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Language diversity in Europe: can the EU prevent the genocide of the French linguistic minorities?

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Abstract

Introduction:

All references about France, be they about French language, French culture, French arrogance or French cuisine seem to indicate that this country is homogeneous, mono-lingua and mono-cultural. If we consider some of its regions we can note a huge linguistic and cultural diversity: Corsica is Italo-Roman, Brittany is Celtic, Flemish is spoken in the North of France, Alsace is Germanic, the language in the Basque region is pre Indo-European while Catalan and Occitan both form part of the "occitano-roman group, half way between Gallo-Roman and Ibero-Roman." According to the new Atlas of Endangered World Languages published by UNESCO, all these languages, with the exception of Corsican, are part of the 3000 languages in danger of extinction.

Keywords

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**Language diversity in Europe: can the EU prevent the
genocide of the French linguistic minorities?**

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Language diversity in Europe: can the EU prevent the genocide of the French linguistic minorities?

Introduction

All references about France, be they about French language, French culture, French arrogance or French cuisine seem to indicate that this country is homogeneous, mono-lingua and mono-cultural. If we consider some of its regions we can note a huge linguistic and cultural diversity: Corsica is Italo-Roman, Brittany is Celtic, Flemish is spoken in the North of France, Alsace is Germanic, the language in the Basque region is pre Indo-European while Catalan and Occitan both form part of the "occitano-roman group, half way between Gallo-Roman and Ibero-Roman."¹

According to the new *Atlas of Endangered World Languages* published by UNESCO, all these languages, with the exception of Corsican, are part of the 3000 languages in danger of extinction².

French linguistic policies

This is the result of a centuries-old French linguistic policy aimed at destroying minority languages within the Hexagon³. Initially articulated by Claude de Seyssel, the concept was first translated on the legislative level in 1539 with the Edict of Villers-Cotterêts, which imposed French as the exclusive language of the kingdom. It has been reasserted since, with exemplary persistence, by all the subsequent regimes.

The aim was to unify the elites who, cut off from their socio-cultural roots, would be in a position to better serve the king. Language was therefore becoming, *de facto*, the instrument of social discrimination: social superiority and linguistic superiority merged and grew inseparable in the framework of that State-in-the-making.

¹ Bec, P. *La langue occitane*, Paris: PUF, 1963, p. 52

² EFA News N°19 September /October 2002

³ Jeanjean, H. *La politique linguistique de la France* *Mots Pluriels* N°8 (October 1998)
<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP898hj.html>

During the French Revolution, after their victory over the federalist Girondins, the Montagnard leaders stated that French was the only language capable of disseminating the revolutionary ideas and that all 'foreign' languages could only be the carriers of reactionary and counter-revolutionary ideologies and should therefore be banned. Barère started this linguistic prohibition in 1794, with his often quoted postulate that "French, being the language of the people, will become the universal language... Federalism and superstition speak Breton, emigration and the hatred of the Republic speak German, the counter-revolution speaks Italian and fanaticism speaks Basque"⁴.

If, as a political principle, nationalism holds that the nation and the state should be congruent⁵, the State had to artificially create those common elements necessary to the establishment of a new nation. The citizens had to speak one language, and be taught that they belonged to one culture and had a common history. Barère expressed very clearly the correlation existing in the minds of the leaders of the Revolution between the linguistic and the political problems they were facing when he addressed the Assembly on the 27 January 1794: "Citizens, you detest political federalism, abjure the linguistic one. Language, as the Republic, must be one."⁶

The Jacobins' arguments, developed between 1790 and 1794 in a number of reports on education presented to the various assemblies,⁷ formed the basis of the compulsory primary education policy of the Third Republic. This compulsory education was partly due to economic pressures but was also one way of forcefully Francising the populations. The policy followed the incorporation of the counties of Nice and Savoy in 1860 as well as the defeat of 1870 when Alsace-Lorraine was lost to Prussia. French nationalism was thus in the process of being redefined and populations may not have been considered completely safe.

