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TERRA DE MIRANDA UNVEILED: THE MIRANDESE MINORITY IN PORTUGAL'S MONOLINGUAL MYTH

1 Introduction

Portugal is commonly perceived, domestically and internationally, as a largely monolingual state. “*Portugal, in essence, is monolingual*”,³ whose cultural unity is expressed through a single dominant language. This perception, however, obscures the existence and vulnerabilities of small linguistic communities whose survival depends on calibrated public policies and sustained community engagement. The Mirandese community, concentrated in Miranda do Douro and neighbouring parishes, exemplifies this tension: historically continuous, philologically distinct, legally recognised, yet demographically declining. The Mirandese community, a linguistic minority whose struggles for recognition represent a salient example of the complex interplay between identity, policy, and cultural preservation.⁴

This paper examines how majority and minority identities are constructed within the Portuguese–Mirandese context and explores the policy implications of these constructions. Drawing on international monitoring reports, European legal instruments, and relevant scholarly literature, this study adopts an interpretive case-study approach to demonstrate how competing narratives of nationhood, language, and modernity have influenced both the formulation and practice of minority rights norms in Portugal.

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³ Torkington 2008, 123.

⁴ Martins – Ferreira 2019.

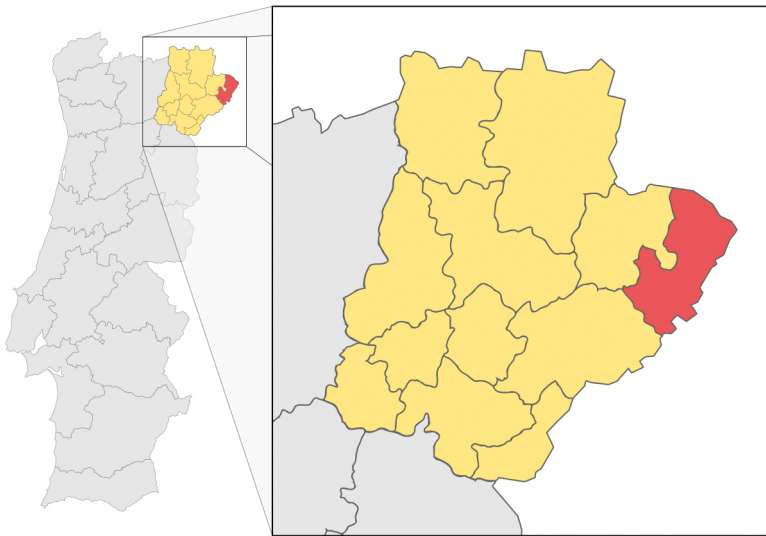


Figure 1: Location of Terra Miranda within Portugal

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miranda_do_Douro, accessed: 12.11.2025.

Analytically, this study makes a twofold contribution. First, it develops a narrative-based analytical framework that situates Portugal's self-image as a monolingual polity within its historical and institutional foundations. Second, it employs the implementation of linguistic minority rights as an empirical lens to assess the vitality and future prospects of Mirandese within this monolingual context. Empirically, the study identifies several interlocking structural pressures constraining Mirandese transmission and everyday use. Demographic decline and rural depopulation have eroded the social base for intergenerational transmission; social attitudes that devalue rural livelihoods undermine the prestige of local speech and encourage parental preference for Portuguese as a vehicle of education and mobility; the centralising logic of state language planning reinforces a single national code across administration, schooling, and media; and global linguistic hierarchies incentivise communication through dominant lingua francas. Collectively, these dynamics confine Mirandese to increasingly symbolic or heritage-based domains rather than sustaining it as a fully functional medium of daily interaction.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first provides a concise historiographical overview of the Mirandese community, while the second outlines the relevant normative framework. In this part, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are presented, clarifying the obligations these instruments entail for state practice in education, administration, and media. The third part turns to the Mirandese case, providing a critical assessment of domestic implementation (with particular reference to Law No. 7/1999), and an evaluation of recent initiatives and persistent shortcomings across education, local administration, and cultural production. Legal and sociolinguistic data are interwoven so that formal provisions are interpreted in light of lived practice and community expectations.

Conceptually, the analysis follows Francesco Capotorti's widely cited definition of a minority as

“a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members — being nationals of the state — possess ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion, or language.”⁵

In Portugal, Mirandese encapsulates the broader struggles of small linguistic minorities. According to a 2020 survey conducted by the University of Vigo, approximately 3,500 people speak Mirandese, of whom only 1,500 speak it regularly, with younger individuals being less likely to do so.⁶ After it endured centuries of marginalisation, the official state recognition of the Mirandese language in 1999 marked a milestone, yet also highlighted the community's demographic fragility and declining intergenerational transmission. Historical disruptions,

⁵ United Nations 2010, 2.

⁶ See: <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/mirandese.htm>, accessed: 11.12.2025.

migration, and social change have dramatically reduced the number of fluent speakers, leaving the language at a critical crossroads (see Table 1 for demographic data).

Table 1: Population of Miranda do Douro Municipality

Year	Population	Changes (%)
1864	9004	-
1878	9564	+6,2
1890	10009	+4,7
1900	10639	+6,3
1911	11208	+5,3
1920	10738	-4,2
1930	11272	+5
1940	12584	+11,6
1950	12944	+2,9
1960	18972	+46,6
1970	10627	-44
1981	9948	-6,4
1991	8697	-12,6
2001	8048	-7,5
2011	7482	-7
2021	6463	-13,6

Source: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miranda_do_Douro, accessed: 11.12.2025.

2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, mixed-methods research design that integrates doctrinal legal analysis, policy review, and qualitative fieldwork to examine the gap between formal legal recognition and substantive implementation of minority-language protection in Portugal.

First, the study conducts a doctrinal legal analysis of international, European, and domestic legal instruments relevant to the protection of linguistic minorities. Primary legal sources include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Framework Convention

for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and Portuguese domestic legislation, notably Law No. 7/1999. This analysis examines the scope, content, and justiciability of language-related rights, with a particular focus on state obligations in the areas of education, public administration, and cultural life.

