

The Logic of Multilingualism in the Alpine Convention

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French, German, Italian, and Slovenian are the official languages of the Alpine Convention: the practice of linguistic pluralism is frequent within some Alpine countries and has been practised since the early years of the Convention. The common institutions play a vital role in ensuring the practice of multilingualism, choosing the model of the European Communities. In the Convention the use of English is frequent, but not predominant. Multilingualism is an asset for the Alpine Convention, allowing the participation of those who do not speak foreign languages – but who play a vital role in the protection and sustainable development of the Alpine region – and contributing to the establishment of an effective system of multilevel governance. This analysis mirrors the daily practice of international cooperation to protect and sustainably develop the Alpine region.

1. The Alpine Convention: an Italian perspective

Italy held the presidency of the Alpine Convention in 2001 and 2002, just two years after it deposited the ratification of the Framework Convention¹. Italy was the last Alpine State to ratify the Convention. However, it had participated to the sessions of its bodies since the beginning of activities under the Alpine Convention. Furthermore, Italy possessed a legal and political culture that was already in harmony with the spirit of the Convention, as the Italian Constitution had already granted special protection to mountain areas and peoples since 1948². With mountains covering more than half of its territory, it could not be otherwise³ (Angelini et al. 2006:15).

In 2001 the Alpine Convention had already produced most of its Protocols, with the exception of those on transport and dispute settlement; so from the legal perspective it had advanced significantly⁴. However, its institutional side lacked a permanent structure, which conditioned its effectiveness, entrusting the whole administration of the Conven-

1 Italy ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Alps with Law no. 403 of 14th October 1999.

2 See article 44 of the Italian Constitution of 1948.

3 This statement is based on data from UNCEM-ISTAT (National Union of Mountain Municipalities, Communities and Authorities – Italian Institute for Statistics).

4 Both the Protocol on Transport and the one on Dispute Settlement were finalised at the Alpine Conference of Luzern, Switzerland, at the end of October 2000.

tion, its initiatives and meetings to the rotating presidency. In order to assist the presidency with an efficient translation of the working documents and an appropriate interpreting of official meetings, Italy further promoted the creation of a Permanent Secretariat⁵, charged to meet also to these needs of the bodies of the Alpine Convention, from the Conferences of the Ministers to the Permanent Committee and the Working Groups, to the various meetings⁶.

The aim of this chapter is to reflect upon the cases for and against the multilingualism of the Alpine Convention. This analysis mainly mirrors the daily practice of international cooperation to protect and sustainably develop the Alpine region. It is therefore based on official documents, the existing literature, chosen interviews, as well as on personal experience. Due to the background of its authors, this chapter begins with an introduction to the context of the Alpine Convention from an Italian perspective and goes on to sketch its evolution in order to present an analysis of the logic or *ratio* of the multilingualism of the Convention.

The Convention for the Protection of the Alps (Alpine Convention) is an international framework agreement for the protection and sustainable development of the Alpine region. It was open for signature on 7th November 1991 in Salzburg, Austria, and since 2000 all Alpine States, including Italy, have signed and ratified it. It consists of a general convention in whose framework nine specific protocols have been adopted, each relating to a particular Alpine issue.

The text of the Convention as well as the letter of the Protocols were drafted “in the German, French, Italian, and Slovene languages, the four texts being equally authentic”, employing the same formula used in the treaties of the European communities since the 1950s⁷. This makes these four languages the official languages of the Alpine Convention, in the same way as twenty-three languages of the twenty-seven Member States are official languages of the European Union. This means that all official meetings should have a simultaneous or consecutive interpreting service and that all working documents should be translated into the four languages. In most cases, this provision is respected and all four official languages receive equal or similar treatment⁸.

5 The possibility of establishing a Permanent Secretariat was already foreseen by article 9 of the Framework Convention; its inclusion in the programme of the Italian presidency was the product of all the efforts that the Alpine States had made since the beginning of the works of the Convention.

6 The Permanent Secretariat was established at the Alpine Conference of Merano, Italy, at the end of November 2002 with decision VII/2.

