

PLURILINGUALISM – PRIORITY IN PROMOTING EQUALITY OF CHANCES

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Abstract. The European Commission pursues promotion of the multi-lingual healthy policy. For this to occur, one of the solutions, and a way to approach each other, is to offer equal opportunities for all languages. All official languages of the Member States and international, but unofficial languages spoken, however, by the EU citizens must be studied, valued, respected and appreciated without being discriminated.

Keywords: plurilingualism, linguistic diversity, European legislation, interculturality, alterity.

Introduction

The instauration of the harmonious inter-cultural relations in the EU is one of the purposes of the Union cultural policies. Just like every nation feels the need to prove their ethnic-linguistic individuality and affirm their identity, the tolerance climate is characteristic of the first form of balance and calamity that has to result in the acknowledgement and acceptance of differences. Either if we have to deal with cultural, linguistic, religious, or racial differences we should refer to something else, to alterity. Alterity does not imply only tolerance, but also complete understanding and cognition of this concept, as well as its integration among the democratic structures. Through his own nature, man is afraid of changes because it assumes an impalpable novelty, a new situation which sometimes has unknown dimensions. People relate to each other in different ways, but man turns into individuality only in regard to the relations of communication with his fellow beings in a social-cultural environment that is favorable to the development of his personality. The “I-others” relationship essentially based on the individual’s capacity to adapt to the existence of the other and on the alterity of the latter assumes the policy of cultural and linguistic pluralism in the European Union.

Materials and methods

A form and also the fundamental condition of cultural pluralism is linguistic pluralism. The work entitled “*Enseigner et apprendre – vers la société cognitive*”, published in 1995 by the Direction of education and culture of the European Commission defines, in general, the linguistic policy they envision, namely “*the need to give the chance to every European young man to learn by means of the educational system how to speak two languages besides their native language. The study of these languages should start at a young age, namely from primary school and should last for a lifetime.*”

The European Commission has a well-defined role in promoting plurilingualism in its cooperation with the member state governments, the European Parliament, the EU regions and social partners, so that to:

- offer the possibility to all citizens to learn two foreign languages from an early age;
- create a more welcoming social environment, which fosters a dialogue between communities and citizens;
- strengthen the role of language skills and increase the chances of people to find a job;
- promote and develop competitiveness.

These objectives, promoted and supported by the EU, represent the central axis of the plurilingualism policy. In order to provide stable and successful services to its citizens, plurilingualism is promoted in the EU by means of certain programs. *The Lifelong Learning Programme* offers a wide range of language opportunities for those who wish to gain experience in teaching and learning in another European country. Launched in 2009, the *Piccolingo* campaign informs the citizens of the European space on foreign language learning starting from early childhood and aims to raise awareness and develop language skills in preschool children. *European Label* is another program of support and promotion of language learning in the EU; the European linguistic label is given to initiatives that have successfully managed to promote creative and innovative language learning activities.

Through its programs and the European network of national cultural institutes – EUNIC – considered by its Director Martin Hope *a catalyst for cultural development* within and outside the EU, the EU promotes the idea based on which culture has the power to bring people together, and should be used outside political tensions. In this respect, due to its national diversity, the European Union is a unique environment for the development of plurilingualism and multiculturalism, because nowhere in the world one can find so many different national identities, gathered under the roof of one entity – even if this entity is actually united by a common constitution. However, the illustrious representative of the communicative action theory, the tireless advocate and defender of the idea of reaching consensus through permanent dialogue, Habermas Jürgen argues that Europeans would not want to preserve the integration process based solely on economic reasons and then, on the other hand, cultural unification is impossible. A proponent of the idea of a federalist Europe, the German philosopher thinks that European nations and the states-nations are too eager to preserve their national culture and identity, and therefore, more understanding and acceptance of cultural differences is needed to overcome stereotypes and to achieve more cohesion in Europe.

Results and discussion

Although the European language policies promote multilingualism and bi-and multilingual efficient communication, many of the official languages and also the less representative languages are **discriminated in this area**. For reasons of time and budget, a relatively small number of working papers are translated into the 23 official and working languages of the EU. Typically, the European Commission uses English, French and German as procedural languages, while the European Parliament uses various languages, according to the needs of its members. The costs of translation, interpretation, publication and legal services involved in the use of a language as an official EU language are estimated at about EUR 3.5 million annually. These would be just some of the explanations (not honorable) of the disadvantage and discrimination of the majority of the EU official languages. In fact, they have tried to create a common European identity, focused on the use of the English language.

