominant power relations deny, suppress, or devalue minority identity. In such contexts, insisting on being recognized as oneself becomes an act that challenges assimilation, symbolic domination, and exclusion, even when it takes non-confrontational or everyday forms. When a minority individual publicly affirms their minority identity – through language use, names, cultural practices, or self-identification – they resist the logic of assimilation. While often informal and non-confrontational, personal recognition undermines the symbolic foundations of majority dominance and can constitute the first stage of broader struggles for collective recognition and rights.

At the micro level, resistance among Bulgarian Turks after 1989 was often subtle and embedded in everyday practices of self-identification and cultural continuity. For individuals who directly experienced, or inherited the memory of, communist-era assimilation policies – most notably the Revival Process – the mere act of openly identifying as an ethnic minority constituted a meaningful form of resistance. Reclaiming and using original personal names in official documents, publicly expressing Turkish ethnic affiliation, and maintaining the everyday use of the Turkish language functioned as practices of everyday politics aimed at restoring agency. These practices unfolded within the broader demographic and political context. According to the first post-communist census conducted in 1992, Bulgaria was home to 800,052 ethnic Turks, who constituted 9.4% of the total population. This demographic presence translated into highly ethnicized patterns of individuals' political behaviour: in the 1991 parliamentary elections, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), representing the Turkish minority, received 8.03% of the vote, closely corresponding to the proportional size of the Turkish population. This alignment persisted throughout the post-1990 period, revealing a stable cleavage between individual Turkish voters and electoral support for the MRF.

Also, the Turkish language played a crucial role in sustaining this linkage between identity and political behaviour. According to the 2011 census, Turkish was the first language of 605,802 Bulgarian citizens (9.1% of the population), underscoring the close relationship between ethnic identification and the mother tongue.

Roma resistance is the daily functioning of many representatives of this community (Marushiakova & Popov, 2016). It manifests itself first and foremost in declarations of multiple identity, and even at the highest level, by putting one's identification as a representative of a minority first. Roma regard official declarations of ethnic identity as an expression of courage and dignity which many of them manifest (Kwadrans, 2015). It adds to their sense of self-worth and of uniqueness. However, this feeling is sometimes mixed with anxiety, shyness, and fear of the reaction of the majority. This is strongly emphasized in the narratives, especially since nationality and ethnicity are indicated in identity documents. A form of resistance, for example, is to officially declare membership of a minority. It is even an expression of courage to indicate this in official documents, despite being aware of the associated possible harassment or acts of intolerance and discrimination.

Similarly, Polish minority participants tend to show their ethnic identity openly, but worry that discrimination can influence their social achievements. With this, minority groups have claimed that they experience more open discrimination in independent Lithuania, mostly from politicians and anonymous comments on the Internet (Zbarauskaitė, Grigutytė, & Gailienė, 2015). The state's minority policies are seen by the Poles as lacking coherence, strategic planning, and genuine interest; moreover, as often based on ad hoc decisions and sometimes as hypocritical, ill-disposed, and nationalist. However, state minority conflicts have not generated violence or minority radicalization (Dambrauskas, 2018).

Russians in Estonia also show their ethnic identity openly, although public display of the flag of the Russian Federation or other symbols that may in any form be associated with supporting the Russian state or the war have become unacceptable since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For decades, the Russian language was widely used in the public space, but the war in Ukraine is also having an effect here, pushing it to the periphery. Still, both public broadcasting and private media in Russian language are available for consumption and are considered an important source of information by around 40% of the Russian-speaking minority, while media from the Russian Federation was removed from service providers in 2022 (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Estonia, 2023). The ethnic identification of Russians in Estonia has changed over time: initially, in the 1990s, post-Soviet minorities in Estonia were often referred to as "Russian-speakers", until this appeared to have a russification effect on non-Russian minorities (Aidarov & Drechsler, 2013). State integration policy shifted to support unique ethno-cultural identities (including Russian), through state support for activities by ethnocultural associations. Gradually, a bicultural Estonian-Russian minority identity emerged, characterised by weaker ethnic differentiation, stronger multicultural values, and stronger Estonian

