



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

eldia

european language
diversity for all

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

Policy implications of ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All), an EU-funded research project on multilingualism, vehicular languages and linguistic diversity in Europe

FEBRUARY 2012

Ongoing

INTRODUCTION

The Changing Faces of Linguistic Diversity

Maintaining linguistic diversity – both protecting minority languages and promoting language learning – has been defined as a strategic political aim in Europe. However, the knowledge basis of all existing policies and initiatives is in urgent need of updating, as the European language landscape is rapidly changing. New forms of communication, mobility and education, new ideas of multilingualism and multiculturalism challenge the existing concepts of multilingualism, and it may be that current policies are based on outdated information and inadequate ideas of ethnicity and language use. Policy-makers will need up-to-date knowledge and new tools.

A Novel Approach

Modern European minorities are multilingual. They do not live in isolated traditional communities but are constantly confronted with the majority language and often also with other regional or international vehicular languages. Instead of dealing with isolated "ethnic" languages, ELDIA focuses on the dynamics of multilingualism and gathers information on how native and vehicular, majority and minority languages interact in today's Europe. We depart from speaker agency, that is: how speakers actively choose between languages and shape their language worlds.

New Knowledge, New Tools

In addition to up-to-date reports and case studies, ELDIA will create the **European Language Vitality Barometer (EuLaViBar)** for assessing and evaluating the state of languages and speaker communities.

KEY OBSERVATIONS (Evidence and analysis)

Contexts of Linguistic Diversity and Multilingualism

Research on European multilingualism and linguistic diversity so far has been characterised by a strong dualism: the two main forms of multilingualism have been regarded from completely different perspectives. On the one hand, acquired multilingualism (learning major vehicular languages such as English) is seen as an asset for the individual and a necessary educational investment for the society. Thus, becoming multilingual is a positive action which can be supported and promoted. Minority languages, on the other hand, are seen not in terms of "doing" but in terms of "being", as an integral part of belonging to an ethnic group. Often this "ethnifying" perspective leads to interpreting minority languages as a problem and a potential cause of inequality in society. In this perspective, minority languages are a burden both for the individual (who has to invest more effort in learning further languages) and the society (in terms of extra investments, both in language teaching and in supporting minorities).

This dualism leads to a general skewedness in research and data assessment:

- The existing research on minority languages is strongly concentrated on a few traditional minorities in Western Europe (such as Catalan, Basque, Frisian or the Celtic minorities); Eastern European minorities, non-Indo-European languages and migrant groups in general are underrepresented. For this reason, ELDIA works with 14 speaker communities, all less well represented in international research but carefully selected to cover the widest possible range of types (see p. 11)
- The acquisition and teaching of minority languages is seriously underrepresented in research.
- Statistics and institutions create and support a picture of "parallel monolingualisms", instead of highlighting the highly diverse forms of everyday multilingualism in which today's Europeans live.
- Minorities are typically researched in a more narrow, national or regional framework.

Networking People and Knowledge

There is very little generalisable and generally accessible data on the acquisition and use of "minor" European languages, and also very little networking between researchers of different regional minorities, who depart from their national traditions, often publish mainly or exclusively in their own languages and in their traditional publication series and lack institutionalised channels for sharing their knowledge with their colleagues in other countries. The first phases of ELDIA have consisted of gathering knowledge and making it accessible, not only in order to identify gaps in research but also in order to facilitate new connections and cooperations. Within ELDIA, researchers from different national traditions come together and share their findings, and they will also distribute their results within their own networks.

A further finding already outlining itself in the first data collected by

ELDIA is that minorities tend to regard themselves, their situation and their problems as something unique and generally display fairly little knowledge of or interest in other multilingual speaker communities in other countries or regions. Yet, already within our sample of 14 case studies, numerous similarities and parallel issues across Europe are gradually becoming visible.

