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Multilingualism in the EU: A Case Study of Croatia

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Abstract

The European Union prides itself on its multiculturalism and diversity characterised especially by its multilingual language policy and its motto "united in diversity". But to what extent does this multilingual policy foster linguistic diversity? This thesis analyses the EU's multilingual policy from the perspective of Croatia, the latest country to join the EU in 2013. Croatia's turbulent linguistic past and relationship with its neighbouring countries provides an interesting yet realistic case study. My research reveals that the EU's multilingual policy does in fact preserve linguistic diversity because it is partly resistant to English dominance. The policy also has linguistic consequences for member states because it allows smaller languages to gain international recognition which in turn allows countries to protect and invest in their own languages. Although the EU's language policy can be criticised, it is currently the best solution for a supranational organisation which is committed to fostering diversity.

Keywords: European Union, multilingualism, linguistic diversity, linguistic policy, Croatian language.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse organisations of its kind. It boasts a unique union of 27 countries and 24 official languages across the European continent. Formed in 1951 after the Second World War as a union of six founding countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), it has become a leader in international politics, economic output, and tourism. Today, the EU remains committed to its original goals of peace, unity, and stability. This is also seen through its key values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights. However, the EU's commitment to language and culture is what sets it apart from other such international organisations. One of its aims is to "respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity" (European Union n.d.) which it does in part through its multilingual language policy which grants its 24 official languages equal status. The aim of this thesis is to analyse to what extent this language policy actually works, is respected, and fosters linguistic diversity. But instead of looking at the policy from the EU's perspective, I will analyse it by way of a case study of Croatia, an EU member state since 2013. Croatia lends itself to this kind of research because it was the last country to join the EU, it itself has a complicated linguistic past, and most importantly, Croatian is certainly not a dominant language. The reality is that the majority of the 24 official languages of the EU are small languages which do not play an important role and whose label of 'official language' is largely symbolic. Therefore, Croatia offers a realistic view of the policy because it is more representative than other larger languages such as French, German, English, or Spanish. I will try to answer two key research questions: firstly, does the EU's multilingual policy preserve linguistic diversity? And secondly, is the policy merely symbolic, or does it have linguistic consequences?

The thesis is divided into three main chapters: the first describes the EU's multilingual policy, its strengths and its flaws; the second provides a historical context of Croatia's linguistic past; and the third discusses what the Croatian example can tell us about EU membership from a linguistic perspective and provides an analysis of the policy from the point of view of a member state. First, however, it is necessary to clarify some important terminology and definitions.

1.1 Terminology and Definitions

The topic of the present research first requires us to define some key concepts. Since we are looking at the EU's policy of multilingualism it makes sense to use the institutional definition

of the term, namely "the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (*High Level Group on Multilingualism: Final Report* 2007: 6). Some institutions, such as the Council of Europe, differentiate between 'plurilingualism' and 'multilingualism' but the EU clarifies that it uses the term 'multilingualism' to refer to both "personal abilities and wider social contexts" (European Commission n.d.).

Next, we need to define what we understand by the term 'language'. The Cambridge Dictionary defines language as "a system of communication used by people living in a particular country" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.), while Merriam-Webster defines it as "an organically developed system of communication used by groups of humans…" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). The contrast between "a particular country" and "groups of humans" immediately brings us to the heart of the matter. The former assumes that a particular language is confined to the socially constructed borders of a nation while the latter accepts that a language emerges anywhere where there are humans to speak it. If we look specifically at how language is defined in Croatian we look to the word *jezik,* which Hrvatska enciklopedija defines as "a system of vocal signs, specific to each linguistic community ('people', or similar group) and historically conditioned, which serves primarily for understanding (communication; exchange of information, thoughts, feelings, etc.), but also simply for expression"[1] (Hrvatska enciklopedija n.d.). This definition is appropriately vague in that it does not confine language to geographic borders but to a community of speakers.

In a recent conference paper, the Croatian philosopher Mislav Ježić (cited in Tadić *et al.* 2024) also distinguishes between *hrvatski jezik, hrvatski standardni jezik* and *hrvatski književni jezik* or, the Croatian language, the Croatian standard language, and the Croatian literary language, as three separate concepts. According to Ježić, 'the Croatian language' encompasses all its dialects and local speech varieties, 'the Croatian standard language' is a formalised version based on the chosen dialect (since the 19th century this is mostly the Neo-Štokavian dialect and therefore does not encompass other dialects), but it does include all functional styles (which 'non-standard' dialects, and even 'literary languages' in their stylization, do not and cannot encompass). Finally, 'the Croatian literary language' is a good comprehensive term for the

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[1] All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated. Original: "U najopćenitijem smislu riječi, jezik je sustav glasovnih znakova, specifičan za svaku jezičnu zajednicu (»narod«, ili sličnu skupinu) i povijesno uvjetovan, koji služi ponajprije za sporazumijevanje (komunikaciju; razmjenu obavijesti, misli, osjećaja i sl.), ali i samo za izražavanje."

Croatian language in all its literary registers and stylizations (of which the 'standard language' is only a part, and dialect stylizations are only its aspects)[2] (Tadić *et al.* 2024: 5). For the purpose of this thesis, any references to 'language' in the Croatian case refers to the first term, the Croatian language, which encompasses the three main dialects spoken within the country.

Previously the languages spoken in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro have been grouped together, as we will see, and referred to as a diasystem (dialect + system) (Garde 1996) which Collins dictionary defines as "a linguistic system forming a common denominator for a group or set of dialects" (Collins English Dictionary 2025). Today this term no longer seems appropriate given the independent status of these countries and their desire to differentiate their languages from each other, for this reason they will be referred to as languages. Let us now look at the EU's multilingualism policy and the status of minor and major languages in Europe.

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[2] Original: "(1) "Hrvatski jezik" obuhvaća sva svoja narječja i govore, a (2) "standardni jezik" stiliziran je po obrascu izabranoga narječja (od 19. st. u načelu novoštokavskoga; dakle ne obuhvaća druga narječja), ali obuhvaća sve funkcionalne stilove (što "nestandardna" narječja, pa ni "književni jezici" u njihovoj stilizaciji ne obuhvaćaju i ne mogu obuhvatiti). (3) "Književni jezik" dobar je obuhvatan nazivak za (hrvatski) jezik u svim svojim književnim registrima i stilizacijama (od kojih je "standardni jezik" samo dio, a i narječne su stilizacije samo njegovi vidovi)."

2. Language Policy in the EU

2.1 EU Multilingual Language Policy: 24 Official Languages

With the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 the four official languages of the six founding nations, Dutch, French, German, and Italian, were made official and working languages of the Community in the very first article of the first EEC regulation. Since then, upon accession, each member state has been able to submit one of its languages to become an official and working language of the EU. Article 55(1) of the current consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union has been repeatedly updated with each new language and now lists all 24 official languages declaring them "equally authentic" (European Union 2016c). More importantly Article 24 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) stipulates that "[e]very citizen of the Union may write to any of the institutions or bodies (…) in one of the languages mentioned in Article 55(1) of the Treaty on European Union [TEU] and have an answer in the same language" (European Union 2016b). This language policy applies to communication with the various EU institutions and any laws and treaties passed by the EU bodies. Internally however, each EU institution applies a language policy which best meets its needs.

It is not entirely clear whether there was an original plan to add each language to the list of official languages when the first EEC Treaty was drawn up, or whether this was inevitable after the decision to make each of the founding nations' language an official language of the Community. Some scholars refer to it as a "decision made by the European Union (EU) at its inception" (Gazzola 2016: 547) while others suspected that the languages of newer member states would not even be added since it would become "not only absurd but also a complete technical, personnel and financial impossibility"[3] (Brozović 2002: 123). Most research on the topic has not considered this question at all but we see that the policy of adding each language is still going strong and does not show any signs of changing.

Additionally, many EU member states have signed and ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a treaty introduced by the Council of Europe in 1992. The charter aims to "protect and promote regional and minority languages and to enable speakers to use them both in private and public life" (Council of Europe n.d.). Croatia, as our country of

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[3] Original: "[…] jezična praksa Europske unije postala bi ne samo apsurdom nego i potpunom tehničkom, kadrovskom i financijskom nemogućnosti."

focus, is among those which has ratified the treaty (Council of Europe n.d.), possibly on account of the minority languages present on its territory. Although the status of minority languages is interesting, I will not be focusing on the EU's attitudes towards minority languages nor on the minority languages spoken in Croatia. This thesis will focus primarily on language as an established standard which acts as a nation's official language.

2.1.1 EU vs Other International Organisations

The EU's multilingual policy is unique compared to other similar supranational organisations (Cosmai 2014: 38). What sets it apart from organisations such as the UN, the World Trade Organisation or the Council of Europe is firstly the greater number of official languages, and secondly, the more extensive language services that the EU offers (Cosmai 2014; Ringe 2022). For example, the UN has six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish (United Nations n.d.), the World Trade Organisation has three 'working languages': English, French and Spanish (WTO n.d.), and the Council of Europe has only two: English and French (Council of Europe n.d.). Looking at other international organisations reveals that standard practice is to limit the number of official languages making the EU "the sole international organisation to have a number of official languages that is […] at least equal in number to all those formally declared as such by the Member States at the time of stipulating their Accession Treaties" (Cosmai 2014: 36). The EU doesn't only offer translation of written language and interpreting services for spoken languages, but also legislative drafting support and editing services (European Union 2025).

2.1.2 Why does the EU have this policy?

Before we consider why the EU employs such a complex language policy, we must first consider the role that language plays in the creation of national identity. With the birth of the modern nation, language was borrowed as a national symbol which had developed naturally, had its own history, and was usually contained within a given territory (Škiljan 2000: 9). The desire to become a nation state led to the current system in which most countries have one official language. These standardised national languages gained prominence with the rise of democracy when, ordinary citizens became important to the state (Hobsbawm 1996). In the 19th century, Romanticism triggered the belief that one language defined the ways of thinking of its users and that a united language corresponded with a united race (Thomas 1994: 250). As a result, today language is seen as a part of culture and a nation's official language is a key element of its national identity. Having said this, there are many countries with multiple official

languages (e.g. Belgium, Canada, Switzerland), or countries which are incredible linguistically diverse (e.g. India, USA) which suggests that the lack of just *one* official language is not an obstacle to feelings of community and national identity. A similar argument applies in situations where minority cultures with minority languages demonstrate very strong feelings of identity which are not associated to a specific nation, such as in Catalonia. A lot has been written about how we define the concept of nation and many scholars categorise nations as imagined or invented communities (Anderson 2006: 6). Hugh Seton-Watson (1977: 5) succinctly concludes that no "'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists". If the concept of nation is socially constructed it calls into question the elements which could encourage feelings of national identity, some nations may consider elements such as history, territory, citizenship law or culture to be more important.

The EU adheres to the traditional conception of a nation state which intended to unite "a sovereign people to live under common laws and a common constitution, irrespective of culture, language, and ethnic composition" (Hobsbawm 1996: 1066). Its policy of multilingualism is based on a relatively novel concept which arose thanks to "the aspiration to universal literacy, the political mobilization of the common people, and a particular form of linguistic nationalism" (Hobsbawm 1996: 1068). The EU's motto "united in diversity" is a reference to this notion of people from different cultures who speak different languages being united and equally valued.

There is also slightly more subtle reasoning for this policy. According to Ringe (2022), there are three main reasons for the EU operating as a multilingual political community. Firstly, it allows the member states to maintain their language as a key element of identity, and as mentioned above, unite these identities precisely on the basis of their diversity. Secondly, it is essential for a functioning democracy in which citizens can interact with and participate in this political arena in their own language. And thirdly, multilingualism ensures the aforementioned principle of equal authenticity which dictates that each language version of EU legislation is equally valid (Ringe 2022: 29).

