

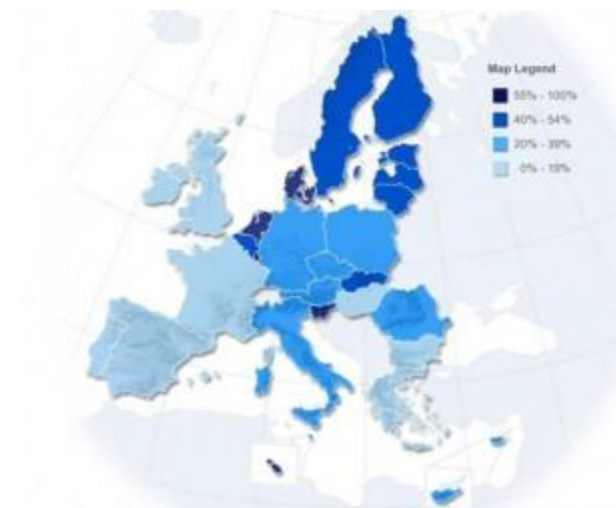
Multilingual Europe

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By Ingrid Piller | July 18, 2012 | Language learning, gender & identity



Percentage of Europeans who speak three or more languages (2012 Eurobarometer 'Europeans and their Languages', p. 14)

The 2012 Eurobarometer Report "Europeans and their languages" was published last month and makes fascinating reading. To begin with, it's always heartening to see the value the European Union places on linguistic and cultural diversity:

There are 23 officially recognised languages, more than 60 indigenous regional and minority languages, and many non-indigenous languages spoken by migrant communities. The EU, although it has limited influence because educational and language policies are the responsibility of individual Member States, is committed to safeguarding this linguistic diversity and promoting knowledge of languages, for reasons of

cultural identity and social integration and cohesion, and because multilingual citizens are better placed to take advantage of the economic, educational and professional opportunities created by an integrated Europe. A mobile workforce is key to the competitiveness of the EU economy. (p. 2)

It is even more heartening to see that this vision is shared by the majority of Europeans: almost all Europeans (98%!) think that learning at least one foreign language is important for the future of their children. And the current generation is itself well on the way towards that goal: with 46% of the population, monolingual Europeans are now in the minority. 19% of Europeans are bilingual, 25% are trilingual and 10% speak four or more languages.

The European policy objective of a trilingual population (national language, English, another language) is already met by the majority of the population in Luxembourg (84%), the Netherlands (77%), Slovenia (67%), Malta (59%), Denmark (58%), Latvia (54%), Lithuania (52%) and Estonia (52%). By contrast, the countries furthest away from this objective include Portugal and Hungary (13% in each), the UK (14%) and Greece (15%).

Looking at where Europeans are now in terms of knowledge of languages and relating it to where they want their children to be makes me feel confidently optimistic about the future of multilingual Europe!

At the same time, not all findings of the [2012 Eurobarometer Report “Europeans and their languages”](#) give cause for optimism, as knowledge of languages has decreased considerably in some countries vis-à-vis the [2006 Eurobarometer Report “Europeans and their languages”](#). The proportion of respondents able to speak at least two languages has declined considerably in these five countries:

- Slovakia (-17 percentage points to 80%)
- the Czech Republic (-12 percentage points to 49%)
- Bulgaria (-11 percentage points to 48%)
- Poland (-7 percentage points to 50%)
- Hungary (-7 percentage points to 35%)

The culprit is English

Why has bi- and multilingualism decreased so notably in these Eastern European countries when the overall European trend is towards more language learning and valuing linguistic diversity more? I knew the answer before I read the explanation of the report because I actually was part of making Eastern Europeans less multilingual at one point in my life.

As a PhD student, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, I had a job in what used to be the German Democratic Republic that involved teaching English linguistics to high school teachers of Russians who were being retrained to become high school teachers of English. This bizarre scenario was repeated across Eastern Europe: as everyone scrambled to learn English, demand for Russian and, to a lesser degree, German, plummeted. The widespread result was not bilingualism in a different combination of languages but monolingualism.

Why?

The Russian-to-English teacher re-training program on which I taught was comparatively well-resourced but even so the outcomes were not great and the fact that you can't simply switch from one language proficiency to another was the major obstacle. Quality language teaching needs a good infrastructure including qualified and proficient teachers, resources, and practice opportunities. It is difficult if not impossible to willy-nilly transplant this infrastructure from one language to another. For instance, some of the teachers I taught had for many years organized language camps and exchanges with schools in Russia. They had no comparable contacts in an English-speaking country and so camps and exchanges went out the window. In this way many Russian language learning opportunities, big and small, were not replaced with English equivalents but disappeared.

It is the effects of the lost language learning opportunities in the 1990s in Eastern Europe that we are now seeing as statistics of declining numbers of multilinguals in the new member states. The [2012 Eurobarometer Report “Europeans and their languages”](#) speaks of a 'lost generation:'

Within these countries the proportions of respondents able to speak foreign languages such as Russian and German have declined notably since 2005. For example, the proportion able to speak Russian has dropped in Bulgaria (-12 points), Slovakia (-12 points), Poland (-8 points) and the Czech Republic (-7 points). Similarly, the proportions speaking German are down in the Czech Republic (-13 points), Slovakia (-10 points) and Hungary (-7 points). It is likely that in these post-Communist countries these downward shifts are the result of a 'lost' generation. Many of those who were able to speak German (following the Second World War) or who learnt Russian at school (it is now much less commonly taught) are now deceased, or, as time has elapsed, have forgotten how to speak these languages. (p. 16)

The global hegemony of English works in mysterious ways: not only is it closely tied to the monolingual mindset in English-speaking countries but apparently it can also result in monolingualism in Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish or Slovakian!

