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The western Balkans and EU multilingualism: A focus on translation and interpreting

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Abstract

To date, four countries in the western Balkans have attained EU candidate country status: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. However, little research has focused on the logistics of how the official languages of these countries will eventually be incorporated as official and working languages of the EU. Therefore, in contextualising the unique historical, political and sociolinguistic situation of the western Balkans, this literature-based study examines current translation and interpreting provision for Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbia within the EU's language services. In addition, specific attention is focused on the availability of relevant translator and interpreter training options, as well as on further areas for potential cooperation.

Keywords: translation, conference interpreting, European Union, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has been focusing its enlargement activities on the western Balkans, with a view to these countries eventually attaining full status as EU member states. At present, only Croatia has satisfied the Copenhagen criteria and acceded to the organisation, which it did in 2013 as

the bloc's most recent member (European Union, 2021a). To date, Stabilisation and Association Agreements have been concluded with Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo, and Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have all now been officially recognised as EU candidate countries (European Commission, 2021a). Given that each of these four candidate countries has their own official language (Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian), some scholarly attention has been paid to linguistic aspects of the wider Europeanisation process, including the translation of legal texts and legislation such as the *acquis communautaire* into the relevant languages (e.g. Jakimovska, 2013; Čavoški, 2018), as well as other important aspects such as the provision of relevant terminological and linguistic databases (Đordan, 2017). However, building on Pym (2000), which examined the potential implications of the EU enlargement of 2004 – which brought ten new member states and nine new languages – for the future provision of translation services in the EU institutions, comparatively little research (Aleksoska-Chkatroska, 2018) has focused on the more general question of how translators and interpreters of Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian will be incorporated into the EU's language services. Hence, after contextualising the unique sociopolitical and sociolinguistic background of the western Balkans, this study aims to provide an overview of current EU multilingualism provision relating to the region, paying particular attention to issues concerning appropriate translator and interpreter training for the official languages of the four aforementioned candidate countries.

Language and politics in the western Balkans: some brief remarks

Historical and political background

In noting Anderson's (1991) notion of language as a key marker of national identity, it can be argued that the complexities of the western Balkans represent an excellent case study in this regard. As illustrated in Table 1 below, the region currently comprises seven countries – Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – with six different official languages from the South Slavonic (Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian) and Albanian branches of the Indo-European language family. With these various languages spoken by members of different ethnic groups and religious persuasions, the western Balkans have been no stranger to multilingualism throughout their history.

Country	EU accession negotiations opened (year)	Population (year)	Official language(s)
Albania	2018	2,862,000 (2019)	Albanian
Bosnia & Herzegovina	n/a	3,502,000 (2018)	Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian
Croatia	EU member since 2013	4,085,165 (2021)	Croatian
Kosovo	n/a	1,796,000 (2019)	Albanian, Serbian
Montenegro	2010	622,000 (2019)	Montenegrin
North Macedonia	2020	2,077,000 (2019)	Macedonian, Albanian

Serbia	2014	6,964,000 (2019)	Serbian
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Table: Relevant data regarding the countries of the Western Balkans.

Source: own elaboration, based on European Commission (2021a); European Union (2021); Eurostat (2021)

As such, the Ottoman Empire was the dominant power in the region for centuries, but, reflecting the Europe-wide rise in national consciousness during the 19th century, various linguistic and ethno-religious groupings in the wider Balkans began to strive for independence. In terms of the western Balkans, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania received their independence in 1804, 1878, and 1912 respectively. However, much of modern-day Croatia and parts of modern Serbia remained under imperial Austro-Hungarian rule during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and in 1878 the Habsburgs extended their empire by annexing the formerly Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a chain of events that would lead to the fateful assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo in 1914, and ultimately, to the horrors of the First World War (Glenny, 2000; Mazower, 2001; Allcock, Danforth, & Crampton, 2021).

