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SAFEGUARDING AND DEVELOPING MIRANDESE A ROADMAP



**ALCM
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SAFEGUARDING AND DEVELOPING MIRANDESE – A ROADMAP

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OUTLINE

This document, organised in four sections, (1.) assesses the current standing of Mirandese, framing it under a strategic vision for the Terra de Miranda, (2.) presents a long term roadmap for its protection and development, and (3.) pinpoints the more pressing and achievable projects to implement that roadmap over the next three to five years. Finally, it (4.) presents the Association for Mirandese Language and Culture (ALCM), whose activities it aims to guide.

1. CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC VISION

Mirandese is the name of a language spoken in North-Eastern Portugal, in the historical territory of the Terra de Miranda, encompassing the Miranda do Douro, Vimioso and Mogadouro municipalities. It has evolved from the Leonese language, and is closely related to modern-day Leonese and Asturian. It is spoken in the Terra de Miranda and by its diaspora, scattered throughout the country and across the world. The number of speakers is unknown, with wide ranging estimates of 3,000 to 15,000, depending on the criteria used.

Mirandese had not been written for centuries, and remained largely undocumented until a linguist, Leite Vasconcellos, identified it as a language in its own right in the late 19th century. After a brief cultural revival, several stark socio-demographic changes during the 20th century led to a gradual decrease in its transmission between generations. The introduction of universal schooling exclusively in Portuguese, mass media, and the development of the three large Douro river dams in the 1950s and 1960s, which were built and managed by a sudden influx of mostly Portuguese-speaking workers, were pivotal moments, with many parents choosing to stop speaking Mirandese with their children, instead opting for the higher-status Portuguese.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several factors would come to change its political status: teaching started in local schools, a spelling convention was approved, and the Portuguese State granted its speakers recognition of their specific linguistic profile (1999).



This, in turn, brought about a relatively more optimistic official standing for Mirandese, with the following pronounced changes:

a) in the socio-linguistic perspective of many speakers – from ashamed to proud, or at least accepting of their linguistic heritage; appearance of some first language enthusiasts;

b) in the language's usage in institutional contexts – today, Mirandese is used by many politicians locally, for instance in the Municipal Assembly, in official speeches, and recently even by the country's prime minister in a series of tweets, and in an official ministerial decree, both translated by the ALCM;

c) in teaching – it was previously only taught to pupils aged 10–12, whereas, since 2000, it has been taught locally to children from 3 to 18 years of age;

d) in media and national culture – albeit for a small market, the Mirandese language enjoys a lively publication scene, several nationally visible bands perform songs or their entire songbook in Mirandese, there are films about the language and the culture, and there is very visible translation activity, with canonical texts translated into Mirandese, notably including, all by ALCM members, the New Testament, The Lusiads, Astérix and Le Petit Prince.

Despite these welcome changes, the situation of Mirandese is precarious and the language is seriously threatened, with the latest research, carried out in 2020 by a University of Vigo team and the ALCM, indicating an initial estimate of only 3,000 fully able speakers of Mirandese locally.

Factors for faltering language usage include the perennial demographic outpouring to other, more wealthy regions and countries, the lack of local economic incentives for using Mirandese (e.g., in the workplace), and a complete lack of educational and linguistic planning resources. These, in turn, depend on currently non-existent language description and documentation, but people available and adequately trained for development initiatives are currently scarce. Lastly, the low visibility of the language and its asymmetric status vs. Portuguese and Spanish hamper efforts to motivate stakeholders to engage.

Our strategic vision sees the Mirandese language and culture as central features in the future of the Terra de Miranda. They are cross-sectoral development levers, able to foster the local culture and tourism sectors, and the best enhancers for primary and secondary sector development efforts, helping to create value-added products. Given the language's threatened status and given the multiplier effect of investments done in its development, we believe the safeguarding and development of Mirandese should take precedence over any other strategic investments in the Terra de Miranda, aiming to achieve, in the medium to long term, the goals presented in this Roadmap and Implementation plan.



