"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. [...] At later stages of political development, language policy was frequently associated with the goal of establishing a comprehensive and democratic public sphere.” This is the starting point of Peter A. Kraus, Professor on the Faculty of Social Sciences and Chair of Ethnic Relations at the University of Helsinki, on his reflections on the uniting of Europe’s language policy. The definition of a common language in a multinational state or in supra-state organization historically has often become a matter a conflict, and at present, this is occurring with the EU. The EU has often been considered a regional harbinger of the coming global-age postnationalism: “Accordingly, analysing 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.”

Language can be considered the ‘hard’ evidence for how cultural elements play a role in the construction of our civic identities, asserts Kraus, and the European discourse of citizens’ rights tends to accept the intrinsic value of linguistic bonds, recognizing and protecting smaller languages against assimilationist pressure. “[Y]et there may be a potential trade-off between recognising the value of linguistic pluralism and creating an institutional context that allows for smooth and functional communication”, and hence, “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.” Notes Kraus, “In contrast with the classical nation-states, the EU cannot be regarded as the political form of organization of an already existing ‘European nation’, nor is it in a position to undertake the project of constituting such a nation ‘from above’”. The resulting dilemma is the main topic of Kraus’s last book.

Peter A. Kraus’ explorative study, balancing political theory, political sociology and comparative politics, aims to highlight normative questions concerning the relationship between cultural diversity, language policy and democratic integration. Facing Europe’s political unification process and sketching its transformation in a
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‘constitutional community’, Kraus first examines the ways and to what extent political and cultural identities are intertwined in the European context. The interplay of culture and politics at the European-level leads—as the author explains—to particular ‘identity dilemmas’. Can the nation-state approach be transcended within the EU framework for a new path of constitutional politics? The prospect of integration must be realized in a way that accords the greatest possible respect to the political-cultural ‘distinctiveness’ of the member states and the substate constitutional entities of the EU. Indeed, the EU’s challenge is it to square the circle of becoming a kind of supra-national community of sovereign states, a multinational union of nation-states sui generis in the world.

In the core chapters of his study, Kraus assesses the relevance of language in the European unification and analyzes the strategies of European democracies in language issues. In the catalogue of European civil rights, not incidentally, the identity of the singles states with their languages has been entrenched, not the identity of their peoples or ethnic communities. Then Kraus examines the language regime within the EU’s institutional framework—this is the institutional multilingualism of the EU and the underlying institutional multilingualism (the reform of the institutional regulation of languages)—and suggests some new strategies for overcoming the current impasse in the EU’s linguistic rules. Correspondingly, the parameters that have governed the EU language policy in external communication are explained.

Probably the most important insights in the intricate relationship between integration and language policy are to be found in the chapters dealing with the problematic character of a European public sphere: How can the political communication in the transnational civil society and in a multilingual context be organized? How can a “European civil society” be moulded and how will it be connected with the institutional will formation? In which language will the transnational political sphere in Europe communicate? The external communication in the EU as a whole suffers from the fact that the information from the Europe of the institutions to the Europe of citizens has had little success in stimulating popular political participation. Moreover, a truly European political public sphere and opinion—a key structural element of politics in democracies—still exists in an embryonic form, restricted to rather narrow elite groups. Kraus concludes that the previous European experiences with official and civil multilingualism do not provide an adequate basis for constructing a general model of multilingual publics.

Chiefl y due to linguistic diversity, today in Europe there is still neither a European communication (media) system nor a European political discourse—Kraus realistically diagnoses —and democracy regarding typically EU issues remains tied to the political framework of the nation-state. On the other hand, a “European public sphere is a must when a democratic European state (or federal Union) is to be formed: it will not come to exist,” as Habermas is quoted, “unless a European-wide, integrated public sphere develops in the ambit of a common political culture: a civil society encompassing interest associations, non-governmental associations, civic movements, etc. and naturally a party system appropriate to a European arena. In short, this entails public communication that transcends the boundaries of public spheres that have until now been restricted to nation states.”