The European Union’s motto, ‘United in Diversity’, contrasts with the cultural standardization entailed in the formation of nation-states and the forging of political identities in Europe. So what does being ‘united in diversity’ mean? Focusing on language politics and policies, this book offers a thorough assessment of the implications of cultural and linguistic diversity for the process of constructing a European polity. It sheds light on some of the most pressing problems associated with contemporary identity politics. It is often claimed that the recurrent celebration of diversity in Europe’s programmatic declarations has an effective political impact. Kraus offers a critical analysis of how the European Union has responded to the normative challenge of creating an institutional frame for integration, which allows cultural differences to be transcended without ignoring them.

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A Union of Diversity

Language, Identity and Polity-Building in Europe

Peter A. Kraus

University of Helsinki
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Language politics and language policies played a crucial role in the historical processes of nation-state formation. Cultural and political integration in modern societies is largely based upon language. Thus, the making of nation-states went hand in hand with political attempts to introduce and maintain standardized communication codes. At later stages of political development, language policy was frequently associated with the goal of establishing a comprehensive and democratic public sphere. In multilingual settings, however, the political definition of a common language regime often became a matter of conflict. These general observations hold particularly true in the context of European history. It is in Europe where the idea of the national language originated and where it became inextricably connected with the dynamics of nation- and state-building. All over Europe, the forging of modern political identities entailed introducing communicative practices based on shared linguistic standards.

Against this background, it is quite obvious that the language issue bears extraordinary relevance if we want to assess to what extent the former logic of political integration has undergone substantial changes. We are experiencing the emergence of ‘postnational’ patterns of identification, which will ultimately reduce the salience of our ‘national’ attachments. The European Union has often been characterized as a regional harbinger of a coming global age of postnationalism. Accordingly, analyzing the role of language in the process of building Europe should improve our knowledge on the actual scope of the transition from ‘national’ to ‘postnational’ forms of political association in this part of the world.

At the same time, focusing on the role language and languages play in creating a ‘union of diversity’ will allow us to discuss some of the most demanding normative challenges related to present-day identity politics in a thorough way: Language can be considered a ‘hard’ evidence for how cultural elements play a role in the construction of our civic identities. In Europe (as elsewhere), the contemporary discourse on citizens’ rights tends to accept the intrinsic value of linguistic bonds, thereby conceding that members of smaller language groups deserve to be protected against
assimilationist pressures. Yet the complex setting of the European Union reveals that there may be a potential trade-off between recognizing the value of linguistic pluralism and creating an institutional context that allows for smooth and functional communication. At any rate, it should not be taken for granted that the recurrent celebration of diversity in the Union's programmatic declarations of intent has an effective impact on the often rather harsh realm of European realpolitik.
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A previous version of this book was published in German in 2004 (Europäische Öffentlichkeit und Sprachpolitik, Frankfurt: Campus). The English edition includes substantial revisions and updates. Several former sections disappeared; other sections were largely modified to take into account recent political developments and additional sources; new sections were added. Eventually, therefore, we cannot speak of the same book anymore, and I very much hope that the changes have contributed to improving the argumentation. Ciaran Cronin was an invaluable support in making this volume possible, translating parts of the German manuscript and editing those chapters that I chose to (re)write in English myself.


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Finally, I dedicate this to my (multilingual) family, to Reetta, Aura and Pau.