

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism

(2006/C 229/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *A New Framework for Multilingualism* (COM(2005) 56 final);

Having regard to the decision of its President of 24 January 2006 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an Opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the decision of the Commission of 30 September 2005 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the opinion on the Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council *establishing the Culture 2007 programme (2007-2013)* (COM(2004) 469 final), (CdR 259/2004 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

Having regard to the opinion on the Communication on *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006* (CdR 248/2003 fin) ⁽²⁾;

Having regard to the opinion on *The Promotion and Protection of Regional and Minority Languages* (CdR 86/2001 fin) ⁽³⁾;

Having regard to its draft opinion of the Commission for Culture, Education and Research, (CdR 33/2006 rev. 2), adopted on 4 April 2006 (rapporteur: **Mr Seamus Murray**, Member of Meath County Council, Member of the Mid-East Regional Authority (IE/UEN-EA));

adopted the following opinion at its 65th plenary session, held on 14/15 June 2006 (meeting of 14 June):

1. General Views

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **welcomes** the new Framework Strategy as a positive contribution to the promotion of linguistic diversity and as a complement to the Commission's existing initiatives to improve communication between the European Commission and its citizens;

1.2 **supports** the three main aims of the Commission to: (1) encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity in society; (2) promote a healthy multicultural economy; and (3) give citizens access to European Union legislation, procedures and information in their own languages;

1.3 however, **feels** that for such an important set of objectives the resources available are not sufficient;

1.4 **accepts** that the responsibility for making further progress with multilingualism mainly rests with Member States and their local and regional authorities but considers that the explicit support of the Commission is necessary to reinforce awareness and to improve the consistency of action at the different levels and across the EU;

1.5 **highlights** the important role played by local and regional authorities in implementing a policy to promote multi-

lingualism and **considers** that references to this role should be more explicitly stated in the communication;

1.6 **calls** for greater recognition to be given to the role of town-twinning initiatives in language learning and cultural exchange and **believes** that such explicit involvement of people at local and regional level can narrow the distance between the EU and its citizens;

1.7 also **believes** that the recent amendment of Regulation 1/1958, under which Irish will be considered an official and working language of the European Union from 1 January 2007 onwards, and the Council conclusions of 13 June 2005, which permit administrative agreements between the institutions and bodies of the European Union and the Member States which allow for the official use of other languages that are recognised by the Constitution of a Member State in all or part of the territory and the use of which as a national language is authorised by law, are further important steps in closing the distance between the EU and a large number of its citizens;

1.8 **recognises** the important contribution of sectoral programmes such as Socrates, Youth and Leonardo and the integrated programme for Lifelong Learning in the promotion of language learning in the European Union. These provide

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 164, 5.7.2005, p. 65.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 33.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 33.

good examples of actions that help to create a multilingual society and the CoR reiterates its view that the Commission can do more in this field;

1.9 In this connection, the Committee welcomes the fact that in its current proposal on the Integrated Programme for Lifelong Learning and Training, the European Commission has not discriminated between the different European languages and thus has not restricted inclusion in this programme to the official and working languages of the European Union only, as is the case now;

1.10 **considers** that the widest opportunities be made available for migrants to encourage the maintenance of their native languages and the learning of the language or languages of the host countries. The Committee **considers** that the rich cultural and linguistic diversity that migrant groups bring to the European Union should be more explicitly recognised and that provision should be made for the teaching of these languages as a minimum requirement. The Committee also **emphasises** the need for more specialised training for interpreters as a way of further facilitating communication between migrant and host communities.