Second, the study undertakes a policy and document review of Portuguese government materials and institutional practices related to the Mirandese language. Primary policy sources include Portuguese state reports submitted under the Council of Europe's monitoring procedures, government white papers, resolutions of the Council of Ministers relating to the establishment of the Mission Structure for the Promotion of the Mirandese Language, and municipal records from the Miranda do Douro region. These sources are complemented by sociolinguistic research, relevant academic literature, and comparative academic papers on minority-language protection in unitary states, for contextualisation.

Third, the study incorporates qualitative fieldwork conducted remotely, in the form of semi-structured interviews. Two interviews were carried out in October 2025 via online correspondence with key actors involved in the protection and promotion of Mirandese language rights, one Mirandese language scholar and one member of the *Associação de la Lhéngua i Cultura Mirandesa*. The interviews were transcribed and translated by the author. One participant provided written consent to be identified by name, while the other interviewee did not. As indicated above, the study employs data triangulation whereby insights derived from the qualitative interviews are cross-checked against legal texts, government reports, Council of Europe monitoring documents, European Parliament materials, and advocacy outputs.

3 Historical Context

The Mirandese language survives today as one of Portugal's most fragile cultural legacies. Spoken by approximately 3,500 people, it is classified as critically endangered. Its speakers live mainly in the north-eastern borderlands, in and around Miranda do Douro, where the language managed to persist across centuries of political, social, and linguistic change. Mirandese descends from the speech of Leonese settlers who arrived in the 12th and 13th centuries during the resettlement efforts of the Reconquista.⁷ Over time, the medieval Leonese evolved along its own path, sheltered by the rugged landscape of the region and largely untouched by Portuguese influence.

For much of its history, the community remained outside the cultural orbit of coastal Portugal. Its closest ties (religious, administrative, and economic) were instead with León. This connection endured well into the early modern period. Today, Mirandese is recognised as part of the broader Asturian-Leonese linguistic group and holds an official status in the Terra de Miranda, which includes Miranda do Douro, Vimioso, and a number of nearby villages in Mogadouro, Macedo de Cavaleiros, and Bragança.⁸

The language's survival owes much to the isolation of the region, a geographic and administrative marginality stretching back to centuries. Ecclesiastical attachment to Leonese dioceses and the persistence of Leonese settlement patterns reinforced this separateness. Yet the same isolation that once protected Mirandese now underscores its vulnerability, showing how cultural particularity can flourish away from the centres of power but struggle under modern pressures toward linguistic standardisation.

⁷ The Reconquista was a centuries-long effort by the Christian kingdoms to retake the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim control. Spanning roughly 770 years, from the early 700s until 1492, it concluded with the capture of Granada, the final Muslim stronghold. This long period of warfare and political shifts played a crucial role in shaping the histories of both Spain and Portugal.

⁸ Czopek 2008, 14.

Mirandese entered the scholarly record at the turn of the 19th century thanks to José Leite de Vasconcelos,⁹ one of Portugal's most influential philologists. A casual remark by a colleague in Coimbra alerted him to the existence of a "different" language spoken in Miranda do Douro. Curious, he travelled there in 1882 and undertook the first systematic study of the language. His research culminated in *Estudos de Philologia Mirandesa* (1900–1901), a landmark work covering phonology, grammar, dialectal variation, and literary examples.¹⁰

Vasconcelos's findings dismantled the long-standing prejudice that Mirandese was merely a corrupted or rustic form of Portuguese. Instead, he demonstrated that it was a Romance language of Latin origin within the Asturian-Leonese family. He also provided the first formal grammar, laying the groundwork for its written usage. As he famously remarked, "*Não é o português a única língua usada em Portugal (...) fala-se aqui também o mirandês*".¹¹

In his classifications of the Portuguese linguistic system, Vasconcelos deliberately excluded Mirandese from the usual categories of primary, secondary, and tertiary dialects. He preferred the term *co-dialecto*, highlighting both its structural proximity to Portuguese and its clear independence.¹² With this, he placed Mirandese alongside Galego, Riodonorês, and Guadramilês, languages shaped by similar historical forces but developing along their own trajectories.

⁹ José Leite de Vasconcelos was a Portuguese ethnographer, archaeologist, and author (1858–1941) who founded the National Museum of Archaeology and wrote extensively on Portuguese philology and prehistory. He was also a medical doctor and university professor who was passionate about Portuguese folklore from a young age.

¹⁰ Vasconcellos 1901.

¹¹ *Portuguese is not the only language spoken in Portugal (...) Mirandese is also spoken here.*"Vasconcelos 1882, 7-8.

¹² Vasconcelos 1882, 38-39.

Mirandês	Português
Outra eideia que anda cumigo zde esse tiempo ye la de que las personas spertában todas bien çpuostas aquel die - nun sei se a spera de la salbaçon, se de l bacalhau i las torrejias. Seia cumo seia, anque l'eigreja nun lo mandasse, todos guardában die santo a 24 de dezembro. I até, por bias desso, se me stá a lhembrar dũa beç mie mai haber ounhido las bacas i me haber dezido[...]	Outra ideia que anda comigo desde esse tempo é a de que as pessoas espertavam todas bem dispostas aquele dia - não sei se à espera da salvação, se do bacalhau e das rabanadas. Seja como seja, embora a igreja não o mandasse, todos guardavam o dia santo a 24 de dezembro. E até, por vias disso, estou a lembrar-me duma vez em que a minha mãe tinha jungido as vacas e me tinha dito[...]

Figure 2: Excerpt from “Christmas in Barroso” by Bento da Cruz, translated into Mirandese and Portuguese to showcase the differences in the two languages
Source: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%ADngua_mirandesa, accessed 12.11.2025.

