

COM-7/030

Brussels, 27 June 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of

13 June 2001

on the

Promotion and Protection of Regional and Minority Languages

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its Bureau on 13 December 2000, under the Fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an Opinion on this matter and to instruct Commission 7 - Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport and Citizens' Rights to undertake the preparatory work;

HAVING REGARD TO the European Parliament's resolutions on linguistic and cultural minorities Arfe, (1991,1993); Kuijpers, (1987); Reding (1990); Kililea, (1994);

HAVING REGARD TO the Council's resolution of 20 January 1997 on the integration of cultural aspects in community actions¹ (97/C 36/04) and the Committee of the Regions' opinion of the 16 January 1997 on the "First report on the consideration of cultural aspects in European Community action";

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion of 17 February 2000 on the European Parliament and Council's proposal regarding the "European Year of Languages 2001" (CdR 465/99 fin)²;

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion of 14 December 2000 in which a multiannual community programme is adopted to stimulate the development and use of European digital contents in world networks and to foster linguistic diversity in the information society (CdR 316/2000 fin)³;

HAVING REGARD TO the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of the Council of Europe;

HAVING REGARD TO Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;

HAVING REGARD TO the Draft Opinion (CDR 86/2001 rev.1) adopted by Commission 7 on 23 April 2001 (Rapporteurs: **Mr Tony McKenna** (IRL-EA) **Mr José Muñoa Ganuza** (E/EA));

WHEREAS the preamble to the EC Treaty indicates a wish to increase solidarity between peoples out of respect for their history, culture and traditions, as well as promote social and economic progress of its peoples within an internal market;

WHEREAS Article 151, paragraph 4 of the Treaty establishing the European Community stipulates that “The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under the provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures”;

WHEREAS that the Presidency Conclusions of the European Council in Copenhagen on 21 and 22 June 1993 state that respect for and protection of minorities is a requirement for membership of the European Union;

WHEREAS the Council’s conclusions of 12 June 1995 on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Europe emphasised that “linguistic diversity must be preserved and multilingualism promoted in the Union, with equal respect for the languages of the Union and with due regard to the principle of subsidiarity”;

WHEREAS the European Council’s meeting held in Lisbon on the 23 and 24 March 2000 specifically recognised European cultural diversity as a potential for creating competitiveness in the European content industry;

adopted the following opinion at its 39th plenary session on 13-14 June 2001 (meeting of 13 June):

1. **The Committee of the Regions’ views on the Promotion and Safeguarding of Regional and Minority languages:**

The Committee of the Regions

1. defines “regional or minority languages” as (i) languages traditionally used within a given territory of a State or within a Region of the European Union by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; (ii) does not include dialects or (iii) the language of migrants;
2. deems that the minority (lesser used) and regional languages are an essential part of the European Union’s linguistic and cultural diversity and a vital element of our common European heritage, respect for which creates better mutual understanding among people and furthers European integration;
3. believes that regional identity is strengthened by the safeguarding and promotion of minority (lesser used) and regional languages;
4. regards cultural and language diversity as an appropriate field in which to promote European territorial cohesion, as it is a multiplying factor and provides added value in regional and local development projects;

5. believes that any action of the European Union in the domain of language policy, should be guided by the aims of conservation, intergenerational transmission, use, promotion and quality of regional and minority languages;
6. believes that the availability of goods and services in minority (lesser used) and regional languages and access to new information and communication technologies is an essential factor in language promotion;
7. deems that language permeates all aspects of people's lives. Linguistic issues are of a comprehensive and all-embracing nature and as such should be present in all areas of policy formulation and implementation;
8. considers that the European Charter For Regional or Minority Languages contributes towards the maintenance and development of European cultural traditions and wealth which emphasises the value of interculturality and multilingualism, in accordance with The Council of Europe's Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and fundamental Freedoms;
9. agrees with the priority areas of action identified in the Charter: education, the legal system, public services, the media, cultural services, economic and social life and cross-border exchanges, and welcomes:

- the promise of the Signatory States to plan to provide education at all levels in regional and minority languages;

- the undertaking that a series of steps in promoting knowledge and use of regional and minority languages in the field of public service be taken;

- the facilitation of cross-border contacts in the fields of culture, education, information and vocational and continuous training;

10. would ask the European Council to consider extending qualified majority voting to Article 151 (culture) of the Treaty of the European Community, excluding harmonization of the legal and administrative rules of the Member States and regions, respecting the internal distribution of competences and guaranteeing the principle of subsidiarity in the Community actions;
11. calls upon the European Commission to apply the principles and objectives of the Charter as a bench mark in assessing compliance of the applicant countries with the obligations towards the protection of its minorities as outlined in the Conclusions of the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen.