Specific Comments on the Framework Strategy

Actions for a Multilingual Society — Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity in Society

The Committee of the Regions

1.11 **agrees** that curricula and structures for the teaching of a foreign language should reflect the changing demands that pupils and students face; therefore, looks forward to recommendations from the Commission on how to bring language teacher training and language-learning tools up to date;

1.12 **supports** the development of the academic field of multilingualism and interculturalism in European society and welcomes the Commission's proposal that research into linguistic diversity could be accompanied by networks of Chairs, along the lines of the successful Jean Monnet action;

1.13 **is aware** of the advantages of early language learning, provided teachers are trained specifically and therefore welcomes the Commission's forthcoming publication on a study of best practice in early language learning which the Committee considers should encompass a regional perspective and hopes that this study will take into consideration the many years of existing regional experience in this area;

1.14 **emphasises** that higher education institutions could be encouraged to play a more active role in promoting multilingualism amongst students and staff and would welcome more projects along the lines of The European Network for the promotion of Languages Among All Undergraduates (ENLU);

1.15 **agrees** that higher education institutions could also play a more active role in promoting multiculturalism in the wider local community by establishing links with local and regional authorities and local businesses;

1.16 **agrees** that the trend in non-English-speaking countries towards teaching through the medium of English, instead of through the national or regional language, may have unforeseen consequences for the vitality of those languages. The Committee emphasises the urgency in addressing this issue and welcomes the proposal to study the phenomenon in more detail;

1.17 **supports** the idea of encouraging Member States to establish national plans to give structure, coherence and direction to actions to promote multilingualism. The Committee considers that these plans should establish clear objectives for language teaching at the various stages of education and be accompanied by a sustained effort to raise awareness of the cultural importance of linguistic diversity. Local and regional authorities should be involved in the development and implementation of these national plans;

1.18 **believes** that regional identity is strengthened by the safeguarding and promotion of minority (lesser used) and regional languages. The Committee acknowledges existing support for these languages but considers that because of their minority and therefore more vulnerable position, special attention needs to be given to looking at further ways in which the future of these languages can be secured;

1.19 **supports** the European Commission's inclusion of 'communication in foreign languages' among the key competencies that all European citizens need throughout their lives and calls upon the Commission to draft the texts needed for its implementation in society.

Actions for a Multilingual Economy

The Committee of the Regions

1.20 **considers** that improved language skills will enhance the capacity for EU businesses to trade and welcomes the publication in 2006 of a study on the impact on the European economy of shortages of language skills. However, the Committee is of the view that the publication should particularly address the regional disparities in language skills and considers that the recommendations should be made widely available. The Committee also supports the forthcoming 2006 web-based publication of an inventory of language certification systems;

1.21 **believes** that, if the cross-border mobility of workers is to be boosted as a means of implementing Community employment policy, greater integration between multilingualism and vocational training is needed;

1.22 **highlights** that in English-speaking countries of the EU there has been a decline in the number of students studying languages. One of reasons for this decline relates to English native speakers' belief that knowledge of other languages is of little benefit or professional use in the labour market, whereby competence in a modern language is not always seen by students as an essential skill for either entry to higher education or into a career. Although the Commission addresses ways in which it will create a multilingual economy, the Committee **reiterates** that more needs to be done in building awareness of the economic benefits of language learning;

1.23 **emphasises** the importance of being able to access and use information in a number of languages and therefore welcomes the creation of a single European Information Space which can offer linguistically and culturally diverse content and digital services;

1.24 **sees** the potential in sub-titles in film and television programmes as a means of promoting language learning and favours further study on the potential for its greater use;

1.25 **considers** that training programmes in higher education and elsewhere need to be continuously updated and therefore considers the organisation of a conference on translator training in universities in 2006 to be worthwhile;

1.26 **welcomes** the launch under i2010 of a flagship initiative on digital libraries and supports initiatives to coordinate work of European research teams in the fields of human language technologies, machine translation and the creation of language resources.

Actions for Multilingualism in the Commission's Relations with Citizens

The Committee of the Regions

1.27 **acknowledges** that over the past ten years, the Commission has developed several multilingual initiatives to help citizens understand how European legislation affects them and welcomes the proposals to build on such initiatives. However, the CoR deems it necessary that the Commission intensifies its information and awareness-raising campaigns informing EU citizens about its linguistic and cultural diversity and its literary and artistic heritage as core set of shared values. Awareness-raising initiatives are crucial for increasing the public's knowledge about their heritage and it is particularly important to target these at the younger generation of European citizens at all stages of formal and informal education;

