

A 'one-language' EU policy would foster elitism and hit disproportionately the least advantaged

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*In an increasingly anglo-centric world, is multilingualism still needed in the European Union? The answer is a resounding yes, according to a study by **Michele Gazzola**. Analysing Eurostat data, he finds that making English the only official language of the EU would exclude approximately four out of five EU citizens from having a deep understanding of official information. This would in turn foster inequality in the access to EU tenders, and likely end up further fuelling Euroscepticism. As he argues, the 0.0087% of the EU's GDP invested in multilingualism is a price well worth paying to ensure linguistic inclusion.*



During a speech addressed to the European Parliament the 26th October 2004, Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands said:

If we had to name something that is most intimately our own, we would probably say our mother tongue. Every member state accordingly attaches great importance to the recognition of its language in the European Union. For that reason, I am addressing you today in Dutch. At the same time, I am convinced that cooperation in Europe will increasingly demand concessions of us in this field. Unless we want to turn the EU into a Tower of Babel, we shall have to make every effort to understand each other as clearly as possible.

In recent years, a number of observers have argued that the EU should finally acknowledge the role of English as Europe's lingua franca – take the bull by the horns, and make English the only official language of the EU. Less

radical commentators have argued in favour of a trilingual policy based on English, French and German.

This proposal is, however, not without controversies. Replacing the 24 official languages of the EU with only English or with three languages (English, French and German) would not only disadvantage the citizens of some European countries more than others; it would also adversely affect economically and socially disadvantaged individuals, thereby increasing the distance between EU institutions and its citizens.

The results of a [recently published study](#) reject the idea that reducing the number of the official languages of the EU would be more effective and inclusive. Using data collected by Eurostat on almost 170,000 residents and their language skills in 25 EU countries, the article shows that if English were the only official language of the Union, 45% of residents in the countries examined would have no access to legal documents, Internet webpages of EU institutions, and to the debates carried out at the European Parliament and broadcasted through the Internet, because they do not understand this language. In other words, they would be linguistically excluded, and this can be viewed as a form of political disenfranchisement.

It would be risky, nevertheless, to put on the same level native speakers of a language and people who have just fair or intermediate skills in such a language. When looking at EU residents who are neither native speakers nor proficient in English, the proportion of residents who would have difficulties in understanding political and legal EU documents increases to 79%. Four Europeans out of five. Thus, contrary to what is commonly believed, proficiency in English is not a basic skill in Europe, not even among the younger adults.

Only 30% of respondents aged 25-34 have no knowledge of English, which is lower than the average (45%), but 74% of respondents in that age class do not speak English at a proficient or native level. This value is quite close to the average for the whole population (79%). In other words, the young are more likely to speak foreign languages than the older generation, but they do not master them much better. This result is consistent with the recent results of the [European Survey on Language Competences](#) of pupils. A language policy based on English, French and German would be highly exclusionary too, because it would disenfranchise 26% to 49% of residents, depending on the indicator used, and these percentages are going to increase considerably after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

This is not the end of the story, though. Multilingualism is not only the most effective policy to convey information about the EU to Europeans. It is also the only one that is truly inclusive at a relatively reasonable cost (0.0087% of the EU's GDP, 1% of the budget of the EU bodies). A drastic reduction of the official languages of the EU would have regressive effects, because it would make the access to information published by the EU particularly difficult for the least educated people, those with the lowest income status, the unemployed, the retired, the permanently disabled and residents fulfilling domestic tasks.

For example, 17% of respondents who have successfully completed a tertiary level of education have no knowledge of English, whereas this percentage is 47% among those who have achieved only an upper secondary level of education. 21% of respondents holding a job have no knowledge of English, French or German, either as a foreign or native language, but this percentage is 41% among the unemployed. Residents with a relatively higher income are more likely to speak foreign languages than those who have a relatively lower higher income, and therefore they are less likely to be linguistically excluded if the EU stops using their mother tongue or primary language of education.

It is not just a blanket reduction in the number of languages that would be exclusionary. Even reducing the current domains of use of the official language entails similar effects. In 2014, for example, 14 Directorates-General (DG) of the European Commission out of 33 published their home pages only in English, eight DGs published them in English, French and German, one DG in 11 languages, and 10 DGs in 24 or 23 official languages. These webpages often contain material that has strategic importance for economic actors such as small and medium enterprises, associations and NGOs that compete for calls for tenders, funding programmes or procurement procedures. As a result, competition among actors may turn out to be biased because of lack of adequate multilingual information.

Translation and interpretation are far better ways to build social cohesion in the EU by allowing them to take part in all societal processes. By contrast, a nineteenth century-style 'one state, one language' language policy would exclude too many Europeans from EU business, and would be disproportionate against the people who are the least advantaged. Perhaps it has never been as urgent as now for the EU to be close to its citizens by using their native languages, and to prevent further fuelling Eurosceptic movements. Avoiding the elitist temptation is therefore of crucial importance, including in the field of language policy.

*The findings discussed in this blog post are based on a recently published [article](#) in *European Union Politics*. The post represents the views of the author and not the position of the *Democratic Audit* blog, or of the LSE.*

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