

## Regional and minority languages in the European Union

### SUMMARY

Nearly half of the approximately six thousand languages spoken in the world are vulnerable or in danger of disappearing. In the EU, 40 to 50 million people speak one of its 60 regional and minority languages (RMLs), some of which are at serious risk.

RMLs account for linguistic diversity and belong to humanity's intangible cultural heritage. International organisations, such as Unesco, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, are concerned with the risk that RMLs face and undertake actions to protect their linguistic rights. Non-respect for regional or minority communities' linguistic rights is qualified as racial discrimination, a breach of human rights.

While language policy is an exclusive competence of its Member States, the EU can support actions promoting and protecting RMLs. However, the current complex political and economic situation in the EU is not favourable for such efforts. Nevertheless, over the years, the EU has undertaken education-related initiatives at all levels of teaching, including with regard to research that facilitates the production of RML teaching materials, the presence of RMLs in cyberspace, and the work on modern-world RML terminology. It has also recognised the need for RMLs to be taught to non-native speakers and has supported their media dissemination. The European Parliament has supported the promotion of RMLs and called for the protection of endangered languages.



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## Language, its functions and linguistic diversity

Language is a communication tool enabling humans to convey meaning and emotions, influence other people and stay in touch. Moreover, it is an essential part of our identity and intangible cultural heritage. The Babel Tower of human languages comprises an estimated six thousand tongues that contribute to diversity of expression and richness of culture worldwide.

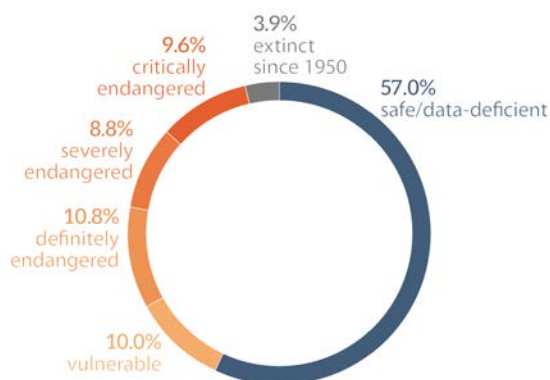
Language is a living experience of the people who use it. They learn it at home, at school or abroad and adapt it to specific situations. As a result of certain historical circumstances, some people speak one language or its dialect at home and another at school or in the public sector. There is no clear-cut border between dialects and state or regional languages, but whatever linguistic positions on the issue there may be, a legal definition gives a language its status in a given country.

A March 2003 [study](#) by the ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) reveals a huge disproportion in the number of speakers of world languages. It points to a drastic linguistic polarity: about 97% of the world's population speak about 4% of the world's languages ([mostly](#) English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili, and Hindi), while only about 3% speak the roughly 96% remaining languages.

This richness of human expression has been diminishing constantly due to economic, military, cultural, educational or religious pressure. Speakers of languages exposed to such impacts can lose interest or even develop a negative attitude towards these languages, a stance that is often reinforced by that of the dominant language population. Natural phenomena can decimate a population and lead to the extinction of its language.

The [Unesco Atlas](#) of the World's Languages in Danger estimates that almost 4% of the world's languages have disappeared since 1950, while about 57% are safe or data-deficient (Figure 1). A little less than 30% are in danger of disappearing mainly due to the diminishing number or ageing population of speakers. Recognising the importance of linguistic diversity as a source of cultural richness and an element of humanity's intangible heritage, Unesco has undertaken [projects](#) on language revitalisation, [language vitality](#) assessment and language diversity, to protect and monitor endangered languages.

**Figure 1 – Languages of the world**



Data source: [Language Diversity](#) – a European campaign, Federal Union of European Nationalities, 2012.

## Languages and their legal framework

### Linguistic rights

Article 2 of the [Universal Declaration](#) of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly (UN GA) on 10 December 1948, states that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms enshrined in it, regardless of their language. [Article 27](#) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the UN GA on 19

December 1966, states that recognised minorities 'shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, ... to use their own language'.

