





SVEN GATZ



THE FUTURE

IS



MULTILINGUAL



BRUSSELS AS A BLUEPRINT



Lannoo

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FOREWORD

No longer one language group pitted against another, but at least a hundred languages spoken by one hundred and eighty different nationalities. This is the language reality of Brussels today, a reality that makes our capital one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities and contributes to its role on the international stage as an important economic, political and diplomatic hub.

The inhabitants of Brussels are well aware of this. The Language Barometer, which charts the language use and skills of Brussels residents, shows that they fully embrace multilingualism. A clear majority has left behind the old dichotomy between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. What's more, seven out of ten Brussels residents see multilingualism as an essential part of the Brussels DNA.

That is good news, because the benefits of multilingualism are widely known and extensively documented. Multilingualism constitutes a significant economic advantage, both individually and collectively. Take, for example, increased job opportunities for multilinguals, and Belgium's greater attractiveness to international investors. At the socio-cultural level too, the benefits are countless, ranging from a better understanding of other cultures and a stronger capacity for empathy to greater self-confidence. Speaking several languages is an important asset for personal

development, among other things increasing our abstract reasoning skills and our creativity.

The Brussels government therefore rightly sees multilingualism as a critical success factor for increasing mutual understanding and promoting trust between communities. With its multilingualism, Brussels perfectly fulfils its role as the capital of Belgium and of the multilingual European Union. For the first time in our country, and indeed in Europe, a government has decided to recognize the promotion of multilingualism as a specific governmental competence. With initiatives like Multilingualism Day and by establishing the Council for Multilingualism, Minister Sven Gatz has set out on his task of promoting multilingualism with verve. With this book, he launches a number of interesting ideas to better embed our multilingual reality in the way we live and work in Brussels and Belgium. The book looks ahead to Belgium's bicentenary, in 2030, a celebration that obviously cannot go unnoticed and indeed presents multiple cultural challenges.

Minister Gatz also rightly emphasizes the efforts that need to be made in the field of language teaching, especially for newcomers and job seekers. Multilingualism is an asset only in combination with inclusivity. It should never become an excuse for living next to each other instead of alongside each other, and promoting indifference. Investments in our language infrastructure will need to be made, to ensure that everyone is sufficiently equipped to assume his or her role in the multilingual society.

At the end of the book, readers are asked whether they thought this book was necessary. Let me dispel any doubts: in conversations with foreign investors and policymakers, our multilingualism is invariably mentioned as one of the important assets of our country. The fascinating testimonies and the comprehensive

picture of multilingualism in our capital make this a book not only for Brussels readers, but for everyone involved in one way or another with multilingualism.

ALEXANDER DE CROO

Prime Minister

INTRODUCTION

The bilingualism of my city has been a source of great pleasure and widening of horizons, but also of contention and discussion throughout my life. Living in such a city in part defines who you are. In Brussels, which is officially bilingual, I grew up in a family belonging to the Dutch-speaking minority. My father taught Dutch at school. He saw it as his mission to promote the use of so-called 'General Dutch', the Dutch language in its standard, 'correct' version. My mother was a French-speaking native of Brussels. Even so, she had learned to speak excellent Dutch. She spoke Dutch all her life with me and my sister.

The French language was, however, anything but absent from my home. I listened to French chansons, watched French TV shows and movies, enjoyed visiting my mother's French-speaking family, and played football in the streets with the French-speaking children in the neighbourhood. This explains the great affinity I've developed with languages, even if I didn't go on to choose a language-centred career like my father. My son did go on to study languages: Romance Philology. And I bring the language story into my political workspace. I see it as my task to convert the evolutions I observe in Brussels into policy.

For about ten years now, in addition to Dutch and French, a third language, English, has been making rapid progress in

Brussels. This is natural, of course, because Brussels has been the de facto, albeit unofficial, capital of Europe for several decades. My city houses the official seats of the European Council, the European Commission and the second seat of the European Parliament. Brussels is also home to the political headquarters of NATO. In today's world, 'Brussels' is more than a city, it has become a household name. Media around the world communicate to their audiences what the European Union declares, does or believes with statements like: '*Brussels has decided!*'.

The influx of European citizens into our 'capital' was initially not so spectacular, giving a group of some hundred thousand inhabitants, sometimes derogatorily described as 'Eurocrats', people who usually kept aloof from city life and who worked in a geographically demarcated European quarter close to Schuman Square.

In the last decade in particular, the number of EU residents has risen sharply. The expansion of the EU to include Eastern European member states has produced a new wave of immigration. These new EU citizens in Brussels are not just people working for the European institutions, or diplomats and lobbyists circling around them. They also include Eastern European immigrants wanting to build a new future in the European capital. A few years ago, I was confronted with this new multilingualism. I ordered a beer in the legendary Flemish café De Monk in the heart of Brussels. The man behind the bar didn't understand me, so I tried '*une bière*'. He didn't understand that either, but with '*a beer, please*', the message got across. I struck up a conversation. He was of Romanian origin and had only just landed a job behind the bar, where he was getting by in rudimentary English.

