Language, Identity and Power:
What Future for Minority Languages in Europe?

Introduction

The European Union (EU) currently has 28 Member States and 24 official languages, as some States share common languages. Some EU Members have two or more official languages, a few of which are officially in use in geographical regions where linguistic minorities reside. Some regional languages have gained semi-official status, such as Basque, Catalan, Galician, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh. Moreover, the EU has over 60 indigenous Regional and Minority Languages (RMLs) spoken regularly by around 40 and 50 million people. Nearly all of these linguistic groups face difficulties in ensuring the survival and the development of their languages.1

Considering that language is an essential element of cultural identity, protection of linguistic minority rights is a human rights obligation. Linguistic minority communities seek to preserve their distinct local languages, some of which are marginalized, excluded and discriminated against. Many minority languages remain unrecognized, unprotected and even endangered. As an extreme example, some of the Saami languages of Northern Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Kola Peninsula only count a few hundred speakers and are in danger of disappearing.

It is difficult to define the most effective strategies for the protection of a language, as different arrangements emerged from specific historical contexts. The 2013 report by the United Nations (UN) Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms Rita Izsák, lists the need for education in minority languages, their use in public life, media, public administration and judicial fields as a foundation for their promotion.2

According to the UN Independent Expert, language can be a source of tension, since proponents of linguistic rights are sometimes associated with secessionist movements or are seen as threats to the integrity and unity of a State. This explains why some countries "aggressively promote a single national language as a means of reinforcing sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity." According to Ms Izsác, "it can also be argued that today globalisation, the growth of the Internet and web-based information are having a direct and detrimental impact on minority languages and linguistic diversity, as global communications and marketplaces require global understanding."3

European Mechanisms to Preserve and Promote RMLs

National governments are the main decision-makers on language policy, but the responsibility of protecting and promoting RMLs also falls on education providers, regional and local authorities, employers’ organisations, trade unions and the media. This briefing note will focus more specifically on regional efforts to preserve and promote RMLs.

1 European Commission, "Regional and minority languages", ec.europa.eu/index_en.htm
4 Ibid.
The European Union has been supporting RMLs since the 1980s through an unofficial minority language policy – as opposed to the policy applied to official community languages – led by the European Economic Community. The European Commission (EC) has been coordinating with national governments and various interest groups to establish shared objectives, and encouraging good practices.

The first attempt at implementing the EU strategy of preservation and development of RMLs came in 1982 with the establishment of a European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL), a “democratically-governed Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) promoting languages and linguistic diversity.” A few years later, in 1987, the Mercator Network and its research and documentation centres, dedicated education, legislation and media, sought to provide reliable and objective information about RMLs to linguistic minority populations in order to encourage and develop cross-border solidarity, cooperation and long-term strategies.

From 1983 to 2000, the EU dedicated a separate budget line to funding projects benefiting RMLs. The EC helped fund projects and partnerships geared towards raising awareness, such as the Euromosaic study. The study, published in 1996, resulted in an overview of the linguistic diversity within the EU. The EC also funded the Regional and Minority Languages Abroad Project (CRAMALP) to determine and evaluate strategies for linguistic protection and promotion of Celtic and other regional languages through higher education. The project identified three key recommendations for future action: the benefits of life-long language learning should be extended to all citizens, quality of language learning should be improved, and a more language-friendly environment should be encouraged. In 2008, the EC also supported the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD), which provides language policy and planning for constitutional, regional and small-state languages in Europe.

In addition to these very specific projects, the promotion of RMLs was also incorporated into projects carried out within broader frameworks. As an example, the Erasmus+ program, launched in 2014, offers opportunities to support new strategic partnerships in the field of teaching and learning regional minority languages.

The Council of Europe (CoE) has been championing the protection and promotion of RMLs over the past few decades. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted in 1992, aims at protecting the linguistic richness and diversity of Europe’s cultural heritage. It entered into force on 1 March 1998 and has currently been signed by 8 States and ratified by 25 States, out of the CoE’s 47 Members. This legal document covers RMLs, non-territorial languages and less widely used official languages. It outlines the core principles to be applied by States to all RMLs existing within their borders and enunciates a series of concrete measures to facilitate and encourage the use of specific RMLs in public life. The guiding aspiration of the Charter is to ensure that RMLs are used in education and in the media, as well as to permit and encourage their use in legal and administrative contexts, in economic and social life, for cultural activities and in trans-frontier exchanges.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also contributes to the protection and development of RMLs through the activities of its High Commissioner on National Minorities. OSCE elaborated the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the

