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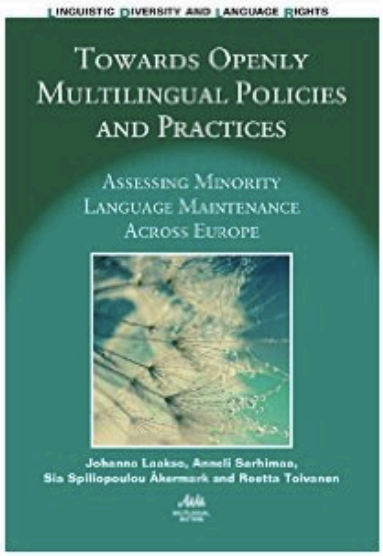
Minority languages in Europe: Nondiscrimination and diversity in language policies and in reality

What we are going to say here is based on the results of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All). ELDIA was an international research project funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the EU, with Anneli Sarhimaa in Mainz as the coordinator-in-chief and research partners at six other research institutions across Europe. The main aim of the project was to investigate the multilingualism of a selected sample of European minorities, both autochthonous and migrant ones, and to create a language maintenance barometer, operationalizing the well-known criteria of language endangerment and language maintenance and applying them on empirical data extracted from a questionnaire study and from centrally planned interviews. The main results of ELDIA and all of our Internet publications can be found by way of our project website (www.eldia-project.org).

On the basis of the main results of ELDIA, a monograph was written by four central members of the ELDIA consortium and published by Multilingual Matters last year.



Of the authors, Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark is not here; she is a specialist in law issues pertaining to minorities and their human rights and the director of the Åland Island Peace Institute. In ELDIA, she led the workgroup which conducted the analyses of legal and institutional frameworks in each country. Johanna Laakso, was the dissemination manager of the ELDIA project, and leader of the case study on Hungarian in Austria, an interesting case as it involves a minority which is partly autochthonous and partly results from diverse immigrations. Anneli Sarhimaa was the instigator of the project and its chief coordinator, and the case study which she conducted was a pioneering one: never before have the Karelian speakers in Finland, a minority long neglected and only recently acknowledged, been subject to such a wide and ambitious sociolinguistic study. Data from this study have also been used in Anneli's new book, *Vaietut ja vaiennetut,* which is soon coming out in Finnish. Related to the topics of this talk is also a recent book on language diversity and the future of minority languages, *Linguistic genocide or superdiversity?,* edited by Reetta Toivanen together with Janne Saarikivi. In the ELDIA project, Reetta was the leader of the media analysis, that is, case studies on the representations of the minorities at issue and the power relationships as reflected in minority and majority media in each country.

As an EU project on multilingualism and linguistic diversity, ELDIA was anything but alone. In fact, recent years have seen numerous international research projects on individual and societal multilingualism, minority languages, management of multilingualism, multilingual language policies etc. etc. There are lots of beautiful words and wishful thinking about the blessings of multilingualism, the EU has claimed to promote multilingualism and the learning of at least two languages in addition to the mother tongue (TwoPlus), also in the interest of democracy and inclusion. However, some languages are clearly more equal than others, the multilingualism of minorities (for instance, Hungarians in Austria who speak Hungarian and German) is treated differently from the acquired multilingualism of majorities (for instance, German-speaking Austrians learning English or French). Above all, the EU still has no systematic and efficient policies for promoting multilingualism and supporting the maintenance of minority languages. Identifying this problem was one of our central points of departure, and the reality of this problem was also confirmed in all our case studies.

To make the long story short, as concerns the state of language diversity and linguistic human rights in Europe, we found numerous gaps between proclaimed policy goals and the reality as experienced by our multilingual speech communities. We will start with the problems with legislation, and I will give the floor to Reetta Toivanen.

> *Zakonad oma, elos em nähkoi.* ['There are laws, we don't see them in real life.' Veps informant in Russia]
> *Zakonad ollah, vaigu ei toimita.* ['There are laws but they don't work.' Karelian informant in Russia]
> *Nincs betartva a törvény.* ['The law is not adhered to.' Hungarian-speaking informant in Austria]

In all countries under study, there are specific language laws or minority laws, many of them passed or amended quite recently. Many of these countries had also signed and ratified the European Charter for regional and minority languages. Yet, this legislation was often directly reported to be inefficient, at least the informants in many case studies expressed their mistrust in the efficiency of laws.