The fact that more and more English can be heard in Brussels, the lingua franca in the city for many EU citizens, has been quantified in recent years in the Language Barometer. This is a tool that measures the evolution of language use in Brussels. VUB researcher Rudi Janssens, who died in September 2021, introduced it in 2001. At that time this passionate and engaging professor established that half of the inhabitants of Brussels grew up in monolingual French-speaking families. This group of Brussels residents, included, he found, only a few people of non-Belgian origin. It was therefore not the case that immigrants from outside Belgium simply switched to French in Brussels. Rather they retained the languages of their countries of origin as their family languages. At the time, Janssens also noted that the classic process of Frenchification of the Flemish in Brussels, in which a Dutch-speaking father and a Dutch-speaking mother switched to French among themselves or with the children, had stopped. Nevertheless, a quarter of mixed marriages between French-speakers and Dutch-speakers still opted for French as the family language.

In the following years, the Language Barometers showed an increasing diversity of home languages in the Brussels-Capital Region, from 72 different home languages in the first Language Barometer of 2001, to 96 in Language Barometer 2 (2006) and to 104 in Language Barometer 3 (2013). In 2013, French remained the lingua franca in Brussels, while English had supplanted Dutch as the second best-known language. Nevertheless, the percentage of Brussels residents who spoke good to excellent Dutch amply exceeded the figure that is usually attached to the number of Flemish people in Brussels in political debate. It was also remarkable that the three most important languages (French,

English and Dutch) had lost relative weight in the third Language Barometer. Arabic, a language not taught in school, was advancing and becoming a typical family language. That did not mean that these Brussels residents did not speak another language. Half of the families where Arabic was spoken also used another family language.

In the most recent Language Barometer (2018), French remained by far the best-known language, even if losing almost 9% over the entire study period. Growth in the Brussels-Capital Region had mainly taken the form of external migration, with the majority of these new Brussels residents not speaking French at the time of arrival. On the other hand, Janssens established that the second generation of migrants picked up French as a second family language. French remained the dominant language in education and scored highest in terms of knowledge among the youngest generation of Brussels residents. Knowledge of Dutch was steadily decreasing and had halved over the period in question. This has to do with both internal and external migration. Especially among Belgians who were not Dutch-speaking at home and who went to French-language schools, knowledge of Dutch had decreased significantly. English had taken second place and, unlike the official languages, had not fallen significantly since 2001. Although it remained mainly a school language, it had advanced slightly as a second family language. Just like Dutch, English remains very important in the labour market and is the most popular language among the youngest generation. Arabic has a more erratic course over the entire study period, first advancing, but then retreating in the 2018 survey.

I would like to conclude this overview of linguistic history since 2001 with nationality data published by the Brussels Institute of Statistics (BISA) in 2020. Of the approximately 1.2 million

inhabitants of the Brussels Region, 510,697 (41.9%) were born as Belgians and 309,013 as EU citizens outside Belgium (25.4%). In addition, Brussels has 398,545 (32.7%) inhabitants who have another, non-EU, nationality of birth. The majority of the Brussels population is therefore no longer of Belgian origin. In fact, Brussels residents born and bred for two or more generations in the Region today account for only around 20 percent of the population. This applies to both the Brussels Flemings and the Brussels-born *francophones de souche* (original French-speakers).

Brussels continues to attract immigrants from outside Europe. In recent years many residents – Belgians, new Belgians and non-Belgians – have also fled the city. These two evolutions have given Brussels a new timbre: the languages spoken there are no longer so dominantly French and, far behind, Dutch, but increasingly English and other major languages shared by new immigrants. In order to live life to the fullest in Brussels and to participate in social life in its broadest sense, from now on it's best to be trilingual instead of bilingual. That is why, in the run-up to the 2019 regional elections, I made multilingualism a campaign theme.

Following the elections, I succeeded in getting the promotion of multilingualism written into the Brussels coalition agreement. During these negotiations, I noticed, the other parties at the table made few objections, as long as the concept of multilingualism remained sufficiently general and vague. But when it came to, for example, the need to make more schools multilingual, we were immediately warned that we in the Brussels-Capital Region were not allowed to trespass into the territory of the (language-based) Communities, which are responsible for education in Brussels. For example, the following, fairly general passage made it into the Brussels coalition agreement: 'The Government will develop

a global policy that promotes multilingualism among the inhabitants of Brussels and thus strengthens Brussels identity and citizenship, social promotion and social cohesion within the Region. This approach will not be limited to education, but will extend to different sectors, such as vocational training, employment and culture. The cooperation with the Community Commissions, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the Flemish Community will be intensified in this direction.'