2. ROADMAP

2.1. DOCUMENTING AND STUDYING THE LANGUAGE

Although known to science for almost 150 years, Mirandese still lacks adequate documentation, studies, and basic resources. There are no audio or video speech and culture collections available, no fully developed grammar, dictionaries, or school textbooks. The systematic collection of Mirandese culture and language should be the primary objective given its wide and multiplying effect for leveraging resource development, cultural heritage valorisation, and attraction of new researchers.

Data collection is the most pressing task not just because of its intrinsic value and its precedence over other actions, but also due to the age of some of the knowledge carriers, those living before the profound changes brought about in the 1950s-70s. We need data collections done in high quality multimedia formats, using state-of-the-art techniques, enabling linguistic and cultural studies, along with the creation of base resources for museum, educational and promotional materials.

2.2. INCREASING THE NUMBER OF ACTIVE SPEAKERS

Languages do not die; their speakers simply stop using them. Miranda has experienced a steady decrease in its population, and, although data is scarce, the general perception is that the percentage of people using Mirandese has also been decreasing, as have its usage contexts. We need to get people who know Mirandese to use it in the public space so that the new generations gain a good enough command of the language to carry it into the future and ensure its survival.

To achieve this, we support the creation of outreach activities in Miranda and other places with significant Mirandese communities, both in Portugal and abroad. They should aim at training adults, collecting data, and, at the same time, fostering public usage of Mirandese, based on events such as thematic chats on traditional knowledge, arts and crafts. Awards for original works done by schoolchildren and language and culture actors can also be a good direct incentive to foster cultural activity and participation in the public space. Mirandese versions for institutional communication materials should be mandatory for local public institutions, and encouraged in private sector contexts.



In tandem, we propose a gradual enlargement of Mirandese training in local schools, implementing a minor reform already agreed with the schools and the Ministry of Education, which will see teacher training, more hours of Mirandese teaching, and Mirandese as a curricular subject in some degrees. In parallel, we support Mirandese being an optional subject in other schools outside the Tierra de Miranda. In all cases, the will of the school communities should be paramount.

2.3. IMPROVING THE VISIBILITY OF MIRANDESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Apart from its intangible value, Mirandese language and culture are the defining idiosyncrasies of the Tierra de Miranda, and, at a time where niche differentiation is key, surely one of its most important endogenous local economic resources. Mirandese often goes unnoticed by visitors, though, including in the city of Miranda itself, and is virtually absent from the public space throughout the Tierra de Miranda. Making Mirandese visible should be part of a wider effort to create a cultural landscape as a pervasive layer for the everyday lives of residents and visitors alike, and to reach potential visitors and customers for Mirandese products elsewhere.

We can achieve this through a concerted programme to foster the usage of Mirandese and to universally translate text into Mirandese (institutional pages, local brand names, and restaurant menus), ensuring place names and cultural traits (landmarks and intangible heritage) are much more visible. In parallel, the wide and scattered Mirandese diaspora can be a means to create a network of ambassadors. It is an untapped source of potential investors, leisure consumers and benefactors/patrons, which could be encouraged to look back to their origins through outreach activities. Finally, the internet is a perfect vehicle for contacting those at a distance, and we should foster internet-based virtual activities with the Mirandese diaspora.

2.4. CREATING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE-SUSTAINED JOBS

A language is one of the main service employment vectors for any territory. While this is currently not the case for Mirandese, the previous lines of action provide the foundations for a language-centred cultural service cluster. Potential new jobs in the cultural and creative sector include translating and copy writing, training hospitality industry employees, touristic and museum agents/guides, hosting researchers wanting to study the language and culture, training teachers and pupils, and being part of or managing a network of semi-professional performers and guides. If fostered and protected, this industry can grow organically over time, in a steady and sustainable manner, relying on tourism and on a network of clients and supporters based primarily outside Miranda.



3. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

We have drawn up four vital projects aimed at achieving the goals in our Roadmap, globally worth €500,000 over the next three to five years. We have planned, budgeted, and scheduled each of them, and each has now started or is starting over the next few months through the ALCM. We are actively looking for partners for each of these broad-reaching goals, ideally for the long term. For every project, we present the rationale, expected results, and development period.