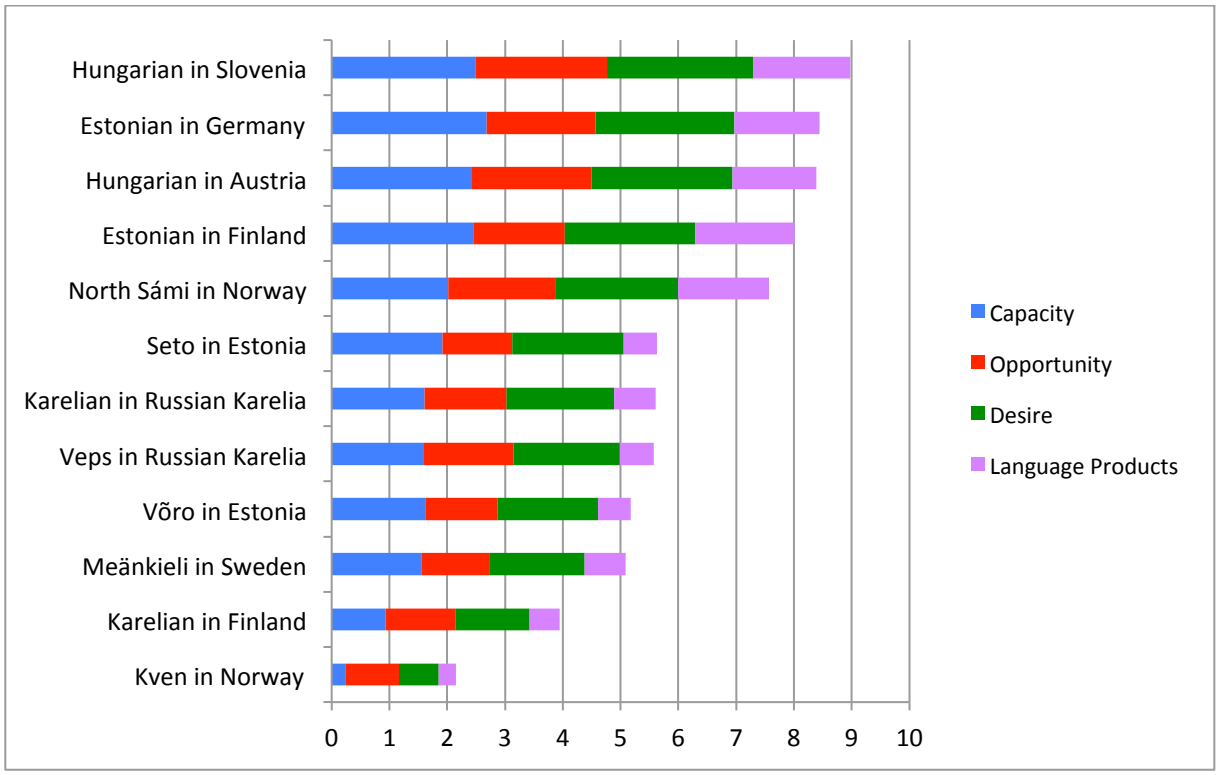
> *(...) õkva nigu es keeletä aga väga nigu ammetlikult es kiteta ka (...)* ['it was not directly, like, forbidden but not, like, officially approved either'; Võro-speaking informant, Estonia]
> *a dem. országok alapszabálya a többnyelvűség* ['multilingualism is the basic rule of dem[ocratic] countries', Hungarian-speaking informant in Austria]

In general, language laws often lack any sanctions, or laws and regulations are too vaguely formulated to have any real effect as concerns the promotion of a minority language. Speakers of minority languages may find it difficult to understand the lawmakers' intention: is their language really approved, or even promoted, or not? Informants quite often referred to general principles of democracy and non-discrimination which, in a way, should include the support for minority languages, but often added that these noble principles were not always realized.

Of course, there are differences between national legislations and law traditions. However, there are also many similarities in, for instance, the relationship between minority and language legislation and foreign policy. In Estonia, the policy of one sole national language still prevents the lawmakers from recognizing Võro and Seto as regional minority languages. These Southern Estonian language varieties are only cultivated and supported as varieties of Estonian, so-called "dialect languages", a novel and controversial term introduced in the Estonian language law. These complications, in turn, are obviously connected to the presence of the large Russian-speaking immigrant population in the country, and this means that the language policies in

Estonia share the burdens of Estonian-Russian foreign policy. Similarly, the treatment of the Kven minority in Norway and the Karelian-speaking minority in Finland has been influenced by a fear of Russia or the Soviet Union, and similar factors have affected minority language policies in many other European nation-states as well.

