

European Language Policy: unification, preservation or promotion of minority languages in the EU

Introduction

When the European Union was established in 1950 member-states granted equal status to all languages, a status that has not been changed. After expanding to its current 27 member-states and having prospect of further enlargement, it can however be challenged how efficient this agreement is or whether a case can be made for the promotion of minority languages. This essay will argue that an economic case can be made for the unification of language, but that for the sake of preserving national identities and safeguarding equality, the use of a common language such as English as Lingua Franca (ELF) is needed. It is further highlighted that language diversity might currently play an important role in protecting welfare states from excessive migration flows. If this proposition would be empirically confirmed, policy measures that protect from excessive migration without violating the right to free movement should be introduced before a common language is to be adopted. Some suggestions for such measures are made but their effectiveness may be insufficient, giving further rise to the importance of minority language promotion and making the introduction of ELF as an official lingua franca seem farfetched. Consequently, promoting multilingualism among those that would be expected to benefit most from a common language, such as those employed in business, politics or with specific skills, is the best possible strategy the EU can pursue.

Identity and Equality – arguments for promoting languages

This essay defines minority languages as languages spoken in one or few countries. Examples of such languages are Slovakian, Estonian and Dutch. The argument for the promotion of such minority languages can be based on the linkage between the (national) language and (national) identity, which is mediated by the (national) language expressing (national) cultural ideas. Moreover, this also implies that the preservation of minority languages is paramount to the preservation of national identities. The European Union recognizes the value of cultural diversity to such an extent that it incorporated this strength into its motto: united in diversity (European Commission, 2020a). Moreover, the EU explicitly promotes multilingualism by setting the objective for every European citizen to master at least three languages (European Parliament, 2019) and having declared September 26 to be the annual European Day of Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

Besides the above identity argument, facilitation of minority languages in the EU can be defended on the basis of equality, as the EU must safeguard citizens' access to the democratic process. Moreover, citizens cannot be forced to be multilingual and investing in language skills is potentially costly in both monetary terms and the opportunity costs of forgone activities

Economic Efficiency – arguments for a common language

To preserve national identities and equality between citizens, it is thus important to facilitate the use of minority languages. However,

this does not imply that the EU must actively promote the use of these languages. Diversity weakens the embodiment of the EU-ideology to create one public sharing one identity. Moreover, economic benefits are to be derived from introducing a common language into the EU. Economic theories such as those associated with network externalities [1] [see for instance; Church & King (1993)] and gravity models [2] [see for instance; Melitz (2008)] illustrate that the unification of language usage, contributes to decreasing transaction costs and increasing labour mobility between states. The resulting efficiency gains help in sustaining GDP growth and fit within the EU's broader vision to position Europe as an innovation-hub, as for instance embodied in the Framework Programmes (European Commission, 2020b).

English as Lingua Franca – a possible common language

A European version of English, English as Lingua Franca (ELF) [3], might be the best candidate for a common language that will coexists along national languages (Cogo & Jenkins, 2010). A large share of the European population already is proficient in “a” form of English, which may ensure that the uptake of ELF is sufficient to grow into a viable version of English [4]. This functional version of English is likely to be relatively easy to learn, because it abstains from grammatical constructions, words, pronunciations and idioms characteristic to national versions of English as well as omit foreign-cultural peculiarities. ELF is compatible with the many loanwords national languages took from other versions of English and invites Europe to alter the language along its own cultural development.

Moreover, ELF would avoid massive sunk costs European states made when investing in their populations' English proficiency. In fact, the usage of English as a lingua franca between Europeans already is widespread and facilitates access to many states outside the EU that natively use versions of English. Finally, recognition of ELF would provide justification for stopping to teach national versions of English from which Europeans might feel culturally alienated.

Welfare States – a common language potentially unviable

One way to preserve national identities, ensure equality across citizens and reap the economic benefits of a common language is to introduce ELF by means of a directive requiring member-states to enforce the possibility for “essential communication” [5] to be conducted in both the national language and ELF. This will ensure that no citizen has worse access to communication while enabling all to move more freely across Europe.