Mirandese, however, began to lose ground from the 16th century onward. Portuguese gradually replaced it in the town of Miranda, a process that only accelerated in the 20th century. New technologies, particularly national radio, and the construction of hydroelectric dams disrupted local life. Economic hardship drove many families away, and Mirandese increasingly came to be seen as a *língua charra* (“rustic language”), a rural language, in contrast with Portuguese, the *língua fidalga* (“language of prestige”), associated with social prestige.¹³

This perception, combined with the pressures of schooling and the job market, convinced many parents that their children’s future depended solely on Portuguese. By the 1950s and 1960s, this “social and linguistic osmosis”¹⁴ had pushed Mirandese into private or symbolic domains, accelerating its decline as an everyday language.

A major turning point arrived in 1999, when the Portuguese Parliament unanimously approved Law 7/99. The legislation acknowledged Mirandese as part of the cultural heritage of the Terra de Miranda¹⁵ and affirmed the rights of its speakers. Scholars such as Manuela Barros Ferreira argued that formal recognition was essential if the language

¹³ Martins – Ferreira 2019, 490.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 490.

¹⁵ Article 2.º: “The Portuguese State recognises the right to cultivate and promote the Mirandese language, as a cultural heritage, a means of communication, and a factor in strengthening the identity of the Land of Miranda.”

was to avoid extinction.¹⁶ The law also guaranteed children the right to learn Mirandese,¹⁷ enabling its introduction into local schools. Though some viewed the measure as merely symbolic, it affirmed the linguistic distinctiveness of Mirandese when compared with Portuguese, Castilian, Asturian, and Leonese.

Barros Ferreira later described Mirandese as a “minority language” that, despite not being the state’s official tongue, merited active protection due to its cultural significance.¹⁸ The law led to the creation of a unified orthographic system and strengthened local initiatives such as the *Instituto de la Lhéngua Mirandesa*.¹⁹ Today, literary production, festivals, research projects, and bilingual signage reflect this renewed visibility.

This institutional framework expanded further with the Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 66/2025.²⁰ Through it, the government created the Mission Structure for the Promotion of the Mirandese Language (EMPLM), based in Miranda do Douro under the Ministry of Culture. The EMPLM was tasked with carrying out the Strategic Plan for the Promotion of the Mirandese Language and coordinating work among municipalities, cultural organisations, schools, universities, and state institutions. Its responsibilities include developing educational programmes, preparing teaching materials, certifying linguistic competence, supporting translation and publishing, and ensuring a digital presence for the language. A consultative council brings together representatives from governmental and academic bodies, while periodic reports monitor the vitality of Mirandese. With an annual budget of up to €500,000, the EMPLM represents the most ambitious state-led effort to revitalise the language, in line with Portugal’s commitments

¹⁶ Czopek 2008, 19.

¹⁷ Article 3 “The child’s right to learn the Mirandese language is recognised, under terms to be regulated.”

¹⁸ Czopek 2008, 19.

¹⁹ The ALCM (Association for the Mirandese Language and Culture) is an institution based in Miranda with over 200 members, whose purpose is the promotion and dissemination of the Mirandese language and the cultural, historical, and natural heritage of the Land of Miranda.” Available at: <https://lhengua.org>

²⁰ Available at <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/resolucao-conselho-ministros/66-2025-911349175>, accessed:01.12.2025.

under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.²¹

These measures aim to protect Mirandese from being overshadowed by Portuguese and Castilian and to preserve it as part of the Iberian Peninsula's shared heritage. Still, serious challenges persist. Sociolinguistic data remains limited, and revitalisation efforts are sometimes disjointed. The situation of Mirandese illustrates both the endurance of a small linguistic community and the precariousness of minority languages coexisting within a centralised nation-state.

4 Legal Framework

The protection and promotion of the Mirandese language are embedded in a multi-layered legal framework that encompasses international human rights instruments, European and Council of Europe treaties, European Union norms, and domestic Portuguese legislation. Understanding these overlapping frameworks is crucial for evaluating the legal rights of the Mirandese-speaking community and assessing the obligations of the Portuguese state to safeguard this language. This chapter details the adoption, context, and operational implications of these frameworks for the survival and revitalisation of Mirandese.

4.1 International Context

Among the most salient instruments is Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees that persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities shall

²¹ "It is the first legally binding multilateral instrument devoted to the protection of national minorities worldwide, and its implementation is monitored by the only international committee dedicated exclusively to minority rights: the Advisory Committee. It was adopted on 10 November 1994 by the Committee of Ministers and it entered into force on 1 February 1998. It is now in force in 38 states." Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/at-a-glance>

not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture and to use their language. While the ICCPR does not explicitly mandate affirmative action, jurisprudence has clarified that effective realisation of these rights often requires positive measures by States, particularly when structural or historical disadvantages exist.

Building on this foundation, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (1992) elaborated on protections for minority communities.²² It emphasises the right of minorities to participate in cultural life, form associations, and engage in decision-making processes affecting their communities. Importantly, the Declaration recognises the duty of States to foster conditions that allow minorities to thrive, ensuring equality without undermining sovereignty or territorial integrity. For the Mirandese community, these instruments provide the normative foundation supporting both legal recognition and practical measures for linguistic maintenance.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) supplements these rights with procedural and non-discrimination safeguards. Article 14 explicitly prohibits discrimination in the enjoyment of Convention rights,²³ and the European Court of Human Rights has accepted claims where language disadvantage intersects with other protected rights, including access to education, justice, and political participation. While the Court's jurisprudence does not constitute a bespoke corpus for very small regional languages, it provides an enforceable framework for protecting minority communities against indirect discrimination.

²² United Nations (1992), *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, Adopted 18 December 1992, General Assembly resolution 47/135. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-rights-persons-belonging-national-or-ethnic>, accessed:01.12.2025.

²³ "The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status". Council of Europe (1950), *European Convention on Human Rights*, Article 14. Available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG, accessed:01.12.2025.