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7 European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, “About us”, eblu.eurolang.net/.
8 Grin F., Moring T., Gazzola M. & Häggman.
9 Celtic, Regional and Minority Languages Abroad Projects, “CRAMALP”, www.cramlap.org/.
10 European Commission, “Regional and minority languages”.
Linguistic Rights of National Minorities in order to elucidate the actual content of minority language rights in situations in which the High Commissioner is involved. The Oslo recommendations give guidance to OSCE Member States on how best to ensure the linguistic rights of national minorities, covering contentious areas, such as, among others, community life, media, economic activity, administration and public services.

The subject of RMLs has occasionally brought together different regional and international actors. One of these initiatives is the 2001 European Year of Languages, declared by the CoE, the EU and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), recognizing that language learning is important for personal and linguistic development needed to respond to economic, social and cultural changes in society. It was expected to draw attention to Europe’s cultural richness.

Lessons Learned: Why Preserve Europe’s Linguistic Diversity?

Even though regional and international actors are involved in the process of protecting and promoting RMLs at the European level, this concerted action has not been decisive and many RMLs continue to face obstacles, from State interests to budgetary restrictions. Today, the EU’s support for RMLs remains limited. In 2000, the budget line that provided regular funding for RML-related projects was discontinued. In 2003 and 2004, the conditions imposed on EBLUL, project-based funding were further tightened. Overall, the amount of money devoted to projects supporting RMLs remains minimal.

RML-specific programmes and actions – as opposed to projects with broader scope – have been found to yield better results. Since specific projects are not yet widespread, the Observatoire “Economic Languge Formation” nevertheless recommends that all stakeholders guarantee adequate safeguards for RMLs, particularly smaller ones, in their strategies. Furthermore, on a technical level, studies have shown that support to RMLs can be considered financially manageable and politically relevant.

Unfortunately, some projects or institutions tasked with protecting and promoting European linguistic diversity led by the EU have been inefficient. For example, the EC has put in place a High Level Advisory Group of Experts on the Social Integration of Ethnic Minorities and their Full Participation on the Labour Market. However, few minority language projects have actually been executed by this expert group, which has proved insufficient to counteract the systemic support given to official languages, deemed more valuable in the field of international business.

Even though the 1992 European Charter for RMLs can be seen as a step in the right direction in terms of protecting RMLs, less-widely used languages connected with recent migratory movements or dialects of the official language are left unaddressed by this mechanism. Additionally, the CoE remains firm in its affirmations of State sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Charter has a cultural objective, rather than a political one, in the sense that it doesn’t conceive the relationship between official and regional languages in terms of competition.

12 OSCE, “OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities”, www.osce.org/
14 Europa, “European Year of Languages 2001”, europa.eu/
15 Grin F., Moring T., Gazzola M. & Häggman.
16 ibid.
17 Grin F., Moring T., Gazzola M. & Häggman.
19 Council of Europe, “European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages”.
The preservation of minority languages is a right to which every European citizen is entitled. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union affirms that "the Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to fore."\(^{20}\) Parallel to this, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU outlines the following: "the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity."\(^{21}\)

Preserving and promoting the use of minority languages is also an asset for the development of Europe. According to the Chamber of Regions of the Council of Europe, regional and minority languages of Europe constitute a valuable and underused resource. Furthermore, linguistic minorities can play a crucial role in Europe’s economic activities, particularly in the diverse array of cultural industries. "By encouraging their use in education and the public sector and making greater use of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages, local and regional authorities can give their regions a strong competitive edge."\(^{22}\) Moreover, RMLs are key to developing trans-border cooperation, which constitutes an important component of European integration. These languages also play an important role in cultural tourism and cultural heritage preservation. Awarding minority groups official recognition or status can also be considered a sign of mature democracy.\(^{23}\)

About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.


\(^{22}\) Chamber of Regions of the Council of Europe, “Minority languages – an asset for regional development”, 18\(^{th}\) session, CPR(18)3, 2010, [wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1584587&Site=Congress](http://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1584587&Site=Congress).

\(^{23}\) Chamber of Regions of the Council of Europe, “Minority languages – an asset for regional development”.