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Linguistic diversity - multilingualism - national languages. Reflections from an European perspective

Linguistic diversity in the EU

Mother tongue teaching is taking place currently in Europe in completely different conditions than a few decades ago. The current context is shaped by globalization, European integration and immigration. Foreign languages knowledge becomes one of the basic competencies necessary for full functioning in contemporary society.

Recalling public opinion surveys commissioned by the Directorate General of Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission (DG EAC), it can be said that over 98% of Europeans see opportunities for their children in foreign languages learning¹.

Globalization expands the multilingualism areas. The EU's goal is to provide Union citizens with the ability to communicate in their mother tongue and two foreign languages. This objective was set at the European Summit in Barcelona in 2002 and confirmed by the Commission Communication in 2008². In this Communication, the Commission:

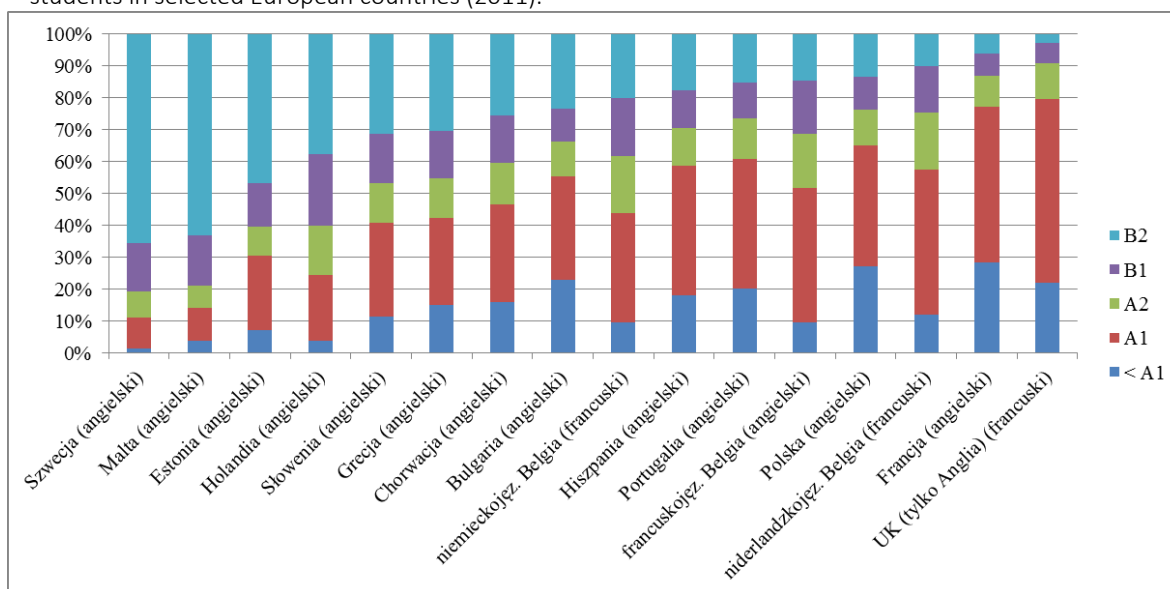
- Calls for the use of existing programs and initiatives to promote interest in language learning, assessment of language skills and further development of curricula for interpreters and translators.
- Supports the mobility of learners and employees, transmits research results on language skills, encourages creativity and innovation in language learning and provides a platform for the exchange of the best practices for stakeholders.
- Encourages the use of film subtitles and promotes the circulation of European works; supports projects on language and communication technologies and cross-border administrative cooperation to reduce language divisions.
- It stimulates the promotion of knowledge of European languages in non-EU countries to strengthen economic and cultural ties.

¹ Special Eurobarometer 386 [Europeans and their languages](#), spring 2012.

² Commission Communication of 18 of September 2008: Multilingualism - fund and commitment.

In 2011, the Commission commissioned the first study of foreign language competence among high school students. The research covered 16 educational systems in 14 European countries. The chart 1 below presents the results of the survey according to the European Language Description System (CEFR) and indicates large differences in the level of foreign language acquisition by students. The highest results were achieved by Sweden and Malta, followed by Estonia and Netherlands.

Figure 1 - Proficiency in reading in a foreign language, according to CEFR levels, among ISCED2 and ISCED3 students in selected European countries (2011).