The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the Council of Europe in November 1950, in its [Article 14](#) prohibits any discrimination in the enjoyment of the Convention's rights and freedoms on the grounds of language. It also grants people who are under arrest the right to be informed about the reasons for their arrest in a language they understand ([Article 5.2](#)). The same applies in the case of a criminal offence concerning the nature of a criminal accusation (Article 6.3.a) and the right to be assisted by an interpreter in court (Article 6.3.e).

### **The changing historical context**

In post-World War II Europe, consideration for minority or regional languages or the recognition of linguistic rights was not a priority. Before and during the war, some linguistic minorities participated or were believed to have participated on the wrong side of the conflict. At the same time, other linguistic minorities, such as the Jews or the Roma, were targeted by extermination policies. Post-World War II Europe witnessed massive voluntary or forced movements of populations across its territory, which changed its linguistic landscape.<sup>1</sup>

A significant development occurred in 1981, when the Council of Europe adopted [Recommendation 928](#) on the Educational and Cultural Problems of Minority Languages and Dialects in Europe. The text, which highlighted linguistic identities as an element of the development of Europe and European ideas, put forward measures that were to be implemented. These included: use of the original geographical names of a given territory as per the indigenous language, use of dialects and mother tongues in pre-school and primary school education, support for minority languages and their use in higher education and local media as well as by the local authorities. Recommendation 928 is considered a preliminary step to the adoption of the [European Charter](#) for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML). This is also a new approach which goes beyond the non-discrimination perspective of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

### **The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages**

In 1992, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe followed the logic of Recommendation 928 and adopted the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML), which entered into force in 1998. The charter focuses on the need to protect Europe's rich linguistic legacy, including its traditional regional and minority languages (RML), some of which are in danger of extinction if they are not protected and promoted. However, it does not take into consideration the languages of newly arrived non-EU migrants who speak languages that are not traditionally spoken in Europe (non-indigenous languages).

The choice of the terms 'regional' and 'minority' languages was one of many options considered. While regional languages are defined in relation to the area where they are spoken, minority languages are defined in terms of the (smaller) proportion of people who speak them compared to the majority language. They are different from such a majority language and are not a dialect of it. They are also

#### **Regional and minority languages**

The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages opted to use both terms together (RMLs). RMLs are languages that are different from the official language(s) of a given state, and are traditionally used within a part or region of this state by a group of its nationals that is smaller than the rest of the population (minority).

called 'lesser-used languages', again in comparison to a country's dominant language. Still another notion introduced, that of 'non-territorial language', is defined as an idiom spoken by minority populations that cannot be identified with a particular area, such as the languages of east European Jews and Roma populations. The application of the charter to the latter is limited and even impossible, as they lack a permanent geographical location and are present in many countries, which makes their representation on a higher level a difficult task.

RMLs are considered in terms of the conservation of Europe's cultural wealth and traditions in the context of European unity, without threatening the status of official languages. Nowhere is the ethnicity issue mentioned, and Article 5 explicitly states that the charter provisions cannot be a basis for any actions against the principle of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its states parties.

The charter does not provide any list of RMLs or specific requirements on the number or the percentage of speakers as a criterion for an idiom to be a minority or a regional language. It is up to a state to decide which languages to include, considering psycho-sociological and political aspects.

The parties to the charter are bound to follow the principles and objectives relating to RMLs, set out in Article 7, such as:

- recognition of such languages as cultural wealth;
- respect for RMLs' geographical areas so that no administrative division barriers would hinder them;
- safeguarding RMLs through promotion activities;
- encouraging the use of written and spoken forms of RMLs in both private and public life;
- linking up groups of RML speakers using the same or similar idiom and encouraging cultural relations among RML speaker groups;
- teaching and studying RMLs at various levels, including teaching them to non-native speakers established in the given RML area;
- conducting university-level research and studies on RMLs; and
- transnational exchanges concerning similar or identical RMLs among different states.

