
The PP and Vox's policy against the Catalan language on the Balearic Islands and citizens' reaction

BERNAT SUREDA GARCIA

Institut d'Estudis Catalans

Study Group on the History of Education, Universitat de les Illes Balears

bernat.sureda@uib.es

The governing pact between the PP (a conservative nationalist political party) and Vox (a right-wing political party), the outcome of the 2023 regional and municipal elections in the Balearic Islands, prompted a shift in the basic principles of language policy, which had remained in place since the end of the dictatorship. The pact regards all measures aimed at guaranteeing equality between the two official languages as “linguistic impositions” and asserts its commitment to eliminating any requirement to know Catalan in order to become a civil servant. The rollout of these measures has sparked clashes with many social groups, evolving so rapidly that we should begin with the most recent developments.

The obsessive drive to place hurdles against Catalan as the usual language of education, a core tenet of Vox's programme which is accepted without reservation by the PP, is masked by the cliché of the right to choose one's language. In late July, the results of a survey of families regarding what language they choose came to light: 78.5% of families in the Balearic Islands chose Catalan as their children's language of education. Only 16% expressed their preference for Spanish as the first language of education, and the remainder did not express any preference.

The linguistic segregation plan proposed by the Balearic Ministry of Education, aimed at teaching Mathematics and Knowledge of the Environment in Spanish and Catalan to pupils of second and third year of primary education in the 2024-2025 academic year, was only adopted by eleven of the 300 schools in the Balearic Islands. That is, fewer than 4% chose this option, and none of the state schools did. This result has been described by both the opposition parties and by teacher and family representatives as a widespread failure. The rejection came with public expressions of opposition from the majority of teaching staff at state schools, parents' associations and other groups in the Balearic Islands.

On 5 May this year, a mass demonstration through the streets of Palma was called by the cultural entity Obra Cultural Balear to criticise the Balearic Government's measures against Catalan. That was just one of the many demonstrations by the educational community and civil society against the PP-Vox coalition's drive to marginalise Catalan at school and make it irrelevant in public life.

Whether questioning the primary role Catalan should play at schools or denying that knowing it should be a requirement for securing a civil service position, the actual goal is to eliminate any protection of the language to leave it vulnerable to the powerful language shift processes caused by demographic changes, pressure from the media and a raft of policies to protect the Spanish language enacted by the powers that be in Spain. Breaking a consensus that had been kept more or less intact since the end of the dictatorship, the goal is to render the principle that citizens of the Balearic Islands should know and be able to use the two official languages unenforceable.

The longest-standing precedent for the current situation is the more than 200 years during which the use of the Catalan language was banned in public life and education. With the advent of democracy, an agreement in the Statute of Autonomy that recognises Catalan as the Balearic Islands' own language establishes the right of all citizens to use Catalan in all circumstances and determines that public administrations are responsible for guaranteeing equality between the local language and the official language of Spain.

The Statute is developed through a Law on Linguistic Normalisation, stipulating that it is incumbent on the Public Administration: to ensure the progressive, normal use of the Catalan language in official and administrative spheres; to ensure knowledge and progressive use of Catalan as a language of instruction in education; to foster the use of the Catalan language in all social media; and to create social awareness of the importance of all citizens knowing and using Catalan. The goal of the school language policy is for the Balearic Government to adopt the provisions needed to guarantee that schoolchildren in the Balearic Islands are able to use Catalan and Spanish normally and correctly by the end of their compulsory education, regardless of their usual language when they begin schooling. It is an objective that in practice should guarantee all citizens the ability to use both languages without any impediment.

Regarding the presence of Catalan in schools, even though the possibility of choosing the language of early education is guaranteed, the linguistic regulations stipulate that each school may determine its own model in accordance with a series of norms guaranteeing that at least 50% must be in Catalan, with scope for raising this to 100% for a full immersion model.

The first attempts to break this model – which, it is important to recall, had been created essentially through proposals from conservative governments – came about during the PP mandate presided over by José Ramon Bauzá (2011-2015), who reduced the presence of Catalan with the excuse of improving knowledge of English. What the Tractament Integral de Llengües (Integral Language Treatment, TIL) decree did was eliminate the possibility of linguistic

immersion and lower the 50% Catalan minimum by adding subjects in English and dividing the school day among all three languages.

The TIL's proposals led to a mobilisation of groups within the educational community, specifically among teachers and parents' associations, as well as in other sectors of civil society who were against the measure. The teachers' response was an unprecedented strike which lasted three weeks. In September 2013, society expressed its rejection of the Bauzá Government's measures with a huge demonstration drawing more than 100,000 people. Finally, in response to an appeal filed by the STE workers' union, the Supreme Court of the Balearic Islands annulled the regulation. The PP lost its absolute majority in the 2015 regional elections and José Ramon Bauzá submitted his resignation from his party posts.

The most recent regulation on linguistic matters in education came with Law 1/2022, dated 8 March 2022, on education in the Balearic Islands, under the last progressive government (Pacte de Progrés). This law consolidates the model developed throughout the democratic period. The fundamental principles contained in the law are: linguistic proficiency in both languages must be guaranteed by the end of schooling; the Catalan language should be considered the Balearic Islands' own language, an instrument of social cohesion in educational and extra-curricular activities and a standard vehicle of expression in the media and Public Administration; non-discrimination against students has to be guaranteed, and they should not be segregated into different schools, groups or classes based on language. It also provides for the right of all students to receive their early education in their own language if it is one of the autonomous community's official languages, calling for linguistic support for students entering the educational system of the Balearic Islands later on through a specific focus on the Catalan language.

This is the model that some now wish to transform, a legal framework that aims to guarantee knowledge of both languages, genuine freedom to use them without barriers, the status of Catalan as the community's own language and as an instrument for social cohesion, and no segregation within schools or into groups owing to linguistic reasons. The Government and other institutions in the Balearic Islands under the control of the PP and Vox coalition may continue to try to marginalise Catalan, but broad swathes of civil society will certainly continue to defend Catalan identity within the culture of the Balearic Islands and the genuine right to use this language in all public spheres.