Targeting Speaker Communities

The practical issues of sampling and identifying the target groups for our fieldwork gave rise to some important observations:

- The official statistic data on languages and language use in different European countries are neither completely accessible nor comparable. Not only are there different regulations for gathering and storing data on mother tongue or ethnic affiliation; there are also fringe groups with unclear identities and whole “invisible minorities” not acknowledged officially. Any comparative research into European linguistic diversity on the basis of population statistics must therefore be evaluated with utmost care, never taking anything at face value.
- Reaching out to speaker communities was often only possible with the help of organisations and clubs. While many of these were very helpful and displayed a positive attitude towards our work, seeing it as a positive sign of recognition, other communities obviously have begun to interpret outsiders’ research interests as an unwelcome intrusion into their affairs.
- Similarly, the reactions of individual informants to our research questions – despite the unified and centrally planned research design – have been extremely different, varying from explicit disapproval to extreme interest and sympathy.

Minorities and Majorities

ELDIA investigates multilingualism and linguistic diversity from a multilingual perspective, focusing on the coexistence and interaction of languages, and thus crucially differs from the traditional “minority research” paradigm. Our fieldwork targets both minorities and control groups representing majorities, and unlike in traditional minority research, our main focus is not on the questions of the maintenance of a specific language or ethnic identity.

However, the reactions of outsiders and the media to our research project have astonishingly often, even despite our explicit statements to the contrary, connected ELDIA with a specific minority and its ethno-political emancipation or interpreted our research as a “rescue mission”. Obviously, in public discourse the “endangerment narrative”, i.e. portraying minorities specifically as carriers of cultural diversity and focusing on the threat of assimilation, easily outranks all other aspects of multilingualism and the coexistence of languages which ELDIA is investigating.

The data of our questionnaire surveys and interviews have not been completely analysed yet, but two findings are gradually becoming visible:

- The interest of the majorities in what are perceived as

minority affairs is often astonishingly low; recruiting policy-makers for the interviews was often difficult, and the answer rate in the questionnaire surveys conducted with majority groups was very low in the most cases.

- The majorities obviously tend to see the minorities in an “othering” perspective: the idea that the minority in question would be part of “our” country, its history or culture was seldom if ever expressed, and surprisingly often, the majority is ignorant or forgetful of the presence and importance of the minorities.

Minorities in Media: Distorted Picture, Lacking Participation

The international media analysis team of ELDIA has conducted a detailed analysis of the media landscape both on the discourse in majority and minority language media, departing from the hypothesis that (minority and majority) media produce and reproduce power relationships between majority and minority language communities; thus, the media play a crucial role in promoting or hindering the maintenance of language diversity.

The provisional results of the study conducted in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden indicate a severe lack of media resources in minority languages. The currently existing newspapers are often read mainly by older people who master the language, while the development of television programmes and internet-based media which could attract younger consumers has often been neglected.

The study also reveals that in all six countries, problems typically faced by minorities (discrimination, lack of resources and educational opportunities, problems in participating in decision-making) are seldom reflected in majority-language media. When reporting on minorities, majority media typically focus on cultural activities such as festivals. In the worst case, majority media, focusing on the endangerment or even the anticipated extinction of minority languages and cultures, may portray any attempts to emancipate a minority or revitalise its language as costly or even futile enterprises.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The legal and institutional background analyses conducted within the project confirmed the dualism described earlier. On the one hand, politicians and policy-makers readily issue proclamations and statements about the value of multilingualism in general, on the other, multilingualism including less widely used and smaller languages is not entrenched in legislation or in institutions.

Innovations and Revisions in Language Legislation

In all case studies included in the project there has been new language legislation, or revisions of older language legislation have been introduced in recent years. This is partly the result of an increased awareness and mobilisation among language speakers and minorities themselves and partly a result of a renewed emphasis on the importance of the official, state or majority languages which are perceived as being under threat from the global languages, in particular English. For the languages of more recent migrants, such as Estonian speakers in Finland and Germany, there is still little legal

recognition and support, even though there seems to be great variation at the local level where much of the language legislation is implemented, in particular within the field of education. The outcomes of such new legislation introduced shall need to be studied in years to come.