In addition, the coalition agreement also announces that Brussels will invite the Communities and the federal government to strengthen language education within the framework of the current competences by means of a cooperation agreement. The Brussels government also wants to improve the training of bilingual teachers, through a collaboration between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking non-university higher education institutes (HEIS), on the lines of the one already initiated in Brussels during the previous government period. Finally, efforts will also be made to improve language skills in the workplace, with new modules for the technical and vocational fields of education, based on the success of language teaching through the regional vocational training for adults.

I'm pleased that this coalition agreement has made multilingualism a topic for discussion among the Brussels parties. That would not have been the case ten years ago. Multilingualism has been an essential feature of Brussels inhabitants, all of them, for a long time now, as the Language Barometers illustrate. With those few sentences in the coalition agreement, this government is sending a signal to European and other immigrants that they too are at home here and can help build this multilingual Brussels.

As the competent minister, I regularly felt myself below the water-line during the first years of the legislative period, with turmoil and anger arising whenever things became concrete. Which other languages are we talking about? What weight do we give to those languages? All in all, I see a feasible path in practice: education is the natural catalyst of multilingualism. But the promotion of multilingualism must be sufficiently broad. It must equally well be grounded in other areas, such as the economy and the labour market, art and culture, and the promotion of social cohesion throughout the Region.

One of the major challenges in my policy is how the competence for multilingualism will evolve after the present legislative period. In my policy on multilingualism, we work layer by layer. The first layer has been to set up a Council for Multilingualism, an advisory council with all kinds of experts, who assist me in developing and implementing my policy. That new Council was officially presented on the first Multilingualism Day in September 2020. Multilingualism Day, the second layer in the policy, will be an annual event. During the second edition, in September 2021, we presented the bilingual brochure *Meer taal in het onderwijs in Brussel – Grandir en multilingue à Bruxelles, à l'école et en dehors* [More language in Brussels education – Growing up multilingual in Brussels, in school and outside]. Teachers who already want to get started with language diversity in their classrooms will find useful tips and ideas there. The brochure contains all kinds of useful information and an overview of methodologies and projects related to multilingualism in an educational context. 4000 copies of this brochure will be distributed to all French-speaking and Dutch-speaking primary and secondary schools in Brussels. Through the various levers of

multilingualism that we are keen to offer – with the Day, with the Council, and via the third policy layer with projects for multilingualism –, we want to create a vibe.

The annual Multilingualism Day needs to be an event that people look forward to, teachers and students, entrepreneurs, politicians, parents, culture lovers and associations. In this way, the quest for multilingualism will become something that cannot simply be stopped in the next legislative period. The advantages of multilingualism are countless: the more languages you speak and understand, the more easily you feel at home in Brussels, but also in Belgium, Europe and the whole world. You will understand people from other cultures much better. Being multilingual strengthens and enhances your profile on the job market. As a multilingual, it's also easier for you to follow and appreciate foreign-language media or cultural events and performances. As an entrepreneur or trader with good language skills, you build stronger relationships with your customers. And last but not least, multilingualism is invaluable for getting to know your neighbours in a diverse metropolitan city like Brussels or for joining a voluntary organization, neighbourhood committee or interest group. This promotes social cohesion throughout the city and even makes Brussels less susceptible to health risks. We know that during the Covid pandemic, the Brussels region had to impose stricter measures on the population owing to insufficient vaccination coverage.

In short, the first policy period for the promotion of multilingualism should be a seed that will continue to grow in the coming years. Today my competence is a coordinating and horizontal one and I have scarce resources. My political mentor, former Brussels Secretary of State Vic Anceaux, also started in this way in 1978,

by coordinating immigration policy. The memorandum he drew up at the time laid an essential foundation, after which Paula D'Hondt, as Royal Commissioner for Immigration Policy, and numerous ministers subsequently got an integration and civic integration policy up and running.

Multilingualism sails in the wake of social and civic integration. Although Brussels is not a flagship in terms of citizenship and integration, it's leading the way in multilingualism. That is why, in the final chapter, I propose a ten-point programme for multilingualism, which could be developed after the 2024 elections. The starting point is my own superdiverse city. In a city you are more likely to meet someone who doesn't understand you than in a country village. Cities are international environments, where economic and cultural renewal most often emerge and spread. But cities are also places where conflicts and less pleasant things happen more often, prompting residents to leave the city for a quieter existence. One thing is certain: the enormous multilingualism that characterizes Brussels today will spread to the rest of Flanders and Wallonia. Starting from the cities, an unstoppable wave is moving out throughout Europe. Anyone who reads this book about multilingualism is looking to the future.

This book is primarily about languages and people. A person reveals themselves in the language he or she speaks. Language is the most expressive way to get to know people. With it you can expose your soul. Then you are the language you speak. But of course you can also use language to hide your soul. Speaking and understanding several languages makes your world larger. You can get to know people who speak other languages more quickly and through them their cultures, their habits, their ways of thinking.

LANGUAGE BATTLE IN BILINGUAL BRUSSELS

