

JULIJANA VUČO  
JELENA FILIPOVIĆ  
University of Belgrade  
Belgrade, Serbia  
{julivuco | jelenafbgd}@gmail.com

## **Serbian roadmap toward European plurilingualism**

### **1. Introduction**

European Union and the Council of Europe have been intensively involved in issues regarding language policies and language education policies on the continent with an objective to create a plurilingual European space. Two crucial directions can be identified in this area: 1. Language acquisition/plurilingual competence and 2. Language mediation (together with translation and interpreting) (Council of Europe, 2002; Commission of the European Union, 2003). In this paper, only the first of these two directions will be investigated in relation to a relatively small European country, Serbia, in which a small area language<sup>1</sup>, Serbian, is spoken along with a number of languages used by ethnolinguistic minorities living in its territory.

European supranational institutions have long ago recognized the relevance and the role language plays in intercultural dialogues in all domains of our social life (economy, politics, education, etc.) And even though they recognize the status of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) of the continent, they also believe that focusing only on the acquisition of ELF at all levels of formal and informal education brings along severe limitations in private, business and public sectors alike. The concept of transnational mobility is based on the idea that individuals should be able to use a number of languages throughout their lives in accordance with their private, professional and other needs, which makes it easier for them to integrate into various local and regional communities. Moreover, the European institutions of language policy and planning have been very clear on supporting the presence of other than 'large' European languages in the European educational systems. These include European small area standard languages, regional, minority and immigrant languages of Europe, as well as globally recognized languages of professional communication.<sup>2</sup>

All the above clearly indicates that choices made by language education planners in a given country affect each and every citizen of a given country: 1. People who speak as L1 some of the small area languages (such as Serbian in the European context) need to have access to at least one foreign language, in this case ELF, at higher levels of education in order to be able to keep up with the global and international developments in different sciences and business; 2. People who speak English or another 'large' language as L1 should be given a chance to develop linguistic competences in languages they need for academic or professional communication (as the competence in ELF is already recognized as a given in Europe, there is a need for the development of 'glocalized' linguistic competences, i.e., a need to learn other languages in order to adjust global conditions to the local environment, especially in the corporate world), and 3. People who speak regional or minority languages should be given an opportunity to develop their own L1 within the educational system, along with majority languages (languages of education) and foreign languages they need for different purposes. (for further discussion, see Filipović 2009).

### **2. Plurilingualism in the Serbian educational system: *de iure* vs. *de facto* language educational policies**

Serbia has a rather well designed national legal framework<sup>3</sup> (based on international legislature) which supports plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (see Filipović et al., 2007, for a detailed critical review of Serbian education policies). Serbia is a multinational state with 26 legally recognized national minorities<sup>4</sup> the rights and obligations of the educational system toward national minorities are defined by the legislature based on the Council of Europe's *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* and other national and supranational documents. All these stipulate that all ethnolinguistic minorities<sup>5</sup> living in the territory of Serbia should have direct, continuous and effective

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<sup>1</sup> Herein, a term 'small area language' is used to designate a standard language with a relatively small number of native speakers. In the case of Serbian, we are talking about 8,000,000 speakers.

<sup>2</sup> Along the lines of the above statement, an *ad-hoc* group of intellectuals, invited by Jose Manuel Baroso in 2008, put together a document entitled *A rewarding challenge: How the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe*, which supports the language diversity as one of the key concepts of the „European project“ at the core of the search for European identity. The document concludes with a recommendation that each and every European citizen should have an opportunity to develop linguistic competences in at least three different languages: 1. L1, 2. Lingua franca and 3. Personal adoptive language (a language that is close to the old notion of L2, acquired along with all the cultural and civilizational traits of a given speech community which uses it). In order to achieve that, European educational systems should be flexible enough to provide their citizens with a wide range of languages at different levels of formal education.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Law on Education, Law on textbooks and Other Teaching Materials, Law against all Types of Discrimination, Law on the Protection of rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, Law on Councils of National Minorities, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Albanians, Aromanians, Ashkalis, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Bunians, Czechs, Croats, Egyptians, Germans, Gorans, Greeks, Hungarians, Jews, Roma, Rumanians, Rusyns, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Shoks, Slovaks, Turks, Ukrainians and Vlachs.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'ethnolinguistic minority' will be used in the continuation of the paper to designate what Serbian legislature entitles 'national minority'.

access to the educational process, which takes into consideration and values diversity, multi- and pluriculturalism<sup>6</sup> and respects and supports cultural identities of all members of all ethnolinguistic minorities. In that respect, the students from ethnolinguistic minorities can choose among the following educational models in primary and secondary education in Serbia: 1. Education in L1 of an ethnolinguistic minority, 2. Bilingual education, and 3. Education in Serbian as L2 with a possibility of taking an elective course entitled *National language with elements of national culture*.

