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The management of linguistic issues in Belgium: a source of inspiration for Greece?

**Bilingualism in Turkish Minority Education & Diverse Approaches in the World
Problems and Possible Solutions**

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The management of linguistic issues in Belgium: a source of inspiration for Greece?

Belgium has a complex demographic composition, and over the last fifty to sixty years, the governance of the country has been greatly complicated by the changes of its political and internal territorial structures.

I will talk about several issues:

- the origin of the linguistic diversity in Belgium;
- the progressive devolution of powers to the regions to better protect the rights of its linguistic communities, including in the areas of culture and school education; and
- the bilingual teaching of the national languages.

These topics seem separate but there is a continuum between them.

This morning, Dr Hüseinoglu has clearly described the state of play of bilingualism issues in the minority school system, including the preservation of the Turkish language, the Turkish culture, the Turkish identity, and the survival of the Turkish-speaking community. He has also stressed two very important points: the historical and geo-political roots as well as the Greek nationalism underpinning the problems experienced by the Turkish-speaking community. Turning a blind eye to such realities can lead to serious disruption of social peace and social cohesion.

These dimensions can never be ignored or underplayed, but they are different from one country to another. The specific historical and geo-political dimensions cannot be ignored either if one wants to understand how Belgium has been forced to face the realities of its linguistic diversity and its mismanagement of this diversity for over a century and has finally been obliged to grant its discriminated Flemish population autonomy in school education.

Origin of the linguistic diversity in Belgium

The Kingdom of Belgium emerged as a new state in 1830 after the population revolted against the Dutch rule, inherited from the defeat of Napoleon in Waterloo in 1815. In the aftermath of this famous battle, the victorious powers (Prussia, Austria, Russia, and England) re-designed the European map. The bulk of the Belgian provinces under French rule was ceded to the Kingdom of the Netherlands which hereby consisted of seventeen provinces. The Hague and Brussels were alternately the seat of Parliament for one year each. The Dutch rule remained in place for fifteen years.

After the Belgian Revolution against the Dutch, which led to the separation of the Southern Provinces from the Netherlands and their independence under the name of the Kingdom of Belgium, the National Congress opted for a constitutional monarchy and put in place a national parliament consisting of two assemblies: the Senate and the House of Representatives. There were then two official languages: French and Dutch.

The Constitution provided that each school could choose its teaching language but, in practice, all schools in the Flanders opted for the only codified language: French, a language with international prestige and importance. Following its usage which can be traced back to the Burgundian and Habsburg courts, in the nineteenth century it was necessary to speak French to belong to the governing upper class, and those who could only speak Dutch were effectively second-class citizens. Late that century, and continuing into the twentieth century, Flemish movements evolved to counter this situation. Some of the objectives of this social and cultural movement were to defend the Flemish culture and to have their language recognized as the official language of their schools and in their institutions.

In 1898, the so-called Equality Law put the Dutch language on the same footing as the French language but in practice that did not change anything. French remained the teaching language in the Flanders. The Dutch language only started to be used as a teaching language with the linguistic laws of 1932-1935. These laws were later reinforced with the linguistic laws of 1962-1963 confirming that Dutch was the sole official language in the Flemish Region and French in the Walloon Region.

The next point is important as it concerns the sudden emergence of a third linguistic minority: German.

In the aftermath of WWI, the German-speaking region of Eupen-Malmedy, which had formerly been part of Prussia and the German Empire, was allocated to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles. In 1920, after a controversial referendum, this region was formally annexed by Belgium. Agitation by German nationalists during the interwar period led to its re-annexation by Nazi Germany during WWII, but it was returned to Belgium in 1945. First perceived as a potential threat for national security, this linguistic minority from a neighboring hostile country which had twice invaded Belgium could have been sidelined and ostracized but it was fully integrated in the Belgian political landscape and Belgian society.

And here is my first recommendation to Greece:

From the Belgian experience with its German-speaking minority (about 75,000 inhabitants), Greece could draw the conclusion that it is more advantageous to harmoniously integrate a minority, even if it is linked to a neighboring country perceived as a threat rather than trying to forcibly assimilate it and stifling its identity. Greece would derive more advantages if it peacefully integrated the Turkish-speaking minority with its compact population, numbering about 150,000 people in Western Thrace, rather than constantly restraining its rights and freedoms.

The devolution of powers to the regions, a solution to Belgium's linguistic problems

Following World War II, Belgian politics became increasingly dominated by the autonomy of its two main linguistic communities. Intercommunal tensions rose and the constitution was amended to minimise the potential for conflict.

In 1962–63, the linguistic laws defined four language regions. After several constitutional reforms, the regions progressively got the full responsibility of the management of their schools and the use of languages.

Currently, we have:

- the Flemish Region (about 6.4 million Dutch-speakers);
- the Walloon Region (about 3.6 million French-speakers);
- the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region (about 1 million Francophones, 90% of the population); and
- the German-speaking Region (75,000 German-speakers).

Belgium's regions now have their own parliaments and governments that have the potential to find an appropriate solution to their linguistic challenges in various fields. Concretely, radio, television, public administration, and schools operate in the official language of the region.