A major argument disfavouring the expected increase in mobility might be based on its implications for European welfare states. Mobility could stimulate brain drains in some states (Chrancokova et al, 2020) and lead to unemployment or social problems in migrant-receiving states. Moreover, such brain drains might strengthen club-convergence patterns [6] which further deteriorate the stability of the union.

However, for these potential effects to emerge, migration must be permanent. When the introduction of ELF is bundled with policy measures incentivizing a timely return of migrants, such as tax

credits or temporary circular and transnational mobility constructions (Krisjane et al, 2016), these negative effects might not emerge.

Conclusion

The free movement agreement hinders member-states in controlling migration, as such the prevalence of minority languages might be one of the final shields against potentially excessive or geographically concentrated migration flows (or at least for the fear for such occurrences). Yet, when policy measures are found that can fulfil this task, ELF can be introduced in a manner that preserves the national identity and ensures equality, while allowing to reap the economic benefits from a common language. However, it remains to be seen whether policy measures can be found that sufficiently substitute the protection minority languages offer, giving further rise to the importance of minority language promotion and making the introduction of ELF as an official lingua franca seem farfetched. Consequently, promoting multilingualism among those that would be expected to benefit most from a common language, such as those employed in business, politics or with specific skills, is the best possible strategy the EU can pursue.

Appendix

End Notes

[1] An increase of the number of proficient users more than proportionally increases the number of possible interactions that can occur between users.

[2] (Empirical) models measuring the decline in trade when the (relative) distance between states increases. A common language decreases the relative distance between states.

[3] “The term English as a lingua franca (ELF) refers to the teaching, learning, and use of English as a common means of communication (or contact language) for speakers of different native languages” (Nordquist, 2020: webpage).

[4] The special Eurobarometer survey 386 (2012) revealed that 79% of the EU citizens perceive English to be the most useful foreign language (p5). That English is mastered to some extent by 38% of the EU citizens (p13) and that 25% of the EU citizens is proficient enough to at least read basic articles and texts in English (p15).

[5] All communication with government authorities, the healthcare sector, the public transport sector, insurance companies, the financial service & housing sector and the education sector.

[6] Club-convergence refers here to a situation in which EU member-states do not converge to the same level of income per capita overall, but to similar levels of income per capita among groups of member-states. See for instance: Von Lyncker & Thoennessen (2017).

References

- Chrancokova, M., Weibl, G., & Dokupilova, D. (2020). The Brain Drain of People from Slovakia. In *Economic and Social Development (Book of Proceedings)*, 51st International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development. Pp 320-329.
- Church, J., & King, I. (1993). Bilingualism and network externalities. *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 26(2), 337-345.
- Cogo, A., & Jenkins, J. (2010). English as a lingua franca in Europe: A mismatch between policy and practice. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 2(2), 271-293.
- Council of Europe. 26 September - European Day of Languages. Retrieved 25 May 2020 at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/26-september-european-day-of-languages>
- Eurobarometer [Special]. (2012). Europeans and their Languages. Reference 386.
- European Commission. (2020a). The EU Motto. Retrieved 25 May 2020 at https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_en
- European Commission. (2020b). Horizon Europe - the next research and innovation framework programme. Retrieved 25 May 2020 at https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe-next-research-and-innovation-framework-programme_en
- European Parliament. (2019). Fact Sheets on the European Union: Language Policy. Retrieved 25 May 2020 at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy>
- Krisjane Z., Apsite-Berina E., Berzins M. (2016) Circularity Within the EU: The Return Intentions of Latvian Migrants. In: Nadler R.,
- Kovács Z., Glorius B., Lang T. (eds) *Return Migration and Regional Development in Europe*. New Geographies of Europe. Palgrave Macmillan, London
- Melitz, J. (2008). Language and foreign trade. *European Economic Review*, 52(4), 667-699.