national identity, which was significant for about a third of Russians (Valk, Karu-Kletter, & Drozdova, 2011). Russian aggression in Ukraine appears to have had an impact on identity as well, as the percentage of Estonian residents declaring their ethnicity as Russian for decades had been around 25%; starting from 2022, it started to decline, reaching 20.9% in 2025 (Estonian Department of Statistics, 2025). When given the opportunity, Russians in Estonia are currently also more likely (about 60%) to choose a form of dual Estonian-Russian identity than to identify as Russian (only 20%): this trend is valid even among Russians with undetermined citizenship (Kaldur, Jurkov, Pertsjonok, & Kruusmaa, 2025).

Mezzo level

On this level, acts of resistance are aimed at an internal audience, such as members of the ethnic community. They foster a sense of collective efficacy, emerging from a shared social identity and the expectation of reciprocal support in pursuing common goals. This involves an active participation within the group and the remediation of deficient or ineffective resources. Mezzo-level practices of ethnic minorities – such as cultural festivals, community organizations, memory work, and digital networking – are mainly focused on community integration. At the same time, they can be understood as forms of resistance because they operate within asymmetric power relations in which dominant cultures claim symbolic and institutional primacy. By sustaining autonomous cultural spaces, these practices resist and challenge symbolic hierarchies, and also contest the majority's monopoly over national identity, memory, and public legitimacy. While often framed as apolitical, routine cultural expression, such practices may constitute organized, collective resistance that consolidates minority communities and preserves alternative systems of meaning.

At the mezzo level, the Turkish resistance in Bulgaria becomes more collective and community-based. Turkish NGOs, cultural associations, and informal networks play a key role in mobilizing resources and asserting minority agency. These organizations often engage in preserving language rights, religious practices, cultural traditions, self-representation, and advocacy. Turkish NGOs have benefited from transnational support which bolsters their activities in education and media, further reinforcing a sense of transnational identity. While these initiatives strengthen intra-group solidarity and provide vital platforms for cultural expression, their impact on broader policy remains limited due to their marginal position in national political structures.

In its traditional Roma family dimension, resistance as a form of social organization is a community of place (neighbourhood, settlement). This includes the activities of families, informal groups, and at the same time ethnic mobilization with the help of NGOs, or even representation in local governments, especially in those places, municipalities, where Roma make up a significant share of the population (Ram, 2014). This fosters the nurturing of social ties within the group, its ethnic consolidation, and also allows the cultivation of culture, customs, and the construction and preservation of identity. A

special role in the Roma community is played by language as one of the most important elements of ethnic identity. Common celebrations and cultural events are organized, as well as religious life – in Slovakia the significant role of Protestant churches in integrating Roma communities and positive forms of resistance can be observed.

Similarly, the Polish minority partakes in cultural events that are related to their national identity. These events are also perpetuated to subsequent generations through the medium of education in schools and NGOs. The promotion of Polish ethnic culture, traditions, language, historical memory, and religion is a key function of NGOs in their activities. However, the activities of Polish NGOs are oriented towards the Polish community and its members rather than towards broader multiethnic civil society (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Sasunkevich, & Šliavaitė, 2021).

In Estonia, minority cultural organisations (such as theatres working in Russian minority language or minority cultural NGOs to retain traditions) are a natural part of the cultural scene and an important mediator between the minority and society at large on both the mezzo and macro level. Their work, on the one hand, provides a sense of community to the minority and supports retention of cultural practices, while on the other hand helps to represent minority interests at the society level, while also uplifting cultural practices from the private to public level. At the same time, these organisations can serve as advocates for the minority, making it less foreign to the majority group, but rather interesting and enriching. Supporting the work of minority cultural organisations is part of the Estonian state strategy for minority integration and societal cohesion. The First National Minority Roundtable coordinating the work of minority organisations was called by the President of Estonia in 1993; currently, this function is undertaken by the Ministry of Culture, where the National Minority Culture Advisory Board (*Vähemusrahvuse kultuuriautonomoomia seadus*) has been operational since 2008.