The aim of the charter being the protection and promotions of RMLs, it requires states parties to choose at least 35 measures from a list proposed in Chapter III. They include actions referring to the judiciary, but also to administrative, cultural,

#### Council of Europe

In 2014, the Council of Europe (CoE) adopted [Resolution 1985](#) on the situation and rights of national minorities in Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE called on its member states to sign and ratify the ECRML, introduce education in minority languages and allow media to operate and provide services in minority languages. It was stressed, however, that the minority language promotion policy should not be detrimental to the country's official language. Thus, it also recommended that if elementary education was provided in a minority language, the official language should be taught according to the methodology of a foreign language.

#### The Oslo Recommendations

In 1998, in reaction to the situation in former Yugoslavia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe published [The Oslo Recommendations](#) on the linguistic rights of national minorities. The document stressed the need to achieve the appropriate balance between dominant and minority languages in order to avoid ethnic tensions. Referring to the use of minority languages in names, the media, or enterprises, it recommended the establishment of minority language NGOs, institutions and associations. It also defined minority linguistic rights in public administration, judicial or penal institutions. The recommendations include the establishment of an independent body to which to report cases of violation of linguistic rights.

economic and social matters as well as to education, media and cross-border trade, to make sure that RMLs are not only used in everyday private life but also in the public sphere. States parties have to choose at least three measures in cultural activities and education, and at least one action in the remaining domains of public life. Signatories are under the obligation to prepare a ratification instrument specifying the RMLs as well as the chosen measures to promote them. They are bound to send regular implementation reports to be examined by a committee of experts.

### **The charter in the European Union**

Not all EU Member States favoured the adoption of the ECRML. Greece was against, while France, Cyprus and the United Kingdom abstained. By May 2016, 17 of 28 Member States had signed and [ratified](#) it. Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Bulgaria have not signed it. France, Italy, and Malta have not ratified it yet, and thus, according to the charter, are committed to respecting their RMLs but not to promoting their use in public life, since they have not chosen any specific measures to do so.

The reasons behind a country's decision not to sign or to ratify differ according to its history and geopolitical situation. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were Soviet republics. In Estonia, for example, Russian, the former dominant language, is now a minority one but spoken by a numerically important population ([26%](#)). Before [France](#) ratifies the charter, it has to amend its constitution, Article 2 of which sets French as the republic's official language. That process started in 2015.

## **The European Union and languages**

### **Legal framework**

The EU has no specific competence concerning the national, regional or minority languages of its Member States. On the basis of [Article 165\(2\)](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), dealing with education, it can support actions asserting the European dimension in education through teaching and dissemination of the Member States' languages. Respect for national and regional diversity is enshrined in Article 167 TFEU.

Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stipulates that the EU shall respect its rich [linguistic diversity](#), while Article 4(2) bestows on the Union the obligation to respect the national identities of its Member States, including regional and local self-government, while ensuring their territorial integrity.

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the Charter of [Fundamental Rights](#) of the EU has been legally binding on the EU institutions and national governments. Its Article 22 refers to respect for linguistic diversity, while Article 21 prohibits discrimination on grounds of language.

### **The European Union, its institutions and languages**

The EU is composed of 28 Member States but has 24 official languages, since some Member States share the same state or official language. The 24 official languages are listed in Article 55(1) TFEU. Of these, the status of [Irish](#) in the EU institutions has been evolving since 2004, with a [derogation](#) limiting the types of documents to be translated into Irish<sup>2</sup> until at least 2022.

