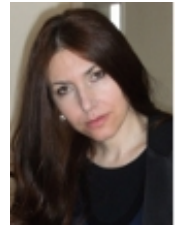


# International actors such as UNESCO and the EU are key to protecting the status of Italy's Greek speaking minority

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/23/international-actors-such-as-unesco-and-the-eu-are-key-to-protecting-the-status-of-italys-greek-speaking-minority/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/23/international-actors-such-as-unesco-and-the-eu-are-key-to-protecting-the-status-of-italys-greek-speaking-minority/)

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*The protection of minority groups and languages is a key issue in several countries across Europe. Stavroula Pipyrou assesses the status of the Grecanici: the Greek speaking minority located in the region of Calabria in Italy. She writes that minority policies were largely ignored under the governments of Silvio Berlusconi and Mario Monti, resulting in members of the Grecanici increasingly turning to international actors such as UNESCO and the EU to strengthen their rights.*



In the harsh land of Calabria in Italy, an odd combination of crests and high plateaux and low sunken plains, where natural disasters and poor national and regional administrative politics meet, reside the Grecanici, the Greek linguistic minority of Calabria. Speaking Grecanico, a language categorised as “[severely endangered](#)” by UNESCO, the Grecanici of Calabria are one of the two indigenous Greek speaking populations in South Italy, the other being in Puglia.

Grecanico (also termed Griko and Greco) is comprised of archaic Doric, Hellenistic, Byzantine as well as local Romanic and Italian linguistic elements. Grecanici also speak the local Calabrian dialect as well as standard Italian. They trace their roots to the period of Magna Graecia (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and the foundation of the first Greek cities. Consecutive relocations from Greece during the Byzantine and Norman eras enriched some Calabrian populations with Greek linguistic elements and provoked a positive economic and social effervescence.

Grecanici originate from the villages of area Grecanica, in the Aspromonte highlands in the province of Reggio Calabria, where they sought refuge from centuries of conquest. Policies of language oppression, especially during the Mussolini years, have left bitter memories and have acquired a highly politicised tenor directly related to the politics of minority identity. Recollections of social discrimination – especially during their mid-twentieth century rural-urban migration – are rife.

Accounts pertaining to the *miseria* (socio-economic poverty) provoked by two World Wars, trans-Atlantic and European migration and forced relocation after the devastating landslides of the 1950s and 1970s that destroyed the Grecanici villages, provide languages of representation and social justification for multifaceted political and ideological dispositions.

At the end of the 1960s a strong Grecanici civil society rapidly started taking shape. With the fundamental aim to address the *Questione Grecanica* (the Grecanici problem), the first Grecanici civic associations debated the local and international import of ‘protecting’ and ‘salvaging’ their Greek language. Their policy advocated new outreach initiatives to engage with as many Grecanici as possible, both in the city of Reggio Calabria and the Grecanici villages, proposing a new ideology regarding Grecanico language, heritage and patrimony. Due to its Ancient Greek roots, the Grecanico language was considered superior and the Grecanici were encouraged by the cultural



Grecanici cultural group, Credit: Jebwalwhales (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

associations to embrace their origins. They further aimed to initiate substantial links with the Greek speaking populations of Puglia and wider publics in Greece.

## **On the margins of Europe**

With twelve languages officially recognised by the state, Italy can boast the greatest diversity of regional and minority languages in Western Europe. The legal framework concerning the governance and protection of linguistic rights is drawn directly from the European Union and the Council of Europe. Under the auspices of UNESCO and other international bodies, the debate over the preservation of endangered minority languages has gained momentum in the last two decades.

We can no longer deny that the complex web of views of minority populations themselves, local and national government, as well as European Union guidelines, synthesise a picture that introduces practical and theoretical incommensurabilities into minority studies. This complex management of minority affairs that is realised through various scales of governance and representation is the topic of my research.

When I first arrived in Reggio Calabria in April 2006 to commence doctoral research, a considerable number of local civic actors, professors, politicians and everyday people tried to persuade me that working with the Grecanici was a utopian project. It was insisted that “these people no longer use the Grecanico language”, that “the language is dead” and that “the younger generations have no interest in it other than instrumentally seeking a job in the local government”. Echoing right-wing views akin to those of the *Lega Nord* and the former *Alleanza Nazionale*, these politicised positions were overwhelmingly influenced by the fear of a break-up of the Italian state provoked by the relatively recent recognition of minorities – ethnic and linguistic.

Despite its problematic history, the implementation of [act no. 482 of 1999](#) in Italy was crucial in that it substantiated the opportunity to directly link the linguistic minorities to local self-government. Following the constitutional implementation, local populations and institutions appeared determined to make use of the law in the territorial areas where the measures of protection applied.

After the delimitation of the geographic minority areas by the provincial councils, the linguistic minorities recognised by act no. 482 were granted the right to use their minority language in the field of education, both as a medium-language and as a subject in nursery schools, in primary and secondary education, in public meetings, with public administration and judicial authorities, in place names, and in the media. Yet, local disillusion was on the horizon. Both the Silvio Berlusconi government and the more recent transitional government of Mario Monti demonstrated incredible indifference to minority policies, culminating in the 2013 budget cuts that left the apparatus of minority self-government bankrupt with employees going months without pay.

More than ever, minorities turn to actors of global influence such as UNESCO and the EU to claim their right to distinctiveness. It has been argued that difference is realised on a global scale through a common set of formats and structures that mediate between cultures, and ultimately scale distinctiveness along a limited number of dimensions. As a result, only some kinds of difference are promoted whilst others are submerged.

The UNESCO [Convention on the Protection of Intangible Heritage](#) in 2003 prompted localities around the world to think of oral traditions, folk practices, rituals, crafts and dance as ‘intangible’, but all the same ‘living’ assets that needed to be preserved. Over the past twelve months the Calabrian Regional Ministry of Culture has announced a call regarding “*Le Minoranze Linguistiche calabresi, un patrimonio dal valore universale*” (The Calabrian Linguistic minorities, heritage of universal value) with the aim to propose a nomination for the possible inclusion of the Calabrian linguistic minorities on the UNESCO representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Whilst the candidacy has not yet been submitted, the aesthetics of separating heritage into categories such as ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ creates a problem in the way Grecanici, as well as a great number of local populations around the world, come to think of themselves through very particular and sometimes unfamiliar taxonomies.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

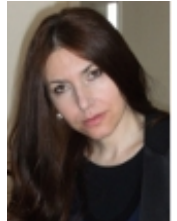
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## **About the author**

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