The worth of language as such is seldom if ever acknowledged in legislation, but policies towards languages and their speakers are determined by other interests. What is officially acknowledged or protected by law is, in the best case, the right of certain people to use a certain language in a certain area; nowhere is multilingualism in general, or the right of people to know and learn multiple languages, protected by law or mentioned as a goal of national legislation. Minority languages in particular are often seen as ethnic attributes rather than components of a multilingual person's identity and language knowledge, and if they can be associated with the neighbouring state (as is the case with some autochthonous and numerous migrant minorities in Europe), decision-makers often see them just as representative of foreignness. The ELDIA study in Austria, for instance, showed that for German-speaking Austrians, politicians and decision-makers, Hungarian is the language of the slightly exotic eastern neighbours, the language of another country, of tourism and immigration, not the language of a minority which has been present in Austria for a thousand years already.



One of the most interesting findings in ELDIA is illustrated by this diagram. As Johanna already mentioned, one of ELDIA's main results was a language vitality barometer. For the barometer, the data from the questionnaire survey were used to calculate scores on a simple scale from 0 to 4: 0 means that the language has completely fallen out of use and 4 means that there are no signs of endangerment. These scores were calculated so as to reflect four so-called focus areas each: *capacity* (here marked with blue) or the informants' subjective ratings of their language skills, *opportunity* (red) or the contexts and settings where the language can be used, *desire* (green) or the speakers' will and desire to use the language, and *language products* (violet) or the availability of products and services in the language. Theoretically, the maximum score for a language would be 16 (4 points for each of the four focus areas), but none of our minority languages came even close to that. And now if we look at the three lowest scores, we see that they belong to minority languages in the Nordic countries: Meänkieli or Tornedal Finnish in Northern Sweden, Karelian

in Finland, and Kven in Norway – that is, in countries which hold high rankings in many other indexes of human development (life expectancy, education, gross national income) and democracy.

In other words, the traditions of Nordic democracy and a deeply rooted – as we would like to believe – ideology of equal opportunities and non-discrimination are not enough to guarantee the maintenance of minority languages. Or, to be more precise, they are not enough to compensate for the effects of assimilatory language policies in the past.

> *Toiset opettajat sanoivat oppilaille, kun he puhuivat karjalan kieltä, että täällä ei puhuta ryssää.* 'Some teachers told pupils who spoke Karelian not to speak *ryssä* [a derogatory name for Russian]' (Tapani Menschakoff about his school days in the 1960s, in an opinion piece in the newspaper *Kaleva,* 7th Dec. 2010)

In fact, until fairly recently all Nordic countries practised openly assimilationist policies towards their minorities, and while all these three languages were regarded as varieties of Finnish and not even acknowledged on their own right, they fell victim to negative attitudes and the national-language ideologies of the national school systems in particular. The idea that a functioning democracy should embrace diversity and support multilingualism has gained acceptance only recently, even in such paragons of democracy as the Nordic countries are generally thought to be. And when the damage has been done and the normal transmission of the language has broken (in the families of our Kven informants, this had often taken place already a couple of generations ago so that many Kvens of today never had the chance to acquire Kven in their childhood families), mere non-discrimination will not bring the language back but active revitalization measures are needed.

To ensure the inclusion and equality of all citizens, and thus also the functioning of democratic decision-making, the reality of multilingualism must be understood and acknowledged, and as we saw, this is something that does not arise self-evidently even from the Nordic traditions of democracy. To the contrary, sometimes arguments of "inclusion", "democracy" or "equality" are used to support regulations or policies which endanger the maintenance or revitalization of minority languages. In various Western European countries there have been or still are policies and regulations forbidding the use of minority or immigrant languages at schools or workplaces. A famous case hit the headlines (at least in Finland) in 2006, when some Finnish-speaking employees of the social service department of the city of Uppsala in Sweden were told not to speak Finnish in the public spaces of their workplace – because, as it was stated, speaking Finnish in public is discriminatory against those who don't understand the language.

> *Kui ei taheta tööle võtta, saab põhjuseks öelda, et ei oska rootsi keelt.* ['If they don't want to hire you, they can justify themselves by saying that you don't know Swedish.' Estonian informant in Finland.]
> "Mentioning Karelian in the Constitution would be unfair to all other minority languages which might at some point be spoken in Finland." [A Finnish politician in discussion]

Minorities can also be played against each other: policies which support one minority can be seen as discriminating against other minorities – or supporting one minority might create dangerous precedents and force the decision-makers onto a slippery slope of endless concessions to more and more minority groups.