3.1. MIRANDESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

A modern vault about the Mirandese language and culture, collecting, documenting, editing, and making knowledge readily available. The basis for further studies, resource creation, tourism and museum applications, and academic-residence attraction. Possibly one permanent direct job created.

3.1.1. DATA COLLECTION: THE HERITAGE VAULT

An ambitious field work initiative to collect cultural and linguistic data from our living libraries, the speakers, in the form of high-quality multimedia recordings and databases. This is a mature project, which we have developed in detail, with carefully chosen partners, including the Terra de Miranda Museum, the Miranda School, and teams at three universities (King's College London, Coimbra, and the Alcalá de Henares' hosted FRONTESSPO data collection project).

3.1.2. THE FRANCISCO NIEBRO LIBRARY OF MIRANDESE

A service providing public access to all the works ever published in and about the Mirandese language and culture, in various media. Following a donation by the ALCM founder's heirs, the library is being created with several hundred books which encompass a good deal of the existing works published in Mirandese, and there is a financial basis to systematically acquire other published works. Furthermore, there are plans to create in tandem a media library containing newspapers, film, audio recordings and pictures.



3.2. CASA DE LA LHÉNGUA DIGITAL

A website centralising information and resources for the Mirandese language and culture. Potentially creates one direct permanent job to manage the content and the online shop.

3.2.1. LHENGUA.ORG

The website lhengua.org is being developed to harbour cultural and linguistic documentation and information, language courses, linguistic resources (Mirandese-Portuguese Dictionary, spell-checkers and a linguistic corpus), tourism information, a public calendar announcing relevant events. It will include an online shop selling books, recordings and other media, alongside merchandise promoting the Mirandese language (also under consideration is the possibility of opening up the shop to products from other stores and brand owners).

3.2.2. ZÁS PA MIRANDA!

A project to install discrete plaques in relevant touristic sites with QR codes, namely for cultural and natural heritage. The QR codes will link to the Casa de la Lhéngua Digital, providing interpretation about highlights of the hiking and cycling routes, such as off-the-beaten track landmarks, sightseeing locations, and stories pertaining to each route, along with tourist information, such as nearby restaurants and accommodation. Contrary to other projects, the ALCM will only develop this once it has obtained financing and the agreement of the Miranda City Council.



3.3. CASA DE LA LHÉNGUA – INTERPRETATION CENTRE FOR THE MIRANDESE LANGUAGE

This project aims to develop and install an interpretation centre for Mirandese in the Casa de las Cuatro Squinas, the historical building harbouring the ALCM headquarters, in the historical centre of Miranda. The project includes a refurbishment of the building's interior, with the creation of a small exhibition with five multimedia sensory experiences and intangible cultural heritage, based on local arts and crafts and the traditional culture, organised around seasonal activities. This project is to be developed in close partnership with the nearby Tierra de Miranda Museum, complementing its assets and perspective, as well as those of other nearby interpretative spaces such as the Terra Mater Centre in Picuote and the Tradicional Music Centre in Sendin.

While the centre and its exhibition are primarily aimed at the school population and tourists, the interpretation centre will be the hub for a large number of small, scattered initiatives for the populations of different villages, ideally carried out in partnership with other local associations. Those initiatives aim to reach the speakers of Mirandese, taking place away from the tourist sites, making the most of contents that we will create primarily with the exhibition in mind. In parallel, the project will update the physical infrastructure for a work area for visiting scholars and for the secretariat of the ALCM.

This project has been carefully devised over the past few years by the ALCM for the Miranda City Council, which owns the building. The project was approved for funding by a competitive 2020 programme, but its development has stalled and is now reliant on political decisions. It should create one permanent job after completion.



3.4. SAFEGUARDING THE PAST, DOCUMENTING THE PRESENT, PUBLISHING FOR THE FUTURE

Given the limitations of the Mirandese editorial market, we usually publish books only once we deem them to be financially sustainable, normally after securing partners who buy a set number of books. We aim to maintain several collections with distinctive visual identities and a good distribution partner to ensure steady clients providing sustainability for regular editions. On a par with originals and translations, we now aim to focus on children's and educational books, which Mirandese lacks the most, but which are harder and more expensive to develop. The ALCM has an ambitious publication programme based on both print and digital media, centred on four collections.