Macro level

Here, resistance is seen as a process of mediating or negotiating power relations directed toward the existing political system, government, or the ethnic majority. At the macro level, EM resistance is directed explicitly toward state institutions and the ethnic majority as the dominant political actor, using both formal and informal channels of the political system to contest exclusion, marginalization, or assimilation. Acts such as voting, petitions, legal acts, and public protests transform minority grievances into public, state-addressed claims, thereby challenging the state's authority to define national identity, citizenship, and legitimate participation. In asymmetric power relations, these practices constitute resistance because they disrupt the majority's monopoly over representation and force the state to respond to minorities not as cultural subjects but as political actors.

Turkish resistance in Bulgaria has also been institutionalized through political representation and legal contestation. This form of contestation became visible already in the final years of communist rule, when collective mobilization among the Turkish minority intensified through the emergence of the first Turkish non-governmental organizations, mass

protests, and a growing sense of collective consciousness. Notably, protests were launched in May 1989 against the forced change of personal names; beyond their immediate political effects, these protests generated a form of collective energy, organizational experience, and shared political consciousness among the Turkish and Muslim minority populations. In the post-1990 period, a significant part of this mobilizational momentum was channelled into institutional politics through the establishment of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), officially registered on 26 April 1990. Since then, the MRF has functioned as the principal vehicle for the political articulation of Turkish and Muslim minority interests at the national level. Its continuous parliamentary presence since the first post-communist elections and the country's relative political stability over several decades (at least until 2024) have allowed the party to maintain a central role in minority advocacy, even if its impact is often questioned or assessed as symbolic rather than structurally transformative (Cholakov, 2018). The sustained electoral performance of the MRF reflects a stable pattern of ethnicized voting behaviour, indicating a durable cleavage between the Turkish electorate and the broader party system. At the same time, the emergence of alternative political formations, such as DOST, points to recurring efforts within the Turkish community to diversify political representation; efforts that have, however, faced significant constraints.

In turn, continuing discontent among members of Lithuania's Polish minority usually concerns the ability to use their ethnic language in public life. While the state language is an important designation of participation in society, Lithuanian attempts to maintain the overriding position of the Lithuanian language were met with protests and criticism by national minorities, who interpreted them as insensitive to the inherent ethnic and linguistic diversity of Lithuanian society. The Polish minority has staged several protests in favour of Polish schools since the Lithuania's independence was restored. The government claimed that both Lithuanian and Polish should be reorganized due to decreasing numbers of schoolchildren. Rallies against the decisions to close the schools for minorities were organised by Polish Schools of Lithuania Strike Committees, the EAPL-CFA (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance) party, and other representatives of the Polish community. Other examples of resistance included the installation of street name signs in Polish language on private premises. This issue was eventually brought to court in 2014, when the court established that official street name signs must be in a state language, but owners of domestic premises may have the signs in their ethnic languages (EFHR, 2014).

Similar institutions expressing Roma minority needs exist in Slovakia as well. Supported by funds from abroad, NGOs publish magazines and strive to change the image of the Roma through various social actions; they are also a partner for the government in negotiating changes in the law. It is through NGOs that changes in relations with the majority, in the image of minorities, or protests or social actions are undertaken. Roma in Slovakia have also seen an opportunity to change their situation through political involvement: they are members of parties, run for elections, take part in voting, and their electoral preferences are

aimed at moderate, rather leftist or liberal currents. Minority NGOs also represent community members in institutions and in legal processes (Ram, 2014).