The 1994 Loi Toubon on the protection of the French language was widely presented as a weapon aimed at countering the growing place of English in French public life, particularly in audiovisual communications. It proclaimed that: "programming must specifically aim at

⁴. Sanguin, A.-L.(dir.), Les minorités ethniques en Europe Paris, L'Harmattan,1993 p.14

⁵. Guibernau, M. Nationalisms - The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1995, p.62

⁶. *ibid.*

improving knowledge and preservation of French and illustrate French-speaking throughout the world". Article 12 states that the proportion of musical written or interpreted by French-speaking artists must reach a minimum of 40% of airplay in the mediaby the 1 January 1996, half of which must come from new talents or new productions. This apparently innocuous law still in place today strengthened the colonialist linguistic policy pursued since the XVIth century. It does not specifically mention regional languages but the circular of the 20 March 1996, explaining the details of the law, specifies that the use of French is compulsory for all audiovisual communications, publicity, business, public meetings.... It does not differentiate between regional languages and foreign languages.

Whenever challenged, the Loi Toubon has been interpreted by the various authorities in light of the 1992 modification of Article 2 of the French Constitution. This amendment, endorsed by all political parties inscribed that "French is the language of the Republic" in the Constitution. During the parliamentary debates, some MPs tried to have the phrase 'in the respect of France's regional languages and cultures' inserted. The Garde des Sceaux formally opposed the motion. This refusal, supported by the Gouvernement, strengthened the body of the law against minority languages which, previously tolerated, then became officially illegal (LA SETMANA 47). Alain Lamassoure, then Minister of the Budget and Government Spokesperson stated that this article could never be used against regional languages, but a few months later he used the very same article to justify the government decision to exclude all regional publications not written in French from the funding given to the weekly regional press from 1995.

In 1996, the General Delegation of the French Language, controlled by the Minister of Culture, M. Douste-Blazy, decided that one delegate from each region would serve as councillor for French, whose principal duty would be to ensure the more effective application of the Toubon Law of 1994.

Jack LANG's attempts

⁷. Talleyrand, Condorcet, Romme, Lakanal, Daunou, Sieyès, Le Pelletier et Bouquier, in particular proposed various projects cf. Parias, L-H (ed.) Histoire Générale de l'Enseignement et de l'Education en France Tome III (Nelle Librairie de France, 1981).

On 27 March 2000, Jack Lang was appointed as Minister for Education “to give back its impetus and its confidence in the national Education”⁸

He accepted the conclusions of the 1998 Poignant Report requested by Mitterrand. This Report urged the Prime minister “to step out of the hypocrisy”⁹ in matters of language education. He pointed out that during the previous school year (1996-1997) 330 000 students had enrolled in some regional languages courses, more than 5000 of those in associative schools using immersion methods¹⁰ and that the demand could not be satisfied because of a lack of funded positions and a lack of space¹¹.

In a 20 June 2000 press conference, Lang explained his vision for primary school education. One particular objective was for every child to have learnt two languages other than French within five years, one in high school and one started in primary school. As early as their first year in high school, students were to be capable of being taught at least one subject in a language other than French. Migrant and Regional languages were specifically identified as under-valued and in need of special consideration. Along with the traditional introductory and bilingual courses already in place in the State Education system, Lang was also considering the immersion method favoured by the minority languages’ schools.

During another press conference, held on 4 September 2000 to mark the beginning of the school year¹², Jack Lang confirmed his earlier statements noting that the State Education had opened more than 100 new bilingual classes in regional languages for that year. He also flagged the signing of a Convention between the State, the Alsace Region and the Departments constituting that Region.

This Convention was signed on 18 October 2000. In his presentation, Jack Lang confirmed the timetable for the teaching of languages in French primary schools which would see, by 2005, every school child learning one language from Kindergarten onwards and starting another in their

⁸. Press conference held 20 June 2000. All conferences and speeches as well as laws and memoranda from the national Education Ministry can be found at: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/>

⁹. *Rapport Poignant*, Op.cit., p.11.

¹⁰. 1969 *Ikastolak* (Basque), 76, *Bressoles* (catalan), 77 *Diwan* (Brittany), 79 *Calandreta* (Occitan).

¹¹. *Rapport Poignant* Op.cit., pp 16-17.

¹². <http://www.education.gouv.fr/discours/2000/langrentree.htm>

first year of high school¹³. He also gave undertakings regarding the setting up of adequate linguistic training facilities for primary school teachers, either through exchanges with Germany, or through courses in the IUFM¹⁴.

2001, marked as the Year of Languages in Europe, gave ample opportunities for Jack Lang to reaffirm his beliefs in establishing France as a multilingual society, a necessity to deal with the multilingual and multicultural European reality.

In a major speech on 25 April 2001, Jack Lang reaffirmed his commitment to regional languages. Endorsing the Poignant report he set out to give some details on his policies and their implementations.