There has been legal affirmation of several of the languages studied in the ELDIA project in recent years. This is the case with regard to Karelian in Finland, Meänkieli and Finnish in Sweden, and Kven in Norway. In the case of Võro and Seto in Estonia there is considerable political and societal debate about the position of regional varieties of the official and state language something reflected for instance in the preparatory works of the new language legislation revision in Estonia. One important finding in this respect is that the standardisation of official languages, such as Estonian and Hungarian, presents obstacles towards the affirmation of the value of regional varieties or dialects of these languages, for instance with regard to Southern Estonian languages or to regional varieties of Hungarian spoken in Austria and Slovenia.

Gaps and problems in language legislation

The absence of legal redress mechanisms in cases of violation of language legislation concerning smaller languages is a finding recurring in all case studies of the project, in particular as regards legislation at the regional and local levels. This applies both to states with a long legal tradition in regulating languages, such as Finland and Austria, as well as for countries where language legislation is a relatively new phenomenon. Another disconcerting finding is that even when there are such redress mechanisms, court decisions are not always respected and implemented, indicating thus the low efficiency of such legislation as well as a low rule of law requirement in this field of law.

Another major finding in the analysis of the legal and institutional frameworks of the languages examined in the ELDIA project is that multilingualism itself is only to a very limited extent legally entrenched. What is usually entrenched and affirmed is a particular language, to be used by a particular number of people in a particular territorially defined region. While such an approach may at best support individual multilingualism within minority areas or regions where languages are spoken locally, it does not necessarily affirm and encourage a wider societal multilingualism under conditions of mobility and globalisation.

Most languages and communities studied in this project have previously been subject to legal research only to a highly limited extent. For most of these speaker groups, general issues of non-discrimination have been investigated, but there is much less research available with regard to language legislation or the legal position of languages in the sphere of education. This is a general phenomenon, but it is particularly so with regard to those varieties whose status – as a language or as “merely a dialect” of a state language – has been unclear: Seto in both the Russian Federation and Estonia, and Karelian in Finland. The same can be said of migrant groups, especially recent ones, such as Estonians in Germany and Finland.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Key messages for policy-makers on general and European level

Diversity belongs to all of us. Promote a European consciousness of diversity and multilingualism as part of European cultural heritage and identity. As already shown in our research, similar issues of multilingualism and diversity appear across Europe, in very different socio-political, historical and ecological contexts. However, the role of linguistic diversity as a traditional characteristic of European societies still tends to be forgotten, in public discourse and media as well as in political decision-making. Despite lip service to minorities' rights, policy-makers and media often tend to portray minorities and diversity as something new (and potentially threatening), as opposed to the allegedly homogeneous "authentic" past. Correcting this misconception may need special measures.

Legislation needs to be adopted in cooperation with those concerned and implemented in practice both nationally and locally. Also smaller, or migrant and regionally used languages form part of the language diversity in Europe today. While legislation alone is not sufficient in order to encourage and guarantee the value of language diversity and multilingualism at an individual and at a societal level, it is an important starting point and precondition for such affirmation. Due to the variety of situations and needs, legislation needs to be adapted and cannot follow a single model for all cases.

Remember that things are complicated. Issues of linguistic diversity and multilingualism can seldom if ever be described with a few parameters only. Aspects such as ethnic affiliation or mother tongue cannot always be decided in terms of simple yes/no questions. In case of doubt, the more differentiated approach will always be the better choice.

Support further comparative research. The available data often give a skewed picture of the situation of languages and identities. In particular, there is still too little pan-European generalisable and comparable knowledge, even despite the fact that some minority groups have been very thoroughly researched on local and regional level.

Key messages for policy-makers and stakeholders on regional and local level

You are not alone. Despite great differences in the history and the eco-socio-political conditions, diversity and minority/majority issues across Europe show much more similarities than the communities themselves seem to realise. Obviously, multilingual communities and minority groups could make even better use of the opportunities for transnational cooperations offered by, for instance, the EU.