The sizable Russian minority in Estonia participates in Estonian politics both at municipal and state levels depending on their citizenship status. Ethnically-oriented political parties initially appeared in the 1990s but were soon marginalised; instead, stronger candidates with Russian backgrounds found their way to major Estonian political parties that address the concerns of the substantial Russian minority to various extents. Due to participation in state-level elections being limited to Estonian citizens, minority voters have had a stronger impact at the municipal level, especially in the capital, Tallinn, or northeastern cities inhabited predominantly by Russians. This situation has changed since March 2025, when the Estonian parliament voted to change the constitution and limit municipal election voting rights to citizens of Estonia or of other EU countries who live in Estonia. Previously, since 1991, all minorities permanently residing in Estonia could vote in municipal elections, regardless of their country of citizenship. The decision was largely dictated by security concerns over the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine and concerns about Russian interference in Estonia's internal politics. The latter is a vivid illustration of the fluidity of the EM situation: their position is subject to change depending not only on internal minority politics, but also on the wider geopolitical situation or the ambitions of the kin-state and related security concerns.

Similarly to Lithuania, Estonian is the only state language in Estonia, with language policies setting the rules for language use in the public space. Still, a large network of public and private minority schools in Russian has been around since the 1990s, although pressure for school reform has gradually increased, becoming highly politicised and used for political mobilisation among both Estonians and EM. This has significantly slowed down the process of reform. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused a dramatic change in the matter, as stronger involvement of EM in the Estonian information space became a matter of national security and a strong argument for increasing political pressure to speed up school reforms. At the same, since previously the Russian Federation had actively instrumentalised this topic in order to interfere in Estonian internal politics (both by criticising language policy and state school reforms as well as financing local NGOs objecting to the reform), this effectively disempowered any opposition to the reform as activity in the interests of Kremlin, and discredited related organisations (Delfi, 2009; Postimees, 2016).

International level

Resistance on the international level involves a shift in minority recognition, with the objective of achieving a balance of power between the minority and majority groups. This is achieved through the acquisition of external support, the consolidation of ethnic communities and the acceleration of global identity. This accelerated global identity enables EM resistance to shift from national arenas to transnational advocacy grounded in global norms of recognition and human rights (Taylor, 1992; Beck, 2006).

At the international level, resistance among the Turkish minority in Bulgaria has been articulated through transnational linkages, external advocacy, and efforts to reposition minority–majority relations within a broader global framework. Already by the late 1980s, collective action extended beyond domestic protest and increasingly targeted the international community. A crucial role in this regard was played by the Independent Association for the Protection of Human Rights, founded in 1988 as one of the first independent civic organizations before 1989. Composed largely of anti-communist activists, including a significant number of Bulgarian Turks, the association actively documented violations of political, religious, and cultural rights and was among the first actors in Bulgaria to establish direct contacts with foreign media such as Radio Free Europe and Deutsche Welle. By internationalizing claims related to forced assimilation, restrictions on religious freedom, and cultural repression, these activists transformed resistance into an act addressed not only to the state but also to the global public sphere.

In the post-1989 period, this international dimension became institutionalized through sustained linkages with international and European organizations concerned with minority rights. Turkish organizations in Bulgaria increasingly operated within transnational umbrella structures, benefiting from cross-border advocacy platforms, and symbolic recognition that reinforced their domestic claims. At the political level, international framing was also visible in the discourse of minority representatives. Ahmed Dogan, the long-standing leader of the MRF, repeatedly portrayed the Bulgarian post-1989 “ethnic model” as a liberal project of coexistence whose value would ultimately be recognized by Europe, while describing the MRF as a “strategic investment” in Bulgaria’s stability and peace (Rechel, 2007). In this sense, international engagement functioned as a resource that sought external validation, diaspora ties, and to at least some extent redefined minority–majority relations by embedding them within global norms of human rights, democracy, and minority protection.

The case of Roma resistance goes beyond the borders of Slovakia, too. It is seen through active membership in international organizations. This form of resistance strengthens the awareness of the self-identification of Roma as Europeans and citizens of the world (Ram, 2014). Moreover, awareness of the existence of and contacts with representatives of the Roma minority in other countries via organizations abroad is also significant. Ethnic social media and networking groups play a particular role, as they are a platform for the exchange of opinions and a sphere of belonging to a larger whole, a pan-European or global minority, which strives for its rights, equality, accessibility, and inclusion. These exemplify how the Roma are seeking recognition by European and international institutions for their ethnic representation.

