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Multilingualism: an asset for Europe

EU citizens must be helped and encouraged to learn languages other than their own if they are to derive full economic, social and cultural benefit from freedom of movement, says a report adopted by the European Parliament. An alternative resolution was adopted with 335 votes in favour, 279 against and 69 abstentions replacing the original report from the Culture Committee.

The report is a response to a Commission Communication on multilingualism. It stresses the need to promote more and better language teaching, as a knowledge of languages is an asset - and increasingly a necessity - in many walks of life.

Broad policy aims

The "political priority", says the report, should be the acquisition of language skills through the learning of other EU languages, one of which should be the language of a neighbouring country and another an international "lingua franca". However, it also says support should be provided for learning third country languages, including within the EU.

Parliament possible dangers in the communication gap between individuals with different cultural backgrounds and the social divide between multilingual and monolingual people, and draws attention to the fact that the lack of language skills continues to be a serious obstacle to the social and labour market integration of non-national workers in many Member States.

In addition, the EU could reap the potential dividends offered by European languages in its external relations, says the report, which calls for further development of this asset in cultural, economic and social dialogue with the rest of the world.

Practical measures

The report welcomes the Commission proposal to promote 'mother tongue plus two' in education and calls for more prominence to be given to European Day of Languages, a Council of Europe initiative held annually on 26 September to celebrate language and cultural diversity.

Parliament stresses the need, in Member States with more than one official language, to ensure full mutual intelligibility between those languages, especially in relation to senior citizens and to the legal system, health, administration and employment.

MEPs stress further, the importance of a full knowledge of the host state's official languages for the full integration of immigrants and their families and emphasises that national governments must effectively promote special language courses, particularly for women and older people. The House calls on Member States to act responsibly vis-à-vis immigrants, providing immigrants with the necessary means to learn the language and culture of the host country, while allowing and encouraging them to maintain their own language.

Press release

Good teacher training is needed to ensure quality and Member States are urged to examine the possibility of exchanges of teaching staff at different educational levels, partly with the aim of teaching different school subjects in different languages.

Among other practical measures, the House recommends to the Member States that TV programmes and particularly children's TV programmes, should be subtitled, rather than dubbed, believing this would facilitate the learning and practice of EU languages and improve understanding of the cultural background to audiovisual productions.

It also stresses the importance of creating programmes to support translation and of setting up multilingual terminology database networks.

In the adopted report, MEPs remove reference possibility for parents to choose the official language in which their children are to be educated and removed the reference warning against the mistake of promoting one language at the expense of the rights of speakers of another.

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