### 2.1. Ethnolinguistic minorities and education in L1

This educational model implies that the overall educational process is carried out in the language of the ethnolinguistic minority. Presently, in Serbia it is offered in Albanian, Croatian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Rusyn, and Slovak. L1 is taught as a core subject with 5 teaching hours per week. Students attending school within this model are also required to take a course of Serbian as L2 with two teaching hours per week. This type of education is faced with challenges in developing academic competences in Serbian which later on impedes the students from ethnolinguistic minority groups to continue higher education in Serbian or to integrate fully into the professional world in Serbia where high degrees of competences in Serbian are a prerequisite.

### 2.2. Ethnolinguistic minorities and bilingual education

Bilingual education is by definition carried out in two languages; in a minority language and the majority language, in this case Serbian. This educational model is not elaborated enough within Serbian educational legislature, which makes it difficult to decide which subjects should be taught in the minority's L1 and which subjects should be taught in Serbian. Normally, a suggestion is made to local and regional educational policy makers to provide teaching contents in L1 in the areas which support and strengthen ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of the students (history, arts, music, etc.), while other subjects should be taught in Serbian. Even though bilingual education has been proven to yield excellent results in a number of European countries, so far it has not been used to a great extent in Serbia, and there is only one case of attested bilingual education carried out within the Bulgarian ethnolinguistic minority in Eastern Serbia.

### 2.3. Ethnolinguistic minorities and education in Serbian as L2 with an elective course 'National language with elements of national culture'

Students from ethnolinguistic minorities who attend school in Serbian are eligible for an elective course in their national language with elements of national culture. The class meets two times a week and is presently offered to members of the Bosnian, Croatian, Hungarian, Romani, Rumanian, Rusyn, Slovak, and Ukrainian communities. This is an optional course and the students' parents, as children's legal guardians, decide on their participation and attendance. However, as the course is not part of the general curriculum, it burdens the students who choose to take it with additional number of classes in comparison with other children from the majority or from those or other ethnolinguistic minority who have opted for a different educational model. Consequently, more often than not students' motivation is extremely low and they soon lose interest in maintaining their language and their culture through this educational model.

## 3. Foreign language education in Serbia

Even a superficial glance at the Serbian language education policy, i.e., even a very brief review of relevant educational documents produced by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia, indicate that there exists an awareness in this country regarding the importance of studying foreign languages: Serbian educational system calls for an obligatory foreign language teaching starting at grade 1 of primary education, and an obligatory second foreign language is introduced in grade 5 of primary education. Therefore, it appears that the Serbian educational legislature already promotes the European objective of trilingual individuals who are capable of using their L1 plus other two languages at different levels of competence in accordance with their needs and interests. However, it is our strong belief that this fact is not a consequence of a well thought out and designed state strategy, but rather a result of years of efforts which individuals from the Serbian academic and educational community have invested in this issue. Consequently, the true effects of this *de iure* foreign language academic policy are:

1. The first foreign language in over 95% of Serbian first graders is English, which is to be understood in light of the status and relevance of ELF in the modern, globalized world. However, this fact impedes the early development of any other personal adoptive language and (yet again) gives English an unfair advantage over other foreign languages.
2. Insufficient number of classes is allocated to the second foreign language which should lead students to the A2 level of the *Common European Framework of Reference for languages* (Council of Europe, 2002).
3. Very few foreign languages other than English are offered in primary and secondary education in Serbia. While around 600,000 students learn English, there are only 80,000 of them who learn French, 90,000 German, 62,000 Russian, 8000 Italian and 6000 Spanish. There are no regional or minority languages offered as foreign languages anywhere in Serbia, which flies in the face of the 2008 recommendations of the European Commission regarding the need to recognize the need by members of different local communities to learn locally and regionally relevant languages. Introduction of a larger number of regional and lesser

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<sup>6</sup> Council of Europe distinguishes *multilingualism*, as a feature of a region or a state, from *plurilingualism* which is a characteristic of an individual. Multilingual states may have very little plurilingual individuals, i.e., speech communities using different linguistic varieties may live in the same political entity without any substantial linguistic interaction.

taught foreign languages would definitely open up new spaces for personal and group affirmation of varied cultural and linguistic identities of the citizens of Serbia.

