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POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

NOTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

In the context of the rich diversity of languages that exist in Europe, this paper considers the possible implications of the disappearance of some of these languages and considers what steps need be planned to safeguard their existence and their future.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- EU** the European Union
- FUEN** Federal Union of European Nationalities
- MELT** Multilingual language transmission
- NPLD** Network for Promoting Linguistic Diversity
- RML** Regional and minority languages

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it. Use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains and cease to pass it from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children' (UNESCO,2003).

Languages are one of, if not the greatest development of the human race. As well as a means of communication, they also encompass a wide range of values and beliefs and are a window on many different ways of looking at the world. In this context, this paper considers those languages in Europe which are under threat or are considered to be endangered.

The European Council's Resolution of the 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism notes that:

'-linguistic and cultural diversity is part and parcel of the European identity; it is at once a shared heritage, a wealth, a challenge and an asset for Europe.'

It also states that 'the promotion of less widely used European languages represents an important contribution to multilingualism (Council Resolution of 21 Nov 2008 on a European Strategy for Multilingualism).

It is widely agreed that languages are an extremely rich part of Europe's cultural heritage. Languages express identity and provide a link for speakers of a language with their past, present and future. Embedded within languages there is a great deal of knowledge about the world and the human experience. When languages become extinct, this knowledge is lost.

Bi and multilingualism is regarded as an asset in terms of creativity and innovation. The cognitive skills of people who are able to speak more than one language fluently are recognised. Research shows that they are more adept at dealing with more divergent thinking, creativity and the sensitivities of communicative. (Baker, 2011)

Between six and seven thousand languages are spoken in the world today (Ethnologue). 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages and, conversely, about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by 3% of the world's people (Bernard 1996). Only 3% of the world's languages are indigenous to Europe. According to the *Atlas of the World's Languages* (UNESCO), there are 128 languages within the European Union that are considered to be endangered. All languages that are treated as a separate language, and not a dialect, have their own ISO- Code.

With the development of the concept of the nation state in the modern era and the emphasis on having a more uniform culture across a state, greater emphasis was placed on developing a common language and a common culture which would assist in the process of assimilation. Policies were also developed within the sphere of education, in particular, to support this objective. This policy development had a particularly detrimental effect on all languages which were not adopted as state languages.

Over the past half century, the process of globalisation has also seen a more generic culture being promoted on the world stage with the English language being a predominant driver in this context. Many lesser used languages have found it difficult to compete and survive on this stage.

A range of minority languages are able to show that they have additional economic value in terms of employment opportunities and also in real economic terms. However, many endangered languages are in deprived rural areas, often with poor transport links. Speakers of many of these endangered languages don't believe that their languages have status or economic value, and, as a result, do not pass their language on to the next generation. This lack of intergenerational transmission is one of the most obvious facets of languages which are endangered.

During the 1990s, UNESCO published the *Red Book of Endangered Languages* which collected a comprehensive list of the world's endangered languages. This was later replaced by the *Atlas of the World's languages in Danger*. In 2002/03, UNESCO asked an international group of ad hoc experts to develop a framework for classifying the vitality of a language. This framework lists 7 levels of vitality; five of these levels deal with languages which are endangered. These classifications were: safe; stable yet threatened; vulnerable; definitely endangered; severely endangered; critically endangered; extinct.

The same group also listed nine factors which characterised a language's overall linguistic situation. These included such factors as levels of intergenerational transmission, absolute number of speakers and trends in existing language domains.

Within the European Union there are many languages spoken. There are 23 officially recognised languages which are the working languages of the Union. There are more than 60 indigenous regional and minority languages with five of these being recognised as being semi official (Catalan, Galician, Basque, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh). All other languages have no official status in the EU.

The EU, although it has limited influence because educational and language policies are the responsibility of individual Member States, notes that it is committed to safeguarding linguistic diversity and promoting knowledge of languages.

The accepted terms used to classify languages which are indigenous to Europe, but which are not state languages within a particular state, are the terms regional or minority languages. This is the term used by the Council of Europe in its *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. These languages fall broadly into four categories, which are: **autochthonous** languages which are indigenous but not state languages; **autochthonous and cross border**, which are indigenous and exist in more than one state, but are not state languages; **cross border languages** which exist as a state language in one state and a minority language in another; and **non territorial languages** such as Roma.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) is a European treaty adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to protect and promote historical regional and minority languages in Europe. The Charter provides a large number of different actions which states can take to protect and promote regional and minority languages. There are two levels of protection—all signatories are required to apply the lower level of protection to qualifying languages. Signatories may also further declare that a qualifying language or languages will benefit from the higher level of protection, which lists a range of actions. From this list, states must agree to undertake at least 35 actions. The Charter doesn't deal specifically with languages under the heading endangered languages but many of the endangered languages of Europe fall into the category of receiving the lower levels of protection.