Promote a local/regional consciousness of diversity. There is an obvious tendency in public discourse to portray minorities as "others", forgetting their historical presence or the shared historical roots of majority and minority groups. Policy-makers and stakeholders should not only make the linguistic and ethnic diversity

better known but also portray it as characteristic of the region, something that belongs to the cultural heritage of all groups.

Promote consciousness of media freedom and participation as essential for democracy and human rights. It is important that journalists are made aware of the linguistic human rights of minorities – that they have constitutional and human rights to use their mother tongue effectively in every sphere of their life, and that portraying minority-friendly policies in negative light means a violation of these rights.

More differentiated media resources are needed. Minority media should be developed also in forms which are more accessible and attractive to younger generations. It is essential to guarantee media freedom for minority communities and secure that they have sufficient resources to maintain and develop the media landscape according to their own specific needs.

Crucial steps are taken locally. National legislation offers a general framework for the use of languages and needs to be implemented regionally and locally, in particular within the sphere of basic education. While regional legislation should not fall below the basic guarantees provided in such legislation, they can certainly promote wider acceptance of and support for regionally used languages. Regions around Europe are shaping their own approaches to multilingualism and language diversity.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) is an interdisciplinary research project which seeks to contribute to the scholarly and the practical understanding of multilingualism and its impact in varying European contexts. The results and the tools created by ELDIA can be further applied in research and policy-making also in other cases and contexts of multilingualism.

The **main objectives** of ELDIA are to

- create a novel multidisciplinary research approach
- create a testable, descriptive and predictive model of the dynamics of European multilingualism and a measurement instrument for assessing the situation of multilingualism (*EuLaViBar* = *European Language Vitality Barometer*)
- identify gaps in language policies and develop sustainable policies for the future
- create an interdisciplinary network of specialists.

Methodology

ELDIA is an **interdisciplinary** project involving specialists of linguistics, law, sociology (media analysis), and statistics. The empirical work is based on 13 case studies conducted with multilingual speaker communities in 8 countries (see the next section for a map showing their geographic distribution):

- Northern Sámi in Norway
- Meänkieli speakers and Finns in Sweden
- Karelians and Estonians in Finland
- Karelians, Veps and Seto in Russia
- Kvens in Norway
- Võro and Seto speakers in Estonia
- Estonians in Germany
- Hungarians in Austria
- Hungarians in Slovenia.

The traditional languages of these speaker communities all belong to the Finno-Ugric language family, which – as non-Indo-European languages in general – is underrepresented in relevant international research. Although the relatedness and the (pre)historical connections between these languages do not belong to the focus of ELDIA, our research in practice profits from the traditional connections along the channels established within the institutional frameworks of Finno-Ugric studies. Above all, the Finno-Ugric language family offers practically the widest possible range of minorities and multilingual speaker groups in a wide array of ecological and socio-political contexts: large and small speaker communities, autochthonous/indigenous and recent, or a combination of these two, etc.

For each case study, the following steps are taken, according to a centrally planned research design and in continuous cooperation:

- *context analysis*: assessment of available data and research on the state of each community at issue. (This was finished in

2010, and summaries of the results are being published in the series *Working Papers in European Linguistic Diversity*.)