[Council](#) conclusions from 2005 allow for the translation of certain documents into languages other than official EU languages, if the former enjoy official status in a given Member State or part thereof, or are officially recognised. Translations must be provided and paid for by the given Member State, thus a special arrangement between the EU

institutions and for example Spain allows for the use of Basque, Catalan and Galician. The Council encouraged other institutions to conclude such agreements. Scottish Gaelic and Welsh – recognised regional languages in the United Kingdom – also enjoy such a status and can potentially be used in formal EU meetings and EU documents.

## Preservation and promotion of regional and minority languages

### Factors of endangerment

RMLs are in competition with the dominant languages and under pressure from the population's assimilation tendency. As long as a language is used by speakers of all ages and in all domains, there is no danger to it. Once the scope of its use shrinks and becomes limited to certain domains and age groups, the risk level of extinction rises. A diminishing population of speakers leads to the extinction of the linguistic community and the disappearance of the language.

[Unesco](#) has drawn up a list of endangering external or internal factors:

- military, economic, religious, cultural or educational domination of another language community;
- [assimilation](#) policy towards minority- or regional-language communities;
- minority community displays a negative attitude to its own language, often resulting from an external negative perception;
- lack of intergenerational transmission;
- difficult socioeconomic situation believed to result from linguistic situation; and
- diminishing number of speakers and the extinction of the linguistic community.

### Degree of endangerment

Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger uses a five-level scale of [endangerment](#) (a 'safe' language refers to a language spoken by all generations with uninterrupted intergenerational transmission) of languages:

- 'vulnerable': still used by children, but restricted to certain domains (for example, in the home);
- 'definitely endangered': no longer spoken as mother tongue;
- 'severely endangered': spoken by older generations; parents understand it but do not speak to their children in it;
- 'critically endangered': infrequently spoken by the elderly in a limited scope;
- 'extinct': no speakers left.

### Factors of language vitality

Specific policies and measures can counter the tendency of decline of a language and preserve it from extinction. The factors of revival result from the factors that put a language at risk: the domains of use, population of speakers, attitudes towards it, and socioeconomic interest in it. All three are interlinked to create a linguistic environment favourable to RML use that can provide for a bilingual community. They correspond to six factors of [language vitality](#), identified by Unesco, which cover: intergenerational transmission, number and proportion of speakers, language learning material, shifts in the use of a language and its response to new domains of life (digital survival).

The [Universal Declaration](#) on Cultural Diversity adopted in 2001 by the Unesco General Conference recognised the link between biodiversity and cultural and linguistic diversity, and set up a linguistic diversity action plan. It recommended the preservation of linguistic diversity and multilingualism, their promotion at all levels of education and in cyberspace, as well as language learning from an early age.

## Status of regional and minority languages in the European Union

It is estimated that between [40 and 50 million](#) Europeans speak a RML. The status of a language is defined by the Member State where it is spoken. Beside the state language status of the dominant language or languages, indigenous regional languages can have the status of a co-official language or be recognised as official languages (Figure 2). A 2013 [study](#) on endangered languages in the EU, commissioned by the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee (CULT), refers to four categories of non-dominant languages, which do not cover lesser-used state languages such as Irish and Luxemburgish:

- autochthonous languages: indigenous languages without state-language status (stateless languages like Breton in France);
- [autochthonous cross border](#) languages: indigenous languages spoken in more than one state without state-language status: North Sami spoken in Sweden and Finland;
- cross-border languages that are autochthonous minority language in one state and a state language on the other side of the border (German in Poland);
- non-territorial languages, such as Romani or Yiddish, which do not belong to one specific territory or state.