4.2 Council of Europe

The Council of Europe's two cornerstone treaties are the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (FCNM, 1995) and the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (ECRML, 1992). These define complementary yet distinct spheres of protection. The FCNM enshrines general principles of equality, participation, and identity preservation, while the ECRML translates those principles into detailed, sector-specific obligations relating to education, administration, justice, media, and cultural life. Portugal acceded to the FCNM in 2001, with the Convention entering into force for the country on 1 September 2002. This accession positioned Portugal within a pan-European regime that recognises the right of individuals to maintain and develop their cultural and linguistic heritage, even though the Portuguese Constitution does not explicitly recognise “national minorities” as a legal category. The monitoring mechanism established under the FCNM, composed of periodic *State Reports* and *Advisory Committee Opinions*, has, since Portugal's first report, paid particular attention to the situation of the Mirandese language.

From the outset, the Advisory Committee has recognised the Mirandese as the only autochthonous linguistic minority of Portugal and has consistently urged the authorities to adopt concrete measures to preserve and develop it. In its *Fourth Opinion on Portugal*, the Committee encouraged the Portuguese government to:

“start a dialogue with the Mirandese community with a view to finding appropriate solutions for strengthening the existing protection and promoting of Mirandese language, cultural heritage, including by considering a possible extension of the protection offered under the framework Convention and also by signature and ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages”.²⁴

²⁴ See the quote from the Advisory Committee, as well as Portugal's government answer to it in: Government of Portugal 2018, 20.

The Committee also underlined that, while Law No. 7/1999 represented a landmark in granting official recognition to Mirandese, the implementation of that law has not been accompanied by sufficient institutional or budgetary resources to ensure long-term viability.

The *Fifth State Report of Portugal* (2024) and the corresponding Advisory Committee Comments reaffirm this concern and highlight both progress and inertia.²⁵ On the positive side, the report records that Portugal signed the ECRML on 7 September 2021, a long-awaited step that formally acknowledged the relevance of the Charter for the Portuguese legal system. The ratification process, currently coordinated by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, requires interministerial consultation, notably with the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Territorial Cohesion, since ratification would entail direct obligations in these domains.

Beyond these procedural elements, the 2024 report introduces a notable development: a set of local collaborative commitments drafted jointly by the Municipality of Miranda do Douro and Mirandese cultural and civic associations, which form the substantive basis for Portugal's prospective implementation of the ECRML. These commitments, ranging from proposals for curricular expansion and bilingual administration to the creation of audio-visual and digital materials, signal a new phase of local mobilisation. The Advisory Committee, in turn, welcomed these efforts as a form of bottom-up compliance, illustrating that local actors are already operationalising the Charter's spirit even before formal ratification.

The Advisory Committee's repeated recommendations thus function as both *diagnostic* and *prescriptive* instruments. They have consistently identified Mirandese preservation as a test case for Portugal's commitment to linguistic diversity, urging the government to move from declaratory recognition towards actionable policy. The Committee's Fifth Opinion is expected to reiterate these calls, stressing that the Charter's ratification would provide a coherent and legally binding

²⁵ Government of Portugal 2024.

framework for the protection of Mirandese across educational, administrative, and cultural domains.

In parallel, civil society has responded with a series of structured initiatives. The *Associação de la Lhéngua i Cultura Mirandesa* (ALCM), alongside other NGOs, has intensified advocacy since 2021, framing Mirandese not only as a linguistic but also as a socio-economic resource. The 2024 Working Group on the Promotion of the Mirandese Language (*Despacho n.º 1294/2024*), established by the Ministry of Culture and including representatives from academia and local government, issued a comprehensive report outlining a strategy for the protection and promotion of the Mirandese language, to be implemented between 2024 and 2028, proposing the creation of a Mission Structure for the Promotion of the Mirandese Language (EMPLM), the establishment of a dedicated budget, and a structured career path for Mirandese language teachers.²⁶ These proposals materialised in early 2025 with the adoption of Resolution No. 66/2025,²⁷ through which the Portuguese government formally created the EMPLM. The Mission Structure's mandate includes coordinating curricular development, certifying teachers, producing textbooks and digital resources, and overseeing media and cultural programming in Mirandese. This marks the first time the Portuguese State has established an administrative instrument with a cross-sectoral remit for Mirandese, partially addressing the "implementation gap" repeatedly identified by the Advisory Committee.

As referenced earlier, according to the University of Vigo's 2020 assessment, the number of active Mirandese speakers is estimated at around 1,500, concentrated primarily in Miranda do Douro and the surrounding parishes. Their data confirm that intergenerational transmission is severely weakened and that public visibility is minimal, particularly in media and digital platforms. Xosé-Henrique

²⁶ Available at: <https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/2s/2024/02/024000000/0002300024.pdf?lang=EN>, accessed: 11.12.2025.

²⁷ Available at: <https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/1s/2025/03/05400/0011600118.pdf?lang=EN>, accessed: 11.12.2025.

Costas, professor at the University of Vigo, characterised the situation as follows

“[t]he Mirandese language is in a very critical situation, given the abandonment of public and private institutions. The use of Mirandese has fallen by 50% in terms of the number of speakers. At this rate, the language will disappear in less than 20 years.”²⁸

Costas wrote a study based on 350 surveys conducted among the population of the municipality of Miranda do Douro, in the district of Bragança, by a team of students from the University of Vigo. According to the university professor, this is also the first time a Spanish university has published a research work written in Mirandese, accompanied by a Portuguese version intended for the general public and for researchers who may have difficulty understanding Portugal’s second official language.²⁹

The fragile demographic reality underscores why international legal frameworks, particularly the ECRML, are not merely symbolic instruments but operational levers that can compel the allocation of resources and institutional accountability. In this sense, the Mirandese case exemplifies how international soft law norms can interact dynamically with local civic activism. The FCNM provides the normative foundation, the right to identity and non-discrimination, while the ECRML would concretise those principles into enforceable duties. The synergy between these frameworks, the Advisory Committee’s recommendations, and local NGOs’ commitments thus creates a multi-layered governance structure where international law, national administration, and local initiative converge.

²⁸ “The Mirandese language is in a very critical situation, given the neglect by public and private institutions. The use of Mirandese has declined by 50% in terms of the number of speakers. At this rate, this language will disappear in less than 20 years”. Available at: https://www.cm-mdouro.pt/viver/multimedia/noticias/noticia/mirandes-em-situacao-muito-critica-devido-ao-abandono-das-entidades-publicas?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁹ Costas 2023.

The timeliness of these developments renders this study particularly relevant: as Portugal edges toward ratification of the ECRML, the Mirandese language stands at a crossroads between symbolic preservation and substantive revitalisation. Whether Portugal can translate this evolving legal architecture into tangible progress—teacher recruitment, curricular reform, bilingual administration, and media presence—will determine whether Mirandese remains a living language or becomes an emblem of unfulfilled cultural potential.

4.3 European Union Framework

The EU complements these instruments with broader principles of cultural diversity and non-discrimination, primarily through the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 21. of the CFR prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, language, or minority status, while Article 22. recognises Europe's cultural richness and mandates respect for diversity. However, the EU's competence is limited by the principle of subsidiarity, leaving Member States primarily responsible for implementing minority language protections.

Regulations such as Regulation (EEC) No. 1612/68³⁰ and case law, including *Groener v. Minister for Education*,³¹ illustrate the EU's recognition of linguistic diversity and heritage, but enforcement is uneven. Consequently, while EU norms reinforce the importance of non-discrimination and cultural respect, practical protection for small linguistic minorities like Mirandese relies on national legal and administrative action, supported by civil society engagement.

³⁰ European Economic Community (1968), *Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 of the Council of 15 October 1968 on freedom of movement for workers within the Community*. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A31968R1612>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

³¹ Court of Justice of the European Union (1989), *Anita Groener v Minister for Education and the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee*, Case C-379/87. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A61987CJ0379>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

4.4 Portuguese Domestic Framework

Portugal has adopted a civic conception of the term “nation”, thus precluding recognition of “national minorities” within its territory. The Portuguese constitutional system draws no distinction between nationality and citizenship: the “nation” consists of the community of citizens. Article 13 of the Constitution provides for equality and prohibits discrimination based on language, ethnicity, or cultural background. Additionally, the Nationality Act stipulates no ethnic, religious, or language criteria for the attribution of Portuguese nationality. The centuries-old application of the *jus soli* principle to the attribution of nationality has helped, and is still helping, to enrich culturally the Portuguese “nation”, which is thus defined as a set of citizens of multiple origins centred around a unified political community implementing the constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of descent, place of birth, ethnic origin, language or religion. The fact of not recognising the existence of politically significant “national minorities”, however, does not exclude the existence of *de facto* minorities, which are defined on the basis of a wide variety of criteria, including ethnic, religious or linguistic aspects.³²

The Constitution defines the Portuguese Republic as a unitary State, although this definition must be taken in conjunction with respect for the principles of local and regional self-government, especially for the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira, which have their own specific legislative and executive bodies exercising broad powers and responsibilities, based on their geographic remoteness rather than any ethnic difference from the mainland population. The Constitution of the Portuguese Republic does not contain any reference to “national minorities”; however, several laws do refer to *de facto* social minorities such as ethnic or religious minorities. The government also noted in 2004 that

³² Report Submitted by Portugal in Accordance with Article 25 paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. (15.12.2004) 2-3. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008b12e>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

“[d]espite its highly heterogeneous ethnic origins, which stem from the multiple migration flows into Portugal over the centuries, the Portuguese population shows enormous cultural homogeneity, particularly in terms of language. In this connection, apart from Portuguese and the languages used by the more recent immigrants, the country’s only dialect is “Mirandês”, which is spoken by several hundred persons in the Miranda do Douro region in the north-east of the country.”³³

The Mirandese was therefore considered to be a dialect and not a minority language. The Government also emphasized in 2004 that there are no Spanish “national minorities”, or any other national minorities in Portugal or Portuguese “national minorities” in Spain, which can certainly be characterised as a political declaration. As counter examples, we can mention Galicia, where many consider Galician a version of Portuguese,³⁴ Olivença,³⁵ or the Mirandese community.

The adoption of Law No. 7/99 of 29 January 1999 marked a pivotal moment in the recognition and institutional protection of the Mirandese language in Portugal. Emerging from a broader European movement that sought to safeguard regional and minority languages, the law reflects Portugal’s gradual acknowledgement of its internal linguistic diversity after decades of cultural and administrative centralisation. Its approval followed a period of increasing local and academic activism throughout the late 20th century, during which the Mirandese-speaking community and several scholars advocated for the preservation of the language as a vital component of the Terra de Miranda’s cultural identity.

³³ Report Submitted by Portugal in Accordance with Article 25 paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. (15.12.2004), 4. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/168008b12e>, accessed: 11.12.2025.

³⁴ On this topic, see: Serrano 2024.

³⁵ The current Spanish town has long been debated between the two Iberian states. The Vienna Congress of 1815 awarded Portugal with Olivença, but Spain failed to return the then Portuguese-speaking town.

The content of the law, already discussed in detail in the *Historical Context* section of this work, establishes the legal framework for the recognition, promotion, and teaching of Mirandese. It affirms the right of the local population to use the language in administrative and educational settings, mandates the State to support teacher training and linguistic research, and authorises public institutions in Miranda do Douro to issue documents accompanied by a Mirandese version. While concise, the law carries significant symbolic weight, as it formally elevates Mirandese from a locally spoken vernacular to an officially recognised element of Portugal's national heritage.

The legislative process that led to its approval was relatively uncontroversial, reflecting a broad political consensus that the recognition of Mirandese did not threaten national unity but rather enriched Portugal's cultural fabric. The law's timing also coincided with Portugal's growing engagement with European frameworks on linguistic rights, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

Although the law's practical implementation has faced challenges, particularly regarding the allocation of resources, teacher preparation, and consistent institutional support, its adoption remains a landmark in Portuguese cultural policy. It established not only a legal basis for the survival of Mirandese but also a symbolic recognition of the multilingual reality that underlies the Portuguese state.