During the interwar years, Albania continued as its own independent kingdom, whilst the territory of the other modern six nations of the western Balkans, together with Slovenia, formed part of the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia. After the Second World War, both Albania and Yugoslavia became Communist republics, with Yugoslavia becoming a multi-ethnic and multilingual federation that was non-aligned with Moscow, whereas Albania originally joined the Warsaw Pact before pursuing a more isolationist policy aligned towards China. In the early 1990s, the fall of Communism led to significant

changes across central and eastern Europe. In Yugoslavia, the disintegration of the multi-ethnic federation and the independence of its constituent republics led to severe and bloody conflicts, the political vestiges of which remain apparent to the present day (Glenny, 2000; Mazower, 2001; Allcock, Danforth, & Crampton, 2021).

As mentioned above, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are all currently candidate countries for EU membership. However, given the political implications of this status, this has not been an altogether smooth road, especially in the case of North Macedonia, where ructions with Greece over the name of the country threatened to stymie its candidacy (Tziampiris, 2012) and were not resolved until the ratification of the Prespa agreement by the parliaments of both countries (Maatsch & Kurpiel, 2021). In terms of future developments required for the potential candidate countries to satisfy the EU's criteria, wide-ranging political, legal, economic, and public administration-related reforms would be required in Bosnia & Herzegovina (European Commission, 2019a); in the case of Kosovo, similar such reforms would also need to be made, and wider issues associated with the country's international relations and international recognition would need to be addressed (European Commission, 2020a).

Linguistic background

Regarding the languages of the western Balkans, the region's complex political history is also mirrored by a complex sociolinguistic situation. Within the wider Balkans, linguists recognise that centuries of language contact has led to a *Sprachbund*, or series of common grammatical features between otherwise linguistically unrelated languages (e.g. Friedman, 2008, p. 363; Comrie, 2009, p. 8).

In terms of the South Slavonic tongues spoken as official languages in the western Balkans, each is descended from the relevant recensions of Old Church Slavonic. Regarding Serbian and Croatian, both tongues were standardised as related but convergent languages during the 19th century. During Yugoslav times, both languages were merged into Serbo-Croat, a multipolar language which was the common language of communication for the entire Yugoslav federation. However, following the fall of Yugoslavia and the ensuing conflicts, the independent nations that emerged were each eager to have their own languages recognised. Hence, Serbo-Croat initially disintegrated into three separate, but closely related, tongues: Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian (Greenberg, 2004, p. 957). Following the referendum on Montenegro's separation from Serbia in 2006, newly-independent Montenegro also codified Montenegrin as a separate version of Serbo-Croat, a development which included the addition of two extra letters to the alphabet (Džankić, 2014, p. 368). Despite some minor differences in grammar and vocabulary, however, the four languages remain highly mutually intelligible (Corbett & Browne, 2009, p. 333).

Turning to Macedonian, the language was only recognised officially during Yugoslav times in the mid-1940s, although efforts to codify and standardise it had been made since the 19th century (Friedman, 2000). Closely related to Bulgarian, this linguistic kinship between the two tongues is indeed a subject of continuing controversy. Although Bulgaria has ostensibly recognised Macedonian as a separate language to Bulgarian since 1999, disagreements on the topic remain (Friedman, 2008, p. 367). In recent times, despite the 2017 Treaty of Friendship between the two nations, these contentious linguistic issues have come to the fore once again, as exemplified by Bulgaria's recent memorandum on the issue. In

the long run, this may have the potential to cause further complications regarding North Macedonia's EU candidacy (Christidis, 2019; Gotev, Michalopoulos, & Trkanjec, 2020; Heraclides, 2021, pp. 243-249).

Of the official languages of the four candidate countries, Albanian is the only non-Slavonic representative. It is a multipolar language which stands alone in its own linguistic sub-group of Indo-European. It is the official language of Albania, a co-official language of North Macedonia, and it also has official status in certain municipalities of Montenegro. In addition, Albanian is also one of the two official languages of Kosovo, alongside Serbian. Interestingly, in adopting the nomenclature and linguistic standard of Albanian as spoken in Albania itself, Kosovo remains "the sole post-Yugoslav nation-state that has not [...] been endowed with its own unique (Kosovan) language" (Kamusella, 2016, p. 217).