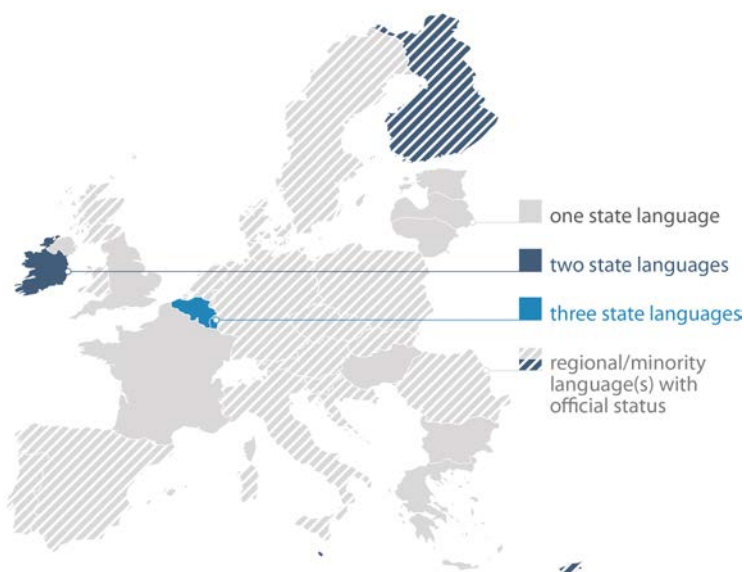
### Regional stateless languages in the EU

The Language Diversity Project funded by the European Commission within its Lifelong Learning Programme has created an [interactive map](#) of regional and minority languages in Europe. It shows their geographical distribution and provides information on the language and the number of people speaking it. It shows that Catalan (spoken in Spain, France, Italy and Andorra) and Occitan (spoken in France, Spain and Italy) are languages used by about 6 million people each, and are the [most common RMLs](#). More than 1.5 million people in Spain speak Galician (and only 15 thousand in Portugal), and 1.27 million speak Sardinian in Italy. Basque has 670 000 speakers in France and Spain, Friulian – 526 000 in Italy, Welsh – 543 000 in the UK, Breton – 450 000 in France.

Five European regional languages enjoy the status of a semi-official (or co-official) language, which means that they can be officially used under an [administrative arrangement](#) between the Council and the requesting Member State. These are: Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, recognised in the United Kingdom; and Galician, Catalan and Basque, which are co-official languages in Spain. The latter two, together with, among others, [Corsican](#), Occitan and Breton, are regional languages in France but do not enjoy official status there.

According to a [Mosaic](#) study for the Commission, which focused on the EU-15 (before the 2004 enlargement), over 75% of RMLs were stateless, that is, they were not an official language in a Member State. The situation changed with the accession

Figure 2 – Status of languages in the EU



Data source: [Eurydice](#), 2008, p.18

of the eastern and central European Member States, where many RMLs are the official language(s) of a neighbouring Member State. This situation is the result of the region's recent history, marked with border changes, resettlements and migrations, as well as the linguistic heritage of the domination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia.

The Mosaic study recognises over 60 indigenous RMLs in the EU. Native speakers of a regional language in one country can outnumber native speakers of a state language in another. It is estimated that between 7 million and 10 million people are native speakers of [Catalan](#) in Spain, France and Italy (Sardinia), while Malta's total population of 420 000 are all bilingual English-Maltese. Both [Catalan](#) and Maltese were [endangered](#) and survived, among other measures, thanks to a linguistic policy of bilingual education known as 'content and language integrated learning' ([CLIL](#)), where both the dominant and regional or minority language are used in classrooms to teach non-language subject matter.

Irish, the first state language in Ireland, has no official status in Northern Ireland (although receives official support in various forms), where it is a regional language. Having been classified by Unesco as [definitely endangered](#), it is covered by CLIL in the effort to revitalise it.

### Endangered and non-territorial languages

Europe is one of the most linguistically [homogenous](#) continents: its population, which accounts for [7.1%](#) of humanity, speaks only 3% of the world's languages. The abovementioned 2013 study on endangered languages in the EU makes reference to 60 RMLs spoken by 40 to 50 million people in the EU. However, the Unesco Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger warns that 128 languages are endangered in Europe. Basque and Welsh are considered vulnerable, Kashubian, Scots, Breton or [Sami languages](#) are classified as severely endangered, while Livonian and Cornish are critically endangered. Europe has already lost Mozarabic, Kemi Sami and Alderney French.