5 Policy Implications

5.1 Educational Barriers

Recent research continues to reveal the fragility of the Mirandese language's position, particularly in terms of its transmission and daily use. A 2020 survey conducted by the University of Vigo estimated that around 3,500 people still possess some knowledge of Mirandese, yet only about 1,500 speak it regularly, a clear indication of declining active

usage and a warning of the challenges the language must confront to survive.³⁶

Although a remarkable 80% of students in Miranda do Douro choose to study Mirandese, the educational system supporting the language remains insufficient. The entire school network, from preschool to secondary education, relies on only two teachers who together are responsible for nearly 400 pupils. Under such conditions, Mirandese risks being reduced to a symbolic or folkloric emblem rather than upheld as a living vehicle of communication. As Alfredo Cameirão stresses, “[f]or Mirandese to gain another level of dignity, and not just remain an almost folkloric aspect”, investment in proper teacher training, stable career paths, and official teaching materials is indispensable. Since children can no longer acquire the language naturally at home, schools have become the primary, and perhaps last, line of defence for ensuring its continuity.³⁷

5.2 Policy Implementation Gaps

Law No. 7/99 represented a significant political gesture toward safeguarding Mirandese, yet its limitations have been noted for some time. Amadeu Ferreira famously described it as “a poisoned present,” acknowledging that although the law established the legal basis for teaching the language, its practical results have been modest at best.³⁸ Mirandese classes remain optional, restricted to a modest one to three hours per week, and offered exclusively in Miranda do Douro. Teachers are not granted formal recognition as professionals, nor does a specific teaching category exist, structural weaknesses that significantly hinder the language’s development. Consequently, despite the symbolic

³⁶ Available at: <https://www.cm-mdouro.pt/viver/multimedia/noticias/noticia/mirandes-em-situacao-muito-critica-devido-ao-abandono-das-entidades-publicas>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

³⁷ IPOL (2024), *Língua Mirandesa: O futuro do Mirandês está numa carta “esquecida numa gaveta”*. Available at: <http://ipol.org.br/lingua-mirandesa-o-futuro-do-mirandes-esta-numa-carta-esquecida-numa-gaveta/>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

³⁸ Martins – Ferreira 2019, 491.

weight of official recognition, the policy's impact on real-world revitalization remains minimal.

The broader legal landscape deepens this contradiction. Portugal is formally bound by international obligations to protect linguistic minorities, yet its own internal framework offers limited protection. The paradox is especially stark given that the country has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities while simultaneously declaring that no national minorities live within its borders. This dual position reflects a persistent reluctance to acknowledge linguistic diversity in a robust and enforceable way.

A meaningful change would require the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, signed in 2021 by Augusto Santos Silva but never activated. Alfredo Cameirão of the *Associação de Língua e Cultura Mirandesa* argues that the Charter would constitute “an absolutely decisive step for the future and survival of the language”.³⁹ If implemented, it would grant Mirandese the status of a regional language and require its recognition across multiple domains, from the classroom to the courtroom. As an example, ratification would oblige the state to provide Mirandese-speaking citizens with translation services in legal proceedings, a gesture that would signal a transition from symbolic acknowledgment to genuine, enforceable protection. Until such measures move forward, the fate of Mirandese remains precariously dependent on institutional goodwill rather than on legally guaranteed rights.

5.3 Sociolinguistic Attitudes and Future Prospects

In an era marked by globalisation and rapid cultural homogenization, Mirandese stands at a crossroads that forces larger questions into view. What is gained, and what is lost, when a small rural language disappears? What does its disappearance mean not only for Terra de

³⁹ IPOL (2024), *Língua Mirandesa: O futuro do Mirandês está numa carta “esquecida numa gaveta”*. Available at: <http://ipol.org.br/lingua-mirandesa-o-futuro-do-mirandesa-esta-numa-carta-esquecida-numa-gaveta/>, accessed: 01.12.2025.

Miranda but for our shared cultural heritage? These questions take on increasing urgency as pressures mount.

The endurance of Mirandese owes much to the perseverance of its community. Deeply rooted in rural life, the language draws strength from local solidarity, cultural attachment, and the conviction that speaking Mirandese is a vital expression of identity. The commitment of scholars, writers, and community activists adds further energy to its revitalisation. Yet these assets coexist with formidable obstacles. Terra de Miranda faces acute demographic decline due to emigration and an ageing population, sharply undermining the natural transmission of the language between generations. Social perceptions that label rural life as obsolete, coupled with national tendencies toward monolingualism, erode the language's prestige. Above all, the dominance of global languages reframes Mirandese as impractical, a cultural artefact rather than a tool for modern life.⁴⁰

The plight of Mirandese encourages reflection on why linguistic diversity matters. A language carries within it a distinct way of interpreting reality, a set of metaphors, memories, and cultural practices. Its disappearance narrows the range of human expression and diminishes the plurality of perspectives through which the world can be understood. Preserving Mirandese, therefore, extends beyond safeguarding a regional heritage, it affirms the principle that cultural uniqueness has a place in a globalised world. Revitalisation is not about resisting change but about ensuring that the past and the future coexist, enriching one another.

Today Mirandese remains at a critical point. A 1996 European Commission study ranked it 34th among 48 European languages in terms of vitality, and UNESCO now classifies it as “definitely endangered,” underscoring the urgency of its situation.⁴¹ Such assessments highlight the fragility of the language but also the ethical imperative to act.

⁴⁰ Hargitai 2014, 14.

⁴¹ European Parliament (2013), *Language Diversity and Multilingualism in the European Union: An Overview of Policies and Measures*. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/495851/IPOL-CULT_NT\(2013\)495851_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/495851/IPOL-CULT_NT(2013)495851_EN.pdf), accessed: 01.12.2025.

Allowing Mirandese to fade would mean accepting a cultural landscape increasingly shaped by uniformity. Ensuring its survival, on the other hand, reinforces a commitment to diversity, autonomy, and the rich mosaic of Europe's linguistic heritage. In defending Mirandese, we protect not only a language but a worldview, an irreplaceable way of experiencing, naming, and celebrating the world.