In this speech, Lang alluded to negotiations taking place with Diwan, the Breton immersion schools. These led to the signing of an agreement towards their integration into the public education system on 28 May 2001.

This convention¹⁵ firstly defined the teaching of a regional language using the immersion method, accepting that all activities in the school, even outside the classroom, be conducted in the regional language, with a gradual introduction of French in the classroom. It acknowledged that such a program must lead to the students being as competent in the target language as in French and as competent in French as those attending a monolingual French school. Between 1994 and 2000, school inspections and various tests had verified that the level of competency in French achieved in immersion schools was at least equal to the level achieved in monolingual French schools. This had been closely monitored at the entrance to High School and in the *Brevet* results¹⁶. It was therefore agreed that the pedagogical methods would be maintained, including the time allocation for various activities.

Jack Lang did seem to make some real progress in an area that had proved so difficult beforehand but his reforms were proposed at a time when politicians were already deeply divided on proposed changes in Corsica.

¹³. <http://www.education.gouv.fr/discours/2000/convalscace.htm>

¹⁴. Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres (Teachers' Colleges).

¹⁵. <http://www.education.gouv.fr/discours/2001/diwan/dpdiwan.htm>

¹⁶. Examination taken at the end of the 4th year of High School.

....and his failure.

On 3 October 2001, the five organisations¹⁷ composing the CNAL¹⁸, the national committee of action for public education, decided to appeal to the State Council, asking for an injunction on the implementation of the integration of the Diwan schools. It argued that immersion in Breton “is contrary to Article 2 of the French Constitution stating that French is the language of the Republic”¹⁹ and contrary to the Toubon law which states that “French shall be the language of instruction, work, trade and exchanges and of the public services”²⁰.

The CNAL is also challenging all decisions made by local and regional administrations regarding their funding of regional language schools.

The SNES²¹, the major secondary school teachers’ union, opposed some aspects of the decree²² defining bilingual teaching by immersion in “regional languages” schools. In particular, it opposed the preferred use of regional languages for administration and meetings. The State Council suspended the implementation of the agreement, and of the May, July and September 2001 decrees or memoranda. The AFP²³ dispatch announcing the result further commented: “In the name of the oneness of the Republic, one century after the forced Francisation of children in the French countryside, the main argument of Jules Ferry’s schooling is being used again by the defenders of the public school, seriously harming the agreement reached after long negotiations.”

¹⁷. DDEN (délégués départementaux de l’éducation nationale) – The National Education Department delegates

FCPE (Fédération des Conseils de parents d’Elèves des Ecoles Publiques) One of the parents’ association

La Ligue de l’enseignement (Education League)

UNSA-éducation (Teachers’ Union)

SE-UNSA (Teachers’ Union).

¹⁸. Comité National d’Action Laïque.

¹⁹. AFP: 2001, *Le conseil d’Etat suspend le protocole d’accord avec les écoles bretonnes Diwan*, mardi 30 octobre, 20h48.

²⁰. Law No. 94-665 of 4 August 1994 relative to the use of the French language, Article 1.

²¹. Syndicat National des Enseignants du Secondaire.

²². *Bulletin Officiel du ministère de l’Education Nationale et du ministère de la Recherche* N° 33 du 13 septembre 2001.

²³. Agence France Presse: dispatch *L’entrée de Diwan dans l’école publique fortement compromise* – Mardi 30 octobre 2001, 19h59.

In Brittany, the decision was met with an uproar. All political and cultural Breton organisations expressed their dismay and the feeling of being betrayed.²⁴ Most Breton members of Parliament support the Minister and members of the regional and the local assemblies want more power given to the Region, as this appears to be the only way to ensure that some progress is made. Calls for demonstrations have been sent and the independentist movement Emgann denounced the “objective attack against Breton” and a denial of the democratic process”²⁵

the EU: the only resort left

After the large demonstration in Rennes on 22 March 2003 that followed the decisions by the Constitutional Council and the State Council to ban the integration of the Diwan Schools in the French education system and to prevent local authorities from using public money to support those schools, the Cultural Council of Brittany resolved to appeal those decisions in the European Court of Human Rights, arguing linguistic discrimination²⁶. The president of the CCB did not expect fast and radical changes as linguistic and cultural questions remain in the domain of the States but he was hoping the situation could go forward if further appeals were to be lodged, forcing the Court to take positive steps towards the linguistic diversity in France and in Europe. The ideology of the Nation-State adopted since the French Revolution proclaims that France is a homogeneous whole (one state, one nation, one language, one culture) in which all citizens are equals, regardless of their race, religion, origins... Although equality may appear as a very desirable aim, this legal equality rules out the recognition of differences within the society and denies the very existence of minority groups. On that principle, France refused to ratify Article 30 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of Children which stated that children belonging to minorities had the right to be educated in their own language.