The good will and best intentions of European lawmakers to promote equality, inclusion and democracy do not necessarily result in efficient legislation, or the laws are not properly implemented. This, in turn, can often be explained by ignorance of simple linguistic and sociolinguistic facts. Anneli Sarhimaa will now present some examples.

As we already showed, political decision-makers tend to think in terms of essentialized ethnic groups or political nations rather than languages. This means, among other things, a strong monolingual bias: multilingualism is not understood, or it is understood as parallel monolingualisms. There is a major problem in how the issues of minority languages and linguistic diversity are seen by lawmakers and politicians: the numerous research results, data, and analyses produced by numerous research institutions, teams, and projects do not reach them, nor do they listen to the experiences of stakeholders from grassroot level. ELDIA was no exception. We produced case-specific reports, analyses, and a comparative report, all supplied with policy recommendations, and also composed two policy briefs specifically directed at decision-makers. Our reports were translated into relevant majority and minority languages, published online and partly even on paper as well, we organized conferences and press conferences, sent out invitations and press releases. Yet, we hardly received any feedback from politicians or decision-makers.

> *Kalevala-dielos minul on juuri se probliemu, kudamua täs on sanottu: Suomes sidä painotetah suomelazennu eeposannu, Kalevalan päiviä pruaznuijah suomelazen kul'tuuran päivänny. Se ei ole mieldy myö.* ['As to Kalevala, I have the problem which has been mentioned earlier: in Finland it is emphatically a Finnish epos, Kalevala Day is celebrated as the day of Finnish culture. I don't like it.' Karelian informant in Finland]

Ignoring available knowledge may, of course, be a conscious political decision. Sometimes the interests of minorities are intentionally suppressed. Our case studies included one blatant case, the Karelian speakers in Finland: promoting their interests didn't fit in with the goals of Finnish nationalism, and so the Karelian language, culture and identity came to be appropriated as building blocks of the new Finnish nationhood. The history of Hungarian minorities outside Hungary also includes numerous showcase examples of politically motivated discrimination which has given rise to further hate-mongering and nationalist populism on both sides of the language border.

> *Soha nem éreztem, hogy másképp bánnak velem, mert magyarul beszélek a környezetemben.* 'I have never felt I was treated differently because I speak Hungarian in the community' [Hungarian informant in Slovenia]
> *Gledajo te ponižno, po njihove moraš v Sloveniji govoriti slovensko.* 'They look down on us saying that in Slovenia you must speak Slovene' [Hungarian informant in Slovenia]

This was obvious even in our study conducted among the small Hungarian minority in Slovenia, where the relations between ethnic groups are generally peaceful and the history of local ethnopolitics is much less traumatic than in Romania or Slovakia, for example. Everybody seems to admit that the state of Slovenia has really done very much to support the Hungarian language, yet some comments give a highly controversial impression of the actual attitudes.

Most often, however, political decision-makers are just as uninformed as lay people in general: all of them are socialized in the language ideology of European nation-states. People are taught to place languages in hierarchies, of "more important" and "less important" or "useless" languages, of "real languages" and "just dialects". The ELDIA project investigated numerous cases where the fuzziness of the border between language and dialect had caused real problems: the Estonian one-language policy and its relation to the South Estonian varieties or so-called dialect languages was mentioned already, and the relationship of Meänkieli and Kven to Finnish has been a problem both to policy-makers and to stakeholders.

They are (we are) taught to regard languages as clearly demarcated units, as distinct systems, each of which is essentially connected to just one ethnic or national identity. For this reason, the possibility of having more mother tongues or first languages than just one is not acknowledged in many countries, Finland included. In the eyes of the Finnish authorities, you can just have one mother tongue, Finnish, Swedish, or "other" – and the choice of mother tongue has direct consequences for one's chances of getting instruction in the mother tongue at school.

The right to the mother tongue emerged as a central issue already at the planning of our research design.