6 Conclusions

Mirandese exemplifies the paradox of legal recognition without effective capacity. Law No. 7/1999 conferred a dignified legal status, yet in the absence of sustained public investment, professional support, and robust implementation mechanisms, it risks remaining an emblematic but largely symbolic achievement. Ratification of the ECRML would strengthen Portugal's legal obligations and provide international leverage, however, the decisive factor will be the state's willingness to commit substantial budgetary resources, establish professional career paths for teachers, adapt administrative and judicial practices, and support civic organisations in community-centred revitalisation initiatives.

Preserving Mirandese goes beyond the field of heritage protection, it is fundamentally a matter of human rights, cultural plurality, and territorial cohesion. The municipal celebration of September 17 as the Official Day of the Mirandese Language embodies how legal recognition can be translated into tangible outcomes, i.e. the reinforcement of cultural identity. These festivities, which honour both the custodians of the language and those who actively contribute to its literary and cultural corpus, highlight the centrality of daily practice in sustaining linguistic vitality.

The policy roadmap integrates international legal standards, state obligations, and community-driven initiatives, offering a pragmatic blueprint for revitalisation. If fully implemented, it has the potential to yield measurable improvements in speaker numbers, educational provision, administrative access and cultural production over the next

5–15 years. Success depends on coordinated action: the commitment of governmental institutions, the professionalisation of educators, the empowerment of civic organisations, and the sustained engagement of speakers themselves.

Ultimately, the survival of Mirandese is a shared responsibility. Every speaker, educator, policymaker, and cultural advocate plays a role in ensuring that the language is not only preserved as a symbolic emblem but remains a living, evolving medium of communication. Protecting Mirandese affirms the enduring value of cultural diversity, the resilience of small communities, and the capacity of a minority language to make a meaningful contribution to national identity and human heritage.

Annex

Interviews on the Present State of Mirandese

Semi-structured interviews with relevant participants were conducted in October 2025 via online correspondence; transcribed and translated by the author.

Interview No. 1 – Mirandese Language Scholar Ana Afonso

Question (Q) 1. Education and Intergenerational Transmission

How do you assess the effectiveness of current educational policies in the Land of Miranda in ensuring the intergenerational transmission of the Mirandese language? What role do, or should, universities and teacher training centres play in professionalising the teaching of the language?

Answer: Current educational policies within the Miranda do Douro school cluster consist of offering one weekly hour of Mirandese language and culture as an optional subject for students from pre-school to the 12th grade. More than 80% of students enroll voluntarily. This percentage is a strong indicator of the recognition, by Mirandese students and their families, of the value of their linguistic heritage. However, beyond the disruption in intergenerational transmission of the Mirandese language within families, offering only one hour of language and culture weekly is far too limited to have a meaningful impact on Mirandese youth. This is further aggravated by the lack of teachers trained in Mirandese language and culture, and by the absence of any didactic materials designed or approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Law Recognizing the Linguistic Rights of the Mirandese People was unanimously approved by the Portuguese Parliament in 1999, yet twenty-six years later, nothing has changed in the inadequate educational policies regarding the teaching of Mirandese in Miranda do Douro.

Regional higher education institutions such as the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB) and the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD) have shown some interest in contributing to teacher training, but without concrete structural initiatives, aside from the recently signed cooperation protocol between IPB and ALCM. The University of Coimbra has launched a Teacher Training Course in Mirandese Language and Culture to prepare future instructors, while the University of Porto, under a protocol with the Municipal Council of Miranda do Douro, offers a two-level Mirandese Language and Culture course as part of its continuous education programme over four academic years.

Nevertheless, all these initiatives remain fragile and insufficient given the near absence of intergenerational language transmission within families. A strategic and coordinated action plan is urgently needed among all responsible institutions to establish genuine educational policies, create a professional teaching framework, support linguistic research and documentation, and produce pedagogical materials for students.

I believe that the Mission Structure recently created by the government to promote, teach, research, and disseminate the language will soon contribute to reversing the catastrophic situation currently faced by the Mirandese language.

Q 2: Linguistic Vitality and Sociolinguistic Change

What are currently the most concerning indicators of language erosion (use, competence, prestige)? And to what extent can bilingualism with Portuguese be understood as a threat or as a strategic resource?

Answer: Miranda do Douro lies in a sparsely populated region in the far northeast of Trás-os-Montes – the most remote part of the country, furthest from Lisbon and the centralised structures of government. Consequently, this municipality, which once fought for the definition of Portugal's borders, is easily forgotten. Being a rural area traditionally categorised as poor by central authorities, it has never attracted much interest or investment, despite the high productivity of its hydroelectric

dams – wealth extracted from the land without generating local prosperity.

The rural exodus that began decades ago, like an unstaunched haemorrhage, continues to carry away the sons and daughters of the region to destinations abroad, where they adopt other languages. The greatest problem facing Mirandese is the lack of people who speak it, who learn it, and above all, who value it.

Other critical indicators of linguistic erosion include its long-standing stigmatisation as a rustic, uneducated, and inferior language during the dictatorship, when it was considered unworthy of prayer or education. This stigma persisted, rendering it a language of little practical value within families and of no relevance for the future. Consequently, a major symptom of this erosion is the breakdown of intergenerational transmission.

As a rural and primarily oral language, Mirandese remained unwritten for centuries. Thus, among its already small number of speakers, an even smaller proportion can read and write it.

After being neglected for so long, Mirandese was rediscovered by philologist José Leite de Vasconcelos in 1900 and later strengthened by the approval of the “Mirandese Law” in 1999. Today, however, Mirandese has become largely folklorised – used mainly in ceremonial or cultural contexts, rather than as a language of everyday communication.

Vasconcelos predicted the death of Mirandese more than 120 years ago, and the recent study *“Persente i futuro de la lhéngua mirandesa”* from the University of Vigo forecasts no more than twenty years of life for this minoritised language.

