

United (and richer) in diversity:

The importance of cross-border cooperation to protect minority and regional languages

“Languages are incredible tools with which we think, learn, relate to the world and communicate with others. They are also embedded in our identities and fundamentally intertwined with culture”

Iliana Ivanova, Commissioner for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2024¹

I was raised in multiple languages at the same time. My mom was born in Paris, so we spoke French at home, and as a Spaniard, I used Spanish in my everyday life. However, since I was born in the region of Catalonia, I additionally carried out my education in Catalan and used it as often as Spanish. While it might sound confusing, in a European context, it makes complete sense: circa 220 languages are spoken across the European Union², of which 24 have become official and 60 are recognised as minority or regional languages. Consequently, interculturalism and multilingualism are at the heart of the EU: fostering respect for linguistic diversity is enshrined in the EU’s primary law³.

My experience is not an isolated one, but a shared reality with many Europeans: in Luxembourg, children attend school in Luxembourgish, German and French. In the region of South Tyrol, Italian, German and Ladin co-exist simultaneously. However, while languages know no national boundaries in the European context, the regimes that protect them do: except for the 24 official languages recognised in the Treaties, the EU does not have competences on this field, thus leaving national authorities to promote (or not) the co-existence of several languages within their territory.

Notably, a common framework was proposed through the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which recognises the use of regional and minority languages both in private

¹European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. 2024. “Linguistic Diversity in the European Union .” *Publications Office of the EU*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d325c589-011a-11ef-a251-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

² Katsarova, Ivana . 2022. “Multilingualism: The Language of the European Union.” European Parliamentary Research Service.

³ Article 22, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU; Article 3, Treaty on European Union

and public life⁴. This Charter, however, has not been ratified by all EU members yet⁵, which results in an uneven application of the framework. Thus, the question emerges: how can languages equally thrive across borders when the Charter has not been ratified by all Member States? The example of Catalan highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation as an essential tool to ensure the protection of minority languages across national boundaries.

Catalan has circa 10 million speakers across Spain, France and Italy⁶. However, neither Italy nor France have ratified the Charter, and do not award Catalan the status of an official language (which is the case in Spain). These uneven legal frameworks result in irregular protection of the language and its community. Particularly in the case of France and Spain, a great contrast is observed between the Catalan community on both sides of the border. For example, while in Catalonia 25% of youth⁷ (aged between 15 to 34) speak Catalan frequently, for youth in the French Catalan communities, it is only 12%⁸.



Map of Catalan speaking communities. Plataforma per la llengua, 2024.

However, instead of perceiving the border between France and Spain as a barrier, in recent years, this geographical proximity has been turned into an advantage to foster a more vibrant and lively Catalan community. Several non-profit organisations have implemented cross-border cooperation initiatives to better protect the language on both sides of the border. Collaborations between French and Spanish civil society organisations seeking to protect Catalan have proved to have a huge impact in the development of the language in both countries, allowing for joint progress. Examples

⁴ Council of Europe, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, 1992

⁵ Council of Europe. 2024. "Chart of Signatures and Ratifications of Treaty 148." Treaty Office- Council of Europe. 2024. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=148>.

⁶ Jones, Meirion Prys . 2013. "Endangered Languages and Linguistic Diversity in the European Union." Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies .

⁷ Generalitat de Catalunya. 2023. "Creix Del 35% al 43% El Nombre de Joves Catalans Que Estudien, Segons l'Enquesta a La Joventut." *Generalitat de Catalunya*, 2023. <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/568422/creix-del-35-percent-al-43-percent-nombre-joves-catalans-que-estudien-segons-enquesta-joventut>.

⁸ Baylac Ferrer, Alà. 2016. *Le Catalan En Catalogne Nord*. OpenEdition Books. Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan. <https://books.openedition.org/pupvd/40085>.

of this cooperation are the extension of emissions of the Catalan public radio and TV to the *Catalunya Nord*⁹. Or, for instance, the development of a guide of all the Catalan-speaking businesses in hospitality and culture in the French territory. This initiative was carried out in cooperation with local authorities in the *Catalunya Nord* and the Catalan NGO ‘*Plataforma per la llengua*’, and is growing day after day¹⁰. These actions are a testament to the importance of cross-border cooperation to ensure a more uniform and efficient protection of minority and regional languages. Especially at the local level, it is critical to engage grassroots organisations, local authorities and civil society actors, which can grow together and maximise each other’s impact through cross-border cooperation. In particular contexts such as this one, diversity can act as a source for unity.

⁹ Plataforma per la llengua. 2020. “Assolim l’objectiu per finançar l’antena de televisió al Conflent”. *Plataforma per la llengua*. [Assolim l’objectiu per finançar l’antena de televisió al Conflent | Notícies de Plataforma per la Llengua | Plataforma per la Llengua \(plataforma-llengua.cat\)](#)

¹⁰ Access to the guide: <https://guiacatnord.cat/>