

Linguistic minorities and the *Guide*

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Europe is not a homogenous continent, but can be described as a mosaic of cultures and languages. Two hundred and seventy-five (275) languages are spoken in forty-five states. More than half of these states used to belong to the former USSR. In Western Europe there are various national, linguistic or other ethnic minorities, and minority languages are spoken by around 100 million people. This diversity arose in the past, partly through wars and battles, revolutions, forced or voluntary migration or emigration and border changes, and partly because the populations concerned were unable to form a state of their own in spite of the fact that they inhabited this land for hundreds of years. After the fall of communism, more or less “unknown” and “unfamiliar” peoples and ethnic minorities became better known at an international level.

The political management of this linguistic and cultural diversity is an important issue. Plurilingualism and multiculturalism need to be maintained as a form of human richness because it is only in this way that peace can continue to reign in Europe. There is a need for reciprocal tolerance between minorities and majorities.

In relation to this, the *Guide* makes the following recommendation:

“... it is less a matter of deciding which and how many foreign languages should be taught in education systems than of directing the goals of language education towards the acquisition of a competence, in fact unique, encompassing the “mother” tongue, the national language(s), regional or minority languages, European and non-European languages, etc. ... Developing and optimising plurilingual competence can become a common linguistic matrix that will give the European political and cultural area a form of plural linguistic identity rooted in the diversity of its communities and compatible with the values of openness to the world.” (p. 37).

Politicians and school-administrators alike are invited to support and promote language diversity in Europe as a resource. It is less a matter of which language is learned or spoken, and more one of finding a place for different languages in the school curriculum. The *Guide* is a useful tool for educational administrators because it clarifies and summarizes a policy for “linguistic tolerance”.

I think it is important to understand this development against the background of the several important steps that have been undertaken so far with the same aim in mind, both by the Council of Europe as well as by the European Union:

1. In 1982 a *European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages* (EU) was established in Dublin and Brussels, and in 1992 it opened an information centre for minority issues.
2. In 1992 the Council of Europe signed the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*.
3. In 1995 the Council of Europe signed the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*.
4. In 1996 the so called *Euromosaic research project* (EU) described the potential of language minority groups to produce and reproduce their language
5. In 1996, in Flensburg (Schleswig Holstein) a *European centre for minority issues* (ECMI) was established in order to promote interdisciplinary research on various dimensions of minority - majority relations, especially in those parts of Western and Eastern Europe where ethno-political tension and conflict prevail

The ratification of the *Framework Convention* and the *Charter*, in particular, cement the main thoughts of the member states about minorities because they: “undertake to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage” (Framework, Section II, Article 5) (see also the *Guide* p. 31). In this way, governments are encouraged to make education available in the respective minority languages at all levels if possible (*Guide*, p.50-51).

It needs to be stressed that ethnic groups have the RIGHT to maintain their languages, to pass it on to following generations and to be supported by their respective government. This also means financial support. In general, governments understand their duties, but in practice I know that many minorities feel that they are “swimming against the current”. This has also been explained by Fishman in his famous book “Reversing language shift” (1991)

I fully agree with the recommendations put forward in the *Guide* in relation to the education of linguistic minorities and their children through school programmes. Children who take part in bilingual education programmes acquire, at an early stage, an awareness of the meaning of language learning; they know that although theirs is a language of a minority, it is useful, and that language learning in itself is rewarding. These children are proud of their knowledge, it is easy for them to learn languages, by comparison to their peers who come from a majority language background, and they enjoy the language learning adventure. This reality is sometimes overlooked, but I would like to reiterate that bilingual education programmes in minority regions are often of a very high standard, and that their experiences and methods could be used as a model for majority schools.

To conclude, I would like to cite the Sorbian writer Jurij Koch, who warns against taking the disappearance of a small people and its language lightly. He wrote in one essay:

“I can only imagine the world with my ethnicity in place. Its disappearance signifies loss. Slowly but surely the impoverishment would be perceptible across the whole country. Perhaps even throughout the continent and the planet. One colour less, more greyness, one sound less, one language less, an increase in silence.”

Thank you very much!