

THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE AS AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE IN EUROPE A contribution to the European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity

This document is intended as a contribution to the NPLD's European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity. It addresses in particular the requirements of the Armenian language.

The Network for the Promotion of Language Diversity is an independent network supported by the European institutions. On February 5, 2015, it launched a draft “Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity in Europe (NPLD2020)”. This aims to outline a new vision for the future of languages and linguistic diversity within the European Union. The Roadmap presents a well structured plan which would ensure that the languages of Europe are able to survive and prosper.

The NPLD has invited all interested parties to submit contributions towards the final version of the roadmap. This document aims to contribute to this process by briefly laying out the situation of the Armenian language in Europe and by formulating key headline recommendations for public authorities at European level.

I. Background

The Armenian language has been spoken in Europe outside of Armenia for at least 1500 years, i.e. since the Armenian diaspora was first established in the South East of the continent. The language was spoken in historic Armenia for millennia. It is an indo-European language.

Today, more than one million people of Armenian descent live in Europe; many of them speak one of the two modern sister Armenian languages: Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian. Western Armenian has an official status as a minority language in several EU countries, including Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland. In France, it is considered a “langue de France.” It has a significant historic presence in a number of other EU countries, where it does not necessarily benefit from a particular status.

Over the 20th century Western Armenian, traditionally spoken in Turkey and in Europe, has suffered a sharp decline. Spoken by millions in 1900, it is now considered an “endangered language” according to the UNESCO classification.

The Armenian language shares the challenges faced by many other minority languages in Europe. It also has a number of specific characteristics, which are particularly relevant to efforts to preserving, nurturing and further developing it in Europe.

1. **Diaspora.** The Armenian language, and particularly Western Armenian, is essentially a diaspora language: the language has been sustained over the centuries through a thick web of non-state institutions such as churches, schools and cultural associations, be it under favourable or hostile conditions, depending on the time and place.

2. **Genocide.** A significant portion of Europe's Armenian diaspora is formed by the descendants of

refugees and exiles who survived the Armenian genocide of 1915. The Western Armenian language in Europe is therefore also a “refugee” language, which is almost extinct in its original heartland.

3. Immigration. A large number of immigrants (several hundred thousands) from Armenia and the former Soviet Union have also settled in the EU over the last 20 years, while Western Armenian-speaking refugees and other migrants have arrived from Turkey and the Middle East. The Armenian language is therefore also the language of modern migrants.

The situation of the Armenian language in the diaspora today is largely the result of the genocide of 1915. The educational and cultural institutions in Turkey which were central to the diaspora that were destroyed during and after the genocide have not been adequately replaced. Additional challenges include the state of dispersion of the diaspora, its lack of resources in the first decades after its arrival in Europe and the lack of support or recognition of the Armenian language on the part of state-run educational and cultural institutions in Europe. Today, Armenian language education is hindered by the lack of recognition of the language, but also by the lack of training and institutions adequate to teaching Armenian as a diaspora language in a European context. Certain established Armenian communities have succeeded in opening schools and providing some language instruction (e.g. in France, Greece and Bulgaria), but these are a few and far between. Significant resources are needed to meet the needs of the new migrants and the descendants of the previous generation of migrants who wish to maintain linguistic elements of their identity.

The challenges encountered by the Armenian language in Europe result from its minority status, from the dispersion of the diaspora, and from lack of recognition in many countries. In the case of Western Armenian, the language lacks the backing of state institutions and of related cultural programmes.

History has shown that, like other lesser-used languages, the continual use of a diaspora language such as Armenian is important to its users and to society around them as well as to Europe at large. Naturally, all Armenian-speakers in Europe speak other languages besides Armenian.

II. Recommendations

1. Recognition, symbolic and official. The single most important contribution to sustaining and developing the Armenian language in Europe would be to grant it greater recognition. Language learning choices at any age are based on the perceived prestige and practical benefits provided by different languages, as well as by their “heritage” and cultural value. A once prestigious language, that carries a rich culture, the Armenian language has suffered from a dramatic loss of prestige over the 20th century. This loss of prestige is partly due to assimilating forces, lack of resources and persistent efforts on the part of certain governments to remove the Armenian legacy from European memory.

As a result, most Europeans, in government as in society, are now largely ignorant of the place of the Armenian language and culture in Europe, and accordingly do not encourage learning or speaking this language. Ignorance of the specific history of genocide and of the destruction of educational institutions means that European society may not understand the causes of the language's erosion and the need to promote its teaching and use.

Priorities should therefore include the following:

- a) The adoption of a policy favouring language diversity in Europe that encourages the use

and preservation of endangered languages and the incorporation of Western Armenian into that policy.

b) The encouragement of research into, and education on, the history of the Armenian language and civilization in Europe, as well as awareness raising of the value of its preservation and advancement at all levels, particularly at school and in the family.

2. Exchange of good practice. As a diaspora language, the Armenian language experiences very specific challenges. Teaching the language and developing educational material often requires methods and an approach that differ from the teaching of more widespread or less dispersed languages. The development of effective methods and material therefore require that educators, dispersed like the diaspora itself in different countries, exchange experience and pool resources. Exchange of good practice is therefore essential, and should furthermore take place not only among educators for Armenian: they are relevant to educators of other languages that are in similar situations as well. European institutions should support such exchanges of experience and best practice, and the development of common programmes where relevant.

This should also lead to support, by relevant institutions, for programmes and initiatives that encourage the learning of Armenian as a European language – a language of heritage, culture and, importantly, everyday use.

3. Mainstreaming. In addition to a few day schools, Armenian language teaching is often conducted in institutions distinct from mainstream educational institutions: children are often taught in Saturday or Sunday schools for instance, or in after-school settings. However, integrating Armenian language education into the school or university curricula would be very effective from an educational point of view. Member states should be encouraged to provide Armenian language teaching at different levels of the educational system, if necessary with support from specialized Armenian language educational institutions or programmes, of which there are several. Conversely, Armenian organizations should work in partnership with the formal educational system in order to learn how it could better contribute to Armenian language education. The EU has a role to play in helping encourage national educational systems to cater not only for the needs of concentrated minorities and immigrant groups, but also for the needs of the more dispersed diasporas.

4. Diaspora research. Diaspora languages have historically provided particular added value and contributed to the development of Europe in various specific ways, e.g. by contributing to trade connections and networks, by promoting cultural exchanges or by contributing to the dissemination of ideas, knowledge and values. This should be the subject of research and of awareness raising in order to allow individuals and societies to make informed choices on matters relating to language use and culture, and to combat the widespread and false perception that minor languages serve no useful purpose and that their value is of an ethnographic and historical order.

5. Western Armenian in Turkey. As a language with strong roots in Turkey, the preservation and development of Western Armenian can be strengthened considerably through positive reinforcement policies and programmes within Turkey, an EU candidate country. There is now a new and significant interest in the Armenian heritage in Turkey. The EU can play a facilitating role in the promotion of Western Armenian within Turkey, a policy that would be consistent with its minority rights policies.