The fate of non-territorial languages, such as Yiddish and Romani, is uncertain in Europe. The situation of [Romani](#), which has no written tradition, is complex. Its native speaker population is estimated at about 4.6 million, for a total Roma population of 6.6 to 12 million people scattered and moving all over the 28 EU Member States. Roma go from 1 000 in Spain, with 1% speaking Romani, to 1.03 million in Romania, where 80% use the language. The linguistic survival of Romani has different odds according to the country and the historical background of the speakers. In the 1990s, the language was the subject of a Council of Europe [research project](#) on codification of Romani in Austria, so that it could be learnt by non-native speaker populations, while an EU-funded project, [Romaninet](#), consisted of the production of a Romani standard multimedia course.

#### Endangered languages

[New York](#) is home to around 800 languages from all over the world. Some of them die there with the death of the last speaker. This was the case of Gottscheers, a German minority language in Slovenia whose speakers left the country and moved to New York.

At the same time, its indigenous Indian language [Lenape](#) was the subject of a successful language revitalisation project aimed at teaching it to its native population as of 1997.

The city has witnessed another successful revival. Yiddish, the language of writing of Nobel Literature Prize winner, Isaac Bashevis Singer, is seriously endangered in Europe. However, the descendants of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to New York are keen on keeping their linguistic heritage and identity. The language is now used in local radio broadcasting and in a newspaper.



## EU institutional support for regional and minority languages

Linguistic policy and RMLs fall under the subsidiarity principle in the EU. Thus, local and central authorities bear the primary responsibility for them, while EU bodies can support their actions and help preserve Europe's intangible heritage in the form of linguistic diversity. Funding can be allocated to research, networks and platforms, or for educational or multilingualism projects and programmes.

Some actions aimed at preserving RMLs are primarily targeted at other areas. For example, although [Decision](#) No 1934/2000/EC on the European Year of Languages (2001) did not mention RMLs, it included the promotion of Irish and Letzeburgesch, which are lesser-used languages. Moreover, almost 66% of the activities in the context of that year covered RMLs, and almost 40% endangered languages.

### The European Council

In 2002, following the European Year of Languages, the Council adopted a [resolution](#) on the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning. It called on the Member States to provide for as diversified a language offer in language policy as possible, including regional languages, in order to promote cooperation and mobility in Europe.

### The European Commission

The Commission's support for languages and language policy started in the 1980s with specific funding for RMLs. Following a 1981 [EP resolution](#), the first European-level funding for RMLs was set up in 1983 as an Action Line for the Promotion and Safeguard of Minority and Regional Languages and Culture. Up to 1998, the over € 3 million allocated to RMLs helped create a series of networks and facilitated the sharing of expertise and good practices. This funding was discontinued in 2001, due to a European Court of Justice judgment [C-106/96](#), which ruled that there was no legal basis for it.

After that, RMLs were covered by programmes on linguistic diversity, lifelong learning and multilingualism. This helped create networks, support research on multilingualism and RMLs, and set up CLIL-based bilingual education.

The Commission's 2003 [action plan](#) Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity (COM(2003) 449) highlighted the need to promote language learning at an early age, to integrate it within lifelong learning and to support RML communities. It recommended that European universities promote national and regional languages facing competition from English. The Commission paid attention to new languages and language families that were to enrich EU linguistic diversity following the 2004 enlargement. It recommended using the structural funds for the promotion of RMLs.

Reacting to the EP's initiative to launch a European agency for language learning and linguistic diversity, in 2004 the Commission launched a feasibility study on the issue. However, it decided to create Mercator, a European network of language diversity centres and finance it through its [Lifelong Learning Programme](#) (2007-2013).