France, for the same reasons, refused to sign the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages aiming at preserving the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe, thereby opposing an important European policy.

²⁴. *Le Télégramme de Brest* 1/11/2001.

²⁵. *Le Télégramme de Brest* 31/10/01.

²⁶. Los bretons se viran cap a l’Euròpa in *La Setmana* N° 406 24/04/2003

European policies

Respect for linguistic and cultural diversity has become an important element in the making and the developing of the European Union. The collapse of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the civil war in Yugoslavia ensured that the question of minorities was given a high priority on the European agenda. It was one of the main issues at the Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension of June 1990 and agreement was reached on a list of rights to be conferred to minorities²⁷. The OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union now coordinate their efforts with a view to developing a coherent system for the protection of minority rights in spite of the disagreements encountered when attempting to define the nature and even the very concept of a "national minority".

The European Council enshrined this notion in Article 22 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights which states "The Union respects cultural, religious and linguistic diversity." On the initiative of the European Parliament, which has adopted a series of resolutions on this subject, the European Union has taken action to safeguard and promote the regional and minority languages of Europe.

Financial support for the European Bureau for lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) constantly increases, as does the support for the Mercator information network.

The French Regionalists movements and the EU

The regional movements had for a long time confined themselves to the question of the defense of the minorities' languages and cultures. The decolonisation debate in the fifties and early sixties led to the emergence of new political movements which were further radicalised in the aftermath of the May 68 social and political events.

They saw the European political integration only as a necessity within the framework of a liberal capitalist society requiring bigger markets, unimpinged by customs and regulations. European unification, a condition *sine qua non* of the Marshall Plan, was only a step towards a greater concentration of capital as European companies, not being able to compete, would be taken over by the anglo-American trusts. The concentration of capital and of industry would lead, in the name of efficiency and rationalisation, to a greater concentration around some

economic centers such as the triangle Genoa-Turin-Milan or the Rhine valley while the excentric regions such as Brittany or Occitania, already under-developed, would see their economic situations worsen even further.

The European regulations were seen as a premeditated plan put in place to institutionalise the ruin of the South of France through the unchecked and fraudulent importation of Italian wines, as well as other wines transiting through Italy²⁸. The opposition to the entry into the EU of Spain and Portugal in 1986, following the opposition to the entry of Greece in 1981, dominated the agenda as both these countries had agriculturally-based economies in direct competition with the South of France regions, further eroding their economies.

The editorial in the Winter 97-98 edition of *Lo Lugarn*, the magazine published by the PNO (Occitan Nationalist Party), announced the changes in strategy and policies of that political organisation and summarised its evolution on the European question: for nearly thirty years it had opposed the construction of Europe in principle, calling for a boycott of the 1984 elections, but in 1994 it favoured a federalist Europe based on regionalism - the other side of the same equation as in France the question of Europe cannot be separated from the question of regionalism.

Actions on the legislative level, the establishment of support structures such as the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages and the financial help given to projects promoting minority languages have ensured that the small minority of regionalists who could see the European potential in the late 1980's became the vast majority by the mid-1990's. The intransigence of French governments, whatever their political colour, when dealing with the minority question in both the international and national arenas, has hastened this shift²⁹.

²⁷. Benoît-Rohmer, F. *The minority question in Europe*. Strasbourg; Council of Europe, 1996.

²⁸. Le Bris, M. *Occitanie: Volem Viure!* Paris; Gallimard, 1974.

²⁹. As examples: France refused to ratify Article 30 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of Children which stated that children belonging to minorities had the right to be educated in their own language. More recently, in July 1999, France refused to ratify the European Charter on minority languages as the Constitutional Council deemed it unconstitutional.