Polish minority resistance in Lithuania operates through the transnationalization of claims via diaspora organizations, international institutions, and kin-state support from Poland. For example, Polish minority organizations have repeatedly internationalized their claims by submitting complaints, shadow reports, and petitions to European and international institutions (e.g. language rights, education reform, or spelling of names) (EFHR, 2012). By framing local grievances as violations of international minority standards, they shifted

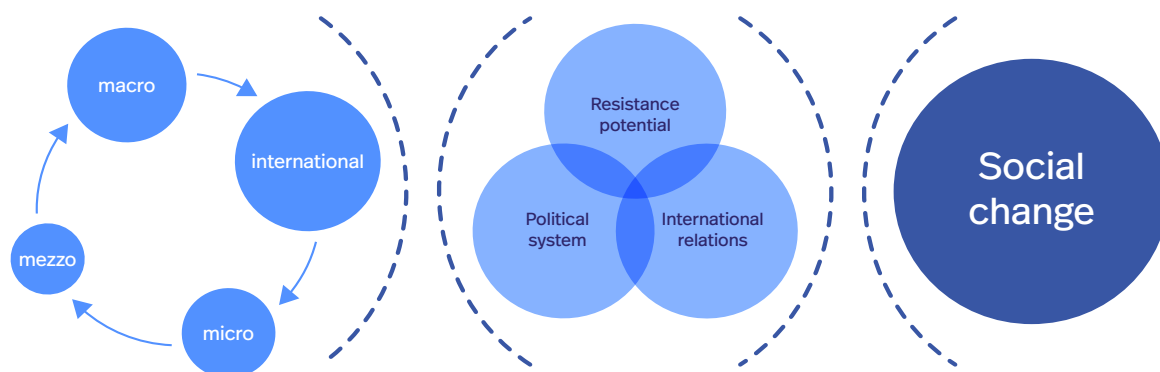
resistance from a domestic dispute to a matter of international accountability, limiting the Lithuanian state's ability to treat these claims as internal or illegitimate. Furthermore, the Polish minority has secured the support of Poland through diplomatic interventions, as well as financial and institutional assistance. While formally legal and non-confrontational, such support constrains the host state and politicizes minority claims at the international level.

This is also the case of the Russian Federation, which, as a kin-state has significantly impacted the Russian minority in Estonia over time although with varying effects. For a long time, minority cultural organisations supported by the Estonian state also enjoyed support from the Russian kin-state, both financially and through direct cultural ties and networks. But the territorial revisionism of the Russian Federation and aggression against Ukraine changed the context completely. Receiving funding from the Russian Federation is no longer acceptable for minority NGOs, as it makes them into an instrument of influence; thus, NGOs previously dependent on kin-state funding had to find alternatives. The active instrumentalization of culture and entertainment by the Russian Federation to influence its expat population caused the rapid re-evaluation of transborder cultural cooperation, as regular cultural and entertainment practices from classical poetry to popular music acquired a new connotation. Additionally, for example, performers who had publicly endorsed Russian aggression were no longer welcome.

Factors for Social Change

Based on the above-mentioned examples, we identify three factors that may transform the position of EM in relation to power, and indeed influence social change (Table 2). Thus, we recognise EM agency, resources and strategies that may constitute capacities (Resistance potential, RP), as well as domestic (Political system, PS) and external conditions (International relations, IR) that may affect social change or create a barrier for integration in particular countries.

Table 2: Relations between EM resistance and social change



Source: The authors.