Source: *First European Survey on Language Competences, 2011*³

The EU in the service of national language protection

Globalization and European integration do not mean that national languages are losing importance. EU policy, despite growing linguistic diversity in Europe, places emphasis on supporting national, local and minority cultures.

Considering the knowledge of mother tongues in Europe, we must take into account the special situation related to the multilingual nature of our continent. The long-term state-building processes influenced the current state of cultural diversity. Currently, globalization contributes to it, which breaks the monolingualism of the community, as well as the post-war and growing immigration in the last few years.

Multilingualism of the European Union peoples means that there are 24 official languages in the European Parliament, which are equal, official languages of the EU. Important Community law documents are also published in 24 languages. The Commission, on the other

³ *First European Survey on Language Competences*, report from a survey conducted by *SurveyLang* commissioned by the European Commission, DG EAC (2011), http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/language-survey-final-report_en.pdf.

hand, uses English, French and German which have the status of working languages. The majority of official documents are also published in three languages.

However, it is worth paying attention to interesting special cases, such as the presence in the set of official languages of the European Union, Irish, which, being of great importance for the identity and care of Ireland's cultural heritage, is the language used by an Irish minority. It is also worth noting the lack of the Luxembourgish language, one of the three official languages of the Grand Duchy, because not all official languages of the Member States become the official languages of the EU automatically.

The European Union, as the treaty says, is obliged to preserve the European linguistic heritage. The existence of multilingual countries, such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, the Netherlands, Finland, Malta, Ireland, makes this sentence not easy. There are 60 other living languages in Europe, with very different fields and levels of official status. The nature of these languages may vary: these are minority languages, local and regional, such as Catalan, Basque, Galician, Provençal, Breton, Welsh, Irish, and Lappish languages (Sami).

The strong presence of one language in the state is also a derivative of the cultural policy centralization, proceeding according to the slogan: one nation / one language.

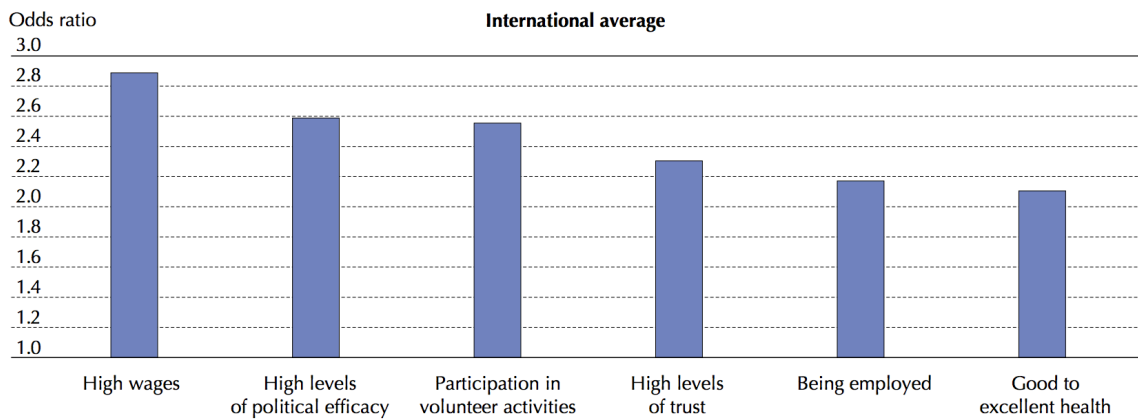
In this respect, the cases of Estonia and Latvia are interesting, where 25% of residents use Russian as the first language. It is also worth noting that despite many years of educational efforts and social inclusion policy, Roma language users still have relatively low social and political status in Europe.

PISA and PIAAC research - a source of knowledge about the mother tongues position

It is very important to master the official language in a given EU country. Therefore, EU policy focuses not only on multiculturalism, but also on monitoring the knowledge of mother tongues. It is analyzed in PISA surveys, for example with the use of reading tests and text interpretation in the language of instruction. An analogous tool for examining the achievements of adults in the use of mother tongues is, inter alia, the analysis of PIAAC results. PIAAC is the International Adult Competence Survey (aged 16-65) conducted under the OECD patronage in several stages, between 2008 and 2013, in total in 40 countries on a sample of 5,000 people in each country.

