

**THE MAZE OF LANGUAGE POLICY:  
A STUDY OF MINORITY LANGUAGES IN ARAGÓN**

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**Abstract**

Aragón is an autonomous community located in the north-eastern part of Spain. Like many other Spanish regions, it possesses its own linguistic identity, with Aragonese and Catalan traditionally spoken in certain areas. In recent years, the situation of Aragón's minority languages has become the focus of significant legal and political debate. In 2023, legal reforms introduced by the coalition of the People's Party (PP) and Vox dramatically altered the region's approach to minority languages. These reforms eliminated the explicit recognition of Catalan and

Aragonese as part of the region's cultural heritage, replacing them with generic labels referring to "eastern" and "Pyrenean" language varieties. This move marked a return to the policies of 2013, which had significantly restricted the legal protection and cultural recognition of the Catalan and Aragonese languages. The reforms have sparked considerable social and political opposition. Supporters argue that the law recognises Aragón's linguistic diversity without imposing a rigid framework that privileges Catalan or Aragonese over other regional dialects. However, civil organisations and cultural movements accuse the government of undermining the protection and use of minority languages, in contradiction with the commitments made under the Spanish Constitution and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

**Keywords:** minority protection, language rights, language policy, Aragón, Spain

**Disciplines:** linguistics, legal studies, sociology

### **Absztrakt**

#### **A NYELVPOLITIKA ÚTVESZTŐJE: TANULMÁNY ARAGÓNIA KISEBBSÉGI NYELVEIRŐL**

Más spanyol régiókhoz hasonlóan Aragónia is sajátos nyelvi identitással rendelkezik: bizonyos területein hagyományosan az aragón és a katalán nyelvet beszélik. Az utóbbi években Aragónia kisebbségi nyelveinek helyzete jelentős jogi és politikai viták középpontjába került. 2023-ban a Néppárt (PP) és a VOX párt koalíciója által bevezetett jogszabályi reformok alapjaiban változtatták meg a régió kisebbségi nyelvekhez való hozzáállását. E reformok megszüntették a katalán és az aragón nyelv kifejezett elismerését, mint a régió kulturális örökségének részét, helyettük általános, „keleti” és „pireneusi” nyelvi változatokra utaló megnevezéseket vezettek be. Ez a lépés visszatérést jelentett a 2013-as nyelvpolitikához, amely már korábban is jelentősen korlátozta a katalán és az aragón nyelv jogi védelmét és kulturális elismerését. A reformok jelentős társadalmi és politikai ellenállást váltottak ki. Támogatóik azzal érvelnek, hogy a törvény elismeri Aragónia nyelvi sokszínűségét anélkül, hogy merev keretet kényszerítene rá, amely előnyben részesítené a katalánt vagy az aragónt más regionális nyelvváltozatokkal szemben. Ugyanakkor civil szervezetek és kulturális mozgalmak azzal vádolják a kormányt, hogy aláássa a kisebbségi nyelvek védelmét és használatát, szembe helyezkedve az Alkotmányban és a Regionális vagy Kisebbségi Nyelvek Európai Chartájában foglalt kötelezettségvállalásokkal.

**Kulcsszavak:** kisebbségvédelem, nyelvi jogok, nyelvpolitika, Aragónia, Spanyolország

**Diszciplínák:** nyelvtudomány, jogtudomány, szociológia

The present study examines the situation of minority languages in Aragón, especially Aragón and Catalan, within the language policy framework of Spain. It focuses on the development of language rights, the possibilities for language protection and revitalisation, and the challenges involved. Linguistic diversity and the promotion of minority languages is not only a cultural issue, but also a fundamental human rights and social policy issue. In the first part of the paper, the linguistic system of Spain is reviewed, with particular reference to the situation in Aragón. It then focuses on the 2013 language law and its consequences. In the third part, the international and domestic legal framework for language rights is examined, followed by specific policy proposals reflecting on the shortcomings of language policy in Aragón. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary and recommendations.

### **The language situation in Spain**

The protection of minority languages is a complex and challenging area, especially in Spain, where linguistic diversity is very rich. During Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975), languages spoken alongside Spanish (Castilian) suffered severe discrimination and repression, and their use was severely restricted. The adoption of the Constitution of 1978 brought a more favourable period for minority languages, although there are still significant differences between the autonomous commu-

nities in this respect. The constitution leaves the official recognition of minority languages to the autonomous regions, which can decide whether or not to grant minority language users the right to use their language in the public sphere.

Spain recognises five co-official languages - Catalan, Basque, Galician, Valencian and Aranese - all of which have the same status as Spanish in the region where they are spoken. While some languages have official status in their respective areas, others, including the most vulnerable, are not protected and their use is increasingly marginalised. From a legal perspective, the treatment of minority languages is therefore not uniform. The case of Aragón clearly shows how the lack of official recognition affects the social perception and use of certain languages.