The General Assembly of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) earlier this year unanimously adopted a resolution proposing the establishment of a European agency on linguistic diversity during its session in Charleroi on the 1st of February. The European monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia in Vienna could serve as a model for the agency promoting linguistic diversity.³⁰

The European Commission intends to publish an Action Plan on language learning and linguistic diversity in summer 2003 and has thus launched a consultation process on this topic. In its contribution to the consultation on language learning and linguistic diversity EBLUL mentions that “linguistic diversity, including the promotion of lesser used languages is a democratic and cultural cornerstone of the Union and recognised in article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union”.

Furthermore, these minority groups organised themselves and found allies in other European minorities.

FRPS

In 1995, a group of political parties representing the major minorities within France created the *Fédération Régions et Peuples Solidaires* (FRPS). Its charter states the federation:

- Encourages cultural diversity and promotes linguistic and cultural identities, officialising regional languages;
- Fights against Parisian centralism and the Europe of States;
- Promotes federalism in France and in Europe, on the basis of the region or community;
- Allows people divided by state borders to regroup within the process of European unification.³¹

EFA

It is part of the European Free Alliance, an alliance of regional / minority movements who have some elected members in the European parliament, who combined with the Greens to form a parliamentary group.

³⁰. EFA NEWS N°21 January- February 2003

EFA members have been active in trying to force the issue of minority languages on various fora.

After the decision taken by the French Council of State on 28 October 2002, the members decided to submit a resolution to the Parliament in Strasbourg, asking the French Government to bring its linguistic laws into line with those of Europe. This proposal states in particular that “This situation is so contrary to the European values of linguistic and cultural diversity and respect for minorities, that the European Parliament cannot allow a Member State, even one as powerful and prestigious as France, to flout these values with such impunity.”³²

Perusing the EFA News, it is easy to see why the French government, because of its centralism, is the main target of attacks by the EFA group.

Their interventions encompass various state organisations:

- writing a letter to the President of the French Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel to help Occitan organisations obtain frequencies for audiovisual broadcasts in Occitan;
- condemning the twofold changes in regional and European elections proposed by the French Government. Under the pretext of being more in touch with voters and needing to win stable majorities, this was seen as yet another attempt to undermine political diversity, so often employed by the Jacobin French Government;
- expressing its complete disagreement with the absurd regionalisation of the forthcoming European elections proposed by the French Government: namely, the grouping of 22 administrative regions into eight electoral regions without either identity or character. ‘*A single, nationwide constituency would be a disaster*’, protested Catalan MEP Miquel Mayol. ‘*This will simply encourage voters to stay away and increase the lack of public interest in Europe*’.

The European Free Alliance can only express its disgust at such a war on democracy and the serious repercussions which might result.

Conclusion

³¹. http://perso.wanadoo.fr/regionprovence/inf_fed/charte_rps.html

³². EFA News N° 21 January- February 2003

Reality of the jurisdiction/ competency regions / EU

The relationship between the EU, the states and the regions have changed: There are in Europe local communities which do not simply have administrative powers but have also political and legislative powers. The EU can no longer ignore this reality because:

- These communities participate in the management of the EU programs (70% of the funds are administered by regional administrations);
- In 7 countries out of 15, regions do have a legislative power, in particular in all the major countries neighbouring France: Germany, Belgium, Spain, UK, and Italy. Therefore there are an increasing number of conflicts between these legislative entities and the EU regarding these competencies. But the Commission, limited by its charter, cannot recognise them.

As G. Alirol pointed out³³, the European Council meeting in Laeken, held on the 15 and 16 December 2001 for the first time in an official document of the European Council, alluded to the legislative competencies of Regions.

Minority languages have become illegal in France. these same languages enjoy official status in neighbouring countries such as Catalan and Basque in Spain, even when they are spoken by smaller minorities, e.g. Occitan has an official status in Spain (Val d'Aran) and in Italy (Occitan-speaking valleys in the Alps), but not in France.

The French Constitution and Loi Toubon make regional languages illegal whilst Article 22 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights states that "The Union respects cultural, religious and linguistic diversity."

The Convention for the new constitution failed to address some of the problems that needed to be resolved in order to break the deadlock between the two. It had the possibility to do so by incorporating a proper regional dimension in the European structure, by giving Regions direct access to the Court of Justice or / and by ensuring the representation was on the basis of the regions, not of national delegations....

³³. Alirol, G. Editorial, Occitania 121 genièr/febrèr de 2002

This lack of progress can only add to the mounting frustration of militants anxious to save their quickly dying languages. These frustrations are most likely to lead to a renewed flaring of violence. Is violence the only language the French government is capable of listening to?