A New Framework Strategy for [Multilingualism](#) (COM(2005) 596) from 2005 highlighted RMLs as part of linguistic diversity. It advised that national language-learning plans should cover RMLs and recommended supporting research on them to promote cross-cultural understanding. Under the strategy, RMLs were treated on an equal footing with majority and dominant languages in the EU funding.

In 2008, the Commission adopted a [communication](#) on multilingualism (COM(2008) 566). There it stated that, among other things, multilingualism can include the capacity to speak

a regional or minority language as well as a national language and one or more foreign languages, which fosters intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.

The LLP funded the [Languages meet Sport for RMLs and Cultures](#) project (and network) to promote regional languages and foster linguistic diversity in the EU between 2009 and 2012. Yearly festivals hosted debates and experience-sharing workshops.

The [VoLANGteer](#) pilot project, once again funded by the lifelong learning programme, was designed to teach Galician and Frisian via a network of young volunteers. It was designed to help Erasmus programme students or other foreigners who had moved to Spain or the Netherlands for study or work to better integrate with the local population.

Crises faced by the EU since 2008 have put financial pressure on the above project; moreover, the priorities of the new Commission appointed in 2014 do not include any policies on RMLs. Consequently, no funding is directly available for their promotion, but some funding can cover certain actions (see below).

### **The Committee of the Regions**

The Committee of the Regions has shown concern about linguistic minorities in the EU. In its 2011 [opinion](#) on Protecting and developing historical linguistic minorities under the Lisbon Treaty, it called for 'a specific policy on linguistic minorities that is adequately funded and underpinned by a firmer legal basis'.

### **Other initiatives at EU level**

#### **The research**

In the 1990s, the Commission funded research on linguistic diversity in the EU which resulted in the publication of [Euromosaic](#) studies on various minority languages spoken in the EU. Between 2014 and 2019, the EU will fund a research project on multilingualism – [AThEME](#) – which will investigate the [role](#) of RMLs in bilingualism.

The European Language Diversity for All ([ELDIA](#)) international research programme was funded under the EU's Seventh Framework Programme for the 2010-2013 period. It covered Finno-Ugric minority languages in multilingual communities in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria and Russia. The cross-border investigation on shifts in the minority-majority language relationships as a result of post-Soviet geopolitical changes focused on their different statuses and practices in official and public use. The researchers studied endangered Sami languages and language vitality, and created the European Language Vitality Barometer. It showed that although [multilingualism](#) is often defined as an objective of linguistic policy in the EU, sometimes it is not encouraged, or is even hindered, particularly as concerns minority or endangered languages. The study also stressed the need for policy-makers to take into consideration minority language populations while devising language policy.

A recent research conducted within the same funding framework – Renewal, Innovation and Change: Heritage and European Society ([RICHES](#)) – focused among other things on European minorities and identity in the digital era. Having stated that cultural heritage also covers languages, it pointed out that providing [multilingual](#) content and access to cultural heritage websites would facilitate a sense of belonging and of sharing a common heritage. It would also promote linguistic minority inclusion and integration.

The European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning ([Mercator](#)), established in the Frisian region of the Netherlands, does research together with Fryske Akademy on multilingual education and on language learning and use at school, at home

and through cultural participation. It is part of a network of five research and documentation centres specialising in lesser used, regional or minority languages within the EU. Mercator has studied endangered languages defining at 300 000 speakers the threshold below which a language is endangered.

The EU education programme [Erasmus+](#) lists integrated language learning and linguistic diversity among its priorities. Its Key Action 2 provides opportunities for partnerships among education, training and youth institutions and organisations, also with regard to promoting RMLs. It funds the [Digital Language Diversity](#) project, which provides support to Basque, Breton, Karelian, and Sardinian to assert their digital presence.

### Networks and platforms

The Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity ([NPLD](#)) funded under the LLP, focuses on language policy and planning for constitutional, regional and small-state languages (CRSSL) in Europe. Its goal is to raise awareness of the importance of language diversity, and to facilitate the exchange of best practices. It targets EU-level politicians and decision-makers as well as governments, academics and researchers.