How multilateral is the relationship between the level of mastering the state language and achieving a satisfactory standard of living and health for the citizens of the Union is shown in the graph 2 below.

Figure 2 - High PIAAC results in a good socioeconomic indicator



Source: PIAAC 2012⁴

The results of the research depicted by the Figure 2 prove a considerably (more than twice) higher probability of having a job by people who in the PIAAC study achieved a high or very high reading score (level 4 or 5) compared to those who showed low or very low levels text understanding (level 1 and below).

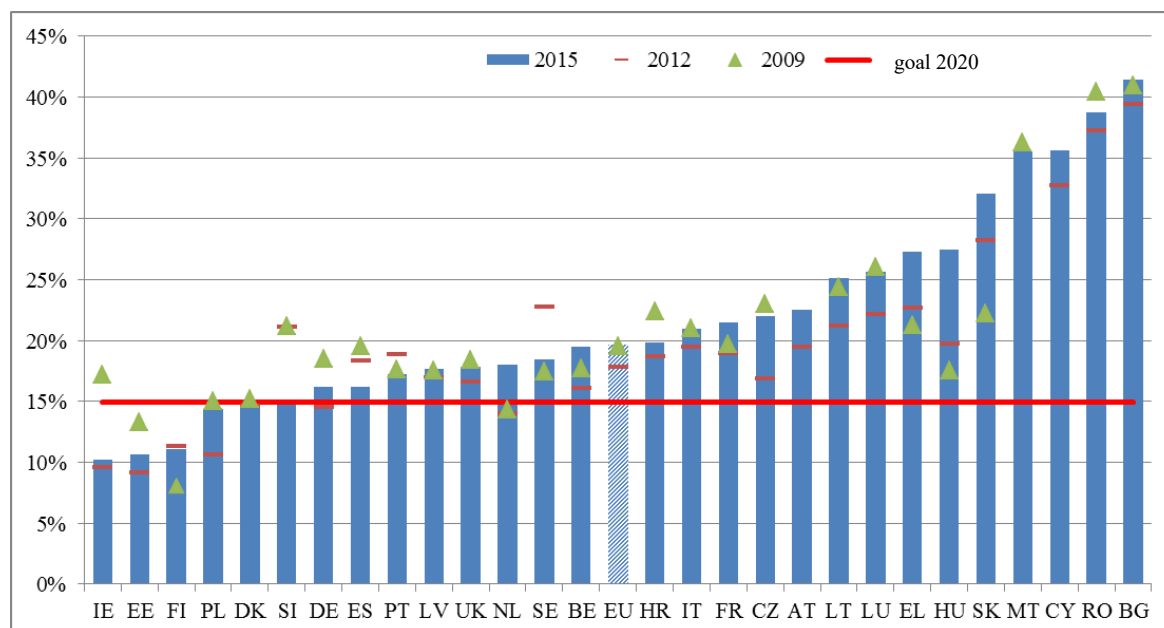
The European Commission also monitors the implementation of research on the mathematical, scientific and linguistic competences of 15-year-olds (PISA). PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is a study carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as part of the International Student Assessment Program. It is the largest educational study conducted on a global scale. It checks the degree of preparation of 15-year-olds for further education, but also provides detailed information in the field of socio-economic backgrounds, migration environments and languages used at home.

The EU uses the "low score" indicator showing the percentage of respondents in PISA tests who did not reach the basic level 2 in reading and interpreting text, mathematics and knowledge in the field of exact sciences.

The priority and strategic goal of the EU is the state in which the percentage of 15-year-olds with the least-defined achievements defined in such a way will not exceed 15% in a given country in any of the above three areas. Figure 3 below shows the percentage of students who did not reach level 2 in reading and interpreting the text.

Figure 3 - Evolution of the percentage of pupils with low scores in reading and interpretation of the last three editions of the PISA test

⁴ The figure comes from the publication, *Skilled for life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD 2013, http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/SkillsOutlook_2013_ebook.pdf.