On the upside, it should be pointed out that curricula for all foreign languages follow the most recent developments in applied linguistics and theory of foreign language teaching, as well as methodological innovations of the European didactic literature. Furthermore, the curricula are designed in accordance with the levels of competence proposed by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2002) which have been accepted as standard in the majority of European countries. Students exiting primary education are expected to have competences at the A2 level in their first foreign language, and at the A1.2. in the second foreign language they start learning in grade 5. At the end of secondary education, they are expected to be at the B1 level in the foreign language they continue studying during the 4 years of high school. And finally, Serbian/English, Serbian/French, and Serbian/Italian bilingual education has been introduced in a number of state schools in Serbia.

### 3.1 Foreign languages in bilingual education

First bilingual classes in Serbia were introduced in the 2004/5 academic year with an objective to provide students with a wider range of teaching subjects through teaching in French and Italian in combination with Serbian. Bilingual education is defined through a percentage of teaching hours carried out in a foreign language, which, in this case, goes between 30% and 45%. Serbian bilingual education model is original, designed in accordance with the needs and interests of the target student populations, but it follows all the key principles of the European CLIL educational model<sup>7</sup>. However, unlike the original CLIL model, where the language competences of other subject teachers are not as clearly specified, the Serbian model insists on dual competences in both the subject matter and the foreign language it is taught in. Bilingual education is offered at upper levels of primary education (grades 7 and 8), and in secondary education in about 15 schools throughout Serbia. Special foreign language requirements exist and entrance exams are organized for all those who like to attend these schools which are specified by the bylaws defined by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

The introduction of this particular type of bilingual education is stipulated by the ever growing need to acquire high levels of competence in foreign languages in order to successfully pass standardized foreign language tests, on one hand, and, on the other hand, by the increased mobility of Serbian university students who have over the last several years become active members of the unified European academic space in which competence in a number of languages goes hand in hand with recognition and validation of other cultures and traditions.

#### **Serbian language education policy: what next?**

In order to define Serbian language education policy in a way which would best suit the needs of different speech communities and communities of practice in this country, we first need to be able to define those needs. State, educational and strategic objectives of such a language education policy should be outlined first.

First, when it comes to the education of members of ethnolinguistic minorities living in the territory of Serbia, a new educational model is called for which would allow them to develop to the maximum of their individual capacities by providing them with an opportunity to use the formal educational system to enhance their linguistic competences in their L1, in Serbian as L2 and in a number of foreign languages they define as needed or interesting from their individual or community point of view. Such an educational model would help children from ethnolinguistic minority groups expand their "ideal self" or the "ought-to self" (Dörnyei, 2005), in which proficiency in the ethnic language, proficiency in the majority language as well as in any other languages they feel they need to acquire would make an important aspect of their desired identity.

Second, if one of the objectives of the Serbian language education policy is for Serbia to become a fully recognized member of the European community 'under the same roof' (Bugarski, 2005), we then need to take a clear stand toward the role of English as a *lingua franca*, and toward the teaching and learning of other European and non-European languages. It is our view that we should accept the role of English as a language of communication, rather than identification (House, 2003), provide it with enough space within the Serbian educational system and prepare the future generations of Serbian students for a fully competent professional and academic communication in ELF. Moreover, in order to assure the linguistic diversity and satisfy the communicative needs defined not on a state level, but rather, on an individual level in the state of Serbia, Serbian language education policy needs to provide a space for a wide range of options for foreign language teaching and learning. That means that new strategies of foreign language education are called for which would pay attention not only to 'large' languages, traditionally present in the Serbian educational system, such as French, German and Russian (and, of course, English), but also to regional languages, such as Greek, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Hungarian, etc., as well as to non-European languages of states and countries which Serbia has long standing cultural, economic and political relations with. Of course, at this particular point in time, when socio-economic situation not only in Serbia, but world-wide is very harsh, it is difficult to even conceptualize to the fullest the extent of such an educational policy, but we believe that it is of utmost importance that these issues be taken into account and put into place once the overall conditions change.

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<sup>7</sup> CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) introduces foreign language as a means of communication when talking about topics in other teaching subjects. It supposes integrated, simultaneous learning of a foreign language and other subject matter.

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