7 See article 14 of the Alpine Convention of 1991, as well as, for example, article 314 (ex-248) of the Treaty of Rome of 1957 and article 53 (ex-S) of the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992.

8 See also article 21 on languages of the Rules of the Conference of the Parties (Alpine Conference), adopted in 1996 at Brdo, Slovenia, and article 19 of the Rules of the Permanent Committee, according to which all official languages of the Alpine Conference – i.e. German, French, Italian, and Slovene – are also the official languages of the Perma-

Due to its geographical extension and strategic position, the Alpine Convention goes beyond the scope of a mere international agreement. It represents a crossroads of nationalities, cultures and languages, unified by a common territory with unique features (Salsa 2005, Cason et al. 1998, Cason et al. 2004, Ruffini et al. 2006). The Alpine regions within the Italian territory alone already mirror this cultural and linguistic diversity, ranging from the Italian and French speaking Valle d'Aosta to the Italian, German and Ladin speaking Trentino-Alto Adige or the Italian, Friulian, Slovenian and German speaking Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Multilingualism is such a central issue in the Alps that, after six years of activities of the Working Group on Population and Culture, led by Italy, a recent ministerial declaration considered language one of the three axes of cultural diversity in the Alps and suggested specific measures in this regard⁹.

Table 1: Measures in favour of linguistic pluralism¹⁰

1	Specific promotion of Alpine languages at school, especially local languages, including dialects
2	Professional training and upgrading for teachers
3	Provision of the tools needed by schools
4	Promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism, as well as of the linguistic integration of immigrants
5	Creation of partnerships among schools of different regions
6	Cultural events – especially in the field of music, literature, and/or theatre – in the local languages, language courses, print and electronic media
7	Projects for the development and knowledge of the territory through the study and use of toponymy
8	Development within municipalities or small centres of signs explaining the main or most important toponyms of a given area

Even if multilingualism is such a central value in the Alps, English – the new global auxiliary language – is often used in non-official meetings or publications, such as the present one, while French – the old language of diplomacy – is sometimes used by those representatives who choose to use an Alpine language anyway or do not feel comfortable speaking English. Sometimes English is also used at the meetings of some Working Groups of the Alpine Convention, mainly due to budgetary constraints or out of convenience.

In recent years, certain technical meetings, such as the ones in preparation of the first Report on the State of the Alps in 2006, were held in English only. Other meetings, for example the one organised in preparation of the mandate of the Working Group on UNESCO World Heritage, hosted in Bolzano on 15th March 2007, took place in the four

ment Committee and its Working Groups; according to both articles, declaration and official documents should all be translated in the four official languages.

9 See section II of the Declaration on Population and Culture, adopted in 2006 at Alpbach, Austria.

10 *Ibid.*; see also the Multi-annual Work Programme of the Alpine Conference, 2005-2010, adopted in 2004 at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

languages, with the draft of the mandate being projected in each language on four different screens and being elaborated at the same time in the four languages. In either case, the translation or harmonisation of the final documents was needed, but these are significant examples of the practice of multilingualism in the Alpine Convention.

2. The origins of multilingualism in the Alpine Convention

In order to better understand the logic of multilingualism within the Alpine Convention, a look at the origins of the Convention and at the evolution of the practice of multilingualism is fitting. The following paragraphs illustrate these developments, dividing them in two periods, the pre and early Convention period, between 1987 and the year 2000, and the late Convention period, starting in 2001. As the principal divide between the two periods, common bodies were created and the functions of translation, interpreting and linguistic harmonisation were institutionalised and professionalised. While the analysis of the first period relies more on external documents and academic literature, the second part mainly draws on primary sources and personal experience.

2.1. The pre and early Convention period, 1987-2000

Since the 1950s, the CIPRA (*Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes/ Internationale Alpenschutzkommission*) has been active in the field of international cooperation for the protection of the Alpine environment at a non-governmental level. In the 1970s a series of Working Groups on the Alpine environment were created at regional level and ArgeAlp (*Comunità di Lavoro delle Regioni Alpine/ Arbeitsgemeinschaft Alpenländer*) was the first institution to be founded. While the official languages of CIPRA were French and German at that time, the languages of ArgeAlp were German and Italian. This was due to the fact that CIPRA was virtually absent in Italy and former Yugoslavia, whereas ArgeAlp was composed only of Italian and German speaking regions, provinces or cantons¹¹.