2.1.3 Equal Authenticity

The 24 official languages listed in the Treaty on European Union are declared equally authentic. This means that each language version applies equally in each member state and one language version cannot take precedence over another (Ringe 2022: 29). This is made possible by what the EU calls a process of 'authentication' which automatically takes places upon

translation. Article 55 of the final provisions of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the Treaty was drawn up in a single original in all 26 of the official languages and that the texts in each language are equally authentic (European Union 2016a; Leal 2020). This means that formally there are no 'translations' but rather multiple 'language versions' or 'originals' (Leal 2020; Ringe 2022). This however does not mean that other language versions cannot be consulted when looking for clarification or specific details, but no single language version can be regarded as the sole original or as superior to the others. The consequence of this process of authentication is that it avoids different interpretations of the same document in different languages which can lead to legal questions arising and it erases linguistic hierarchy among the official languages (Leal 2020; Ringe 2022). However, it also erases the work of translators and puts into question the value and validity of translation. This policy suggests that a translation is less worthy than an original and that the work of a translator can never be good enough to achieve the same status as an original. One could argue that this is a dangerous precedent for such an influential supranational organisation to be setting.

2.2 Problems with EU Multilingualism

Naturally, this highly complex and unique language policy poses some problems. The first criticism which can often be found in media coverage of EU language policy focuses on cost. In the past there have been claims that maintaining such a language policy is expensive and places a burden on taxpayers. This is because translation and interpreting services require substantial ongoing public spending which is financed through national tax revenues. Costs have likely been increasing with time as the number of official languages has increased. In reality, according to the most recent available figures from 2012, EU translation services cost around €1 billion per year making up around 1% of the annual budget of EU institutions and bodies, and costing the taxpayer an average of €2 annually (European Commission 2013). Therefore, this can hardly be considered an extremely 'costly' service nor is it necessarily 'unsustainable'. However, we also need to consider how much EU citizens value the translations services provided and how much they are willing to pay for them (Gazzola 2016: 562). On the other hand, we could also consider whether the EU is contributing *enough* to language services. Leal (2021) claims that given the EU's motto of "united in diversity", its emphasis on language as a source of cultural identity, and its promotion of linguistic diversity, dedicating less than 1% of its budget to language services is a rather modest contribution.

Another criticism which can be found among academics is the lack of transparency from the EU. For example, in Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community (consolidated version 1 July 2013), Article 1 defines the 24 languages as "the official languages and working languages of the institutions" (European Union 2013). No explanation of what the distinction between these two concepts is given thus implying that they are synonymous (Cosmai 2014) which in turn leads one to ask why a distinction has been made. As previously mentioned, a closer look at the different EU institutions reveals different practices at different times. The European Commission for example prefers the use of what are unofficially known as 'procedural languages' in daily work practices (European Commission 2013). These languages are English, French, and to a lesser extent today, German but their label of 'procedural languages' remains unofficial insofar as it has not been mentioned in any law or treaty thus far (Leal 2020).

This problem goes hand in hand with what could be regarded as the biggest problem with the multilingual policy, namely the fact that the 24 official languages are more equal in theory than in practice. The EU applies a policy of de jure multilingualism but de facto monolingualism, i.e. it relies heavily on English. Nowadays almost all business is carried out in English, laws are originally drafted in English and knowledge of English is more important than knowledge of other languages. Data for 2022 shows that 91.8% of source texts translated by the European Commission were in English and English was the second most frequent target language after French (European Commission 2022b). In theory the EU emphasises the importance of diversity and of maintaining each member states' culture by granting official status to the languages by enabling the translation of huge quantities of texts, by providing interpretation services, and by leaning heavily on its motto and claiming to be "united in diversity". In practice however, by presenting translated documents as originals, not translations, and privileging English, the EU fosters a sense of unity at the cost of multiplicity (Leal 2020).

Therefore, English has become a kind of unofficial lingua franca in the EU, but this has not been officially acknowledged which actually further reinforces this de facto monolingualism. Would it make a difference if the EU were more transparent about these inequalities and inconsistencies? After all, as we will see later in this section, the current language policy of the EU is in some ways very beneficial and even essential. Greater transparency could increase public trust in the EU and even bring about changes. For example, if the EU were to publicly declare the language in which original texts were drafted it would be forced to make an effort for this to not always be English and could encourage true equality between the official

languages (Leal 2020: 493). At a time when the public already demonstrates low levels of trust in politics and politicians, it would be a breath of fresh air for the EU to acknowledge its flawed yet functioning language policy.

2.2.1 Alternatives to the Current Multilingual Policy

The EU's multilingual language policy has been frequently criticised by academics but not many alternatives have been suggested. Gazzola (2016) carried out empirical research to see which language regime is, or could be, most effective based on linguistic disenfranchisement, more specifically "the percentage of citizens who potentially cannot understand EU documents […] because they do not master any official language." (Gazzola 2016: 4). The research compares the current multilingual language policy with three others: a hexalingual language regime of English, French, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish (the largest EU official languages in terms of native speakers), a trilingual language regime based on English, French and German, and a monolingual (or English-only) language policy.

The results showed that the current multilingual language regime is the most effective as it produces the lowest disenfranchisement rate and ultimately is not as much of a financial burden as some may claim. Despite the EU's best efforts, second and foreign language knowledge is not adequately widespread throughout the member states to be able to reduce the number of official languages. Foreign language knowledge also tends to be limited to the upper classes of society and those with higher education; changing the current language regime to one of the other suggestions would exclude a large part of society on the basis of education and resources. Finally, as mentioned above, the financial burden of the current multilingual language regime can hardly be considered unsustainable and still doesn't warrant cutting down the number of official languages (Gazzola 2016).

2.2.2 Benefits of the Current Multilingual Policy

Further advantages of EU multilingualism, communication in nonnative languages, and reliance on translators are analysed by Ringe (2022). His analysis reveals that the EU's multilingualism, although uneven, defuses the issue of 'language' and allows the various EU institutions to apply language practices as they see fit. An unintentional result of this is that language has become a mere tool for communication thus avoiding issues which may arise considering that language is inherently political. By using non-native languages, EU actors are limited in their language, and the principal focus is on effective communication and mutual understanding. According to Ringe the effects of this are threefold; the language used in EU

policymaking is simplified, language is standardised, meaning that it becomes difficult to distinguish speakers or drafters based on what they say or write, and the language used tends to be "neutral, decultured and de-ideologized" thus hiding national and political backgrounds or agendas. Furthermore, interactions between non-native speakers of a language increases tolerance and empathy and often leads actors to question any expressions of political difference because they cannot be sure of the real intention. The prevalence of English in the EU also contributes to this neutrality because the English used, sometimes called EU English or European English, is close to becoming its own standard which is more "utilitarian, standardized, pragmatic, decultured, and de-ideologized" than English varieties used in Anglophone countries (Ringe 2022: 11).

The consequence of this depoliticization of language is that conflicts caused by 'language' are subdued not amplified because the expression of political difference is limited. More specifically, "multilingualism depoliticizes the language of politics, which in turn depoliticizes political communication and thus politics and policymaking." (Ringe 2022: 13).

2.3 The Presence and Status of English

The multiple mentions of English being the dominant language and serving as an unofficial lingua franca leads us to the question of why English is still an official language post-Brexit. Although not the topic of this paper, we must acknowledge the paradox of English being the most used language in the EU even after the United Kingdom, the country which submitted this language upon accession, has left the EU. Over the past few decades English, much like Latin and French before it, has gained lingua franca status not just in the EU, but all over the world. It became an official EU language in 1973 when the UK joined the EU and was also submitted as an official language by Ireland when it joined in the same year.

One argument which has been made to defend the presence of English is that it is the official language of two member states: Ireland and Malta (European Union n.d.). However, upon accession Malta submitted Maltese as its official language and in 2007 Ireland requested Irish to become an official and working language of the EU. Granted, Irish has had a slightly unique status in the EU wherein it was initially only a Treaty language (only the EU treaties were translated), and since 2007 a derogation was granted by the Council due to a shortage of translators meaning that not all documents could be translated into Irish. However, in 2022 this derogation ended, and Irish gained full status like the other EU official languages and now has sufficient capacity to meet translation demands (European Commission 2022a). Since each

country can only submit one official language, this argument holds little ground. In fact, allowing these two countries to have two official languages recognised could set a precedent and lead other member states to request a similar arrangement.

Having said this, in order for a language to be stripped of its official language status, the change must be approved unanimously by all member states in the Council (European Commission 2013). In the case of English, it is unlikely that Malta, and more importantly, Ireland, would vote in favour of this change because English is spoken by the majority in Ireland while Irish remains a minority (Leal 2021: 158). Regardless, English has remained an official language because it is the most used language in the EU and is integral to its functioning. For example, nowadays, 95% of legislation is drafted in English and the remaining 5% supposedly in French (Barbier in Kraus and Grin 2018: 337). In fact, removing English could potentially be a very costly and time-consuming process for the EU (Zonjić and Šetka-Čilić 2018: 186).

This increased use of English, mainly by non-native speakers, has led a unique variety to arise which does not necessarily reflect the English used in the UK or US. For this reason, there have been calls to identify the English spoken in the EU as Euro-English because if a standardised version of European English were to be established, this could act as a true lingua franca which belongs to everyone and to no specific country or member state. Modiano (2022) claims that given the extremely high percentage of EU citizens who have learnt, or are learning, English, it can no longer be considered a foreign language but is more reflective of a second language in the EU. His research suggests that foreign language learning is decreasing as people are settling for knowledge of their mother tongue and proficiency in English. Since Brexit, there is no reason for those learning English to strive for the British English standard, nor should it be replaced with American English which is also a culture-specific variety. Instead, Modiano argues, the EU should make an effort to frame European English as a lingua franca which is culture specific to Europe and can give users a sense of belonging; and in the future, as this new standard grows and evolves, the EU is likely to intervene which will demonstrate its power to shape a language and its role as a gateway to official recognition, a topic which will be discussed later in this paper.

Needless to say, if another country who had submitted a language which was not the official language of any of the other member states were to leave, this language would no longer remain an official EU language. English is far too integral to the functioning of the EU for it to be removed. However, the English which is being used today in the EU and Europe no longer reflects the British English variety but has evolved into what could possibly become a new

variety precisely because it has served as a lingua franca and is constantly used by non-native speakers.

2.4 Croatia: The Latest Member of the EU

We will now look at what the current EU policy on multilingualism looks like from the perspective of a member state. Croatia was the last country to join the EU in 2013, ten years after applying for membership, and adopted the Euro at the beginning of 2023, making it the 28th member state of the EU and the 20th member of the eurozone. As we have just seen, for any member state with an official language which is not English, French or maybe German, the status of official EU language is largely symbolic. Croatia, being a very small country, likely sees this new official status of its language as a success despite the fact that in the realm of the EU it is a minority language. Croatia acts as an especially interesting case study given its turbulent linguistic past and relatively recent independent status.

3. Case Study: Croatia

3.1 Introduction

Croatia is a parliamentary republic located in the northwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula. It borders Slovenia to the northwest, Hungary to the northeast, Serbia to the east, Bosnia and Herzegovina to the southeast, and Montenegro at its most southern point on the Adriatic coast. It also shares a maritime border with Italy to the west.

We will first look at the evolution of the Croatian language from initial attempts at standardisation, its status after the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes which then became the first and second Yugoslavia, and finally what happened after Croatia gained independence with Croatian as its official language and modern-day attempts at standardisation.

3.1.1 Why Croatia?

I have chosen Croatian as the language of my case study because it presents a somewhat unique case but is also illustrative of the situation of other smaller official EU languages. The uniqueness of the Croatian case lies in the relatively recent evolution of the Croatian linguistic identity which arose out of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the ensuing conflict in the 1990s. Furthermore, Croatia was the last country to join the EU in 2013 and unlike previous larger expansions in which multiple countries joined at the same time, it joined alone. The question of linguistic equality will be one of the key discussion points when analysing the EU's multilingual policy and Croatian, as a smaller language, can illustrate the tensions between symbolic equality and practical efficiency.