For decades, Mirandese – a “charra” and “campechana” (friendly, down-to-earth) tongue – has existed in a state of diglossia with Portuguese, the dominant language, which penetrated the Land of Miranda through television in the 1960s. The language that once served as a vehicle of daily communication among locals has lost its speakers and is now being overtaken by European Portuguese – just as European Portuguese itself is being influenced by Brazilian Portuguese. I believe that a coordinated linguistic policy promoting active use of Mirandese could lead to well-managed bilingualism, strengthening

the self-esteem of Mirandese speakers – as illustrated by the educational video “*Os números em mirandês de 0 a 100*” by *La Bida Mirandesa*.

Q 3: Legal Instruments and Implementation Gaps

Despite its official recognition under Law No. 7/1999, which aspects of Portuguese language policy do you believe continue to fail in substantively protecting Mirandese – and why?

Answer: As mentioned earlier, twenty-six years have passed since the approval of the “Mirandese Law,” yet little or nothing has changed for the Mirandese people or for the teaching of their language. Portugal still lacks a coherent linguistic policy capable of ensuring effective protection for Mirandese.

Several state budgets have promised to allocate specific funds for the protection and promotion of this linguistic heritage, but these funds have never been released – instead, their nominal value increases annually without ever being applied to their intended purpose.

Because Mirandese continues to be perceived merely as a regional curiosity with limited relevance to national life, there is a chronic lack of both funding and institutional support. Perhaps this year, or next, we will finally witness the establishment of the Mission Structure for the Promotion of the Mirandese Language, as well as the long-awaited ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which remains signed but unratified, forgotten somewhere in a drawer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Unfortunately, even if these measures arrive, they may come too late – people have already emigrated, passed away, or lost hope, and those who remain speak the language only rarely.

As a Mirandese activist and representative of the language within the Wikimedia Foundation Portugal, I find it extremely challenging to motivate Mirandese speakers to engage with the language, create an editing community, and thus sustain Biquipédia, the free knowledge encyclopaedia in Mirandese. If we fail to promote a critical mass of contributors, Biquipédia may disappear – which would represent a profound loss.

Q 4. Long-term Revitalisation Perspectives

Considering the broader context of globalisation and migration, what types of public policies – educational, cultural, digital, or economic – would have the most realistic impact on the vitality of Mirandese over the next 20 years?

Answer: In my view, the revitalisation of Mirandese – meaning its emergence from the rural and private sphere of ageing local populations into all domains of social life – will only be achieved when both Mirandese speakers and the wider Portuguese society recognise the economic value of this endangered linguistic heritage.

When people understand that Mirandese represents a unique marker of cultural distinction that enhances Portugal's image as a multilingual nation and serves as a source of identity, pride, and potential prosperity for the Land of Miranda, then the language will endure.

The following measures are essential:

- Educational policies that train teachers, produce pedagogical resources for students, and create a more immersive system of Mirandese-language education;
- Cultural policies that encourage the public use of Mirandese in arts and culture;
- Digital policies that expand online content and communication in Mirandese, digitise linguistic materials, and develop corpora for linguistic research and documentation;
- Economic policies that recognise Mirandese language competence as an asset in regional employment, foster Mirandese-language entrepreneurship, and reinforce the economic value of linguistic heritage.

Ultimately, the establishment of an Institute for the Mirandese Language and Culture is indispensable. Such an institute could build a strong network connecting educational institutions, local and regional authorities, and cultural and commercial associations. Through cross-sectoral cooperation, we could finally work towards a shared goal:

affirming the Mirandese language as both a core element of identity and a driver of sustainable development.

Interview No. 2 – A member of the leadership of the Associação de la Lhéngua i Cultura Mirandesa

Q 1. Community Engagement and Youth

How is the association involving younger generations in the appreciation and everyday use of Mirandese? What are the concrete obstacles to youth mobilisation?

Answer: Through initiatives in schools that encourage the use of the language and by providing support to teachers, supplying didactic materials according to their specific requests.

Q 2. Relationship with the State and Local Authorities

How would you characterise the collaboration between the association, the Portuguese Government, and local municipalities in implementing the Mirandese Language Protection Act? Is there sufficient institutional support, or does the responsibility primarily fall to civil society?

Answer: Between 2019 and 2024, the ALCM received annual municipal support amounting to €25,000. Meanwhile, a Mission Structure is expected to be established with the objective of promoting and safeguarding the Mirandese Language. At present, however, we find ourselves in a situation where only civil society plays a continuous and active role in defending and promoting the language.

Q 3. Media and Digital Presence

Mirandese has been gaining some visibility online and across social media. What role do you attribute to digital and cultural media (music, literature, social networks) in linguistic revitalisation?

Answer: Digital media are fundamental for the dissemination and promotion of the Mirandese Language. Without them, there would be no podcasts in Mirandese, nor language promotion through audio and

video platforms (YouTube, Vimeo, TikTok, Reels...), musical dissemination (e.g. *Galandum Galundaina*, *Çarandas*, *Trasga*, *Pica & Trilha*, *Músicas da Raia*...), or cultural promotion via social networks and the websites of publishers that issue works in Mirandese (*Câmara Municipal*, *Âncora Editora*, *Zéfiro*, *Traga Mundos*, among others).

Q 4. Future and Sustainability

What concrete measures do you consider priorities to ensure the continuity of the language, for example, regarding funding, teacher training, local employment creation, or cross-border partnerships with Astur-Leonese-speaking communities?

Answer: In our view, integrating the Mirandese Language in schools is of paramount importance. Only by introducing linguistic immersion in pre-school education and continuing through the first and second cycles can we equip students to use the language in daily life, thereby halting the linguistic erosion that results from the abandonment of Mirandese as a language of everyday family and social interaction. Only when political and community leaders realise that the Mirandese Language constitutes a unique and essential economic asset will serious measures be taken to safeguard it. We can only hope that this awareness does not come too late.

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Author's Note on Language Assistance

The authors declare that parts of this paper's text underwent stylistic refinement and linguistic editing with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5 model). The tool was used exclusively to improve clarity, consistency, and academic expression, without altering the paper's analytical content, empirical evidence, or original conclusions. The authors assume full responsibility for the ideas, interpretations, and findings presented herein.