Nordquist, R. (2020). English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms. ThoughtCo. Retrieved 25 May 2020 at <https://www.thoughtco.com/english-as-a-lingua-franca-elf-1690578>

Von Lyncker, K., & Thoennessen, R. (2017). Regional club convergence in the EU: evidence from a panel data analysis. *Empirical Economics*. 52(2), 525-553.

Efficiency and Enlargement in the European Union

Introduction

Colomer (2009) depicts a situation in which the European Union comprises 38 member-states and covers all current states above the Mediterranean Sea but below the Arctic Ocean, and in between the Atlantic Sea and Russia. Although the EU is not yet on three quarters of this size, it is worth asking whether this would make the functioning of the EU more efficient. The essay will argue that enlargement potentially increases the efficiency of the union but that such efficiency-gains are not expected in the near future, because member-states should first converge their policy-preferences. The essay supports this claim by outlining that enlargements are expected to cause further diversity in policy-preferences, while the EU already suffers from division and lacks the solidarity and institutional strength to overcome this division. Moreover, it will be emphasised that because of the ambiguity in the determination of net-efficiency gains following enlargement, perceptions play an influential role in the formation of public opinion. This increases the need for enlargements being of undisputable benefit to all member-states, the more because redistribution of benefits will be complicated. The convergence of policy-preferences could potentially be reached by means of a political crisis. Yet, the timing of such a shock is uncertain and it would be risky not to take the time to gauge the stability of any potentially enhanced bond before engaging in enlargement.

Economic Efficiency

Alesina (2003) explains that policy-measures the European Union can pursue to reach pareto-optimality relate to utilizing economies of scale or internalizing externalities. *Externalities* encompass all benefits and costs that are incurred by other states than the state acting. The cost of cleaning-up air pollution that drifts into a state from a neighbouring state would be an example of a (negative) externality. *Economies of scale* encompass the increasing returns that result from upscaling a process. The reduction in overhead costs following European integration and leading to a lower per-capita cost of public goods would be an example of exploiting economies of scale. Alesina (2003) further stresses that from a theoretical perspective, the EU should only engage in policy domains where externalities or economies of scale are expected to be large. Moreover, for both the utilization of economies of scale and the internalization of externalities, are benefits expected to increase with the number of states participating.

Other arguments favouring enlargement could relate to the improvement of the EU's position to contain rent-seeking. Enlargement could for instance reduce tech-giants' [1] bargaining power over EU policymakers which may lead to an increase in market-competition and thus social welfare. Furthermore, an increase in the size of the single market might stimulate productivity growth and thus result in economic development [see for instance (Romer, 1986)]. Finally, a larger union will lead to a larger probability of states disagreeing with each other. This increased risk

of conflicting-interests might lead to political contestation featuring more prominently in the policy-making process.

The Cost of Diversity

However, this latter argument might not only translate into a strengthening of checks and balances, but slow down the policy-making process. Moreover, the increased risk of conflict, together with the increased size of the union, might increase the risk of interests becoming geographically clustered which could potentially result in a break-up of the union.

The aforementioned well illustrates the difficulties diversity introduces when the size of the union is increased. The more diverse the social, cultural, historical and economic-backgrounds of EU-citizens become, the more diverse their policy-preferences become and the more challenging it becomes to satisfy states' heterogenous needs. Let alone to find common interests and reach agreements. The effectiveness of the EU-cooperation and the success of enlargement thus depend on the compatibility, and the evolution of this compatibility over time, of current member-states, as well as aspiring member-states policy-preferences.

Yet, convergence of policy-preferences is hindered by the EU's current internal divisions and institutional ill-suitedness to address these divisions. A lack of solidarity is the main cause for division and manifests itself in, for instance, an absence of willingness to integrate fiscal policy or to redistribute refugees. The EU's institutional ill-suitedness to address these divisions is best

expressed in its legislative procedure in which states can veto any proposal that leverages autonomy to the EU. Other institutional weaknesses of the EU relate to: a lack of transparency and accountability (Alesina & Perotti, 2004), fiscal and political imbalances (Hix & Høyland, 2008), and the integration of policy domains exhibiting little externalities or economies of scale while being absent in ones the EU theoretically should not (Alesina, et al. 2005) [2]. These additional weaknesses further deteriorate the EU's position to call and find (public) support for reform, and are in turn difficult to resolve for the same reason. That is, states can veto any proposal that leverages autonomy to the EU.