RP plays an important role as it is the first condition for generating future change. In the case of Lithuania, there have been two possible paths of Polish minority activity in this

regard. Firstly, it is the assumption that the goals of the Polish minority can be achieved only through contacts with Lithuanians. Secondly, that only EAPL-CFA can achieve the goals for the Polish minority. The execution of these strategies occurred in a variety of temporal and spatial configurations, including simultaneous, separate, and cooperative relations between the two sides (Jundo-Kaliszewska & Eberhardt, 2024, p. 73). Up to a certain point, the above-mentioned activities took place on two tracks. While there is a conspicuous lack of consent from the Polish minority regarding its orientation, the second option seems to be less popular as the party has been losing supporters due to its lack of effectiveness in realising the interests of Poles in Lithuania, its pro-Russian orientation and a change in the ethnic and demographic composition of the Vilnius region, as well as the formation of a new type of Polish voter in Lithuania characterised by increased liberalism, openness, pro-Western sentiment, and a good knowledge of the Lithuanian language. Additionally, Lithuanian PS has been more flexible when issues of significance to the Polish minority were addressed by pan-Lithuanian parties whose members are of Polish origin. For example, the modification of the regulations pertaining to the spelling of surnames assumes particular significance not only for minority representatives but also for Lithuanians themselves who are married to foreigners, as well as for their children. Although the draft law was proposed by the Minister of Justice at the time, the Pole Ewelina Dobrowolska, it was supported by the ruling coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, and the Freedom Party. In this case, the Lithuanian government might be most interested in effecting such a change. Furthermore, the potential for the resolution of issues affecting the Polish community in Lithuania is correlated with IR, such as the quality of relations between Lithuania and Poland. For instance, the deterioration of Polish-Lithuanian relations in the first decade of the 21st century coincided with the rejection of the law legalising the spelling of Polish surnames in Lithuania (2010) and the law on education in Lithuania (2011), which limited the number of hours of instruction in Polish in schools for minorities. Consequently, it is widely accepted that the resolution of issues affecting Poles in Lithuania is contingent on the quality of relations between Vilnius and Warsaw.

In turn, minority strategies toward Bulgarian ethnic policy can be broadly divided into those that operate within existing institutional frameworks and those that develop outside them. The experience of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria suggests that engagement with formal political institutions is possible only to a limited extent and remains highly contingent on the openness of political structures and broader power configurations. Even when access is formally granted, the capacity of minority actors to influence state policy has largely remained constrained and selective rather than transformative. One of the key mechanisms of RP through which resistance nevertheless strengthens ethnic minorities is the consolidation of group identity around shared experiences of marginalization, collective memory, and political goals. Resistance encourages communities to organize and to develop internal structures capable of articulating collective claims; however, the existence of such structures does not automatically translate into effective policy outcomes. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the case of

the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which emerged as a direct response to the repression of the Turkish population under the communist regime. Initially perceived as an ethnic formation, the MRF gradually adjusted to the constraints of the democratic system and established itself as a permanent actor in parliamentary politics. Rather than signalling an unambiguous success, however, its institutional consolidation has produced contradictory effects. As noted by Cholakov (2018), the very presence of the MRF in the political arena has repeatedly served as a convenient focal point for nationalist mobilization, facilitating the articulation of anti-minority discourses and contributing to the rise of populist radical-right actors. In this sense, the MRF's trajectory illustrates both the possibilities and the structural limitations of minority participation within Bulgaria's political system. While the Turkish minority enjoys a comparatively higher level of political representation than other minority groups in Bulgaria, this representation has not been free of internal tensions or criticism. Minority voices increasingly point to the party's limited responsiveness to everyday social and economic concerns, a critique echoed in scholarly analyses that describe the MRF as progressively exhibiting features characteristic of oligarchic party organizations. Consequently, institutionalized representation has often resulted in managed inclusion rather than substantive empowerment, reinforcing existing power asymmetries rather than fundamentally reshaping ethnic policy outcomes.

As seen by the advancing process of democratization of the state, PS opportunities in Bulgaria simultaneously resulted in the further development of legislation on the freedoms of association of citizens, through which the NGO sector began to form in 1989 and has grown steadily since the early 1990s. According to available statistics, organizations of an ethnic nature now account for about 3.5% of all registered NGOs in the country, while organizations devoted to human rights and ethnic issues account for 2.6%, making up a total of more than 5% of all non-governmental organizations in the state. These organizations work in the areas of education, anti-discrimination, and minority empowerment. Resistance in this case is not open confrontation with the state, but the gradual building of social subjectivity through mechanisms of self-help and education.