Languages the countries of which are not a part of the European Union are also discriminated in the European space. This happens to the Russian language, for example, and this – out of the simple reason that the Russian Federation is not a member of the EU. According to the EU data, **though it is not a EU official language**, Russian language as the native language or as a communication language is spoken in 14 Member States of the Union: in Latvia – by 800,000 speakers, in Estonia – by 430,000, in Lithuania – by 340,000, in France – 40,000, in Romania – by 30,000 people (and according to the data of the Lipovan Russians Community, by about 100,000 people), in Germany – 20,000, in Poland – 20,000, in the UK – 20,000 in Bulgaria – 15 000, in the Czech Republic – 12,000 in Hungary and Yugoslavia – by 5000, in Slovenia – 3000, in Croatia and Macedonia 1000 citizens speak Russian. Together with the Dutch, Russian is the 7th language in the top of the languages spoken in the EU. About 13 % of the EU citizens speak Russian to some extent – for 1 % it is their native language, 6 % of the member-states Europeans consider it their second language (non-mother tongue), and 7 % can communicate in Russian. 13 % of the EU citizens, who consider Russian as their native language or as their language of communication, are affected by this language discrimination.

Besides the Russian language, there are *regional languages* spoken in the European communication space, which have no official recognition at the EU level (although, perhaps, they have official recognition in the Member States). Some of them have more speakers than some less used official languages. Among them we can mention the Belarusian language (especially Bialystok province of Poland), the Frisian languages, which form a group of three Germanic languages, divided into several dialects, spoken by about 700,000 members who belong to ethnic groups from north-western Europe, especially from the Netherlands and Germany, **Aromanian** spoken by Aromanians in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Macedonia, France, Germany, USA, Australia, Latin America, Austria, Albania.

To improve communication in the European Union and respect the linguistic rights of citizens, and to harmonize the educational systems and programs under the European Framework of Reference **foreign language teaching** in European cultural space at European standards is required. This does not involve only a harmonization of the school curricula provisions with the educational content based

on school years or on educational levels, but an activity that requires professionalism and dedication for raising the quality of teaching, the modernization of the foreign languages teaching and learning methods in accordance with international methodology, the endowment of educational areas with the technology necessary to carry out educational activities at international standards, which would lead to the development of intercultural communication skills in multilingual European society. The EU Council Resolution of February 14, 2002 on the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning emphasizes that the acquirement of languages is one of the essential skills necessary for every European citizen to participate in the European knowledge-based society and therefore facilitates both integration in the society and social cohesion. In 2000, the European community set a goal as ambitious as it was valuable to its citizens: to become, by 2010 the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. In the plan elaborated to achieve this, known as the **Lisbon Strategy**, the education policy was central, and language learning was essential in that context. Language learning from an early age may speed up the children's assimilation process, may improve their ability to express themselves in their mother-tongue and may help them achieve better results in the assimilation of new knowledge. However, it may also influence their attitude to other languages and cultures. These arguments fully justify the European Commission initiatives to promote and support the learning of at least two foreign languages from an early age as well as the research in the quality of teaching development field.

We believe that plurilingualism is the core of the European project. Languages reflect the cultural and identity differences between us, but at the same time, allow us to understand each other. Europeans who speak several languages can integrate more quickly into another country either they intend to study or work there and enter more easily into contact with other cultures. Scholarships offered by various member-states within the union help promote the language and culture of the state, and the Europeans, who have received by means of bilateral agreements, scholarships in the Romanian language and civilization courses, have studied our language and became acquainted with the culture and civilization of the Romanian people.

Multilingualism aims to increase people's adaptability to intercultural area requirements, a context generated especially by the mobility of the working force and by the extension of the area of action of transnational companies. In this environment, except for the problems of an increasing social inclusion, appears the problem of harmonious cohabitation in a tolerant environment, a goal that can be achieved only in the context of understanding and respect for cultural and identity values of all people. Plurilingualism increases the interest and tolerance in the other's image, and the interest in the study of one or more foreign languages in Europe. The knowledge of foreign languages is an asset in the business environment. Thanks to the knowledge of several foreign languages, businesses and employees may become more competitive, and EU citizens may have greater mobility. The European Union strategy on foreign languages and economic competitiveness opens up new opportunities.