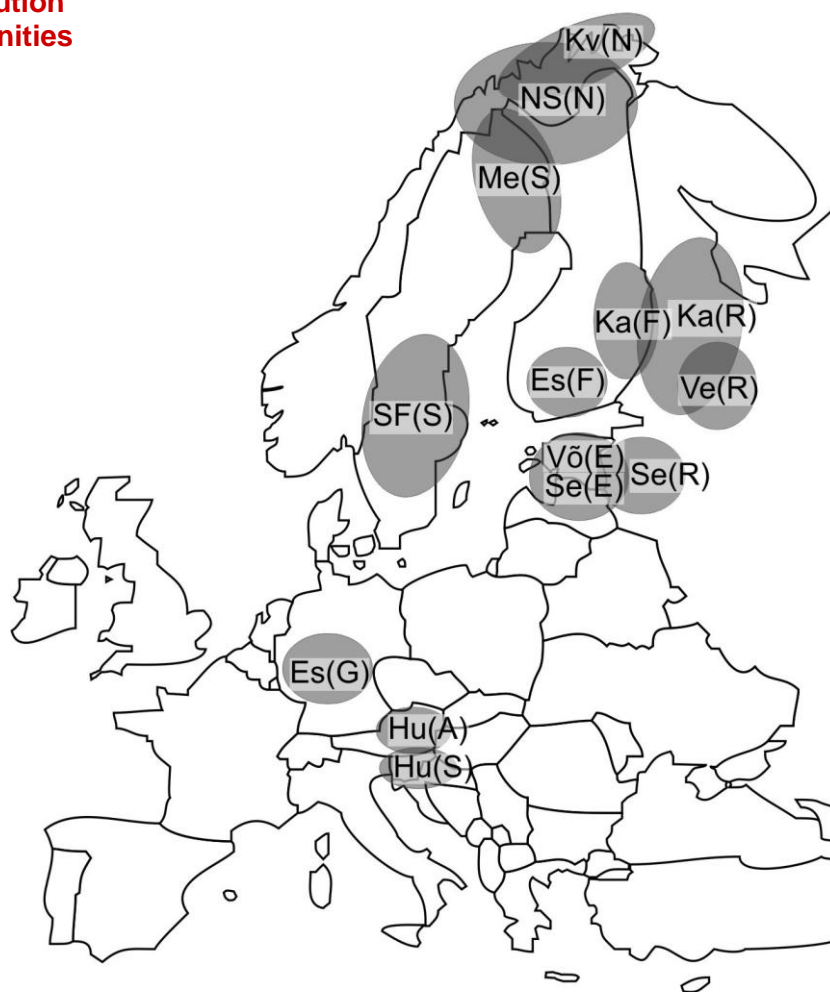
- *questionnaire survey*: according to a centrally planned sampling design, questionnaires translated into 23 different majority and minority language varieties were sent to informants representing the minorities at issue and to majority control groups.
- *interviews*: 8 individual and 8–9 focus group interviews were conducted for each case study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and they will be annotated and analysed according to a centrally planned design.

Parallel to the fieldwork and data analysis, an analysis of media and an analysis of law issues, covering most of the groups at issue, were conducted.

The **results** of the case studies and analyses will be summarised in case-specific reports for each speaker community. The case-specific reports, furthermore, will form the basis for a comparative report and the *EuLaViBar* which will be presented at the end of the project.

In addition to the project website offering general information in ten languages, we have also created an electronic open-access publication series, *Working Papers in European Language Diversity* (<http://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:80726>). For the general audience, we publish newsletters (in five languages) twice a year.

Geographic Distribution of Speaker Communities



MAP LEGEND (explanation of abbreviations)

The abbreviations stand for: Language (Country).
Abbreviations are listed in alphabetic order.

- Es (F) = Estonian in Finland
- Es (G) = Estonian in Germany
- Hu (A) = Hungarian in Austria
- Hu (S) = Hungarian in Slovenia
- Ka (F) = Karelian in Finland
- Ka (R) = Karelian in Russia
- Kv (N) = Kven in Norway
- Me (S) = Meänkieli in Sweden
- NS (N) = North Sámi in Norway
- Se (E) = Seto in Estonia
- Se (R) = Seto in Russia
- SF (S) = Sweden Finnish
- Ve (R) = Vepsian in Russia
- Võ (E) = Võro in Estonia

* *Light grey fields indicate the rough geographical distribution of a language*
Dark grey fields indicate overlaps between the given languages areas.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Duration	1st April 2010 – 31st October 2013 (42 months)
Funding Scheme	FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union – Collaborative project Area 8.5.2. Diversities and Communalities in Europe SSH-2009-5.2.1. Vehicular Languages in Europe in an era of globalisation: history, policy, practice
Budget	2,669,266.00 EUR
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FURTHER READING

Working Papers in European Language Diversity
Permalink: <http://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:80726>

RELATED WEBSITES

Northern European and Baltic Languages and Cultures (SNEB)
<http://www.sneb.uni-mainz.de/>

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