

“Perspectives of language communication in the EU”
Nitra, Slovakia, 28 – 29 July 2016

“Declaration of Nitra”

L'Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani.
(We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians), Massimo d'Azeglio, 1866.

We have made Europe, now we must make Europeans. Only Europeans can provide the necessary affective and democratic legitimacy for the EU. Brexit has made clear that the present crisis in European integration is one of identity. Governing diversity is the key issue. There is a need to improve governance by aligning government institutions with communities of communication. The lack of such alignment is an existential problem for the EU.

Many citizens have legitimate fears that, for Europe to succeed, their national identity will be destroyed. Their concern must be addressed. Citizen engagement with Europe will remain weak until citizens feel a European identity, in harmony with their national and regional identities. This is so because, despite the great strides of European integration in the economic and commercial spheres, its cultural, educational and linguistic aspects have remained at the national level. There has been no attempt to develop a common education for European citizens. Languages enable communication but, of equal importance, they express identity. There is at present no one language which expresses a pan-European identity. The EU motto of united in diversity appears to favour diversity at the expense of unity. Yet a balance between both is essential.

Increasing globalisation has led to the dominance of English. As a global language, English is poorly equipped to express a European identity. In the post-Brexit EU, only 10% of EU citizens speak English as a mother tongue or very well as a foreign language, so its exclusive use in the EU would exacerbate social inequalities, and be perceived as elitist. Over-concentration on English is a crucial factor weakening motivation to study other languages. Linguistic inequalities are often the result of ill-advised language policies and not the outcome of spontaneous socio-economic phenomena. Linguistic injustice generates different forms of economic and social discrimination, which should be tackled through appropriate language policies at the EU level.

There is a widespread tendency to undervalue the importance of language policy as an integrating factor. This strengthens the status quo, which is unsatisfactory, even for native English speakers, as Brexit and other referendums have shown. Multilingualism is a core EU value, as it is essential to ensure non-discrimination in the treatment of EU citizens, including speakers of regional or minority languages. There is a need for thorough exploration of these crucial areas.

Foreign language teaching is not producing the expected results. Both Eurobarometer and SurveyLang have shown decreases in competence, both in first and second foreign languages. There is a clear need for a new strategy to improve language learning, and increase language awareness and intercultural competence, by testing empirically which first foreign language is most likely to encourage subsequent language-learning. The Visegrad 4+ countries present an ideal framework for this innovative approach, and to take practical steps to make it a reality, thus promoting both linguistic diversity and a common European identity.