Eighteen countries in Europe have signed and ratified the Charter, three have signed but haven't ratified as yet; a number of states haven't signed the Charter. The Charter itself is an important international instrument to safeguard regional and minority languages. The Committee of Experts, which advises the Council of Europe, notes that many states still lack a structured approach to language preservation and promotion. The Council of Europe recommends that states should develop long term and structured strategies in order to safeguard minority languages.

Over the past thirty years, the European Union has promoted a range of strategies to support the learning of languages and linguistic diversity. In 1983 the European Union established an Action Line for the Promotion and Safeguard of Minority and Regional Languages and Culture. By 1998, this Action Line provided 3,350,305€ directly for projects related to minority languages. This support had a significant networking effect and it was a catalyst in promoting the sharing of expertise and good practise. This budget line was suppressed in 2001 after the judgement of the European Court of Justice (1998). Following this, the EU has decided to apply a mainstreaming strategy instead of setting up a separate programme. At the time, it was requested that the EU should review its spending on RML's as part of this new development. In 2008, a report to the Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament noted, in the context of the Lifelong Learning Programme, that: 'Investment in minority languages has been much lower.'

In 2011 the Committee of Regions noted in a Policy recommendation that there is a need for:

'a specific policy on linguistic minorities that is adequately funded and underpinned by a firmer legal basis;'

Linguistic diversity and language learning has been significantly promoted in the context of multilingualism in Europe over the past decade. Regional and minority languages have also been promoted in this context. Following a request from the European Parliament, the Commission launched a feasibility study on the possible creation of a European Agency for Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity. The European Commission's response was that it preferred to see networks being established and funding for three network which deal with RML's has been provided almost continuously since 2008. These include the NPLD, FUEN and Mercator research networks.

At present, the EU has placed its main emphasis, in the context of multilingualism and the generation of new ideas and policy suggestions, on the establishment of the Civil Society platform on Multilingualism.

Some Member States, mainly at regional governmental level, have developed well structured strategic plans for the promotion and safeguarding of their languages. This is especially developed in the regions of Spain and the UK. The Irish Government has also developed a 20 year strategy for the promotion of the use of the Irish language. Most of these strategies, however, have been developed in the context of the stronger RML's. In some member states there are a range of minority languages, some of which may be endangered. Member States should attempt to ensure that there is an element of a parity of support between different linguistic minority groups within their jurisdiction.

A number of innovative ideas have been developed to promote endangered and minority languages over the past decades. These include project within communities as diverse as the Sami communities and the communities on the Isle of Mann and in Wales. One

particularly successful project was the MELT project, co funded by the EU, which supported the development of expertise in the preschool sector in the learning of minority languages.

Endangered languages face many challenges. The digital age, especially, can be both a challenge but also an opportunity. META-NET (2012)notes, that those minority languages, which are quite highly developed, such as the Basque and Catalan languages, are in a high risk category, in terms of their future sustainability. But there also opportunities, as language communities can help each other by using their languages as the language of social media.

Economic growth and employment will, understandably, be the focus of the EU over the coming years. Linking the issue of endangered languages to this agenda is not always easy. However, when languages die, they, in general, disappear for ever. In order to put weight behind its rhetoric with regards to linguistic diversity, the EU needs to look in detail at the practical support it's able to provide for endangered language communities within the remit it has in this area.

Key findings

Policy Recommendations

Consideration should be given to ensuring **specific funding for endangered language communities** if they are to survive. Support should be provided with the process of developing a policy framework for the promotion of endangered languages within the overall context of linguistic diversity.

The Council of Europe should be asked to **consider the possibility of including specific clauses within the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages with regard to endangered languages**. The European Union could also encourage those Members of the Union who have as yet not signed the Charter to do so, and to encourage all members who have signed, to ratify the Charter.

As part of the European Union's emphasis on sharing good practice, all member states should be **encouraged to produce national strategic plans** for the promotion of endangered languages based on the high quality good practice which is already available within a number of language communities in Europe. The European Union should advise member states that similar support should be given within the state to each endangered or minority language community. In terms of setting European wide priorities for language revitalisation, the main focus should be on language transmission in the home and the learning of endangered languages within the educational system. **Robust educational policies are required** to promote the learning and use of endangered languages.

Better collaborative action is required between the key actors in the area of providing support for endangered languages. Existing networks at a European level need to be enhanced and sufficiently funded in order to be effective and efficient in this context.

Specific attention needs to be given to the support that technology can provide. Many of the endangered languages communities are small in numbers and can be increasingly dispersed. **Technology and social media can provide easily accessible means of communication** for these language groups both as a means of individual communication but also as an effective way of group communication. European Research and Development funding could be very impactive in this area

Endangered language communities need to be **empowered to promote their own languages**. There is a great deal of knowledge and expertise available in this area and this should be utilised. Particular emphasis should be placed on increasing the use of endangered languages by young people. In order to do this, these language communities must have the resources to show and **persuade their young people that their languages are useful, relevant and desirable**.