3.1.2 Accents, Dialects, and Supradialects

The Slavs make up the largest ethno-linguistic group in Europe and present-day scholars divide the Slavic peoples into three groups: West Slavic, East Slavic and South Slavic. This classification is based on both linguistic and historico-geographical elements (Gołąb 1992). Map 1 shows the geographical distribution of these three groups and the countries which are generally regarded as belonging to each one. This thesis will be focusing on the South Slavic group and more specifically on the geographical region herein referred to as the Western Balkans (devoid of any political connotations) which today encompasses the nations of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.
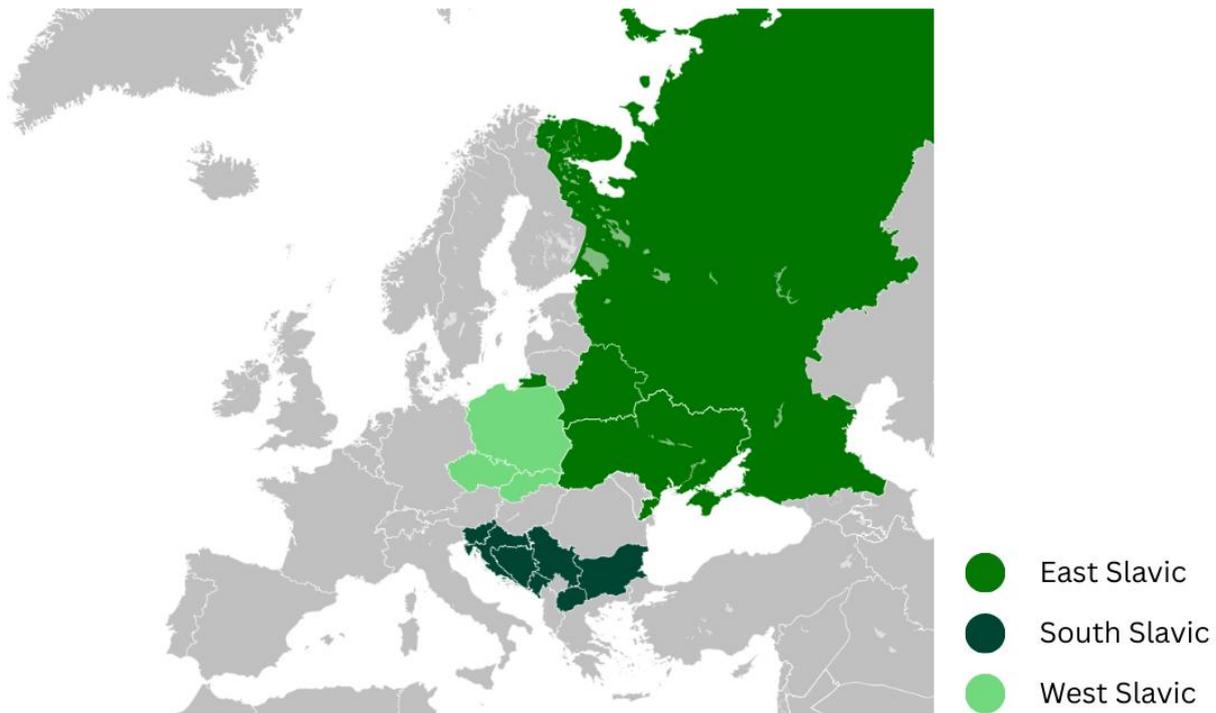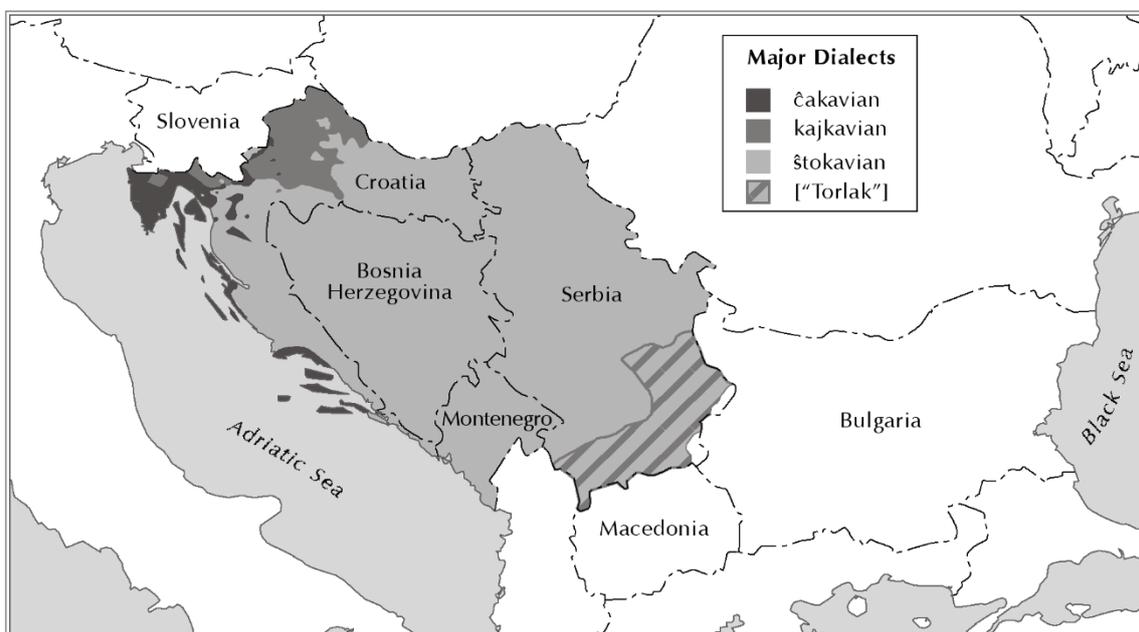
Map 1: Slavic Speaking countries in Europe today.

The languages spoken in this region form what is known as the South Slavic dialect continuum which allows communication and mutual intelligibility (Peti-Stantić 2017). An in-depth description of these dialects is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but a certain amount of detail is necessary for the discussion that follows. There are three supradialects present in the area known as Kajkavian, Čakavian and Štokavian (named after the interrogative particle they use for 'what?': *kaj, ča* and *što*). The presence of a fourth supradialect known as Torlak (or sometimes the Prizren-Timok dialect) is controversial given that it can also be classified as a dialect of Old-Štokavian (as opposed to the Neo-Štokavian dialect which is dominant today) (Alexander 2013: 348). The Kajkavian and Čakavian dialects are spoken only in Croatia, in the northern area bordering Slovenia and Hungary, and along the Adriatic coast and islands respectively. The Štokavian dialect on the other hand is spoken in parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro. The Torlak dialect is spoken in the southeastern section, namely south and southeast Serbia.

Another linguistic phenomenon which is important to consider in this region is the modern pronunciation of the Proto-Slavic vowel *jat* which gave rise to *e* in certain dialects, known as ekavian but *je* or *ije* in other dialects, known as ijekavian where both the *e* and *je/ije* instances have a short and long *jat* vowel. For example, the short *e* vowel in ekvian would give us *mleko* (milk) while the long *e* would give us *devojka* (girl). The ijekavian, however would be *mlijeko*

and *djevojka* (Thomas 1994: 239). There is also a third pronunciation where the *jat* vowel evolved into an *i*, giving rise to the ikavian pronunciation which is found in small pockets across Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and northern Serbia, but primarily along the southwestern Croatian coast. The examples above would therefore become *mliko* and *divojka*. Since *jat* reflexes concern a highly regular phonological phenomenon which does not impede understanding nor does any other significant linguistic trait fully correlate with each pronunciation, we cannot call these separate dialects like we do the Kajkavian, Čakavian and Štokavian ones. Nevertheless, the ekavian pronunciation is found in the east, the ikavian roughly in the west, and the ijekavian roughly in the centre (Alexander 2013: 348). Maps 1-5 provide a visual of the distribution of dialects and *jat* pronunciations.

Map 2: Distribution of the four supradialects Čakavian, Kajkavian, Štokavian, and Torlak.

Map 3: Distribution of the ekavian pronunciation of the jat vowel.
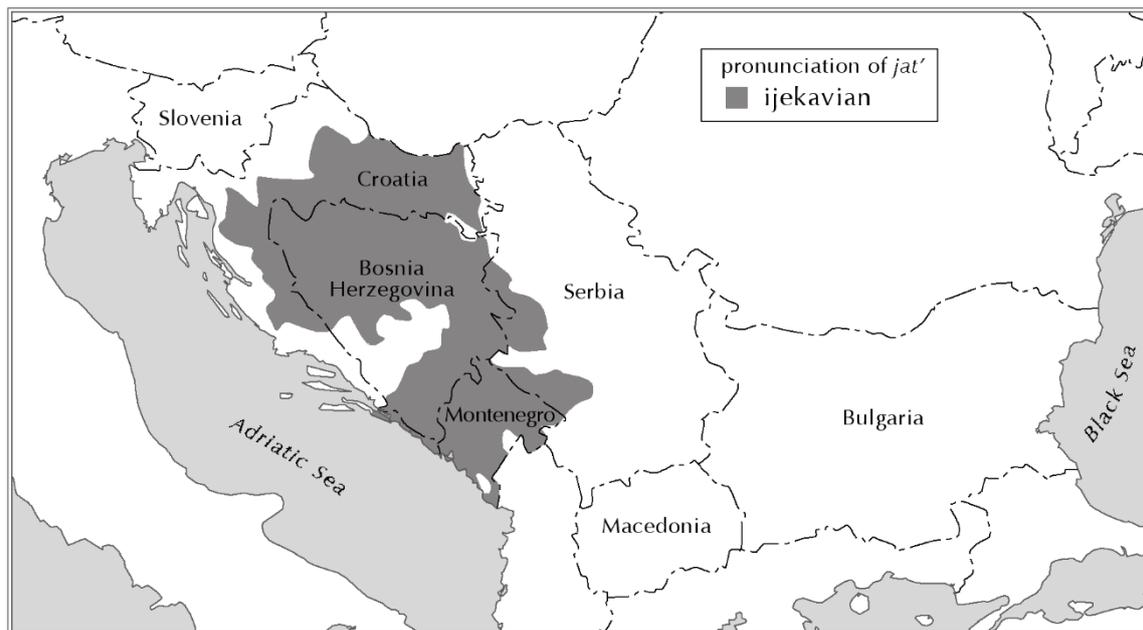
Map 4: Distribution of the ijekavian pronunciation of the jat vowel.
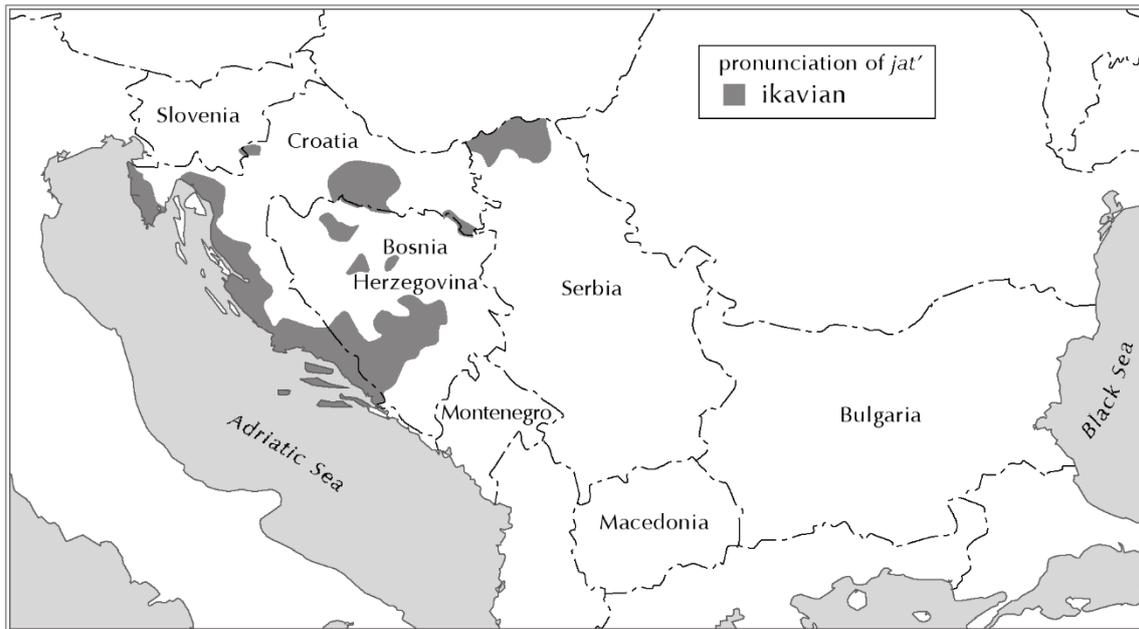
Map 5: Distribution of the ikavian pronunciation of the jat vowel.[4]

3.2 Historical Context

3.2.1 From Serbian and Croatian to Serbo-Croatian

Today the South Slavic dialects spoken in the Western Balkans are recognised to varying degrees as four independent languages: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. For example, they are all officially recognised by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and have their own language codes. However, Montenegrin, unlike the other three languages, cannot be selected as a language in Microsoft programs. For the purpose of this thesis, we will concentrate primarily on the development of Croatian and its relationship with Serbian because "the idea of Yugoslav unity has always depended upon a functioning coalition between Serbs and Croats" (Alexander 2013: 363). This is in no way intended to imply that the case of Bosnian and Montenegrin is less important or less interesting, in fact, a whole separate piece of work could be produced with a focus on the linguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina or in Montenegro.