In the 1970s, the Alpine governments also made a first step towards the development of an international legal instrument in this field, with the adoption of the Ecological Charter for Mountain Regions in Europe in the context of the Council of Europe¹². However, only starting from the mid-1980s some concrete steps were made towards the conclusion of an international agreement for the protection of the Alps. In 1987, CIPRA – which was in the process of increasingly professionalising its activities and staff, but which was still us-

11 For more information, see the websites of CIPRA (<http://www.cipra.com>) and ArgeAlp (<http://www.argealp.org>).

12 See resolution 76 (34) of the Committee of Ministers, adopted in 1976 at the 258th Meeting of the Ministers' Deputies.

ing only German and French as its official languages – launched the process of developing an international convention, what later became the Alpine Convention.

Multilingualism imposed itself on the work of the Convention from the beginning. All four languages received equal respect at all meetings from the very first ones with very few exceptions. The multilingualism of the Convention even influenced the linguistic regime of CIPRA, which, after moving its office to Vaduz, Liechtenstein, adopted Italian as its third official language in 1990. Slovenian, the fourth official language of the Convention, was added in 1992. The multilingualism of the Alpine Convention was then established and, as in the case of CIPRA, was already influencing the linguistic regime in the Alps. Naturally, the multilingualism of the Convention was then reinforced during the Slovene and Swiss presidencies in 1995-1998 and 1999-2000, respectively, because of the linguistic pluralism of many Swiss cantons and the small number of Slovene speakers outside of the Eastern Alps.

2. 2. The late Convention period, 2001-present

The Italian presidency of the Alpine Convention in 2001 and 2002 faced a situation similar to that of the previous Slovene and Swiss presidencies, given that the knowledge of Italian is not as common as that of French or German at European level, as in the Slovenian case; also, in a number of Italian Alpine regions, especially Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli Venezia Giulia, multilingualism involving at least one other official language of the Alpine Convention is a common feature, as in the Swiss case.

The multilingualism of the Convention was further strengthened by the beginning of the collaboration between the bodies of the Alpine Convention and INTRALP, which is still ongoing at the time of the writing of this chapter. INTRALP is now a team of interpreters and translators from all over the Alpine region, which is based in Italy and has acquired a deep knowledge of the Alpine environment, as well as of the specific terms and peculiar 'jargon' of the Alpine Convention. The creation of INTRALP was encouraged by the Italian presidency, which stimulated the association and professionalisation of individual interpreters, who had worked for the organs of the Convention under the Italian presidency.

Moreover, with the creation of a Permanent Secretariat at the end of the Italian presidency, a further step was taken in the direction of reinforcing the institutional support to multilingualism in the Alpine Convention. In fact, among the duties of the Permanent Secretariat in its seat of Bolzano, Italy, there is the provision of translation and interpreting services for the organs of the Convention. At that time, the city of Bolzano was chosen not only because it was at the centre of the Alps, but also because of its bilingual regime,

with German and Italian being both official languages¹³. The Permanent Secretariat plays a central role in ensuring the optimal practice of multilingualism and in carrying out the harmonisation of the various versions of the official documents produced in the framework of the Convention. As a matter of fact, a linguistic analysis of the documents of the Alpine Convention highlighted that of all Protocols to the Convention – all of which were finalised before 2000, i.e. before the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat – only the Protocol on Dispute Settlement underwent a process of linguistic harmonisation.

The Italian presidency was followed by two German-speaking presidencies, in order the German and the Austrian ones, in 2003-2004 and 2005-2006, respectively. From the perspective of the practice of multilingualism, the late German presidency was marked by the critical situation of the Permanent Secretariat after the departure of the interim Secretary General, while during the whole Austrian presidency the Permanent Secretariat suffered from this situation, in particular, because of the lack of an official Secretary General; moreover, towards the end, it suffered from limited funding. This stretched the capacity of the institutions of the Convention to ensure and maintain the practice of multilingualism.

