



Multilingualism in the EU: Rising to the challenge

October 2018

EU citizens have the right to use any of the 24 official EU languages in correspondence with the EU institutions. EU legislation is published in all of those languages, and Members of the European Parliament have the right to speak in the official language of their choice. This ensures everyone is able to follow and access the Parliament's work. In addition, according to Unesco, the EU is home to over 200 endangered regional and minority languages, spoken by some 40 million people. While it is national governments that determine these languages' legal status and the extent to which they receive support, the EU encourages linguistic diversity through various programmes and initiatives, and assists national governments in meeting the ambitious goal of enabling EU citizens to communicate in two languages other than their mother tongue. One such example is Erasmus+, the EU's programme for education and training, which offers new opportunities for (young) people to improve their language skills by engaging in learning and training abroad.

Remaining 'united in diversity' thanks to multilingualism

'At a glance' note by Ivana Katsarova, September 2018

The diversity underpinning the European Union is embodied in the harmonious co-existence of 24 official languages. Following the success of the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe designated 26 September as the European Day of Languages. The European Parliament has consistently acted to support endangered languages and linguistic diversity in the EU, calling on the EU and the Member States to commit resources to their protection and promotion.

Languages and the Digital Single Market

Briefing by Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, September 2018

The citizens of the EU communicate in its 24 official languages, plus approximately 60 regional and minority languages, and 31 national and regional sign languages. Some of these have many millions of native and foreign speakers, whereas others are spoken by just a few thousand people each. Dominant languages can threaten the survival of 'smaller' ones with many fewer native speakers, which thus need protection. Multilingualism policy in areas such as language teaching and learning, and translation and interpretation, is necessary to facilitate communication among various language communities and for supporting languages with fewer speakers.

Language equality in the digital age – Towards a Human Language Project

Study by the Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA), March 2017

The EU is a unique endeavour involving more than 500 million citizens sharing about 80 different languages. While multilingualism is one of the biggest assets of Europe, it is also one of the most substantial challenges for the creation of a truly integrated EU. In the digital era, the invisible separating power of language barriers is a major challenge hindering European citizens and businesses from drawing upon the possibilities of a truly integrated Europe. Language barriers particularly affect the less educated and older population, as well as speakers of smaller languages, thus creating a noticeable language divide. It has a profound effect on cross-border public services, fostering a common European identity, workers' mobility and cross-border e-commerce and trade.

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Legal aspects of EU multilingualism

Briefing by Rafał Mańko, January 2017

The multilingualism of the European Union – with 24 official languages since Croatia's accession – has no precedent, either among multilingual states or even at the level of international organisations. The principle of multilingualism is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which obliges the European Union to respect linguistic diversity, prohibits discrimination on account of language and provides for the citizen's right to communicate with the institutions in any official language of the EU. In legal terms, EU multilingualism falls into three categories: the original (authentic) languages of the Treaties, the official languages of the EU and the working languages of the EU institutions.

Sign languages in the EU

'At a glance' note by Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, September 2018

European Languages Day on 26 September is devoted to the variety of languages spoken by EU citizens. However, not all people can speak, or hear others speaking. Some use sign languages, which policy-makers consider either in the context of the rights of people with disabilities, or as a linguistic minority right. The United Nations has launched the International Day of Sign Languages, celebrated for the first time on 23 September 2018.

Further reading

Multilingualism and lifelong language learning

'At a glance' note by Denise Chircop, September 2017

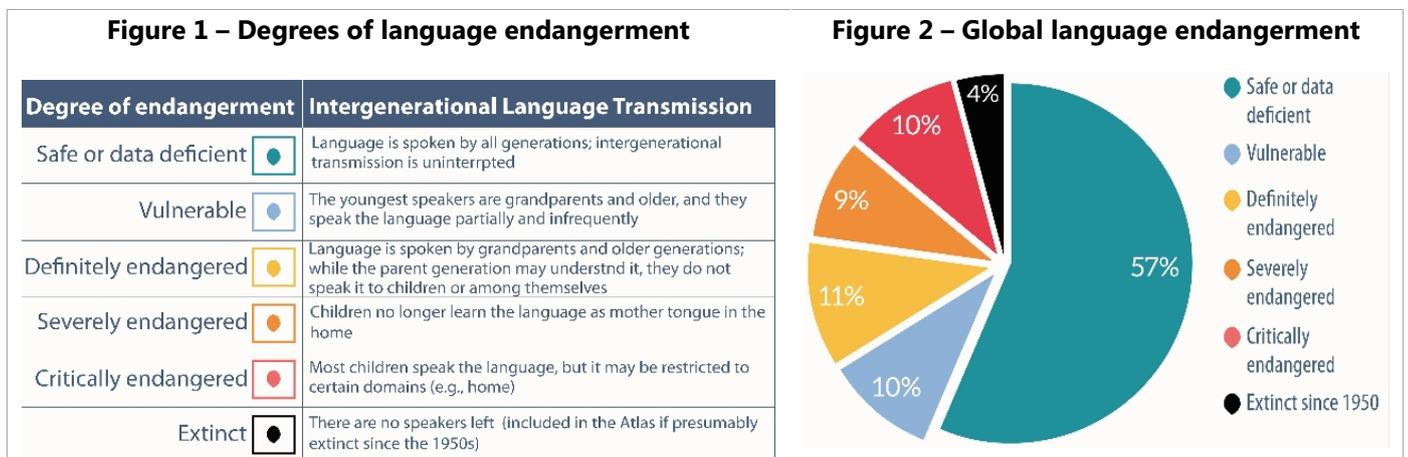
Regional and minority languages in the European Union

Briefing by Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, September 2016

International Roma Day: How the European Union supports the study of Roma culture, language and history

Briefing by Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, April 2018

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