Today Croatian and Serbian are recognised as two separate languages and are the official languages of Croatia and Serbia respectively. However, in the not-so-distant past, and to some extent even today, they were grouped together as one language, Serbo-Croatian, largely due to their extreme similarity. When analysing the development of Serbian and Croatian from their

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[4] Maps 2-5 Source: Ronelle Alexander, published by permission.

inception through to their convergence and ultimate separation, we find many differing opinions. Not only are there different interpretations on the Serbian and Croatian sides, but there are also differing views among Croatian scholars. Let us first look at the Croatian perspective which claims that Serbian and Croatian developed independently but with time evolved and converged to arrive at what some would consider a single language (Garde 1996; Katičić 1997).

In the past, the choice of secular written (literary) language was determined mainly by religious affiliation in cases where the liturgical language closely resembled the idioms spoken by the people. This meant that the dialects which were actually spoken were not written. Eastern Christianity in Slavic countries used Slavonic as its liturgical language which then became the written language of the Orthodox Slavs, Serbs and Bulgarians. In the 18th century, Slavonic Serbian combined Church Slavonic of the Russian recension with spoken Serbian to create a language which was difficult to understand and not appropriate as a literary language (Alexander 2013; Garde 1996). However, the Serbian Orthodox Church viewed this as the language of the people and did not feel there was a need for literary languages to develop off the basis of the individual spoken vernaculars (Peti-Stantić 2017).

In the region where today's Croatian is predominantly spoken, the Roman Catholic Church dominated accompanied by its sole liturgical language, Latin. For centuries Latin had served as the language of literature and science across Europe and therefore did not belong to any one single linguistic or ethnic community; it was equally 'foreign' to all its users (Peti-Stantić 2017: 386). Latin, as an ethnically unmarked and universally accepted language, served as an example of a culturally all-encompassing language to aspire to when it came to standardisation (Alexander 2013: 355). At the same time, its status as 'no one's language', meant that it did not compete with local vernaculars but instead occupied the prestigious supranational domains of religion and learning, while vernacular languages developed alongside it. As a result, these vernaculars were written down very early on and for centuries literature in said languages coexisted with literature written in Latin. This applies to the vernaculars spoken by the Catholic Slavs, including the Croats (Garde 1996: 132).

The early 19th century saw the introduction of Romantic nationalism and with it an increasing bond between language and national identity. This led to a need to standardise the varieties spoken by the people and not the church which could serve as unifying forces. In order to standardise, first one linguistic variety had to be imposed on a specific territory. The chosen variety then had to be codified via official grammars and dictionaries before it was imposed

through a state administration. In the region in question there were four cultural-administrative centres with their own varieties which were eligible for standardisation: Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Cetinje (Ljubešić *et al.* 2018: 103). In the 1800s two prominent linguists, Ljudevit Gaj (1809–1872) and Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864), made language reforms to Croatian and Serbian respectively bringing the standards much closer.

In the 1830s Croatia found its language and culture was being threatened under Habsburg rule and there was a growing desire among young Croatian intellectuals to read and write in the vernacular as opposed to German, Hungarian and Latin, the preferred languages of polite society at the time. Thus the birth of the Illyrian movement led by Ljudevit Gaj, a Croatian linguist and writer (Auty 1958; Skendi 1975). The Croats did not have to worry about establishing a popular language of the people because for centuries they had been employing the popular language as a written language which coexisted with literature written in Latin (Alexander 2013: 355). Instead, Gaj was faced with a diverse language defined as Croatian which was made up of multiple dialects and he wanted to "establish a stronger and more unified Slavic cultural and political presence within the Habsburg state, with the goal of countering Hungarian cultural dominance" (Alexander 2013: 354). The Štokavian dialect with the ijekavian pronunciation was the most widespread in the region and present to varying degrees in all four of the administrative-cultural centres making it the most logical choice for a common language (Ljubešić *et al.* 2018: 104).

In the early 1800s, the First Serbian Uprising triggered Serbia's attempt to free itself from Ottoman occupation. By the 1830s Serbia had transitioned from an Ottoman province to a vassal principality. Vuk Karadžić, a Serbian folklorist and philologist, sought to standardise the Serbian language not based on Church Slavonic but on folk poems so that the written language was the same as the spoken one. It was also an attempt to further Serbia's newfound independence from Ottoman rule by "building a strong sense of identity based on popular poetry, primarily the *junačke pjesme* (heroic songs)" (Alexander 2013: 353). The idea of a united language was not difficult to impose in Serbia where until then Church Slavonic was seen as everybody's language. However, Vuk faced opposition from the Church which saw itself as the guardian of Serbian identity and expression. Basing himself on the epic songs and folk poems, Vuk opted for the variety where folk speech was 'purest' and thus abandoned the difficult-to-understand Slavonic-Serbian with an etymological spelling and replaced it with the Štokavian ijekavian vernacular and a phonetic spelling (Alexander 2013: 353; Garde 2022: 133).

As a consequence of these reforms, almost the same variety was codified in all four centres and the languages spoken in Serbia and Croatia arrived at a point where they very closely resembled each other. According to Katičić (1997), these developments reveal that two distinctly different processes took place in two different contexts, which resulted in what could be considered one linguistic entity.

In 1850, representatives for Serbia and Croatia met in Vienna to discuss the issue of literary language policy and signed the Vienna Literary Agreement. The agreement acknowledged that as one people, the South Slavs needed one literature to unite their fragmented one. It addressed the question of orthography and dialect, and the signers agreed that instead of creating a new idiom, it was better to select one of the already existing vernacular dialects for a literary language (Greenberg 2008b: 183). Many saw this agreement as having lain the groundworks for a 'united' Serbo-Croatian language. In reality, the Illyrian's were not satisfied with the agreement, and many Croats would point out that the leader, Gaj, was not actually present at the meeting. Vuk, on the other hand, played an instrumental role in the drafting of the agreement and it was his agenda of a Štokavian ijekavian language with a phonetic spelling which was eventually accepted. This new supposedly united language was not actually named in the agreement text but was referred to as Croato-Serbian by the Croatian representative and Serbo-Croatian by the Serbian representative. Interestingly, Vuk, as a key player, continued to refer to it as Serbian (Alexander 2013: 359). There was also no mention of whether the Cyrillic or Latin alphabet would be used. Although not everyone was in favour of the form of this united language, the signing of the agreement does however illustrate a desire for unity at the time. Attempts to establish the united Serbo-Croatian language which followed were promoted by different parties in different regions during Austro-Hungarian rule and took place in different circumstances in the Croatian and Serbian contexts. For example, in the Serbian sphere this was characterised by independent authors and cultural activists fighting the intellectual establishment of their people while in the Croatian context it was supported by the authorities and was led by the education establishment (Katičić 1997: 174). All these elements point to the existence of two languages, two language planning efforts and ultimately two identities. The question of identity was in fact at the root of this linguistic problem; according to Katičić (1997), there was little evidence of a united Serbo-Croatian identity and "without the fulfilment of such a common identity no language can be regarded as truly 'unified'" (Katičić 1997: 179).

Although there were key figures who were opposed to linguistic unity, for example Ante Starčević (1823–1896) who saw it as Serbian identity being imposed on the Croats, the majority

of Croats were in favour of a united Croatian and Serbian linguistic identity. The Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts (JAZU) was established in Zagreb in 1867 which aimed to enforce Vuk's proposals and the late 1800s saw the publication of multiple grammars, dictionaries and manuals of the 'Croatian or Serbian language' by so called "Croatian Vukovites" (Alexander 2013; Greenberg 2008a). During this time Yugoslav unity was supported by the Hungarian administration possibly because it was seen as a way to subdue growing Croatian nationalism (Greenberg 2017: 30). Although many of Vuk's reforms had been accepted in Serbia, Serbian writers continued to write ekavian instead of adopting the ijekavian spelling. However, once Serbia gained independence in 1878 it was more concerned with pursuing its own interests and making sure the language (consistently referred to as Serbian) remained relevant in the modern European age. It was agreed that adopting words from western languages was acceptable but excessive foreign influence was resisted, especially when it came to Germanisms which were seen as emanating from a Germanised society in Zagreb. In Croatia on the other hand, new concepts were assigned Slavic words suggesting a more 'purist' linguistic identity. By the early 1900s, despite the widespread use of ijekavian among Serbian speakers, the ekavian prevailed. The Croats however had embraced the ijekavian pronunciation and it had become a linguistic marker of Croatian identity; it also created a distinction from Serbian. Both sides continued to use their own alphabet, Latin for the Croats and Cyrillic for the Serbs. Nevertheless, there was still strong support for the united Yugoslav idea (Alexander 2013; Greenberg 2017).

It is important to remember that standardisation and codification efforts were strongly based on the notion of Romantic nationalism which sees a language as the marker of one nation's identity (Alexander 2013). Furthermore, the decision to standardise the Štokavian ijekavian dialect in the four centres was strongly influenced by the vision of a single independent Slavic state where the Slavic groups shared a common future. However, this vision was never strong enough to replace local, regional and religious differences. As we will see, this conflict between integration and separation never subsided and was likely the reason that this romantic vision of unity was never achieved (Ljubešić *et al.* 2018: 103).

3.2.2 Language Policy in Yugoslavia

After WW1, the region of the Western Balkans began a united but turbulent period as a single state first known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and later as Yugoslavia. If until 1918 authors and linguists on both the Serbian and Croatian side were in favour of a united Serbo-Croatian language, opinions changed with the formation of the first Yugoslavia. In this

newly formed state, the 'Croatian or Serbian' language was expected to function as one and the same. Due to the fact that Belgrade was the capital and there was a larger number of Serbian speakers, the new standard was characterised by elements of standard Serbian being introduced into Croatian language use. The Croats found their freedom of language use restricted by a Slavic-speaking political and administrative centre which saw its language as the official version of the common language (Alexander 2013; Katičić 1997). Croatian institutions which existed during Austro-Hungarian rule disappeared, Serbian technical and scientific terms were maintained because their international terminology made them more prestigious, texts for public circulation were drafted in Serbian because it was inefficient to publish in multiple languages (except for very important texts), the Yugoslav military used Serbian, and so on. The only element of Croatian which took precedence over Serbian was the use of the Latin alphabet since it was more internationally recognised and widespread. What essentially started to develop was a language formed of the Serbian standard written in the Latin alphabet (Garde 1996: 136). Naturally the Serbs saw no problem with this development but the Croatians were concerned that they were being robbed of their language and thus their identity (Garde 1996). Slowly, influential Croatian linguists started to reject these reforms and the idea of language unification on Belgrade terms so that by the start of World War 2 popular beliefs were leaning towards the notion that "Croatian and Serbian had to be considered as two distinct languages because of their cultural and emotional individuality" (Katičić 1997: 184).

During WW2, purist views of the Croatian language as completely separate from Serbian grew in Croatia promoted primarily by the Croatian fascist organisation known as Ustasha, and its leader, Ante Pavelić (1889–1959). The newly formed Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a fascist puppet state politically and militarily controlled by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, attempted to 'purify' the language via a series of authoritarian measures such as banning the Cyrillic alphabet, prohibiting 'Serbian' words from a published list, imposing the use of 'Croatian' words – which were sometimes forgotten terms from the past or sometimes simply invented on the spot – and applying traditional spelling reforms (Alexander 2013; Garde 1996: 137).

The Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, later renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, was formed in 1945 after the Partisan's victory led by Josip Broz (1892–1980), nicknamed "Tito". The NDH ceased to exist and support for the populist agenda of the Partisans was strong. This second Yugoslavia was a federation of six nominally equal republics: Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia

(Lampe and Allcock 2025). As a united nation the Serbo-Croatian agenda was renewed and Serbo-Croatian was once again regarded as one language which represented the Croats and the Serbs equally (Katičić 1997: 185). In 1954, a meeting between Serbian and Croatian linguists to discuss language matters for the unified language led to the signing of the Novi Sad Agreement. This was once again an attempt to officially unite the different variants by laying down ten conclusions related to the Serbo-Croatian language. The main conclusions were that Serbs, Croats and Montenegrins shared a single language with two equal variants, the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet had equal status, the different pronunciations had equal status, and following the agreement the two sides would together compile orthographic manuals and establish common terminology. The Novi Sad Agreement also seemed to resolve the question of what this united language should be called. Officially "it was to be called *srpskohrvatski* 'Serbo-Croatian' for the Eastern variant, and *hrvatskosrpski* 'Croato-Serbian' for the Western variant" (Greenberg 2008a: 30). These tumultuous relations and conflicts of opinion between those in favour of a united language and the Croats who remained adamant in their demand for an independent Croatian language which did not have to adapt to Serbian continued over the years and was only resolved with the breakup of Yugoslavia (Katičić 1997: 186). Problems started to arise after the death of Tito in 1980, and the first signs of conflict broke out around a decade later in 1991.

Interestingly, despite obvious opposition to the joining of the two languages, at the time a large part of the Croatian population was ready to accept, at least in principle, a united language (Katičić 1997). Serbo-Croatian was mostly considered to be a single language with different variants and different official and unofficial names and according to the final census in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1981, 73% of the population declared Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue (Bugarski 2004: 12).

3.2.3 Post-Yugoslavia: From Serbo-Croatian to Croatian

Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in 1991 closely followed by Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This led to the formation of a third configuration of Yugoslavia made up of Serbia and Montenegro. The nature of the conflict and the causes of the *Domovinski rat* (Homeland War) which started in 1991 are beyond the scope of this thesis, but by the late 1990s much of the conflict in Croatia had been resolved and it was an officially recognised independent state with its own language, Croatian.

Language policy and opinion immediately after independence were focused mainly on restoring a status quo and undoing the linguistic changes which were made when trying to unite the two languages. The problem was that it was unclear what the original status quo actually was (Katičić 1997: 187), but there was a clear sensitivity to anything which could be seen as 'non-Croatian' or specifically a Serbianism (Greenberg 2008a: 50). It was implied that "the idioms so separated in name and status should be demonstrated to be distinct enough in their linguistic substance and structure as well" (Bugarski 2004: 12). The main focus of language planning in Croatia during this period was in the lexical domain. Any words deemed to be Serbian were replaced by Croatian ones, all available sources were used in an attempt to establish vocabulary as far from Serbian as possible, this often meant introducing neologisms or archaic expressions and often relying on regionalisms. Spelling reforms were made, Cyrillic was no longer taught in schools, and various Croatian dictionaries and grammars were published (Bugarski 2004; Škiljan 2000; Škiljan 2004).

Although the majority of Croats were in favour of reclaiming their language, they often protested when confronted with new words and expressions which were now unfamiliar to them (Katičić 1997: 187). Thus two opposing schools of thought emerged; there were those who believed that the Croatian language had to be created by banning supposedly 'Serbian' words and expressions, and instead using 'Croatian' ones, as mentioned above, while others believed that the language they had been speaking all along had been Croatian and it was enough to continue in this way. This second group, which comprised mainly linguists, believed that the existence of synonyms made the language richer and more nuanced. Politicians who were members of the right-leaning party in power, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and journalists belonged to the first group which was willing to impose a type of ethnic cleansing of the language (Garde 1996: 139).

Other Croatian scholars address the irony of having to change the Croatian language in order to distinguish it from Serbian because this implies that we are actually looking at two variants of the same language (Škiljan 2000). According to Škiljan (2000), it would have been more appropriate to establish a symbolic difference on the level of linguistic consciousness to create a sense of identity.

If we compare the language which was spoken in Croatia before the Homeland War to the one spoken after, we find that very little changed linguistically speaking (Škiljan 2000: 5). What took place is better described as "administrative fragmentation" (Bugarski 2004). Writing during the early 2000s, Bugarski (2004: 15) finds that "no real diglossic split seems to have

occurred, not even in Croatia; nor have distinct ethnolects emerged to differentiate the Bosnian Muslims, Serbs and Croats". Similarly, Škiljan (2000) argues that Croatian language policy which took Serbo-Croatian to Croatian cannot be explained by science or linguistics, but by political and ideological factors.

3.2.4 Differences (or not) between Croatian and Serbian

Today's standard Croatian and Serbian still bear an extremely close resemblance and the two languages are mutually intelligible to the point where speakers of one would understand close to 100% of speakers of the other. Thomas (1994) provides a detailed analysis of the main 'differences' between the two languages (although this is not so straightforward as we will see). The most obvious difference between Croatian and Serbian is that they use a different alphabet; Croatian uses the Latin alphabet while Serbian uses Cyrillic. Having said this, the Latin script used in Croatian, and the Cyrillic one used in Serbian align on a one-to-one congruence and Serbian has maintained digraphia i.e. speakers can read and write in both alphabets (Magner 2001). This immediately reduces what is often cited as the biggest difference to a partial one (Garde 1996; Thomas 1994).

If we look at the phonetical element of the two languages, we find that "the number and nature of the phonemes are identical, and that the accentual system […] is the same"[5] (Thomas 1994: 239). The main difference arises when we look at the pronunciation and spelling of the *jat* vowel mentioned previously. The current standard Croatian uses ijekavian, while the current standard Serbian of Serbia uses ekavian. But as we saw the actual situation is far more complex since there are regions of Serbia where the ijekavian pronunciation is used and the ekavian pronunciation can also be found in some parts of Croatia.

Morphologically, Croatian and Serbian are almost identical. There are almost no differences in the declension or conjugation of verbs between the two languages, and where variation does occur, it often occurs in both languages. For example, one difference is the suffixation of borrowed words where in Croatian *-irati* is added while in Serbian *-isati* or *-ovati* is added (e.g. *kontrolirati/kontrolisati* or *interesirati/interesovati*). This difference doesn't always apply however, for example both languages would use *telefonirati*. One syntactical difference which is often highlighted when discussing the differences between Croatian and Serbian is the use of the infinitive in Croatian instead of the conjunction *da* + present indicative in Serbian. For

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[5] Original: « […] le nombre et la nature des phonèmes sont identiques, et que le système accentuel […] est le même »

example, in Croatian one would say *Ne želim ići* to say 'I don't want to go', while in Serbia, the more common construction would be *Ne želim da idem (Не желим да идем)*. However, this is also not an official difference but more a question of preference wherein one form is preferred in Croatia while the other is more often used in Serbia.

We see the greatest difference between Croatian and Serbian at the lexical level. At first glance it seems easy to list words in two columns, one with the Croatian and one with the Serbian equivalent e.g. *kruh* vs *hleb* for 'bread' or *siječanj* vs *januar* for 'January'. However, a closer look reveals that the rules and the trends are not consistent, and most words cannot easily be filed under one language as opposed to the other. Despite this, there have been attempts in published grammars and dictionaries which simply list 'Croatian' words in one column and 'Serbian' words in another. However, there is not always an exact equivalent which means that sometimes rare, scholarly or archaic words are assigned to one of the languages even though they are no more in use in that language than in the other or vice versa; words are listed under one language but are also just as much in use in the other. The problem with these kinds of publications is that the intentions are highly normative and they do not consider real world language use, context, or literature. A corpus of written texts would likely reveal that authors and writers in the region of the Western Balkans use 'Serbian' and 'Croatian' words or verb forms interchangeably without concerning themselves with whether they comply with any given standard. In fact, an analysis of language use across Croatia and across Serbia would likely reveal dialectal and regional differences which are further from one of the given standards than Croatian is from Serbian.

As we can see, the most striking thing about analysing the differences between Croatian and Serbian is actually how similar they are. None of the differences listed above are official or normalised enough to serve as evidence that Croatian and Serbian are two separate and distinct languages. Even official attempts to differentiate the two languages are often unsuccessful because they reveal contradictions. So, on what basis can we classify them as different languages?

3.3 Are Croatian and Serbian truly two Different Languages?

Firstly, the separate emergence of the two standards and their independent development allow us to classify them as separate languages; the 19th century did not see the erasure of Croatian and Serbian, and the creation of a new language known as Serbo-Croatian. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the ongoing back and forth over the past decades suggests that the idea

of a shared South Slavic identity was never completely successful. From Vuk continuing to call the language he was reforming Serbian, to the Croats taking every opportunity to 'purify' their language, these two groups of speakers were never truly united. Therefore, the Serbs and Croats did not share a religious identity nor a cultural one and the standardisation of their languages occurred in different contexts.

We can also look in more detail at the dialects which belong to these languages. For example, "only in the Croatian language […] do the Štokavian, the Kajkavian and the Čakavian dialects coexist in a specific flow of interconnected communication" (Katičić 1997: 183). If we consider that the Čakavian and Kajkavian dialects are spoken only by Croats and that the Čakavian dialect can be heard nowhere in Serbia, it would be misleading to class this as Serbo-Croatian. Therefore it is the contact between these dialects that has shaped the physiognomy of the Croatian language (Katičić 1997: 183).

A theory which is frequently applied by Croatian sociolinguists in order to justify the independent status of the Croatian language is known as the *axiological theory*. This theory, first put forward by Katičić in 1972, adds a value-based element to our understanding of a language. It takes a sociolinguistic approach which emphasises that a language carries values, meanings and emotional importance for its speakers and can act as a symbol of its 'homeland' in a metaphorical sense. There is an interactional relationship between language and nation; a language gives a nation an identity while a nation gives an identity to a language (Škiljan 2000: 15). In the Croatian case, since it is difficult to differentiate based on history, genealogy or structure, some Croatian linguists claim that Croatian is an autonomous language because Croats use it in the same way that other nations use their language, they recognise it in every text, and it has its own identity (Brozović 1995: 32). Simply put, all Croats know that Croatian is their language (Katičić 1997: 181).

However, the axiological theory has some limitations. Škiljan's (2000: 16) main criticism is based on the fact that 'community' is too vague and flexible. If we do not define which community's values count it is not a given that the language community will fall perfectly within the confines of a given nation. For example, dialectal speakers of Croatian in Istria could claim their own separate language identity, or inhabitants of multiple nations could create a joint identity, as was almost the case with Serbo-Croatian. Therefore, the theory is based on outdated nationalist beliefs that one language belongs to one nation. Furthermore, if language identity did in fact develop naturally and automatically from a nation's spirit, there would be no need to shape or promote language identity. As we have seen, in Yugoslavia and in Croatia

the government has, and does, promote language identity through policies, education and propaganda. Škiljan also points out that ordinary speakers are often excluded from shaping language identity and instead "only members of the political and linguistic elites are asked to articulate the common will and linguistic consciousness" (Škiljan 2000: 17).

Finally, another common argument is the idea of "one nation = one people = one language" which is applied to the Serbo-Croatian case by Thomas (1994). He argues that no nation can carry the name of another nation or people, thus no language can carry the name of another nation or people. If we consider this specific case, it would mean a people speaking a language which carries the name of their former enemy. Given the horrors and atrocities which took place during the war, one can understand the reluctance shown by the natives of Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to call the language they speak Serbo-Croatian (Thomas 1994: 255). This argument could be disputed in a similar way as the axiological theory since it bases itself on "Romantic national ideology of the nineteenth Century" (Škiljan 2000: 16) and seems to ignore the fact that in countries such as Austria and Switzerland the name of the language comes from German of Germany. Similarly in Belgium and Switzerland they speak French from France.

Based on these arguments we can come to the conclusion that Croatian and Serbian are ideologically and politically independent languages of great linguistic similarity. Realistically, Serbian and Croatian (as well as Bosnian and Montenegrin) exist as separate standard languages because they appear in the legislation of their respective independent countries and serve as important symbols of national identity in the same way that Serbo-Croatian no longer does any of these things (Bugarski 2004: 18). The next section will look at recent attempts at language standardisation in Croatia and how successful it has been in forging its independent status via EU membership.