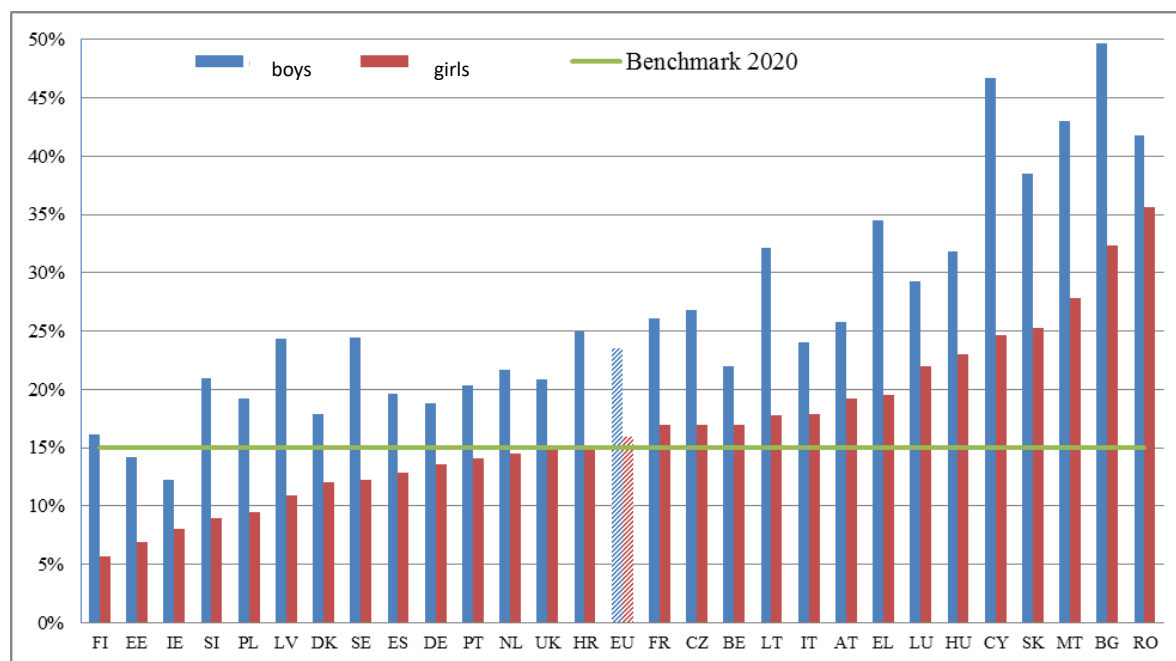
Source: PISA 2015, 2012, 2009⁵

Figure 3 should be interpreted according to the following relationship: the lower the percentage, the better the country's result, because the values show the percentage of the weakest students. A significant spread is noticeable between member countries. Poland ranks fourth in the EU. Us leading countries with the lowest percentage of students with poor results in reading and interpretation are Ireland, Finland and Estonia.

It is important from the point of view of public policy to counteract significant differences in performance between boys and girls. Chart 4 shows the alarming scale of these differences. The percentage of boys with poor reading performance is significantly higher in all EU countries.

Figure 4 - Percentage of boys and girls achieving low scores in the PISA 2015 study

⁵ Chart included in the brochure DG EAC (2016): *PISA 2015 EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe*.



Source: PISA 2015, own calculations by DG EAC⁶

Integration of migrants as a task of education policy in Europe

Another important factor influencing changes in the functioning of languages in Europe is immigration. Europe is becoming more and more diverse in terms of nationality:

- 4% of EU citizens are non-EU citizens (20 million),
- in 2015, 2.6 million residence permits were issued in Europe,
- millions of EU citizens are immigrants and speak the language of their countries of origin in the third generation. These phenomena are observed on a large scale in the Turkish minorities in Germany and in Arabic in Belgium and France.