> *jos meidy on painettu monta kymmenty vuottu, piendä lastu, tu-painettu. häi ei sua omua muamankielty paista. sillo hänen pidää olla oigevus olla karjalankielinen vaikka hän ei sitä malta. ja, kehittiä ielleh.* ['If we have been under pressure for dozens of years, a small child, has been under pressure. S/he is not allowed to speak his/her mother tongue. Then s/he must have the right to be a speaker of Karelian, even if s/he doesn't understand it. And, to develop it further.' Karelian informant in Finland]

Who is entitled to be a speaker? Mother tongues do not come naturally, if they have been suppressed, and as a Karelian informant put it: if you have never had the chance to acquire the language, if you never gave up your heritage language but it was taken away from you already in your childhood, then you should nevertheless have the right to call it your mother tongue and to develop your language skills. This insight should have direct consequences to how the teaching of minority languages is organized and how political decision-makers understand their responsibility. At the moment, for example in Finland there is no specific support for the learning of Karelian as an autochthonous language: Karelian-speaking children are entitled to mother tongue classes at school but only if their parents are immigrants from Russian Karelia.

Actually, it is precisely in language acquisition and intergenerational transmission where the ignorance of authorities and public-sector (healthcare, education) professionals has the most fateful consequences. It still happens in Europe that even academically educated civil servants, teachers or doctors try to persuade minority language speakers to use the majority language with their children or even propagate ideas of multilingualism being dangerous or detrimental for the child's development. Experiences like this emerged also in the fieldwork of ELDIA.

> *Mullahan on pieni lapsi ja sen kans mie en puhu en paljo mithään meänkieltä. Kyllähän mie koitan mutta en mie tiä miksi siittä ei oikein tule mithään. Ja kunka sen tekis. En tiä.*
> 'I have a small child and with her I don't speak Meänkieli almost at all. I do try but I don't know why it's not really working. And how one would do it. I don't know.'
> [Meänkieli-speaking informant in Sweden]
> *[...] ja joskus on niinku huvikseen päätetty että puhutaan kotikielenä karjalaa, se oli aika hauskaa niinku yhen illan ajan.*

[...] siihen se sitten jäi. 'And at times we have, like for fun, decided to speak Karelian at home, it was good fun like for one evening. But then there was no more of that.'
[Karelian-speaking informant in Finland]

A less visible but just as acute problem pertains to the revitalization of minority languages in cases where the acquisition of the language within the family requires special support. This situation is typical, for instance, of Meänkieli in Sweden and Karelian in Finland: today's speakers in child-bearing age have often been raised in the majority language and only picked up their heritage language from grandparents or by self-study or language courses. They may have no experiences in parenting in the heritage language, and even if they want to pass the language on to their children, speaking the heritage language at home on a daily basis "doesn't feel right" or it feels rather like a joke or "good fun". Families in these situations need professional help to support language transmission. This help is very seldom if ever available; as a rule, teachers, kindergarten or healthcare personnel have not been trained to support multilingual families or multilingual language acquisition. For a successful transmission of the heritage language, in principle very little is needed, beyond consistently speaking the language to the child. However, if adequate support and information is not offered, parents may be tempted to opt for the most convenient choice: "letting the child decide" – and in doing this, the parents don't understand that they have already made the choice on behalf of the child.

Time to sum up: Each language, of course, carries linguistic and cultural values which will be irretrievably lost if the language dies out. In the ELDIA study, practically all informants in our diverse target communities expressed the same wish: *both* to learn and master the majority language as well as possible (nobody denied the importance of knowing the state language) *and* to maintain their heritage language. Acknowledging and supporting multilingualism means also respecting their wishes and their inclusion into a democratic society with which they can identify themselves.

We have seen that mere goodwill and pious wishes are not enough. Well-meaning laws are not properly implemented, and although decision-makers seldom if ever have the explicit intention to oppress or discriminate, they very often fail to create laws, regulations and policies which would really help and support minority language communities to maintain their languages. One major problem which can be read at least between the lines in each and every one of our case studies is the lack of ideological clarification in the discussions with authorities and lawmakers. The goals of supporting minority languages, the values and the worth of language-related culture are seldom if ever really discussed; instead, the discussions revolve around financial aspects, allocating resources, minimizing costs and saving taxpayers' money. Because of this, minorities may even be afraid of speaking about the problems in already existing support. For instance, minority-language teaching often has to be organized with poorly qualified or unqualified personnel, because no qualified teachers are available – but if we complain about the quality of teaching, will the decision-makers use this as an excuse for giving up the support altogether? Or if the state of minority language maintenance is honestly and realistically assessed, will the decision-makers jump into the conclusion that it isn't worth while to waste any more money to supporting this minority ("statistics show that the language is going to die out anyway")? These questions quite essential to language and democracy are often not addressed, not even expressed.

[Ja tähän sorvaan vielä jotakin, jos tarvitaan.]