We previously mentioned the drafting of the first Report on the State of the Alps in 2006 as an example of an exception to the practice of multilingualism, as the report was initially drafted in English, and the preparatory meetings were usually held in English only. Furthermore, as in this period the Permanent Secretariat lacked Italian and French native speakers, the use of German became particularly common within the Permanent Secretariat, even if its statute established the equal respect of the four languages¹⁴. However, English has always been common at technical meetings, such as those of some Sub Working Groups, or in the daily correspondence among the representatives of Alpine governments or observers.

The current French presidency benefited from the normalisation of the situation of the Permanent Secretariat, with the nomination of a full Secretary General, and the reviving of its activities and services with new, multilingual personnel in both the seats of Innsbruck and Bolzano. Under the new Secretary General and the French presidency, all official languages are represented by at least one staff member who is a native speaker of that language. Minor meetings and communications still sometimes occur in English or French only, but the general rule is that all communications, meetings and documents are available in all four Alpine languages. This is also true for some activities that run paral-

13 See article 99 of the Special Statute for Trentino-Alto Adige of 1972.

14 According to article 5 of decision VII/2, “equal consideration shall be guaranteed to the four official languages in the selection of the personnel”.

led to those of the bodies of the Alpine Convention, such as some expert workshops, or public conferences.

Now that the context of the Alpine Convention has been introduced and a sketch of its evolution has been provided, certainly from an Italian perspective, but focussing mainly on the linguistic regime of the Convention, we can now present an analysis of the logic of the multilingualism of the Convention.

3. The logic of multilingualism in the Alpine Convention

At the time of the drafting of the text of the Alpine Convention among the seven States sharing the Alpine territory only France, Germany and Italy were members of the European Communities. European institutions were already multilingual as they adopted as official languages the languages that each Member State wanted to be adopted as such¹⁵; Switzerland was already a multilingual country with four national languages, German, French, Italian, and Romansh¹⁶. The former Yugoslavia, as well as some Italian Alpine regions, was also multilingual. So, for most Alpine countries, multilingualism was already a reality and the spirit of the Alpine Convention only reflects this reality. Moreover, since the European Communities ratified the Alpine Convention in 1996, the text of the Framework Convention as well as of the Protocols that have been ratified at European Community level are also available in other official languages of the European Union, including English. As an official observer to the Convention recently commented, “at the end of the day, they are *four* official languages, not one hundred!”

English has the advantage of being a relatively neutral language, not favouring any participant to the Convention, but it is not an Alpine language. In the Alpine area, being the number of those who speak all four official languages extremely limited, the translation of all official documents and the interpreting of all meetings is essential for the works of the Convention. This is true even if most participants do speak English and a number of them speak at least two, often three Alpine languages.

However, the same choice was not made in the case of the Carpathian area, where a ‘sister’ convention to the Alpine Convention exists, the so-called Carpathian Convention¹⁷. In fact, the Carpathian governments chose English as the only official language of their Convention, because each of the seven Contracting Parties to the Convention has

15 See article 314 of the Treaty Establishing the European Communities and article 53 of the Treaty on European Union (consolidated versions).

16 See article 4 of the Federal Constitution on national languages, as well as article 18 on freedom of language and article 70 on languages.

17 The Convention for the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathian Mountain Regions (Carpathian Convention) is a ‘sister’ international framework convention to the Alpine Convention. It was open for signature on 22nd May 2003, in Kiev, Ukraine, and all seven Carpathian States, i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine ratified it, with the exception of Serbia (as of December 2007).

a different official language, and the use of seven official languages for a convention for such a specific mandate would be particularly cumbersome, especially in an area currently not as wealthy as the Alpine region. This linguistic regime of the organs of the Carpathian Convention therefore requires the Carpathian governments and international institutions to engage in further efforts for the dissemination of the works of the Convention in the Carpathian languages.