Translating and interpreting for the EU

As alluded to in the introduction to this article, the road to EU membership requires candidate countries to meet numerous political, legal, and economic standards. However, it is important to note that the EU's multilingualism policy also has a role to play in this process, albeit behind the scenes. This is owing to the fact that, unlike many other international organisations such as the United Nations or NATO, the EU subscribes to the concept of linguistic equality – that is, where the official language or languages of each member state also become official languages of the whole organisation.

Indeed, the legal basis for this concept was first outlined more than six decades ago (Regulation 1, 1958). Originally, this legislation served to recognise the parity of the four languages (Dutch, French, German, & Italian) of the EU's six founding

members: Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, & West Germany. Several enlargements, however, have extended the geographical and linguistic scope of the EU to include the majority of European nations and their corresponding official languages. As such, with its current complement of 27 member states and 24 official languages, the EU thus embodies Umberto Eco's famous dictum that "the language of Europe is translation" (Eco, 1993, cited in Frank, 2016), and vast numbers of linguists are required to manage the challenges posed by this level of multilingualism.

Exact information regarding the total size of the EU's translation and interpreting services can be somewhat difficult to determine, as each of the organisation's various institutions maintains their own data. In addition to translators and interpreters, a range of other linguistically-trained staff, for example lawyer-linguists, proof-readers, and language editors are also required (European Personnel Selection Office, 2021). As such, Cosmai (2014, p. 98) estimated that there are around 4,100 translators across the EU institutions, with the majority centred in the European Commission. Regarding interpreting, Marco Benedetti, former head of the European Commission's DG Interpretation, noted that in 2011 there were around 500 staff interpreters (who are EU civil servants), as well as a pool of 2,700 freelance interpreters. Around 700-800 interpreters were at work on a daily basis, serving approximately 50-60 meetings (Benedetti, 2011, pp. 134-135). By 2013, however, these numbers had risen to comprise over 600 staff and more than 3,000 accredited freelance interpreters, who together served over 60 meetings each day. In addition, around 40 large conferences were also organised every year (European Commission 2013b). Turning to the European Parliament, Bartłomiejczyk (2020, p. 15) noted that approximately 430 staff interpreters are employed there, whereas the European Court

of Justice has a complement of around 70. With 69 interpreters required for a meeting covering 23 out of the 24 EU languages, Olga Cosmidou, former head of the interpretation and conference directorate at the European Parliament, highlighted that up to one thousand interpreters could be required for the Parliament's plenary sessions in Strasbourg (Cosmidou, 2011, p. 129). These figures can fluctuate, of course, according to the demand for relevant translation and interpreting services; with regard to the latter, this has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions (Marking, 2020).

Methodology and research questions

As noted previously, the aim of this study is to provide a summary overview of current EU-related translation and interpreting provision pertaining to the region, focusing specifically on aspects relating to translator and interpreter training for Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian, the official languages of the four western Balkan candidate countries. Accordingly, the following two research questions were outlined:

- i) How will Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian be integrated into the EU's translation and interpreting services?
- ii) What is the relevant EU-related translator and interpreter-training infrastructure in the Western Balkans?

Given the exploratory nature of the article, it was decided to utilise a literature-based approach. Although it can be argued that review-based approaches can be limited vis-à-vis more empirical studies, nonetheless literature-based work can be useful for examining current knowledge on a topic, as well as benefiting scientific progress within a given field (Palmatier,

Houston, & Hulland, 2017, p. 5; Snyder 2019, p. 334). As such, the material consisted of relevant publicly available sources, including the websites of the translation and interpreting directorates of the EU institutions, as well as scholarly literature and media reports. The study is intended to provide a solid overview of the topic under analysis, thereby providing a possible prelude to empirical work at a later stage.

Analysis

Integrating the languages of the western Balkans into the EU's translation and interpreting services

In terms of preparation for incorporating Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian into their activities, successive enlargements have ensured that the translation and interpreting directorates of the EU institutions have a significant track record of accommodating new EU languages. Over time, these languages have also included less-widely spoken tongues such as Finnish (Gambier, 1998), Czech (Čeňková, 2019), as well as Irish and Maltese (Hoyte-West, 2019). As such, in this regard it can be argued that integrating the languages of the western Balkans should pose no great challenges.