Conversely, a lack of minority consolidation (RP) weakens the position of minorities, which is particularly evident in the case of the Roma who, although present in large numbers in Slovakia, often function in dispersed and unintegrated communities. Thus, the Slovak PS includes its ethnic policy, which functions in accordance with European standards, domestic regulations and institutions, but does not effectively translate into the practical implementation of Roma rights. As a result, rights regarding inclusion, accessibility, and equality have not been realised. The restricted use of the Romani language in official contexts is a prime illustration of this challenge. Moreover, under the IR category, Roma represent a stateless minority and lack a kin-state, and have to rely almost exclusively on their internal mobilization. On an international level, their resources are restricted to international human-rights regimes, NGOs, and supranational institutions.

The sizable Russian minority in Estonia has a seemingly strong resistance potential (RP), but this has only been partially realised. The integration policy in Estonia has

determined the pathway for minorities to achieve their status: by learning the Estonian language and through naturalisation as the means for achieving full political participation and inclusion. Although supported at state level, the retention of ethnic identification remained largely dependent on minority own initiative. An exception to this would be linguistic identity, significantly retained through the remaining Russian-speaking schools. In terms of political systems (PS), the political mobilisation of Russian EM was realised more strongly on municipal level in regions with high density of minority population, for example in Tallinn or in Narva, leading to stronger inclusion of minority representatives in municipal institutions. But the advantages of both RP and PS experienced strong setbacks after 2022 due to the position of the Russian minority in Estonia being strongly dependent on IR between Estonia and the kin-state Russia, even more so than in the case of the Polish minority in Lithuania. The more openly the kin-state takes steps to mobilise expat minorities to impact internal politics of the host country (e.g., through information manipulation, or external funding of minority organisations), the more securitized the position of the Russian minority becomes, which directly impacts their position in the society. In some instances, the impact may be even positive, as it stimulated the establishment of ETV+ in 2015, a state-funded Russian-language public broadcasting television channel that aimed at the stronger involvement of Russian-speaking minorities in the Estonian information space and providing an alternative to the Russian Federation's state-funded media, which at the time was still freely available in Estonia. Regarding the IR category, for the most part the invasion of Russian Federation in Ukraine changed the situation for the worse, strongly securitizing the minority which had a clearly negative effect on its position. Several societal questions that had been long-deliberated until then were decided quite quickly, from the education reform speeding up the transition of Russian-speaking schools to Estonian as the language of instruction, to recent limitation on voting rights, all arguing for reducing the potential impact of the Russian Federation on internal processes in Estonia by instrumentalising the sizeable minority.

Conclusions

The relations between different forms and levels of resistance acted by the EM in CEE can be understood through the interconnectedness and the interpenetration of micro, mezzo, macro, and international levels of resistance. At micro level, personal and social identity plays a crucial role in the manifestation of resistance. Resistance may be a form of adaptation strategy that fosters a social and psychological state of ethnic belonging and collective efficacy among EM. The sharing of experiences and active participation in various activities have been demonstrated to engender a sense of empowerment and unity. This is of pivotal importance in the realisation of shared objectives and the struggle against discrimination, thereby fostering a heightened sense of EM identity and visibility within the socio-political landscape. Next, at mezzo level, resistance often involves organized community efforts and institutions, such as cultural associations and NGOs that promote minority heritage and language. The overlaps

between micro and mezzo resistance are significant, as grassroots initiatives often feed into larger organizational efforts, enhancing the community's ability to advocate for their rights and interests. Then, macro level involves strategic actions aimed at influencing broader political structures and policies. The minority political activities concerning rights and reforms exemplify macro-level resistance. Efforts at this level are often informed by the micro and mezzo levels; EM sentiments and organizational goals shape the demands placed on the government. Moreover, successful macro-level initiatives can, in turn, empower micro and mezzo levels by creating a more favourable environment for cultural expression and minority rights. Finally, the international level of resistance helps to cumulate potential across borders and to create global visibility for the minority. However, the presence of ongoing internal group divisions within the organisation, such as in Roma communities, is likely a contributing factor to the chaotic nature of resistance observed at the mezzo level, as well as the inadequate strength demonstrated at the macro level. At the same time, in case of the kin-state acting as adversary to the host state, its interference on either the mezzo, macro or international level may discredit minority resistance on all levels, undermining its achievements.

