



Endangered languages in the EU

In line with wider global trends, many languages currently spoken in Europe are endangered and some are at imminent risk of extinction. Though education and language policies remain the competence of Member States (MS), the EU has taken initiatives to promote multilingualism and preserve European linguistic diversity, including measures in support of regional or minority languages which have dwindling numbers of speakers. Nonetheless, the precarious state of many European languages is a cause for concern, with growing acknowledgement that a decline in linguistic diversity also entails broader losses in terms of knowledge and cultural heritage.

Endangered languages

Many causes can contribute to a language's decline and eventual disappearance, including urbanisation and migration trends, and pressure to use dominant languages for socio-economic or political reasons, e.g. to access employment or education or to exercise civic rights. UNESCO experts [define](#) nine factors to be considered when judging if a language is at risk of extinction, with transmission between generations seen as the single most important element for language survival. UNESCO's [Atlas](#) of world languages in danger suggests that within the EU more than 100 languages are vulnerable or endangered (such as, to take a few examples, Breton, Kashubian, Manx, Rusyn, Yiddish and the Sami languages).

The Council of Europe's (CoE) [Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) is aimed at protection of regional and minority languages (some but not all of which are endangered). Parties to the Charter sign up to certain common principles and also undertake to implement concrete actions which, being tailored to the specific situation in the country concerned, vary from state to state. An expert committee oversees implementation, publishing regular [country evaluation reports](#). But the Charter, in force since 1998, has not been ratified by all EU MS; as of July 2013, 17 had [ratified](#) it. In a 2010 [resolution](#), the CoE concluded that the Charter had produced

positive results but that extra action was required on the specific challenge of highly endangered languages.

Actions at Union level

The obligation to respect linguistic diversity in the EU is enshrined in [Article 3](#) of the TEU. An EP [study](#) of 2013 noted that EU support for endangered languages is generally subsumed in wider policy initiatives on [multilingualism](#), education and training and worker mobility. Relatively few programmes or initiatives specifically cover [regional or minority languages](#) and dedicated funding for language learning is largely focussed on the EU's more widely-spoken languages. Smaller language communities often struggle to meet the administrative and financial requirements (such as provision of matching finance) for competing for access to EU funding.

Recommendations for the future

Various bodies and stakeholders such as the [Foundation for Endangered Languages](#) or the [Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism](#) have issued recommendations for sustaining or revitalising endangered languages. These include calls for an EU language action plan with special provisions for endangered languages and a dedicated budget for their protection. Support for research and for language teaching is seen as essential. The possibilities offered by new technologies and digital media, including social media, have also been highlighted in this regard.

European Parliament

The EP has consistently supported the cause of endangered languages in [various resolutions](#) on multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Its [Intergroup on Minorities](#) has also been active in this area. An [initiative report](#) on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the EU, urging targeted actions from the EU and the MS and the earmarking of EU funding for this purpose during the financial programming period 2014-2020, shall be voted upon in plenary in September.