Regarding the eventual recruitment of translators and interpreters of the four languages as staff translators and interpreters (that is, as full EU officials), it can be anticipated that no significant changes to the recruitment process will be made. As also outlined in Cosmai (2014, pp. 111-112), staff translator recruitment generally proceeds by means of competitive recruitment examinations (also known as *concours*). In addition to the other tests common to graduate recruitment procedures at the EU, candidates for translation roles are

required to sit two translation tests into the mother tongue: one from a language chosen from English, French, or German; and the other from any current EU official language. For staff interpreters – who must hold either a degree in conference interpreting or a minimum of a year’s professional experience in conference interpreting – the role-specific test consists of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting exercises from at least two EU official languages (European Personnel Selection Office, 2021).

Turning to opportunities for freelancers, the vast majority of the EU institutions also use freelance translators; however, contracts for this kind of outsourced work are awarded via specific calls for tender (European Commission, 2019b). For translations into non-EU languages such as the languages of the four candidate countries, this is typically the way that relevant linguistic needs are managed. For freelance interpreters, however, the recruitment process is different. In a similar vein to the tests for staff interpreters, putative freelance interpreters must hold either a degree or professional experience in conference interpreting. In front of the watchful eyes of a jury of staff interpreters from the European Commission and the European Parliament, they must also pass an interinstitutional accreditation test which demonstrates their ability to interpret – in both simultaneous and consecutive modes – from at least two languages into the mother tongue. Admission to the testing procedure is competitive, and profiles of desired language combinations are published each year (European Union, 2018). As such, tests for EU and non-EU languages take place periodically. With regard to the languages of the western Balkans, for example, tests for Albanian interpreters were originally scheduled for April 2020, but have been deferred due to the ongoing pandemic (European Commission, 2020c).

Although the recruitment of linguists for the four languages should be straightforward in procedural terms, the unique political and sociolinguistic situation of the western Balkans may have an impact on translation and interpreting within the EU institutions. For example, in terms of candidates for the interinstitutional freelance interpreting tests, currently candidates offering very similar languages (for example, interpreting from Danish into Swedish, or from Czech into Slovak) are not admitted (European Union, 2018). Though information about upcoming tests for Bosnian, Montenegrin, and Serbian was not available at the time of writing, given the similarities between those tongues and also with Croatian, it can be assumed that similar restrictions would also be applicable. As has been noted elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2021, forthcoming), this mirrors the special circumstances which apply to freelance EU interpreters currently working with Bosnian, Montenegrin, and Serbian in their language combination (European Union, 2021b). Unlike at the International Criminal Court, where interpreting needs are serviced by a single Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian booth (UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, 2021), the interpreting services of the EU institutions recognise each country's official language as a separate tongue (European Union, 2021b). Thus, with Croatian already an EU official language, in the future – and in line with current EU multilingualism policy – it is conceivable that there will also need to be separate booths for Serbian and Montenegrin too.

EU-related translator and interpreter training infrastructure in the western Balkans

The translation and interpreting directorates of the EU institutions, most notably at the European Commission, have

longstanding links with relevant training institutions across the globe. In the context of translator training, the European Commission's DG Translation works with dozens of institutions across Europe via the European Master's in Translation (EMT). Despite its name, the entity is not a degree-granting programme, but rather a kitemark, given that it consists of a consortium of universities offering high-quality courses which satisfy specific entry criteria (European Commission, 2021b). Although membership of the EMT is also open to institutions operating in candidate countries (European Commission, 2021c), no members from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Serbia have been recorded in its current iteration, which is due to last until 2024 (European Commission, 2021d). Hence, the extent of DG Translation's wider cooperation with universities in candidate countries remains largely unclear, although EU officials from the Croatian and Slovenian translation units have delivered advanced professional training on translating the *acquis communautaire* for linguists from the four western Balkan candidate countries (Regional School of Public Administration, 2015, pp. 3-4). However, this activity appears to be separate from the translator training courses that are available at universities in all four of the countries. An example can be seen in the case of Lakić & Pralas (2016), who outlined their experience of developing and enhancing the postgraduate translation programme at the University of Montenegro's Institute of Foreign Languages. Their study highlighted significant references to EMT competences in the planning, design, and implementation of the course, thus demonstrating moves towards complying with EMT criteria in the Montenegrin context.