So far for the main participants to the meetings of the bodies of the Convention, such as the heads of the delegations or the national focal points. Concerning the main recipients of the works and decisions of the organs of the Alpine Convention, i.e. mainly local and regional authorities – but also sometimes national institutions, as well as individual citizens or stakeholders in general – it must be stated that they often have little knowledge of foreign languages, including other Alpine languages. For this reason, the availability of the works and documents of the Alpine Convention in all Alpine languages is not only essential, but it is also needed to ensure access to information and public participation¹⁸.

In this field, the Alpine Convention and its implementation by the Alpine States can be considered a good example of the principles of the Aarhus Convention¹⁹ put into practice. A recent document on the formalised rules and procedures and the non-formalised practices regarding access to information and access to justice in the framework of the consultation process on the Almaty Guidelines²⁰, prepared by the Task Force on Public Participation in International Forums with the assistance of the Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention, reported that the public relations tasks of the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention include responding to requests for information and providing for general information through the website of the Alpine Convention (www.alpconv.org)²¹. In fact, the rich content of the website of the Alpine Convention is not only available in all four languages, plus English, but so is its internet address²².

Even if multilingualism was a natural choice for the Parties of the Convention, it still represents a rather extreme one. Of course, it is not as extreme as employing all the languages and dialects spoken in every single Alpine valley, but it is still closer to that extreme of the spectrum of possible linguistic choices than to the extreme of an English-only lin-

18 Italy, for example, is investing a considerable amount of resources in the process of translating its national report of 2005 to the Compliance Committee into all the four Alpine languages. A manual, so far available in Italian only, on the implementation of the Convention in Italy at national as well as local level was already produced (Angelini et al. 2006).

19 See, in this regard, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, done in 1998 at Aarhus, Denmark. While the letter of the Aarhus Convention does not provide for any obligation of its Parties to make all information available in all national languages, this is not against the spirit of the Convention, especially of articles 3, 6, 7 and 8.

20 See doc. ECE/MP.PP/2005/2/Add.5.

21 See doc. ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.2/Add.1.

22 That is, <http://www.convenzionedellealpi.org>, <http://www.conventionalpine.org>, <http://www.alpenkonvention.org> and <http://www.alpskakonvencija.org>.

guistic regime. Between the model of the European Union, which uses all the languages of its Member States, and that of the Council of Europe, which employs only English and French, the Alpine States have chosen the former for the Alpine Convention. The practice of multilingualism in the Convention is akin to that of the Swiss cantons, of some Italian Alpine regions, as well as of the former Yugoslavia. These experiences at the same time justify and support this extreme choice of linguistic pluralism. Had these experiences not existed, the establishment and implementation of the linguistic regime of the Alpine Convention would have been more cumbersome; on the other hand, if an English only linguistic regime had been established, the interaction among the participants to the Convention would have been more troublesome, with higher risks of misunderstandings, and lower chances of true cooperation.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to reflect upon the cases for and against the multilingualism of the Alpine Convention. This analysis mirrored the daily practice of international cooperation to protect and sustainably develop the Alpine region: it began with an introduction to the context of the Alpine Convention from an Italian perspective and a sketch of its evolution, in order to present an analysis of the logic of the multilingualism of the Convention. This chapter highlighted how the practice of linguistic pluralism is frequent within some Alpine countries and has been maintained since the early years of the Convention, how the common institutions play a vital role in ensuring the practice of multilingualism, and how the model of the European Communities was favoured over the use of English, which is frequent, but not predominant.

Multilingualism is an asset for the Alpine Convention. This asset justifies a remarkable investment in translation, interpreting, and harmonisation, all of which absorb an important share of the budget of both the Permanent Secretariat and the Alpine States. This allows also to those who do not speak foreign languages – but who do play a vital role in the protection and sustainable development of the Alpine region – to participate to the works of the Convention. In this manner, they contribute to the establishment of an effective system of multilevel governance, from local authorities to international civil servants, from individual citizens to the national governments²³.

23 See, for example, the presentation “Regionalism Reconsidered: The Alpine Convention as a Model of Earth System Governance” presented by Jörg Balsiger of the University of California at Berkeley, United States, and the European University Institute of Fiesole, Italy, at the 2007 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change; see also Price (1999, 2000, 2001).

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