### **Minority languages in Aragón**

In Aragón, the most widespread is undoubtedly Spanish (Castilian), which is almost entirely dominant in the province of Teruel, the province of Zaragoza and the southern parts of the province of Huesca. Catalan, on the other hand, is found in the eastern part of the community, bordering Catalonia. Finally, there is the Aragonese language and its Benascan dialect, which are present in the northern part of the province of Huesca and, in the north-western corner of the province of Zaragoza (Villanueva, 2012).

The number of minority speakers in Aragón is given differently by different sources. According to the Ethnologue, one of the most

complete linguistic sources, 11 000 people speak Aragón as their mother tongue and another 20 000 as a second language. A similar figure is given by the Atlas of Endangered Languages developed by UNESCO, which classifies 10 000 native speakers as Aragonese and classifies them as 'endangered' (UNESCO, 2011). Article 7 of the Statute of Autonomy of Aragón refers to the territory's own languages and linguistic varieties. The Statute states that „Aragón's own languages and linguistic varieties are one of the most outstanding expressions of its historical and cultural heritage and represent a social value of respect, coexistence and understanding.” (Statute of Autonomy of Aragón, 2007)

### **Language laws**

In 2009, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party won the elections and Marcelino Iglesias became president for the third time with the support of the Aragón Party (PAR). The first Aragonese language law, Law 10/2009, *de uso, protección y promoción de las lenguas propias de Aragón* (Law 10/2009, on the use, protection and promotion of the Aragonese languages), was adopted at this time. This law aimed to normalise the use of Aragonese and Catalan in relations between citizens and the administration (López, Ignacio, 2011).

Article 2 of Law 10/2009 recognises Aragón as the historical and original language of Aragón. Paragraph 2.3 further stipulates that Catalan and Aragonese „shall be protected and their teaching shall be guaranteed and promoted” (Law 10/2009, emphasis mine).

In the 2013 elections, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) lost almost 30% of the vote compared to 2007, and the Popular Party (PP) won the most votes in Aragón since 1999. As a result, Luisa Fernanda Rudi (PP) became president. Law 10/2009 was then repealed and Law 3/2013 was adopted. The latter amended the previous one and, unlike the former, only mentions minority languages once and does not take into account in any way the sociolinguistic situation or linguistic vitality of the regional languages. Both historical languages lose their designation in this legal document. In many respects, the 2013 law was „a regulation without content, and perhaps its only purpose was to abolish the previous regulation and maintain the legal appearance” (Susin, Ignacio, 2021). The law does not mention Aragón by name, but uses the term 'languages specific to Aragón'. This move reduced the official status of Aragonese and restricted its use in education and administration.

The adoption of the 2013 law is seen by many as a politically motivated, symbolic response to Catalan independence aspirations. However, political decisions that ignore the scientific consensus have mostly affected local language users, contributing to the gradual disappearance of languages (Franc, 2015).

### **Appeal against the law**

In the Spanish parliament, 63 MPs, including the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, the United Left, Convergence and Union, and the Catalan Republican Left, filed a constitutionality complaint against the law,

arguing that it violated the Spanish Constitution, the Statute of Autonomy of Aragón and international conventions on the protection of minority languages, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Europa Press, 2013).

In addition, a number of linguistic and cultural organisations in Aragón and the Huesca departmental council have spoken out against the law, stressing that it does not recognise the trilingual reality of Aragón and threatens the survival of minority languages. The complaint was accepted by the Spanish Constitutional Court in September 2013, and in March 2016 it issued a decision rejecting the complaint and declaring the law constitutional (El País, 2013).

Several organisations (Rolde de Estudios Aragoneses, Consello d'a Fabla Aragonesa, Institut d'Estudis del Baix Cinca and Associació Cultural del Matarranya) have complained to the Ombudsman. The complaint stated that the government was failing to fulfil its obligations under the Statute of Autonomy of Aragón, the Spanish Constitution and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. They also complained that it had abolished the Directorate General for Language Policy and programmes for the promotion and dissemination of Aragón and Catalan.

The Ombudsman, who has power in language matters under the existing language law, has accepted the complaint and recommends that the government should launch language protection policies with

adequate budgetary support (El Periodico, 2024).