The interplay between these levels of resistance is significant. Grassroots expressions of ethnic identity (micro) build the momentum needed for community organizations (mezzo) to mobilize larger protests aimed at governmental policies (macro and international). Conversely, victories at the macro level (such as improved rights or recognition) can boost morale and encourage more individuals to engage in micro-actions and community initiatives. Together, these forms of resistance create a synergistic effect that enhances the minority's capacity (RP) to advocate for their rights and foster social change. In Lithuania, relations between the different forms and levels of resistance acted by the Polish minority are characterized by their mutual reinforcement, creating a comprehensive strategy aimed at challenging discrimination, asserting identity, and negotiating political power. The cases of Bulgaria and Estonia both illustrate the ambivalent role of EM resistance in fostering social change within a post-communist context marked by historical conditions and/or partially democratic consolidation. Although these countries have formally transitioned from nationalizing policies to more inclusive frameworks – particularly during the EU accession process – the practical impact of minority resistance, especially among the Turkish population, remains uneven across the micro, mezzo, macro, and international levels. At the micro level, resistance manifests through routine acts of ethnic affirmation such as language and private cultural or religious practices. With regard to the Roma population in Slovakia, a multifaceted sense of identity is expressed in declarations and manifested in resistance at micro and mezzo levels as described by the classic theory of Roma identity by Mat Salo (1979) and Tadeusz Lewowicki's Theory of Identity Behaviour (2001). The formal declaration of minority affiliation, coupled with the concomitant expression of Europeanness or pan-Europeanism, serves not only to underscore the sense of minority status, but also functions as a signal to political elites, representing a form of resistance embodied within

the call: “We are here. Pay attention to us!”. It is difficult, however, to see them forming any planned or thought-out comprehensive strategy to challenge discrimination, assert identity, and negotiate political power.

Resistance strategies can strengthen ethnic minorities by helping them to consolidate and organize politically, but their influence on state policy depends on a number of factors. The state may succumb to international or domestic pressure, but reforms often remain superficial. Social change requires not only the actions of minorities (RP), but also the political will (PS) to integrate, the economic conditions for equality, and the breaking down of historical and cultural barriers. As emphasized above, the Europeanization of a state’s ethnic policy has had a significant impact on changes in legal regulations and integration programs, but in practice many reforms have remained merely declaratory. Bulgaria and Slovakia particularly show the continuing marginalization of the minority groups and political tensions surrounding the minority issue. Instead, they have adopted a model in which ethnic minorities are allowed to function within a defined legal framework, but are not treated as equal to the majority of society.

Finally, the relation between the minority host and the kin-state (IR) may have a significant impact on the position and opportunities of the minority and how positive the impact of support or the involvement of the kin state on the minority is, as has been noted in case of Poles in Lithuania and Russians in Estonia. Certain significant geopolitical changes, such as the war in Ukraine, may have an impact far beyond minority-kin state relations, as the example of EAPL-CFA political party in Lithuania losing its influence in representing the interests of Polish minority in Lithuania partly due to its pro-Russian position which does not resonate with more liberally-orientated minorities. Moreover, the occupation of Crimea and later full-fledged war in Ukraine inevitably embody how geopolitics affects minority-majority relations. Particularly, the Estonian case shows increasing distrust towards the Russian minority, especially citizens of Russian Federation permanently residing in Estonia, who similarly to the 1990s were perceived as potential instruments for manipulation by the Russian Federation to interfere in Estonia’s internal politics.

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