3.4.1. *Lhéngua*

Lhéngua, launched in mid-2020, hosts high quality works originally written in Mirandese or about Mirandese. It is a joint initiative with long-term partners *Âncora Editora*, a well-reputed national publisher, and features art by the local collective LB. It is about to republish the long-sold-out seminal works by Leite Vasconcelos, the long-awaited Mirandese-Portuguese Dictionary, and the most relevant Mirandese literary work of the early to mid 1900s, *Bersos Mirandeses*.

3.4.2. *Tierra*

Tierra, started in late 2020, gathers translations and bilingual editions of relevant literary works of regional, national and world literature, aiming to give Mirandese a strong lexical and cultural corpus to draw from. Following the publication of two cornerstone works by local authors, we will shortly publish a collective translation of Miguel Torga's *Bichos*, and António Aleixo's *Este Livro que vos Deixo*. Local visual artist Ana Afonso has created the art, visually unifying the collection.

3.4.3. *Medrar*

Medrar, is our most recent endeavour, which we currently cherish the most, aimed at a younger audience. It is to be launched in mid-2021 with an illustrated children's story, but our main aim after that, since no textbooks have yet been created for Mirandese, is to develop five school textbooks: two for primary school, and one each for upper primary, lower secondary and upper secondary.

3.4.4. *A new collection*

A new collection, to be launched, with works by new and unpublished authors, namely those to be distinguished in literary contests.



4. THE ALCM

The ALCM is a not-for-profit organisation whose aims are to safeguard and develop the Mirandese language and culture. The ALCM is headquartered in Miranda do Douro's historical Casa de las Quatro Squinas, and has been granted public benefit status by the Portuguese State. It has been in existence for nearly 20 years and currently has over 200 active members.

The main activities and achievements of the ALCM are:

A) DATA COLLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION

We systematically collect and organise data into a language and culture documentation vault. Most notably:

- a. we are about to finish collecting all the fine toponymy (place names) of Miranda;
- b. we took part in interviewing nearly 5 % of the total population of Miranda to assess their language knowledge and socio-linguistic perspectives;
- c. we have been setting up a library to include all works published in and about Mirandese language and culture, which we intend to open to the public before 2022.

B) TEACHING

We provide training for free or at very low fees, especially aimed at adults. We hold courses both in the classroom, such as our long-running courses at the Casa de Trás-os-Montes in Lisbon, and online. In the year running to June 2021, we organised three courses, attracting around 100 pupils from across the world. Our courses are certified and are attended by both non-speakers and native or heritage language speakers of Mirandese.



C) EVENT ORGANISATION

We have organised a multitude of events and actions over the years, including the Mirandese Language and Culture Colloquiums (Jornadas de Lhéngua i Cultura Mirandesa), online sessions for the Mirandese community (Terreiros de la Lhéngua), and a joint event with the Council of Europe, the Portuguese Government and the Miranda Municipality about the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

D) PUBLISHING

Over the past two decades, the ALCM has taken part in dozens of publications. We currently have three collections: (i) Lhéngua, for original publications in and about Mirandese, (ii) Tierra, for translated publications, and (iii) Medrar, for children's books. We also produce a weekly cultural news sheet and a fortnightly podcast.

E) ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

Our most fruitful collaborations include the Miranda City Council (local development and activities, services), the Portuguese Government (education and language policy) and the Council of Europe (European Regional and Minority Languages Charter).

F) RESEARCH AND OUTREACH

We have on-going initiatives with local institutions such as the Museu da Terra de Miranda (translations, joint projects), the Miranda School (joint projects, student awards), the University of Vigo (data collection), the University of Porto (podcast), the University of Coimbra (teacher training), the University of Alcalá (fieldwork, documentation), the University of Lisbon (scholarly edition, research), and the Polytechnic Institute of Braganza (field work).