### **Questions to the European Commission**

According to information from the European Parliament's written questions of February 2024, in December 2023 the Aragonese Government presented the 2024 budget, which, in addition to confirming the abolition of the Directorate-General for Language Policy, the only authority responsible for promoting the use of the Aragonese language, also eliminated the only remaining funding for the Aragon Language Academy through amendments by the far-right VOX party, after excluding it from the state budget. In addition to the cuts affecting languages deemed endangered by UNESCO, the PP-VOX government has announced its intention to amend the Heritage Law, part of Aragón's Statute of Autonomy, which provides protection for Aragonese and Catalan, removing this recognition, from June. In addition, the abolition of the Aragonese Language and Catalan Language Institute has been announced. In the light of this, the first question to the Commission was: Is the Commission aware of this change, which affects the two indigenous languages of Aragón? Is there an EU fund which could provide support for the Aragonese Language Academy in the event of its exclusion from the budget? Are there any measures to penalise governments that abolish departments for the protection of endangered

languages? (Question to the European Commission, 2024)

The reply states that the Commission is monitoring the changes in Aragón and underlines that multilingualism is a key European value and that regional and minority languages are a fundamental part of the EU's cultural heritage. However, the EU has no competence in relation to national or regional minorities or the recognition or use of languages, either in education or in other areas within Member States.

Although the Commission has no power to develop European policy in this area, it works with Member States and stakeholders to support projects to preserve regional and minority languages. The Erasmus+ and Creative Europe programmes support all languages, including regional and minority languages. The Aragon Language Academy may seek partnerships to apply for a project (European Commission, 2024).

### **The Constitutional Court's position on the new language law**

The Constitutional Court upholds the restoration of the name of the Aragonese languages, but rejects the appeal against Law 3/2013 (Fernández, 2016). The appellants' claims and the legal basis of the judgment are presented below.

According to the appellants, the constitutional recognition of the right to use the mother tongue is not merely a proclamation of linguistic rights linked to certain funda-

mental rights; it also implies an institutional guarantee that languages are recognisable and can be used to their full extent. In contrast, Law 3/2013, ignoring the terminology of several Aragonese laws that refer to Aragonese and Catalan, omits their mention and instead consistently refers to them as „the Aragonese language in the Pyrenees and pre-Pyrenees areas” and „the Aragonese language in the Eastern areas”.

The Constitutional Court stresses that Article 4.1 of Law 3/1999 of 10 March 1999 on the cultural heritage of Aragón was amended by Article 35 of Law 2/2016 of 28 January 2016 on fiscal and administrative measures of the Autonomous Community of Aragón. According to the Court, „this amendment is relevant” and the appeal is moot on this issue, since „the restoration of the designation of the Aragonese and Catalan languages to their respective linguistic forms has been carried out, so that the designation adopted at the time has been repealed.”

With regard to the challenge to the creation of a single academy, the Constitutional Court considers that its possible unconstitutionality has not been adequately demonstrated, since the action only expresses a fear or a presumption and does not go into the substance of the matter.

The principle of non-retrogression has appeared in the appeal. The appellants recall that the international texts contain the principle of maintaining the legal status of the language, which constitutes a safeguard and prevents the rules from being reverted,

ensuring the irreversibility of the minimum rights acquired.

It is argued that the preservation of Europe's linguistic heritage and its diversity is increasingly accepted as an international principle, and that it should be assumed that, except in cases clearly justified by linguistic changes, no language should have its legal status reduced and that legal amendments should always increase its protection, with the aim of recognising its official status or extending its territorial or material scope (Lopez, Susin, 2021).

The appellants also argue that the prohibition of retroactivity of provisions restricting individual rights (Article 9.3 of the Constitution) has crystallised into a principle of irreversibility of the fundamental status of rights, especially when their essential content is enshrined in an international law that has been fully accepted by the Spanish State. The principle not only applies to the protection of fundamental rights in the legal system, but has also allowed the principle of irreversibility to be consolidated in other areas, such as environmental legislation. This principle does not preclude the amendment of environmental laws, but requires a 'balance' to be struck between economic development and environmental protection, where minimum standards must always be maintained and monitored. According to the appellants, if this principle is applied in cases involving the designation of areas for special environmental protection, it should be applied even more so to the use of the vernacular. They recall that

the principle of the protection of legitimate expectations, which derives from the principle of legal certainty, according to the Constitutional Court's judgment 222/2003 (4th legal principle), must prevent the free elimination of the minimum guarantees that guarantee the exercise of the rights of certain social groups, preserving the balance between the hardening of the legal system and the violation of the legitimate expectations of the groups affected by retrogressive legislation (Lopez, Susin, 2021).

In this case, the appellants consider that there has been a retrograde step both in terms of the overall rights of Aragonese and Catalan speakers and in terms of legal certainty, since a rule has been abolished which guaranteed minimum individual rights and determined the minimum legal status of the native and minority languages in Aragón. However, the Constitutional Court considers that „although the principle of legal certainty requires that the succession of laws in any State governed by the rule of law must be subject to certain conditions, these do not include the prohibition of unfavourable reform” (Lopez, Susin, 2021).

### **Citizens' initiative for the protection of Aragonese languages**

A petition campaign was launched at the initiative of Rolde de Estudios Aragoneses, which collected around 2 500 signatures in 48 hours. The campaign stresses that more than 150,000 people use or know Aragonese and Catalan, which are protected under the

Constitution of Spain, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Statute of Autonomy of Aragon and local laws (Tricas, Izagirre, 2024).