Regarding the EU's interpreting directorates, analysis of sources from the European Commission's DG Interpretation

reveals more extensive collaboration. The assistance most freely available is an open-access pedagogical resource, the Speech Repository. This is a virtual tool which provides interpreter training speeches in over thirty languages. To date, Montenegrin is not included among this number, but there are speeches available in Albanian (4 videos), Macedonian (28 videos), and Serbian (7 videos) (European Commission, 2021e). In addition, DG Interpretation also works closely with relevant MA programmes in conference interpreting in Serbia and North Macedonia. In the 2019/2020 academic year, pedagogical assistance including teaching assistance and virtual classes were made available to conference interpreting students at the University of Belgrade. This was supplemented by weeklong “training the trainer” courses for interpreter trainers at the university, as well as financial aid to attend the relevant SCIC Universities Conference, an annual event organised by DG Interpretation which brings together members of all partner universities across the globe (European Commission, 2019c; European Commission, 2020c). Although no course ran at the Ss. Cyril & Methodius University in Skopje during 2019/2020, the university is listed as working with DG Interpretation (European Commission, 2019d), and teaching staff from the university were able to be funded to attend the SCIC Universities Conference (European Commission, 2020c). However, no conference interpreter training programmes in either Albania or Montenegro were listed as collaborating with DG Interpretation. A glance at the study programmes available at the University of Montenegro reveals that there is currently no specialist conference interpreter training course available (Univerzitet Crne Gore, 2021). In the Albanian context, universities in Tirana and Vlora do offer interpreting modules under the auspices of postgraduate translation studies degrees. However, as noted by Kanani & Bîrsanu (2017, pp. 102-103),

training in simultaneous interpreting is often hampered by a lack of necessary technological infrastructure such as booths. In Kosovo, in the past a full master programme in translation and interpreting has also been offered at the University of Pristina's Faculty of Philology (Universiteti i Prishtinës, 2021), thus reflecting increasing demand for relevant services (Karjagdiu & Krasniqi, 2020, p. 96).

Concluding remarks

In providing an overview of the intersection between the western Balkans and EU multilingualism, this study has demonstrated that the integration of Albanian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian into the EU translation and interpreting directorates should not pose significant logistical problems. As illustrated by previous enlargements, the EU's language services are used to meeting the necessary requirements. However, with regard to Montenegrin and Serbian, the similarities between the former Serbo-Croatian languages may also require some accommodation at a practical level.

Turning to training issues, it is clear that cooperation in the field of translator training is an area for development for all four languages and their respective candidate countries. As such, in satisfying the quality requirements for the EMT consortium, regional institutions will strengthen and enhance their postgraduate translation degrees. Although EU cooperation with interpreter training institutions in Macedonia and Serbia appears to be strong, links still need to be forged with relevant institutions in Albania. As exemplified by the postponed interinstitutional accreditation test, it is clear that there is a demand for Albanian interpretation services at the EU level. In addition, the provision of online training material on

the Speech Repository in Albanian, as well as in Macedonian and Serbian, is a positive indication that training and development needs for these three languages are being considered. For Montenegrin, however, it appears that cooperation could still be deepened, including the provision of a relevant conference interpreter training programme in the country at a later date.

However, it is crucial to bear in mind that the EU's translation and interpreting services are primarily responsive in character. Given that a country's EU candidacy is, first and foremost, a political act, what remains clear is that the state of affairs can change at any time. A recent example is the case of Iceland, which was awarded EU candidate country status in 2010, but ultimately chose to withdraw its application in 2015 (European Commission, 2017). As such, there is always an element of conjecture in anticipating future needs at the supranational level, given the vicissitudes and complexities of international affairs. What is assured, however, is that subject to the necessary political will and once the Copenhagen criteria have been met, the translation and interpreting services of the EU institutions will incorporate the languages of the western Balkans as official and working languages of the European Union, thereby ensuring multilingual provision at the highest level.

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