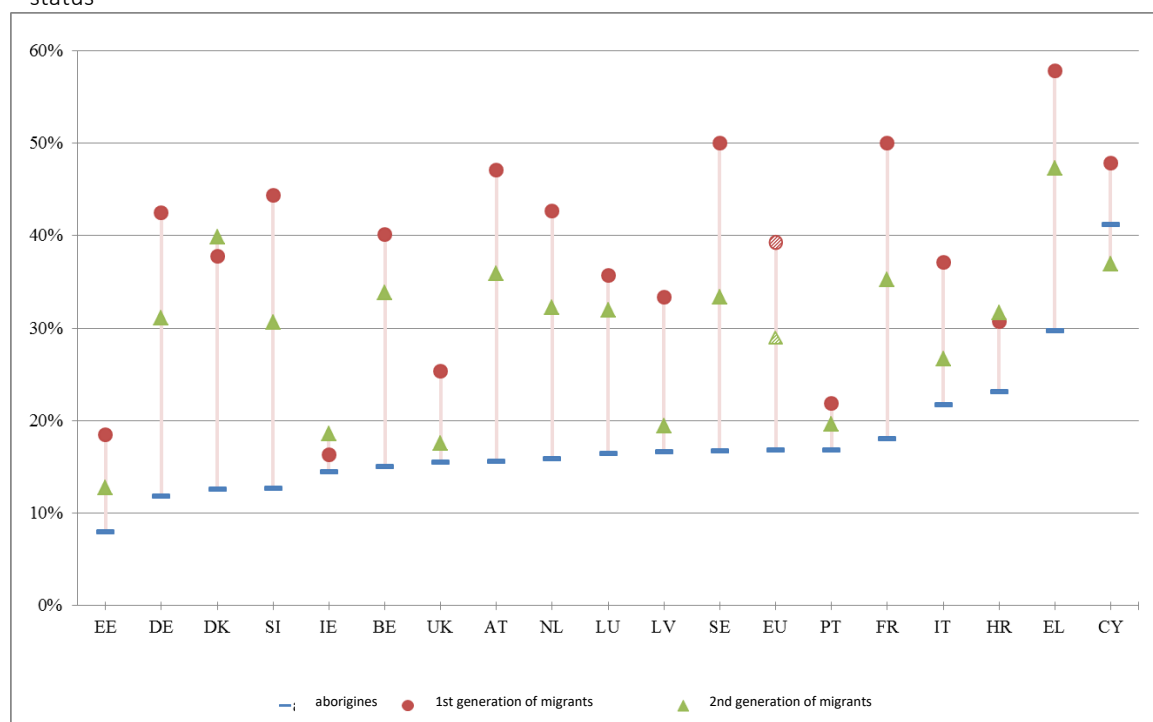
However, attention should be drawn to the significant differences in the shaping of EU policy towards migrants within the EU and citizens of non-EU countries, i.e. refugees and foreigners fleeing the war or in search of a better life in Europe. In relation to the latter, the Union pursues an active integration policy aimed at facilitating full-fledged participation in the labor market and the civic and cultural life of the host country. As DG EAC research shows, being an immigrant is associated with lower educational opportunities, hinders socialization and learning state language at school, and marks the lack of social capital. It often occurs in combination with other problems, such as poverty, low education of parents, or raising children by a single mother or father.

As Figure 5 shows, immigrants' children achieve significantly lower scores in math statistically. For the record, let us emphasize that "low results" in the PISA survey are defined as the result below the baseline level 2. With a few exceptions, the second generation of

⁶ The Figure is included in the brochure DG EAC (2016): *PISA 2015 EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe*

immigrants performs better than the first generation, approaching the results achieved by native people.

Figure 5 - Percentage of low mathematics results students in PISA 2015 surveys according to migration status



Source: PISA 2015⁷

How can state intervention help immigrants start and raise the educational outcomes achieved by their children? According to the latest DG EAC research, employing foreign teachers is a very effective procedure, as they provide many positive patterns and better communication in the classroom with their attitudes⁸.

Secondly, it is worth implementing special pre-school education programs for immigrant children and training programs for teachers to change stereotypical attitudes towards immigrant children.

Conclusions

⁷ The Figure is included in the brochure DG EAC (2016): PISA 2015 EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe.

⁸ European Commission (2016), *Study on the Diversity Within the Teaching Profession with Particular Focus on Migrant and/or Minority Background*.

Linguistic diversity in Europe is a fact, using several languages in parallel in many European countries is a norm, globalization and cultural consumption will soon intensify these processes. That's why mastering foreign languages is one of the key competences. However, it is very important to master the national /first/ national language, which is responsible for general competences and achievements in the final exams at school. A good knowledge of the mother tongue also influences the future fate and successful biographical projects of young people positively, as demonstrated by PIAAC research. To a special extent, these requirements apply to pupils with a migrant background who have to overcome the language barrier and various manifestations of economic deprivation.