

Endangered languages in the EU

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, the EU has taken initiatives to promote multilingualism and preserve its linguistic diversity, including measures in support of regional or minority languages. A decline in linguistic diversity has been increasingly acknowledged to entail 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 [Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) is aimed at protection of regional and minority languages (some but not all of which are endangered). Parties sign up to certain common principles and also undertake to implement concrete actions which, 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 Member States; as of April 2015, 17 had [ratified](#) it. In a 2010 [resolution](#), the Council of Europe concluded that the Charter had produced positive results but that extra action was required for 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 focused on the EU's more widely-spoken languages. Smaller language communities often struggle to meet the administrative and financial requirements (i.e. provision of matching finance) 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 supported the cause of endangered languages in [various resolutions](#). Its [Intergroup on Minorities](#) has also been active in this area. A September 2013 [resolution](#) on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the EU urged targeted actions from the EU and Member States, and the earmarking of EU funding for this purpose during the 2014-20 financial programming period, in the light of cuts in funding. However, no specific budget line is dedicated to the matter in the current financial framework.

This note is an update of an [earlier one](#), published in September 2013.