3.4 The Croatian Language Today

3.4.1 Croatia's Accession to the EU

Croatia began the process of accession to the European Union as early as 2001 and saw this as an opportunity to establish itself as an independent state. It also likely saw it as an opportunity to distance itself from the political region known as the Western Balkans which to this day carries negative connotations. It is possible that the Homeland War somewhat paradoxically paved the way for EU membership because high levels of nationalism could have been instrumental in gaining public support for the EU. Applying for membership so soon after the

war meant that nationalistic tendencies were still high, the nation felt that it had succeeded in reclaiming their country, and the idea of EU membership was presented as the next, and perhaps final, stage in a process of gaining sovereignty (Jović *et al.* 2011).

However, when preparing for accession, there were fears that Croatian would not be added as an official EU language. Instead, Croatia was encouraged to agree on a combined standard language with its neighbours and there was talk of adding a language which combined Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin. This was mainly related to budget concerns and the ongoing treatment of these as the same language (Bašić 2010; Grčević 2011). From the brief comparison of Croatian and Serbian which we saw earlier, this idea is not completely unfounded since they are extremely similar and mutually intelligible languages. Having said this, following such a turbulent history classifying them as one and the same could be problematic. Those concerned were probably looking to the future and the likely situation in which the other former Yugoslav countries would also join the EU and expect their languages and corresponding translation departments to be added. In the end, as we know, Croatian was added as an official language and although this is a problem the EU has yet to face, it will likely be a controversial move to add three additional translation departments for three languages which so closely resemble Croatian and are mutually intelligible, especially when there are already concerns about the cost of EU translation services to the taxpayer.

The benefit of Croatia joining the EU alone and so soon after the war is that certain scenarios were avoided. What would have happened if the other ex-Yugoslav states had joined at the same time? Would each of their languages have been recognised individually or would they have been grouped into one? What would have happened if Serbia had joined first? The EU will have to make a decision on whether to add Bosnian, Serbian, and Montenegrin as official EU languages soon since all three countries currently hold candidate status.

3.4.2 The Standardisation of Croatian

The standardisation of Croatian has been a long and complicated process probably due to the similarities between it and the languages spoken in the other ex-Yugoslav countries which were discussed above. Despite this, progress has been made in establishing it as an independent language. For example, in 2008 Croatian was classified as a separate language from Serbian by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) where now Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin also have their individual identifiers. The influential and prestigious Library of Congress further contributed to the establishment of Croatian as a standalone language when

it started classifying works as 'Croatian' and not 'Serbo-Croatian' (Babić 2008). These efforts culminated in Croatian being added as one of the 24 official EU languages with Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013.

Official EU language status was also in part responsible for Croatia finally passing a language law in early 2024 after multiple attempts in recent decades (Šupuković 2025; Tadić et al. 2024). The *Zakon o hrvatskom jeziku* (Croatian Language Law) was instigated by Matica hrvatska, a non-profit, non-governmental Croatian institution which aims to promote Croatian national and cultural identity in various sectors (Matica hrvatska 2013). The law formally regulates the official and public use of Croatian, for example by recognizing Croatian as Croatia's official language and one of the EU's official languages (Šupuković 2025). It defines the Croatian language, including its three dialects (Čakavian, Kajkavian, Štokavian) and various national idioms, it mandates that official government bodies, regional authorities, and public entities must use Croatian (in both oral and written forms), with local idioms permitted in specific cases, and enshrines citizens' right to petition EU institutions in Croatian and receive replies in Croatian. The law also dictates that the government must adopt a *Nacionalni plan hrvatske jezične politike* (National Plan for Croatian Language Policy) which will define priority measures and goals for promotion, development, standardization, technologies, etc. and establish a *Vijeće za hrvatski jezik* (Council for the Croatian Language) as a government advisory body which will be tasked with overseeing language use, dialect diversity, and planning (Zakon o hrvatskom jeziku 2024).

The Croatian Language Law has been compared to similar laws in other European countries, and this has often been put forward as an argument for why the law is also needed in Croatia (Tadić 2023). It is true that many European countries have language laws, and the nature of these laws can be grouped based on what they deem most important. For example, in countries with more than one official language, the laws regulate official internal bilingualism or linguistic diversity (Pupovac 2023). Pupovac (2023) identifies a trend among the Nordic-Baltic countries such as Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia whose laws place emphasis on a mandatory level of speaking and writing ability or the level of language knowledge and language skills. The central and southeastern European countries with language laws such as Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, and now Croatia, emphasise language as an inherent element of the people, of cultural heritage, and of national identity.

However, the law was not praised by everyone and received substantial criticism. Those who support it claim that it protects against cultural and linguistic encroachment from neighbouring

languages, shields Croatian from domination by global languages (especially English), and reinforces national identity, preserving heritage and supporting Croatian as the language of personal and collective thought (Tadić 2023). Critics argue that the new law is not needed because there is already legislation which enshrines Croatian and Latin script in public and official use, and there are existing institutions charged with the protection of Croatian language and culture (HDP 2023; Pupovac 2023). The Croatian Writer's Society (HDP) deems the law 'right-conservative' in tone and worries that this law is simply a reaction to Serbia passing a similar language law. They voice concerns over the fact that no writers, arguably the creators and protectors of a language, were consulted in the drafting of the law, the effect this could have on library purchases of Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin authors, and the proposed introduction of *lektori* (proofreaders) to police public language use which seems like an attempt to "cleanse Croatian of 'serbisms'" (HDP 2023). Further concerns over the law are based on fears of how it will impact artistic expression among authors. Stripping people of their right to use words and expressions which could be deemed 'too Serbian' or 'not Croatian' is suppressing their freedom of expression and could have a lasting effect on the literary culture of the language and country (Jergović 2023).

Ante Žužul (2023), an influential Croatian publisher, believes that a language law is needed to preserve the Croatian identity and all the values of language, culture and national unity, but was not satisfied with the law when it was proposed. He mainly criticises the decision to give authority to the *Institut za hrvatski jezik* (Institute for Croatian Language) instead of to already existing cultural and academic bodies. For example, he is very critical of the decision to dissolve the *Vijeće za normu hrvatskoga standardnog jezika* (Council for the Norm of Standard Croatian Language) in 2012 which was tasked with taking care of the Croatian standard language. Žužul's fears are steeped in history, opposing language manuals and disputes over orthography. He warned that passing the law as it was proposed would create conflict among linguists over which norms and references to use, enforce what he deems a 'less-Croatian' orthography, and hand control over to an institute with questionable morals. So, while a language law is urgently needed, it must truly support expert consensus, academic institutions, and public interest, and not just politically appointed bodies; a flawed law could cement past abuses and weaken Croatia's linguistic integrity rather than preserve it.

Nevertheless, the law was adopted with a significant majority of 95 in favour, 10 abstentions and 17 against. Šupuković (2025), writing a year after the law was passed, explains that there is little evidence of change based on the law apart from the creation of the Council for the Norm

of Standard Croatian Language. The government has until February 2026 to adopt the National Plan for Croatian Language Policy with a list of priority goals and measures related to the protection of the Croatian language, ensuring its freedom of use, and encouraging its development.

3.4.3 Future Challenges for the Croatian Language

The Croatian language has made significant progress in gaining independent status, becoming officially recognised, and being standardised but it must now prepare for future challenges. Languages that are actively being used in society will inevitably change so that any crystallised form of a language will rapidly become outdated and lose its relevance. Croatian must therefore evolve and adapt in order to survive because if it ceases to serve modern society it will cease to exist. We can already predict some of the ways in which smaller languages will have to change in order to keep up with larger, more dominant ones.

Possibly the biggest challenge to Croatian as an official EU language will be the emergence of inclusive and gender-neutral language. Miloš (2023: 6) defines gender neutrality as "the use of gender-indeterminate (non-sexist) language, which is considered socially desirable, i.e. inclusive and gender non-discriminatory, or if it is not, it is marked as exclusive and refers to only one gender"[6]. The idea is that language shapes social attitudes and using gender-neutral forms contributes to reducing stereotypes and achieving equality (Prewitt-Freilino *et al.* 2012; Tavits and Pérez 2019).

In 2008 the European Parliament adopted multilingual guidelines on gender-neutral language. These were updated in 2018 and have been published in each of the official languages to "provide practical advice […] on the use of gender-fair and inclusive language" (European Parliament 2018). The Croatian document offers guidelines specifically for situations where a text refers to a person or position, the question of professions, and verb and noun forms to be used. It states that when the gender of the person who holds a particular position is known, the correct form of said profession should be used. When it comes to job titles, it is best to avoid using both genders of the profession but in some cases, for example in job advertisements, this is acceptable, as is the masculine followed by the gender which is sought e.g. (M/F). It is also important to think about people's attitudes and how they want to be referred to; unfortunately,

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[6] Original: "Rodna neutralnost u jeziku opći je pojam koji, ukratko, podrazumijeva uporabu rodno neodređenoga (neseksističkoga) jezika, koji se smatra društveno poželjnim, odnosno uključivim i rodno nediskriminirajućim, odnosno ako nije takav, označuje se kao isključiv i odnosi se samo na jedan rod."

the feminine form of some professions have certain negative connotations in which case the masculine would be preferred even when referring to a woman. The verb and noun forms which should be used in Croatian and complex, but the recommendations are to try to avoid specifying a gender. A few examples include using the imperative or present tense with direct address to a person, using the impersonal and passive forms, using the masculine plural to refer to both genders to avoid pairs, collective nouns when masculine forms are perceived as gender-exclusive, etc. (European Parliament 2018).

Furthermore, many languages use titles which reveal a woman's marital status. Different languages have dealt with this in different ways; in English an extra title, Ms., has been added while in Croatian often there is now only one option, *gospođa* (Mrs). In administrative texts in the European Union, often the title is simply removed and replaced with the subject's full name. The bottom line is that inclusive language should not compromise clarity or make texts difficult to read. Solutions must be consistent and context-appropriate, for example if a neutral option exists or where appropriate, paired forms. Having said this, inclusive language is still not a requirement, and these are non-binding recommendations which aim to encourage translators and writers to consider gender sensitivity when drafting documents (Miloš 2023). As we can see from the suggestions for Croatian, these solutions are not perfect since they still rely heavily on the masculine form even when we do not know the gender of the person or group.

Croatian will also face outside threats to its status due to foreign influence with increasing globalisation and interconnectedness. Evidence of this was already seen more than ten years ago; in large corporations owned by non-Croatians, foreign languages were being prioritised, and Croatian laws were amended to say, "in the Croatian language and Latin script or in a language that can be easily understood by consumers and other users"[7] (Grčević 2011 p. 56). In order for Croatian to maintain its status as an EU language it must embrace true standardisation. This means enabling comprehensive communication in domains such as science, governance, culture and international interaction. If a language cannot fulfil its functions in higher education, administration, economy, and the arts, it loses its standard status, and non-standard languages cannot be recognized as official at the EU level (Ježić 2012). Therefore, by maintaining and developing the standard variant across academic, bureaucratic, and cultural domains, Croatian will remain viable in its highest registers and thus remain

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[7] Original: "na hrvatskom jeziku i latiničnom pismu ili na jeziku koji mogu lako razumjeti potrošači i drugi korisnici"

eligible as an official EU language (Ježić 2012). Having said this, a complete rejection of world dominant languages such as English will be an obstacle to progress.

Being the forerunner of EU accession and integration in the region of the Western Balkans has so far worked in the country's favour but is likely to have an impact on the language. Thus far efforts have been focused on distinguishing Croatian from Serbian but now there is an even greater threat of foreign influence, especially from English. Will Croatia be able to find a way to protect its language and culture without succumbing to nationalistic linguistic policies and politics? Will it be able to embrace English as a lingua franca without letting it take over in all sectors?

4. Croatia and EU Multilingualism

Having looked at EU accession from the linguistic perspective of a member state and analysed the process of language standardisation in Croatia, we can now consider what this case study can reveal about the EU's multilingual policy. This chapter will look at what the Croatian case can tell us about the EU's authority as a gateway to linguistic recognition and symbolic sovereignty. It will then consider how the multilingual policy is demonstrative of some of the EU's key values. Finally, we will look at the problem of functional inequality, the main criticism of this language policy, by comparing Croatian to a dominant language, English, as well as to other smaller languages. But first let us consider the Croatian perspective and how EU membership and its multilingual policy have impacted the Croatian language.