[RML2future](#), another network funded under the LLP, focuses on RMLs approached from the multilingualism perspective. Between 2008 and 2012 it concentrated on the RMLs transmission in Germany, Denmark, Austria, Belgium and Italy, considering them essential for linguistic diversity in the EU.

The [Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism](#) searching for new ideas and suggestions in the field of multilingualism resulted in the two-year [Poliglotti4.eu](#) project. The network focuses on language policy, research on multilingualism and the standardisation of minority languages. Conscious of the role played by a modern vocabulary in minority languages, it also works on inventing new terminology in Frisian to reflect the new domains of social and technological life. It led to the creation of the Language Observatory providing information for language professionals.

#### Defending lesser-used languages

The European Language Equality Network ([ELEN](#)) was established in 2011 together with some other bodies active in the field to replace the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, which stopped its activities once EU funding was cut. It is an important Europe-wide NGO for the protection and promotion of European lesser-used languages. At present, it covers 42 languages in 21 European Member States. At the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review session in 2015, it presented its [report](#) on human rights breaches referring to the linguistic rights of regional minorities in Spain.

### The European Parliament's position

The EP's interest in protecting RMLs was reflected in its 1981 resolution (see above), which resulted in funding actions in this domain. The EP adopted a [resolution](#) on regional and lesser-used European languages in 2001, urging the Commission to present a report on the results of the European Year of Languages with a special focus on RMLs. It stated that RMLs needed to be present also in new technologies such as translation software. It called on the Commission to earmark funding specifically for these languages, and on Member States to sign and ratify the ECRML. The EP also appealed to candidate countries to take steps to protect their linguistic diversity.

In 2003, the EP adopted a [resolution with recommendations](#) on the same topic, focusing on new Member States. It invited the Commission to set up a European agency on linguistic diversity and language learning to promote multilingual Europe and a language-

friendly environment, including the integration of RMLs in language learning programmes. The EP called for RMLs teachers' mobility and training in RMLs, as well as for cross-border cooperation among regional and minority communities and civil society organisations. It suggested RMLs enjoying an official status or used at universities should be covered by the [Socrates programme](#).

Ten years later, the EP adopted its [resolution](#) on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the EU, calling on the EU and the Member States to pay more attention to the extreme threat for many endangered European languages, and to commit to the protection and promotion of the Union's linguistic and cultural diversity.

In 2015, some 30 Members of the European Parliament submitted a [written declaration](#) on the protection and promotion of RMLs, to bring to attention the situation of certain severely endangered languages in the EU. They called upon the Commission to increase its financial support for raising local and regional authorities' awareness of the lesser-used, regional or minority languages that are vulnerable. It stressed their importance for maintaining communities' identity and promoting tolerant multicultural societies.

The EP also has an [Intergroup](#) for Traditional Minorities and National Communities and Languages whose work focuses on RMLs. At its 2013 conference on [radio broadcasting](#) in minority languages, a recommendation from the ECRML, the ELEN presented its [report](#), which highlighted the role of broadcasting as a part of language revitalisation policy, and noted RMLs broadcasting difficulties with funding, frequencies and rights.

In 2016, two political groups in the EP, together with the European Linguistic Equality Network (ELEN), organised a [hearing](#) on language discrimination in the EU. The multilingual panel covered regional languages, with interpretation in Catalan, Irish, Welsh, and without interpretation in Gaelic, Occitan, Breton, Basque, and Hungarian for its minorities in Slovakia and Romania. Considering language discrimination as a form of racism, the panel worked on recommendations to be addressed to the Commission.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [Language Policy Evaluation](#) and the European Charter for RMLs, François Grin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p.55.

<sup>2</sup> [Recent Developments](#) on the Status of (Minority) Languages within the EU Framework, Niamh Nic Shuibhne, in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (2004-2005), p.374.

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