According to the initiative, the PP-Vox-PAR coalition government of the Aragón region is planning to amend legislation that would abolish the recognition of these languages, preventing their teaching, dissemination and promotion of the related culture. The aim of the petition is to maintain the current linguistic protection and ensure the survival of these languages. However, Jorge Azcón and his government see the Aragonese language as the problem, not its rescue (Tricas, Izagirre, 2024). According to the Council of Europe, „the protection and strengthening of minority languages contributes to the building of Europe, which cannot be based on principles other than democracy and the right to diversity”, which are among the fundamental values of the Member States. Nothing is known of Azcón's views on this, but in the drift of his populist views he may have become Eurosceptic (Tricas, Izagirre, 2024).

### **Council of Europe's action**

On 17 January 2024, the Council organised a hearing in Madrid, where it met representatives of local organisations interested in the defence of Aragonese languages, including experts from the Rolde de Estudios Aragoneses, the Consello d'a Fabla Aragonesa and the Johan Ferrández d'Heredia Cathedral of the University of

Zaragoza. The government's position will be heard later, after which the committee of experts will prepare a report for the Committee of Ministers. The latter will make recommendations which the authorities responsible for the area, in this case the Government of Aragón, will be obliged to take into account.

The Council of Europe's intention is to ensure that minority languages are adequately protected and promoted, with particular reference to the situation of the Aragonese and Catalan languages. The implementation of their recommendations is not only a legal obligation, but also a cultural and social one. The Seminar presented a detailed report on the institutional situation of the Aragonese and Catalan languages. It was highlighted that the progress made in language policy between 2015 and 2023 was sharply interrupted by the change of government. These measures included the abolition of the Directorate-General for Language Policy, which was responsible for the promotion and teaching of the Aragonese and Catalan languages between 2015 and 2023. The financial impossibility of the Aragonese Language Academy, which is responsible for ensuring the correct use of the Aragonese languages. The amount allocated to the promotion and development of languages was €385,500 in 2023, while it fell to €0 in 2024, despite having the largest budget in history (Arainfo, 2024).

Council of Europe representatives expressed their concern about the data presented and indicated that they would take it into



account in their periodic report on the situation of minority languages in the European Union. They stressed that the protection of the Aragonese and Catalan languages is an international and legal obligation.

### **Consequences**

The budget cuts are having an impact in many areas, such as media content. Aragón Television's programmes „Charrín Charrán” and „A Escampar la Boira” have been discontinued. Subsidies to local municipalities and associations have ceased. The development of digital tools related to the language, such as translators and online dictionaries, has been discontinued. In the educational sector, there has been no progress in the development of materials related to Aragonese languages.

The Aragonese Sociolinguistic Seminar recalled that the language policy of the Aragonese Government is contrary to European, Spanish and Aragonese legislation, which guarantees the protection and right to use minority languages. They pointed out that the creation of the Aragonese Language Academy in 2021 was the result of an agreement between the Government, the Aragonese Parliament and the University of Zaragoza, and that it is therefore also illegal to prevent it from being established. The meeting highlighted the need to protect minority languages and urged that international recommendations be taken into account.

In relation to the protection and promotion of the minority languages of Aragón, the following changes have occurred during the evaluation, which give cause for concern: funding for organisations aimed at the protection and promotion of the Aragonese language has been drastically reduced, programmes at regional level have been stopped, cross-border initiatives such as the LINGUATEC project have been suspended. The reorganisation of the government structure and of the competences of the Directorate-General for Language Policy is hampering the use of Aragón in public life. The teaching of Aragonese to adults in official language schools has been discontinued. Aragonese speakers are not consulted by the regional authorities about their needs and requirements. Funding for the Aragón Language Academy has been significantly reduced (Arainfo, 2024).

### **Conclusions**

Immediate and decisive action is needed to protect the Aragonese language and culture, in cooperation with the speakers of the language. The inclusion of the name of the Aragón language in the Statute of Autonomy is also important. In the long term, a detailed plan for the protection, use and promotion of the Aragonese language needs to be drawn up in cooperation with its speakers. Ensure effective coordination of Aragón language policy. Provide targeted funding for Aragón language support organisations. Promote the use and presence of Aragón in television, radio, print

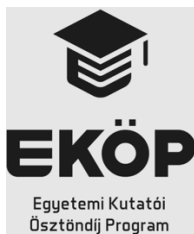
and online media. Restore the teaching of Aragón to adults in official language schools. Strengthen the role of the Aragonese Language Academy as an advisory body to the public authorities on matters relating to the Aragonese language. These measures are essential for the preservation and development of the Aragonese language and culture.

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