

TEIN4citizens – Engaging civil society in cross-border regions for the future of Europe

Multilingualism and Identity in the 21st Century Europe

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic impeded a face-to-face meeting of European experts and citizens in Girona in March 2020, the forum on "Multilingualism and identity in 21st century Europe" was celebrated on-line, one year later, over three afternoons. It brought together 12 experts (linguists, historians, geographers, educators, philosophers, anthropologists) from 6 countries and around 170 citizens from 15 states: 13 European (including 9 from the EU) and 2 Asian.

What is the role of languages in 21st century Europe? How do they relate to identities? What about minority languages? And what about languages that have been brought in through immigration? In a country like Catalonia, with a strong national identity closely linked to the Catalan language, most of the participants (Catalans from the Spanish and French states) agreed in calling for more respect from regional, national, and European institutions towards minority languages.

Many of the participants in the forum had a direct relationship with the world of education (school teachers, students, administrative staff), so that part of the debate focused on the role of schools in promoting multilingualism. One of the main conclusions was that linguistic diversity should be supported in the educational world through respect and interest for all languages.

1. The European linguistic mosaic. Languages and identities

The sociolinguistic reality of the various European regions is diverse. But it is precisely in the border areas that languages and identities are most clearly visible. If one compares the map of the political Europe with the map of the linguistic Europe, the first thing one notices is that the lines that are drawn practically never coincide. With the sole exceptions of Iceland, Andorra, San Marino and Malta, all the other countries of the continent are multilingual (and this, logically, is not exclusive to Europe, but is observed all over the world). In this sense, border areas are usually the most multilingual regions and the most exposed to the languages of neighbouring countries (simply because of their geographical proximity, but also because they are transit areas).

“The participants see how, despite declarations of intent regarding linguistic diversity, the European institutions are ignoring in practice the languages spoken by millions of European citizens.”

The eastern part of the border between Spain and France is a territory where languages and identities are lived with passion. On both sides of the current administrative border live citizens who share a common history, a language (Catalan), and a sense of identity closely linked to this language (although this identity does not exclude others). These citizens, however, see how—despite the declarations of intentions regarding linguistic diversity and linguistic and cultural rights—the European institutions ignore in practice a language spoken by some 10 million European citizens (together with the rest of the indigenous languages that are minoritised and, let us not forget, the hundreds of languages that immigrants, new European citizens, have brought with them). Another one of the topics of discussion was the extent to which languages are elements that shape identities.

2. Identified obstacles

There are more than 80 indigenous languages spoken in the territory of the European Union, of which only 24 are official languages. Despite the fact that one of the founding principles of the EU is multilingualism, established in the Charter of Fundamental Rights (since 2000), in the end these principles only take into account the official languages of the states, so that the more than 40 million European citizens who speak a non-official—"regional" or "minority"—language are neglected.

The fact that, especially from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards, European nation-states were formed on the basis of political, economic, cultural and linguistic standardisation means that national identities are closely linked to languages. This is an obstacle to the formation of a supranational European identity, since it cannot be based on linguistic standardisation in any case (but, instead, there are some common cultural elements of the European project, based on the heritage of classical cultures and Christianity).

3. Proposals for the future: the role of Europe

The motto of the EU project is "United in Diversity". As far as languages are concerned, the EU is a non-conventional body, since all the official languages of the member states are official and used in legislation and institutions. But this idea should be extended beyond the official languages of the member states. Another relevant idea is to develop existing instruments, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, promoted by the Council of Europe in 1992 but of voluntary adherence. To date, only 25 of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe have ratified it (although, it should be noted that it is up to the states to decide which articles of the treaty they want to implement and for which languages). Other states, such as France, Turkey or Russia have not yet ratified it.

As far as the European institutions are concerned, citizens have demanded greater respect for all languages (especially minority languages), whatever the economic cost (due to the multiplication of translation and interpretation expenses). Citizens should be able to use their mother tongue with the institutions.

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Finally, the role of education is key: better training for teachers should be encouraged so that they have the tools to promote multilingualism and interculturalism (not forgetting the languages and cultures brought by immigrants in recent decades) as a vehicle for a more united Europe.

Appendix: Programme of the forum – Girona (online), 9, 11 and 18 of march 2021

Tuesday, March 9	
16h	Welcome and presentation Sílvia Llach, vicepresident of Territory and Social Compromise Jordi Cicres, University of Girona
16h10	Identity from the Philosophy point of view Joan Vergés, University of Girona
16h30	Identity from the Anthropology point of view Carles Serra, University of Girona
16h50	Debate
17h05	Europe and the linguistic law Joan Becat, Institute of Catalan Studies and University of Perpignan Via Domitia
17h25	The role of languages in the European organisations Birte Wassenberg, Sciences Po-University of Strasbourg
17h45	Debate
18h	End of the first day

Thursday, March 11	
16h	Welcome Martina Camiade, Institute of Catalan Studies and University of Perpignan Via Domitia
16h05	The languages of Catalans Carme Junyent, University of Barcelona
16h25	Multiculturalism, multilingualism and Andorran identity Alexandra Monné, University of Andorra
16h45	Plurilingualism in border regions: the case of the Upper Rhine Region Margot Bonnafous, Euro-Institut Kehl
17h05	Debate
17h20	Linguistic experience in La Bressola Schools in Northern Catalonia Cesc Franquesa, La Bressola (School network in Northern Catalonia, France)
17h35	The contested politics and borders of language and identity in Northern Ireland Anthony Soares, Center for Cross-Border Studies, Northern Ireland
17h50	Debate
18h	End of the second day
Thursday, March 18	

16h	Welcome Jordi Cicres, University of Girona
16h05	The border, a privileged observatory of languages Narcís Iglesias, University of Girona
16h25	Intercultural management and multilingualism Eithne Knappitsch and Karin Martin, Carinthia University of Applied Sciences, Austria
16h45	Discussion, proposals and conclusions
18h	End of the forum

For more information:

<https://sites.google.com/view/multilinguisme-i-identitat/es>

<http://www.transfrontier.eu/tein4citizens/>

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