If we analyze the teaching of less representative languages in the European Union, and also outside it, from the perspectives offered by the labor market, in view of new EU policies which encourage learning **lesser used languages**, we see an increased interest of the European citizens in the Slavic languages – Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, the Russian language being on top of the preference list due to the opening towards the economic east area it offers. And last but not least, languages are the dominant tools of communication, because our societies tend to acquire an increasingly multilingual character emphasized at all levels, from hospitals to courts or police stations, schools and workplaces, and on the other hand because we interact more and more in Europe and internationally. As the language skills acquired through the learning of two or more languages contribute to career development, but given the fact that most Europeans speak foreign languages, the Eurobarometer Service of the Commission for Multilingualism implemented two research projects on European citizens' language skills and their attitude towards foreign languages. The surveys were performed at five-year intervals (in 2001 and in 2006), so that they could clearly reveal the changes in the attitudes of Europeans. The results are worthy of consideration. In 2001, 53 % of the respondents stated that besides their mother tongue they could speak another language. In 2006, their share rose to 56 %. The highest percentage of citizens who speak foreign languages is registered in Luxembourg (99 % of the population know at least one foreign language), followed by Slovakia (97 %) and Latvia (95 %). In 2006, 28 % of the respondents spoke two foreign languages, compared with 26 % in 2001. The most

popular foreign languages were English, French and German, followed by Spanish and Russian. Generally, the survey results showed that in the small Member States where people used more national languages, there was a higher level of multilingualism. The same was true for the countries with lesser used languages or for those who performed “language exchanges” with neighboring countries. In 2006, in only six Member States most people spoke only one language: Ireland (66 % of the population knew only their mother tongue), the United Kingdom (62 %), Italy (59 %), Hungary (58 %), Portugal (58 %) and Spain (56 %). Very few Europeans believed that language learning was unimportant (8 % in 2006, however a slight increase compared to 7 % in 2001).

In conclusion, plurilingualism and Europe are two sides of same coin. In Europe, linguistic diversity is a reality that unites us in a common history and culture. Multilingualism is the most explicit illustration of the motto “*unity in diversity*”; it is the instrument that tries to create strong connections between people, rather to exemplify the differences between societies. Linguistic diversity strengthens European identity, and also develops other facets of our identity – local, regional and national.

In the current context of globalization, mobility and migration, plurilingualism can provide new solutions for individuals and society.

Plurilingualism is the main characteristic of the European project. It is necessary to facilitate the development of the language skills in Europe, not only in education but also in other areas that are naturally related to foreign languages – economic growth and jobs, justice and security, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Languages are a shared responsibility. Each of us plays a role in this area – the European decision makers, the Member States, school systems, businesses, citizens.

Our modern knowledge-based society is built around communication. In the European landscape, varied from a linguistic and cultural point of view, languages are bridges that give citizens the means to communicate, to understand their own culture and that of others, to rediscover and develop further our shared values. Knowledge of foreign languages is a key element in building a Europe for everyone. Secondly, throughout the Union, extensive reforms aimed to create a Europe of economic growth and employment, which represent “*the Lisbon Strategy objectives*”, are undertaken. Language skills will help us achieve these goals.

Language skills give the European citizens more opportunities on the labor market, both in their country of origin, as well as throughout the European Union.

And a Europe in which people from different Member States speak several foreign languages is a more welcoming society for people traveling within it. Young people who speak several foreign languages can move more easily throughout Europe to study or work.

Thirdly, foreign languages really contribute to European competitiveness. Companies that have employees mastering language skills are better prepared to take advantages of the opportunities offered by the European market – the largest in the world. Also, language skills help businesses reach customers and markets all around the world. (Leonid Orban)

The study confirms that the knowledge of English as a foreign language is not enough. To conquer new markets, companies and people want to learn other European languages or languages from other continents, such as Mandarin or Russian.

Diversification of the way of language acquirement is imperative in the modern society, given the mobility of citizens, the acute lack of time and the different needs of the applicants.

Conclusions

In a European cultural and multi-linguistic environment with the demands of normality (like the cultural and communication area of the new Europe) knowing *the other* may result in something beneficial only through the study of language – the essence of a culture. “Language is a part of our identity and represents the most direct expression of culture. Thanks to language – we can read the information on the site of the European Commission for Multilingualism, we can establish relationships with our fellow beings, we can structure our thinking and we can hand down our cultural inheritance. Languages are bridges between peoples and cultures” [1]. Through its policy in the field

of multilingualism, the strategy for multilingualism of the European Commission pursues the promotion **without discrimination (our bold)** of all languages, it stimulates the teaching of foreign languages (of any of them) and promotes linguistic diversity in the society; thus, **it promotes a multilingual healthy policy**. For this to occur, one of the solutions, and a way to approach each other is to offer equal opportunities for all languages. Small language study and the attitude towards them in Europe must be brought on an equal footing with the languages considered official and used for work purposes. All official languages of the Member States and international, but unofficial languages spoken, however, by the EU citizens must be studied, valued, respected and appreciated without being discriminated! This – in a space that wants “to give birth” to a new generation of multilingual citizens [2] in which multilingualism, cultural pluralism and education for acceptance are promoted.

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