4.1 The Croatian Perspective

This subtitle is slightly misleading in the sense that it suggests that we have the Croatian perspective, but this is not the case. Although a lot was written about Croatia joining the EU and the status of Croatian as an official EU language prior to accession, there has been much less interest in how this membership and language status has impacted the evolution of the Croatian language. Nor has there been many reflections on the policy itself. From a linguistic perspective it seems that official EU status was the be all and end all in terms of international recognition. Beyond relatively recent and very general analyses of the EU's multilingualism policy (Crnić-Grotić 2020), far fewer Croatian publications have considered the status of Croatian within the EU and the effects of its multilingualism on the language. This suggests that for Croatia, the status of official EU language was important because it officially separated Croatian from Serbian and from other neighbouring languages. Even the project titled *Hrvatski jezik u Europskoj uniji* (The Croatian Language in the European Union) which set out to "describe the contemporary use of the Croatian language in the context of EU institutions based on practical examples and to produce new linguistic and terminological resources"[8] (Institut za hrvatski jezik n.d.), was abandoned early on. What does the lack of reporting on the topic of Croatian being added as an official EU language tell us about the EU and this policy? Do the member states care about the policy or are they satisfied with official language status? Granted,

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[8] Original: "…opisati suvremenu uporabu hrvatskoga jezika u kontekstu institucija EU-a utemeljenu na primjerima iz prakse te proizvesti nove jezične i terminološke resurse…".

the Croatian case only provides a twelve-year time span which is not long in terms of language evolution, but EU membership can also have an impact on language policy in the country.

4.1.1 Croatian as an Official EU Language

Although very little has been written about how EU membership has impacted Croatia from a linguistic or cultural perspective nor about how Croatia perceives the EU's multilingual policy knowing that its own language holds low, largely symbolic, status, academics and experts have discussed certain topics which lend themselves to an analysis from an EU membership perspective. Topics such as general linguistic properties, terminology, language technologies, and language learning are likely to be impacted by Croatia joining the EU and its language becoming and official EU language.

4.1.1.1 General Linguistic Properties

EU membership is likely to have an impact on general linguistic properties of a language because it brings it into closer contact with other languages. This is especially evident when it comes to dominant languages such as English seeping into other languages. Evidence of linguistic changes have been studied in the Polish case after Poland joined the EU. Sosnowski and Bonnard's (2015) article focuses on the influence of the EU's multilingual policy on Slavic languages primarily in regards to Polish as an official EU language and Russian as a language which is present in the region but has not been granted any status. These two synthetic languages are compared to Bulgarian, an analytic language. Their results found that analytical tendencies are leading to a decrease of morphemes in Slavic languages. Some examples of the analytical tendencies in morphology include a decrease in the number of cases in all inflected parts of speech, a more frequent use of uninflected nouns and adjectives, the growing importance of nouns with common gender, and, in particular, the use of masculine forms to depict feminine gender. The number of prepositional units in Polish and Russian, identified as "the most important part of speech in analytic languages", has grown and continues to do so (2015: 406). They also found that traditionally non-Polish lexemes appeared in Polish after its accession to the EU. Research of this kind could be applied to Croatian, it also being a synthetic language, to see whether it too has changed since accession and could benefit national efforts to protect the language. The paper also warns that when in close contact "languages tend to simplify and converge in terms of grammar and vocabulary" (2015: 408). This suggests that the EU's multilingualism policy might not be very effective in maintaining a multilingual society with diverse languages if the official EU languages are in very close contact.

Similarly, an official EU language is likely to change from a legal perspective as the member state translates the required documents and finds terms and definitions for EU specific concepts. Research into the translation of the acquis in the Western Balkan countries reveals that the legal language used is almost identical. Čavoški (2018) studied not only the legal language but also the legal culture, which they define as the "legal rules, values, doctrines and attitudes about law in society". Their findings suggest that accession to the EU was not as influential for Croatia's promotion of its independent language as it may have seemed. Despite the emergence of new standard languages in the former Yugoslav states, the legal language and culture in the region of the Western Balkans remained very similar due to their shared history. With its earlier accession, Croatia created a template for translation manuals, terminology, and translated acquis which have been reused by the other three countries. Therefore, the Western Balkans have emerged as a distinct legislative and linguistic region which has actually been further unified through the EU enlargement process. This shared legal language and culture could be an opportunity for the EU to modify its multilingual policy when Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro eventually join. Whether increased cooperation between the countries or joint translation teams will be accepted by these countries remains to be seen. However, from a linguistic perspective, it seems that EU membership could bring these countries closer together rather than solidify their independence.

4.1.1.2 Terminology

The extensive EU-specific terminology coupled with the EU's terminology management system, IATE, means that accession to the EU guarantees the increase of an official language's terminology. This also likely means the broadening of a language's standard lexicon (Škiljan 2006). Research into the Croatian language (specifically translation and terminology) five years after accession provided a very positive analysis of the situation. Cimeša and Miloš (2019) emphasised that high-quality legal and administrative translations were being produced, Croatian terminology was being developed and standardised within the IATE database, and that Croatian was integrating into the EU's multilingual framework while maintaining its linguistic specificity. The quality of translation within the EU is maintained through harmonization, workshops, and strict standards and terminology work follows international standards and respects copyright and the General Data Protection Regulation. They provide a very idealistic conclusion to their article by stating that these processes all reflect the EU's motto "united in diversity". This shows how Croatia has benefited from EU membership in the context of translation of EU documents but doesn't consider how membership has impacted

everyday language use or what Croatia contributes to the EU. One of their examples of EU-specific concepts which were adapted to Croatian linguistic norms concerned the term *returnee* which in Croatian was translated as *vraćenik*. They state that this term was "returned to the language" because a distinction had to be made from the term *povratnik* (Cimeša and Miloš 2019: 4). This manipulation of the language is unsurprising given the nature of legal language, but what is surprising is that this term doesn't seem to exist in online Croatian dictionaries even after it gained an IATE entry. This is a clear example of how EU terminology has not entered into the Croatian lexicon. Further research could reveal if this is a trend or an exception and could thus indicate the level of Croatian linguistic integration with the EU.

Other analyses of terminological progress are not as positive. Ostroški Anić (cited in Tadić *et al.* 2024: 22) warns that even after terminology efforts during EU accession and over the last 10 years, there is still no organized permanent form of terminology activity or systematic education of experts for working on terminology in Croatia. Even the STRUNA project (terminological database of Croatian professional terminology) did not lead to the creation of a terminology policy that would form the foundation for a larger terminology infrastructure.

4.1.1.3 Language Technologies

A topic closely connected to terminology is that of language technologies. As an official EU language Croatian could benefit from more advanced language technologies as the EU places emphasis on protecting languages and maintaining a multilingual society. If smaller languages such as Croatian do not develop language technologies, they risk becoming extinct as users settle for terms in larger languages which already have the vocabulary (e.g. English) (Tadić 2024: 21). This is also cited as one of the motivating factors for the Croatian Language Law; "the improvement of language technologies for the Croatian language"[9] cited in Article 16 of the law is crucial (Tadić 2023). The 2012 META-NET White Paper Series studied the level of support that European languages received through language technologies. It covered all the EU languages as well as others spoken in the region and found that more than 20 European languages are at risk of digital extinction (European Language Equality 2012). Given that Croatian is a relatively small language, fears of its digital extinction are not unfounded. The development of Croatian language technologies is essential to its protection, and each language has to develop its own large-scale language models in cooperation with EU member states and not rely on American-made LLMs whose functioning is not transparent (Tadić 2023). If an

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[9] Original: "unaprjeđenje jezičnih tehnologija za hrvatski jezik"

initiative of this kind were to take off on an EU level, EU membership would be essential for linguistic protection.

4.1.1.4 Demographic Changes and Language Learning

EU membership will continue to increase migration in Croatia which means that language learning is going to become more important. This will also put the language at risk of outside influence. The Croatian Language Law addresses the issue of "promoting and improving the learning of the Croatian language among foreigners and descendants of Croatian emigrants in Croatia and abroad"[10] (Hrvatski sabor 2024). EU membership was instrumental in granting the Croatian language its independent status which today is sufficiently widespread to allow the language to be taught outside of Croatia. Universities across the world offering Croatian as a language is a clear sign of success. Through EU membership Croatia has also been able to benefit from exchange programs such as Erasmus which also promote language learning. According to Štimac Ljubas (cited in Tadić *et al.* 2024: 25), the promotion of Croatian language learning could be further improved with the creation of an institution which would be responsible for implementing a concrete strategy.

The situation within Croatia is more concerning for the country and its language. Croatian is among the four European countries with the sharpest decline in the number of speakers and Croatia has a rapidly falling population (*Croatia Population (2026)* 2026). However, immigration has increased, especially from Asian countries, possibly as a consequence of EU membership (Državni zavod za statistiku 2025). Although many would assume that migrants see Croatia as a temporary step in their journey to other EU countries, recent research suggests that a large percentage of foreign workers in Croatia plan to stay there. These workers could offer a solution to both the falling population and the decreasing number of Croatian speakers (Stojanov 2025). Unfortunately, a language integration policy is currently lacking, language courses are expensive, they do not meet foreign workers' needs, and a large part of the burden of registrations and financing has been put on employers who are unwilling to prioritise this (Stojanov 2025; World Bank Group 2025). Increased immigration and emigration are a natural consequence of EU membership but could also provide a solution to the decreasing number of Croatian speakers, something which domestic language policy should embrace.

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[10] Original: "e) promicanje i unaprjeđenje učenja hrvatskoga jezika među strancima i potomcima hrvatskih iseljenika u Hrvatskoj i inozemstvu."

The lack of research into Croatia's status as an official EU language is surprising given the numerous publications which reported on the fact that prior to Croatian being made an official EU language, there was a possibility that it would have to merge with its neighbours to create a language which encompasses Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. Perhaps Croatian as an official EU language is not only symbolic from the EU's perspective but also from Croatia's perspective; its linguistic status is threatened by its neighbouring countries but not by larger more influential EU languages.

4.2 The EU Effect

The reach and power of the EU means that it acts as a gateway to language recognition, and its authority can grant a nation symbolic sovereignty. Symbolic sovereignty refers to the affirmation of a state's national identity and autonomy through symbolic markers rather than through direct political or decision-making power. In this context official language recognition acts as a symbol of sovereignty and national identity. By granting Croatian the status of 'official and working language', Croatia's statehood is also symbolically recognised. It is a type of sovereignty which is expressed and affirmed through symbols, in the Croatian case this is the language, its flag, and name.

The Croatian case demonstrates how the EU acts as a gateway because Croatian being added as an official EU language has been crucial to it being recognised internationally as an independent language. Škiljan (2006), writing before Croatia joined the EU, acknowledged that Croatian becoming an official EU language would be largely symbolic because smaller languages have very little presence in day-to-day EU operations. Regardless, EU membership would be beneficial for Croatia in terms of international recognition of its independence and its language. He criticised the country for not having a coherent language strategy at the time for its EU integration period; for example, a persuasive narrative to promote Croatian as a gateway language useful for communication across Southeastern Europe. It is clear that EU membership increases geographic, educational, and cultural mobility, making multilingual competence essential for a member state's youth. Škiljan suggested that this was an opportunity to promote Croatian in reciprocal international language education which could have extended its reach and enabled "linguistic returns" in other countries. It would be interesting to research whether this has been the case in the last 12 years. The recognition of Croatian is especially significant if we consider that what was previously known as Serbo-Croatian is not recognised

to any extent today, nor did it receive a similar level of recognition when it served as the official language of Yugoslavia.

Further evidence of the EU's influence can be seen in Matica hrvatska's first EU funded project *Uključiva kultura – potpora socijalnoj inkluziji kroz kulturu putem Vijenca* (Inclusive Culture – social inclusion support through culture via Vijenac). The two-year project aimed to "improve the quality of media reporting on vulnerable groups by educating journalists and producing media content, with an emphasis on social inclusion through culture"[11] (Matica hrvatska 2022). The project seemed to be a success and was very in tune with EU policies for a more inclusive society.