Net-efficiency Gain

It is worth highlighting that the expected efficiency gains and costs of diversity are hard to quantify, making a cost-benefit analysis a somewhat futile exercise. Let alone an attempt to optimise this net-efficiency gain. It is in this vacuum that perceptions on the net-efficiency gain become more influential. Because EU-citizens share no common identity and the EU suffers from division among its member-states, public opinion might in times of adversity be easily influenced to the detriment of the project. Moreover, Guiso et al. (2016) illustrate that after large steps in the integration process are made, such as the Maastricht Treaty, public support deteriorates. Finally, because net-efficiency gains are hard to quantify, it is near impossible to introduce a redistribution-scheme that compensates those states that win little or lose from enlargement. These three points imply that enlargement must truly be a success for a state, to

be perceived by its citizens as being so. This increases the need for enlargements benefitting the EU in its entirety. A requirement difficult to fulfil when member-states are divided.

Conclusion

There are potentially great efficiency gains obtainable from further European integration, but enlargement might come at the cost of slowing-down the policy-process and reduces the compatibility of states' policy-preferences. Moreover, political division among member-states already is present to the extent that integration in some important policy-domains, such as fiscal policy, has stagnated. A lack of solidarity and the ill-suitedness of EU-institutions to reform themselves, form two of the main barriers to breaking this situation. It has further been highlighted that net-efficiency gains are difficult to determine and redistribution schemes complicated to implement. Both points give rise to the influence of perceptions in the formation of public opinion which can potentially backlash any negative consequence from enlargement.

For the prospect of sustaining and potentially increasing cooperation, it is crucial that the EU does not enlarge until member-states policy-preferences are sufficiently converged and give new impulses to the vision for the European-project. An exogenous shock in the form of a crisis might do this by increasing solidarity between member-states. When this happens agreement on reforming institutions and shifting autonomy towards the EU becomes plausible. Yet, the timing of such a shock is uncertain and

it would be risky not to take the time to gauge the stability of any potentially enhanced bond before engaging in enlargement.

Appendix

End Notes

[1] Tech-giants such as Amazon, Facebook and Google typically having no physical presence in the states they operate. Therefore, it is relatively easy for these companies to avoid taxation.

[2] A lack of transparency and accountability results for instance from only the European Parliament debating openly and the difficulty of undertaking formal action against the European Commission. Fiscal imbalances result for instance from the minor financial resources of the European Union relative to the member-states and the heterogeneity in the fiscal policies of member-states, such as for instance the variety in corporate income tax rates.

Political imbalances result for instance from the European Commission having both the monopoly on formally proposing legislation and the responsibility to implement legislation, and the legislative process being structured such that a majority vote in the European Parliament is not decisive.

References

Alesina, A. (2003). The size of countries: does it matter? *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 1(2-3), 301-316.

Alesina, A., Angeloni, I., & Schuknecht, L. (2005). What does the European Union do? *Public Choice*, 123(3-4), 275-319.

Alesina, A., & Perotti, R. (2004). The European Union: a politically incorrect view. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18(4), 27-48.

Colomer, J. M. (2009). The building of the American and European Empires. LSE Europe in Question Discussion Paper Series. LEQS Paper No 06/2009.

Guiso, L., Sapienza, P., & Zingales, L. (2016). Monnet's error? *Economic Policy*, 31(86), 247-297.

Hix, S. & Høyland, B. (2008). The Political System of the European Union. Palgrave Macmillan. Edition 3. ISBN 9780230249820.

Romer, P. M. (1986). Increasing returns and long-run growth. *Journal of political economy*, 94(5), 1002-1037.