2. **The Committee of the Regions' recommendations**

The Committee of the Regions

1. believes that the European Union is in a privileged position to contribute, within its own area of competence and while respecting the importance of subsidiarity, towards the survival and development of the more than forty historical languages that form a crucial part of Europe's cultural legacy, by:

- raising awareness of our cultural heritage;
 - developing innovative approaches, by fostering the exchange of specialist experience and knowledge; and
 - creating networks between people active in this field and applying best practices;
2. calls upon States except Ireland and Luxembourg, where Irish and Luxembourgish are the first languages in both states, to sign and ratify without reservations, the Charter on regional and minority (lesser used) languages, in order to support the principles and objectives laid down therein and extend the level of support offered to minority and regional languages, especially as regards their use in the field of public service. In view of the options available for the degree of protection afforded to minorities, the signatory countries are called upon to take on board those provisions that guarantee a high level of protection and contain specific obligations. They should avoid selecting less binding provisions which would undermine the aim of the charter - which is to protect languages and minorities - and make the signing of the charter no more than a PR exercise for the countries concerned;
 3. calls upon the European Commission to respect Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights by including specific provisions for linguistic diversity, with particular emphasis on provisions to encourage the inclusion of minority (lesser-used) and regional languages, in all the European Union's policies and programmes with special reference to the fields of information technology, audio-visual policy, education, culture, language learning, cross-border cooperation, cultural tourism, language technology, regional development and spatial planning;
 4. recommends that the Commission establish a multi-annual programme that will have as its objective the promotion and safeguarding of the minority (lesser used) and regional languages of the European Union;
 5. urges the Commission to take immediate action to ensure that minority (lesser used) and regional languages are included in the activities of all current European Union programmes: in particular The Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Development, the Culture 2000 Framework Programme, the MEDIA Plus programme, an action plan within pre-existing programmes such as Socrates, Leonardo and Youth , European Union action in support of education and SMEs, Structural Funds and Cohesion Funds, the e-Europe action plan, the e-Content programme, and the action plan on venture capital;
 6. deems it necessary that the European Commission intensifies its information and awareness-raising campaigns informing the citizens of the European Union about the richness and diversity of its culture including the linguistic and cultural richness of the regions and also support a representative organisation of the linguistic communities at the European Union level;

2.7 proposes that the European Commission consults with the bodies in charge of language policies and/or representative associations of the linguistic communities in terms of funding and long-term strategy as far as regional and minority languages are concerned;

2.8 considers necessary that the Commission on a regular basis will support a research project to collect precise, reliable and periodically up-dated information on Europe's sociolinguistic development, identifying the factors that have contributed towards the growth or decline of languages, including the activity of public administration in this field. This initiative will conduct research, set targets and objectives, formulate policies and monitor the progress of initiatives and institutional involvement in the field of language promotion;

2.9 in this way, an evaluation of the results of the European Year of Languages should be done, which specifies the effects on minority (lesser used) and regional languages;

2.10 highlights that the framework programme that finally emerges from the agreements reached should be applied according to the subsidiarity principle, by which the European Union, the Member States, regional and local authorities, social partners and society in general have an active role to play through varying forms of collaboration and co-ordination;

2.11 recommends that the Commission establishes an interinstitutional task force with the CoR as a fully fledged member on the safety and promotion of minority (lesser used) and regional languages;

2.12 calls upon the local, regional and national authorities to promote the use of minority (lesser used) and regional languages in the cultural production, audiovisual media, press and editorial production, which are the most appropriate means of disseminating rich and plural language models, as is the provision of the full range of educational materials and lifelong learning;

2.13 recommends that the issue of minority (lesser used) and regional languages be placed on the agenda of the Inter-Governmental Conference in 2004 as soon as possible with a view to giving these languages due recognition in the treaties of the European Union.

Brussels, 13 June 2001

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 36, 5.2.1997, p.4

² OJ C 156, 6.6.2000, p.33

³ OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p.38

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