4.3 Multilingualism as a Reflection of EU Values

A closer look at the EU's multilingual policy reveals that it is a direct consequence of some of the organisation's key aims and values, for example its respect for national identity, its motto "united in diversity", and the political neutrality of its processes. This suggest that the multilingual policy was not implemented as a functional goal of the EU but evolved as a result of the organisation emphasising other values. This also sheds light on the question of whether there was an original plan to add each language or whether it seemed like a natural progression; if the EU is more focused on implementing its key aims and values, continuing to add each language as an official language can be seen as an unavoidable result of this.

4.3.1 Respect for National Identity

The first EU value which is maintained by this policy is the EU's respect for the national identities of its member states. The so called 'national identity clause' in Article 4(2) of the Treaty on European Union states that "The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities" (European Union 2012). Considering the bond between language and national identity, the EU accepting Croatia's submission of Croatian to be made an official EU language also illustrates this key provision. Without this provision in place, it is highly likely that the notion of EU membership would not appeal to European countries who would see accession as a handing over of sovereignty. The EU has to demonstrate a certain level of respect for its member states to ensure it doesn't overstep. For

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[11] Original: "Cilj projekta je unaprjeđenje kvalitete medijskog izvještavanja o ranjivim skupinama edukacijom novinara i proizvodnjom medijskih sadržaja, s naglaskom na socijalnu uključenost kroz kulturu."

example, the UK's decision to leave the EU was partly motivated by the feeling that the EU had too much control over the country (Zonjić and Šetka-Čilić 2018: 180).

4.3.2 "United in Diversity" vs Balkan Linguistic Fragmentation

Another one of the EU's values which seems particularly relevant in the Croatian case is the motto "united in diversity". As discussed in the first section, the fact that the EU has 24 official languages which are representative of each of its member states shows its commitment to uniting diverse nations. In the context of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the linguistic fragmentation which followed in the Western Balkans, adding Croatian as an official language is a step towards remedying this fragmentation and uniting even more of the EU's languages. It is interesting that the languages of the ex-Yugoslav nations which are so similar were unable to function in harmony while the EU has managed to maintain a certain form of linguistic equality between languages which are completely different. However, the difference between the Yugoslav approach and the EU's approach is that the EU values diversity while the Serbo-Croatian agenda aimed to unite Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin as one language with one identity. The success of the EU's approach bodes well for the future when these four languages will once again have to function in some sort of unity. It could also suggest that the EU will take a different approach than to simply unite the languages and treat them as one.

4.3.3 Political Neutrality vs Political Consequence

Although the EU itself is not politically neutral, some of its processes and procedures, for example during the accession process, can be classed as neutral. Every country which joins the EU has to follow the same procedure and meet the same requirements. The same applies to a language being added as an official language of the EU. Therefore, the EU adding Croatian to its official languages is presented as a politically neutral, administrative act following Croatia's accession to the EU. The EU did not actually issue any comments in regard to the fact that Croatian is so similar to Serbian or the other ex-Yugoslav languages nor did it call into question how justified its standardisation is; any speculation which was discussed earlier in this paper was published by non-EU affiliated persons. However, there are political consequences to this decision. Adding Croatian confirms it as a separate national language, it symbolically validates Croatian nationhood, and it reinforces Croatian's separation from Serbian. It also indirectly legitimises post-Yugoslav language fragmentation which it will have to deal with in the future when the other Balkan states join the EU.

4.4 Functional Inequality

The notion of functional inequality refers to the fact that larger, more dominant languages are more frequently used and unofficially hold higher status. As we saw in the first chapter, English dominance has led to a policy of de facto multilingualism but de jure monolingualism. Looking at Croatian allows us to see how this plays out in real life. Larger languages such as English, French and German are used more frequently and in more important situations which means they dominate during drafting and negotiation, potentially shaping policy before translation. The existence of dominant working languages means that some languages provide greater access to power and influence. For example, speakers of languages such as English and French are able to participate more easily in negotiations, drafting of documents, and decision making, thus giving them the chance to shape outcomes earlier. Speakers of smaller languages on the other hand must adapt linguistically once drafting is complete and the time for negotiation has passed. This creates a hierarchy of use, even without a formal hierarchy of status.

4.4.1 Croatian vs English

For example, if we compare English, as a dominant language, with Croatian, we can see the difference in frequency of use and status. English dominates in the drafting of legislation while smaller languages such as Croatian are almost always translations (although classed as 'originals'). Looking at translation statistics from 2022, over two million pages were translated from English compared to only 5,050 from Croatian. The differences are not as striking when it comes to target languages, but around 40,000 fewer pages were translated into Croatian compared to into English.

As previously discussed, the widespread knowledge of English within the EU means that it could be classed as a second language as opposed to a foreign one. According to European Commission data, in Croatia, English is spoken by 34% of the population and English is the second most used language in the country (Van Parys 2025). Given this elevated knowledge of English in Croatia and the fact that English holds quite high status in many parts of the world, Croatian speakers might opt for English instead of using their mother tongue to save time and reduce costs. This could also create a tension between linguistic rights and efficiency. Although officially the 24 languages are equal, speaking English can give people access to both high-level and informal exchanges. This calls into question whether the EU is doing enough to preserve multilingualism or whether it could do more.

4.4.2 Croatian vs Other Small Languages

The purpose of this case study has not been to suggest that Croatian is a unique case, but to use it as an illustrative example of the status of smaller languages in the context of the EU's multilingual policy. If we compare Croatian to other small official EU languages we can see similar trends. Slovenian is an example of another South Slavic language which developed parallel to Croatian and is spoken primarily in Slovenia by its population of around two million. Much like Croatian, Slovenian is low down in the list of languages both as a target language and a source language in the Translation in Figures document from 2022 (European Commission 2022b). Most of the other languages found at the bottom of the two lists are small languages native to small countries.

In fact, if we consider Irish and Maltese, two of the smallest official EU languages, we can see the true influence of the EU's multilingual policy. As we already saw in section 2.3, both Ireland and Malta have two official languages, both of which are official EU languages. Although English has official status in the two countries and in the Irish case it is even dominant, both countries have submitted their own languages, Irish and Maltese, to be made official EU languages. This once again emphasises the importance of official language status. Unlike Croatian however, Irish and Maltese benefit from official language status for their languages as well as from English being the dominant language.

4.5 EU Multilingual Policy in Review

Having analysed the EU's multilingual policy and how it looks from the perspective of a smaller language, we can now try to answer our main research questions. Firstly, does the EU's multilingual policy preserve linguistic diversity? And secondly, is the policy merely symbolic, or does it have linguistic consequences?

4.5.1 Preserving Linguistic Diversity

The EU's multilingual policy, as flawed as it may be, is clear evidence of its dedication to preserving linguistic diversity and promoting multilingualism. The policy is complicated and expensive to maintain but the EU has been committed to it for decades. Although the status of 'official EU language' is largely symbolic, it can still be very meaningful to smaller languages. The policy encourages language learning but also ensures that all legislation, procedures and information is accessible even to those who only speak their mother tongue. The EU's widespread influence and power elevate the status of a language once it is made official thus

enabling international recognition. Although English has become dominant in the EU's functioning, this doesn't necessarily take away from linguistic diversity. Now that the UK has left the EU, English, and especially a new variant of European English, is the perfect candidate for lingua franca status; it belongs to everyone in the EU equally. This way of working which has emerged ensures that linguistic diversity is maintained, languages are protected and promoted, and clear and open communication is maintained, be that in English or in any other official language. The EU's motto "united in diversity" is reflected in this policy which acknowledges the official status of each country's language and declares them all equally important.

4.5.2 Symbolic Equality vs Linguistic Consequences

This policy is definitely symbolic but not merely so. Croatia's case shows that the EU can fully recognise a language for reasons of identity and sovereignty, while accepting that this language will play a limited, unequal role in the actual functioning of EU institutions. However linguistic diversity is also preserved. The EU's influence means that official recognition of this kind can lead countries to promote and protect their language. As we have seen in the Croatian case, this official recognition was instrumental to further progress, i.e. the passing of a language law which aims to protect a language. The multilingual policy itself also contributes towards preserving languages. The fact that Irish was added as an official language in 2007 in an attempt to promote the learning of Irish and try to preserve the language illustrates the power of the EU. Finally, if we compare the multilingual policy to any other potential policy, this is the one that is most likely to have a positive effect on languages and linguistic diversity because there is a semblance of language equality. The EU is also held accountable by the inhabitants of its member states if it does not maintain language services in all the official languages.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyse the EU's multilingual policy from the perspective of an EU member state. The Croatian case study has revealed that while the status of 'official language' is in many cases more symbolic for the EU than anything else, the same cannot be said for the member states. Acquiring official language status can impact international recognition of a language as well as influence language policy within a country. The bottom line is that the EU has such overpowering and far-reaching influence that membership and recognition can have an impact both nationally and internationally. For example, findings suggest that EU membership has boosted tourism in Croatia since it became more accessible, mainly to visitors from within the EU, but also from further away (Tkalec 2024). As we saw, it also contributed to efforts to pass a language law after multiple previous attempts. Interestingly, this topic of research has not gained much traction within the country itself where citizens seem satisfied with its status of EU member state and Croatian as an official EU language. The obvious symbolic nature of this language status has not been questioned by Croatian scholars, nor have any concerns been raised in regard to the inequality of language use inside the EU.

This thesis has revealed that after a long and turbulent linguistic past, Croatia is now at a point where its own language is internationally recognised as independent from Serbian or Bosnian and Montenegrin. As the first of the Western Balkan countries to join the EU it has been in an advantageous position. It set an example for how these countries are capable of integrating in the EU, it led translation efforts of required treaties and the acquis, and it has adapted to EU terminology requirements. However, it is highly possible that this period of linguistic stability and independence could be challenged by the remaining Western Balkan countries joining the EU. The EU has set a precedent by adding Croatian as an official language and will soon reveal how committed it truly is to its language policy. Will it be willing to add Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin as independent languages? Will it be more concerned with budget questions or with respecting its member states' linguistic past?

In terms of the key research questions which this thesis set out to answer, the Croatian case study suggests that the EU's multilingual policy does in fact preserve linguistic diversity. It ensures all documents and treaties are translated into all the official languages, it allows EU citizens to contact the EU in their own language and receive a response in their own language, and it ensures interpreting services so that representatives are free to speak in their own

language. Although English has become the dominant language in everyday processes, drafting of laws, and informal communication, smaller languages have not been forgotten. The commitment to the policy and the policy itself show how dedicated the EU is to maintaining linguistic diversity and ensuring that even smaller languages receive recognition.

Furthermore, the policy is not merely symbolic but does actually have linguistic consequences. The Croatian example has shown how external validation and recognition can enhance internal efforts to protect a language. Furthermore, this international recognition has led to Croatian being studied around the world and by immigrant workers in the country. I believe that in order for Croatia to maintain its language's current strong and steady position, it must accept linguistic change instead of reverting back to puristic views of what is 'true' Croatian. It must also accept that one of the consequences of EU membership is a more diversified demographic of Croatian speakers who can help it become a truly international language.

From a linguistic perspective there is still plenty of research which can be carried out for Croatia and its language. There has been a great deal of research on the history of Croatian and Serbo-Croatian, the similarities between the two languages, Croatian becoming an official EU language etc. but far less focus on what happened next. It would be interesting to see whether the language has changed since EU membership both at a bureaucratic, official level and at an informal, spoken level. Has it become more inclusive? Have what some would refer to as 'serbisms' remained? Is there evident outside influence? Due to its history, loan words have always been present in Croatian; across the country we encounter borrowings from Italian, German and of course Serbian or Bosnian. Has EU membership impacted this at all? Since English dominates in the world and in the EU, it is highly possible that Croatian, like many other languages, will start adopting English words, if it hasn't already. This doesn't necessarily have to be a problem, but it would benefit from a certain level of control. Much like the difference in opinions after Croatia gained independence, some will see the addition of English vocabulary as a threat while others will see it as increased linguistic richness. In a globalised and interconnected world like the one we are living in today it would be unusual and impossible for a language to remain unchanged, all we can do is embrace it.

Future research could also compare the effects of official language status on Croatian with other smaller EU languages such as Slovenian or Bulgarian. Has official status been enough to placate concerns about English dominance? Are other smaller languages more concerned with linguistic equality in the EU? What can the EU do better to ensure linguistic equality?

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