In the German-speaking Region, the local government has decided that German would be the official language of the 75,000 inhabitants.

In the Flemish Region, the French-speakers of six municipalities contiguous to the Brussels-Capital Region enjoy some linguistic facilities because they represent a large share or the majority of the local population.

In the French-speaking region (Wallonia), the Dutch-speakers of a number of municipalities also enjoy some linguistic facilities because they represent a large share or the majority of the local population.

In the Brussels-Capital Region, the Dutch-speakers who represent no more than 15% of the population are in the minority but have a guaranteed political

representation in the parliament despite their small number; a fixed quota of seats superior to their percentage.

Concerning the use of languages at school:

A second national language is learnt from primary schools on; usually two hours per week in the last two years but more and more earlier in the bi-lingual region of Brussels-Capital. In secondary schools, the students can start learning a second language, national or foreign, from the first year on, and later they can learn one or two more languages.

Their teachers are rarely native language speakers and are trained in the linguistic region where they want to teach.

What does the Belgian experience of governance tell us concerning the Turkish-speaking minority in Greece? Of course not that Greece should become a federal state to guarantee the linguistic and other rights of the Turkish-speaking community. But an alternative solution could be the devolution of powers, in a legal framework, to regions where compact communities speaking a language other than Greek could enjoy more self-governance in terms of preservation and development of the language and the culture.

The Belgian experiences of bilingual schools/ immersion classes

The concept of “immersion bilingual education” or “classes d’immersion” in French was invented in Canada in 1965 when English-speaking pupils in primary schools were also taught a number of subjects in French, but the practice existed well before.

In Belgium, school education in two languages is mainly experimented within Wallonia and in the German-speaking Region, much less in the Flemish Region and occasionally in the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region.

In the Walloon Region, immersion programs with a choice between three languages have existed since 1998 when the then Minister of Education, Laurette Onkelinx, promulgated a specific decree for this purpose. They were first experimented in municipalities near another linguistic region and then all over the region.

Any student can enroll in an immersion class. The programs can start in the last year of kindergarten or in the first or third year grade of primary school. During the 2009 - 2010 school year, more than three hundred schools in Wallonia offered immersion classes. Since then, their number has continued to increase.

The region opted for partial linguistic immersion, which means that the program could be implemented for 25% to 75% of the teaching hours in primary schools and 40% in secondary schools. Dutch is the top choice and is followed by English and German.

The main difficulty is to find good teachers but, in general, the results of the immersion programs in Wallonia are rather positive and similar to other European countries.

The German-speaking Region was in fact the first to introduce linguistic immersion programs in the 1930s. For obvious geo-political reasons, the purpose was to integrate the youth of this recently annexed part from Germany. Such programs were then very modest and involved the use of the French language during manual, physical and environmental activities. Linguistic immersion was officially recognized in 2004.

The following is a concrete example of how it is functioning now:

In 2015, the Gymnasium Cesar Franck in La Calamine, a German-speaking municipality of 10,000 inhabitants, was the first secondary school in the region to enroll French-speaking and German-speaking students. A number of classes are given in both languages and the students have the possibility to attend them in the other language.

In the first three years grades of primary school attached to it, there are also mixed groups who are taught one week in German and one week in French, three times for one hour per week. This was the continuation of another experience of mixed classes which started in kindergarten. Students attend the first two days of the week in one language and the last two days of the week in the other language. On Wednesdays, the groups are not mixed.

In the Flemish region, bilingual education is a politically sensitive issue and is not very successful because of its history and its rising regional nationalism. On 7 May 2004, a decree authorized bilingual education in Dutch and French starting from kindergarten or the first year of the primary school but only as an introductory course to the language or for awareness-raising purposes. However, due to the lack of well-trained teachers and appropriate teaching material, this initiative was not very successful. From 2007 to 2011, only nine projects were initiated and only 10% of the classes were taught in French.

Bilingual classes were only introduced in secondary schools in 2014 on the basis of a decree adopted a year before. However, bilingual classes are limited to 20% of the teaching hours and to students having a sufficient knowledge of the other language. Preserving the Flemish character and identity of the school is an obligatory objective. Moreover, the classes in another language (French,

English, or German) must also be taught in Dutch. Behind these limitations is the historical fear of a comeback of the French language. This explains why in September 2014, no more than twenty-five Dutch-speaking schools proposed such a program.

All these positive developments were only possible in the management of linguistic diversity because there was a political will to do it, but it took decades and a deep transformation of the state to become more inclusive and united.

Regaining autonomy and self-management of the linguistic school education by the discriminated minority must be the objective.

In Europe, more and more schools propose immersion programs. The Belgian example shows that a wide range of teaching policies are possible according to the circumstances, local realities, and sensitivities. What is needed in Greece is the political will to opt for and implement inclusive policies aiming at the harmonious integration of pupils and students who speak Turkish at home and in their community. The mobility of students facilitated by the Erasmus program as well as bilingual and multilingual school education is an increasing trend in a multi-cultural Europe which contributes to a better understanding and peace between peoples, to stability and prosperity. Greece should not miss this train.

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