1.28 **favours** the Commission's continued fostering of multilingualism on its Internet portal (Europa) and in its publications. The Committee welcomes the launch of a languages portal on Europa providing information about multilingualism in the EU and the accommodation of new portals dedicated to language learners and language teachers. The Committee also welcomes the setting up of an internal network by the Commission to ensure that all departments apply its multilingualism policy in a coherent way;

1.29 **reminds** all European Institutions of the need, in its policy for communicating with the public and especially in the internet portal dedicated to European languages, to bear in mind the existence in the Member States of European languages different to those considered the official and working languages of the EU institutions, and with a constitutionally recognised official status. In these cases, the Committee believes that the European Commission should add these languages to its policy for communicating with the public;

1.30 **considers** that giving a greater role to translation field offices in Member States in promoting multilingualism, particularly through the customisation of the Commission's messages for local target audiences as a positive initiative;

1.31 **recognises** the importance of stimulating an awareness of the value of linguistic diversity and therefore **supports** the organisation of high-level seminars on multilingualism in Member States, targeted at journalists and other opinion multipliers;

1.32 **considers** the organisation of an international translation competition between schools in Member States to be a positive and worthwhile initiative and would encourage the development of similar multilingual benchmarking and competition for local and regional authorities across the EU;

1.33 **welcomes** the Commission's proposal to set up a High Level Group on Multilingualism and supports the holding of a ministerial conference on multilingualism at which it considers that the Committee should be invited to participate.

2. The Committee of Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 given their role in promoting culture and language in their communities, the CoR **recommends** that references to the part played by local and regional authorities should be more explicitly stated;

2.2 **calls for** greater recognition to be given to the part played by initiatives such as Euroregion activities and town-twinning schemes in language learning and cultural exchange at the local level;

2.3 **recommends** the Commission to further reinforce awareness of multilingualism and to improve the consistency of action at different levels across the EU, utilising the inclusion of the 'competence in foreign languages' among the key competencies that every European citizen should have;

2.4 **calls** on the Commission to increase its contribution of sectoral programmes such as Socrates, Youth and Leonardo and the integrated programme for Lifelong Learning in the promotion of language learning in the European Union supporting in particular the student mobility promoted by the Erasmus programme;

2.5 **proposes** that other European Institutions consider the positive experience gained by the Committee of the Regions in the use of co-official languages, with a view to adopting the provisions in question;

2.6 **recommends** that initiatives promoting the learning, study and perfecting of foreign language skills by employees be aimed at local and regional authorities themselves, in relation to the tasks that their staff carry out in promoting European integration and in cooperation policies, and calls upon these bodies to include linguistic competence in their educational programmes and projects where this falls within their responsibilities;

2.7 **recommends** that more support be provided for migrant groups not only to learn the language of their host country but also to encourage the maintenance of the languages and cultures of these groups and calls for more explicit references to policy measures in relation to migrant languages, which could be implemented with the cooperation of and between local authorities, universities and businesses;

2.8 **emphasises** the need for more specialised training for interpreters as a way of further facilitating communication between migrant and host communities.

Specific Comments on the Framework Strategy

Actions for a Multilingual Society — Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity in Society

The Committee of Regions

2.9 **recommends** that language teacher training be made a priority and calls on the Commission to outline more explicitly its action plan for language teacher training at all levels;

2.10 **recommends** that the Commission specify the distribution of Chairs in Multilingualism and Interculturalism across the Member States;

2.11 **calls on** the Commission to promote more projects which would encourage linkages between Higher Education institutions and the wider community including local and regional authorities and local businesses;

2.12 **proposes** that the Commission promote multilingualism in higher education through projects along the lines of

The European Network for the Promotion of Language Among All Undergraduates (ENLU);

2.13 **calls on** Member States to act on the recommendation of the Commission to adopt National Plans for multilingualism and cultural diversity;

2.14 **recommends** that the Commission provide a clear set of guidelines on how National Plans for multilingualism can be adopted by Member States;

2.15 **recommends** that the role of regional and minority languages in creating a multilingual Europe should be more explicitly stated.

Actions for a Multilingual Economy

2.16 **recommends** that the study of language shortages in the EU should particularly address the regional disparities in language skills and considers that recommendations emerging from the study should be made widely available;

2.17 **calls on** the Commission to intensify its awareness-building campaigns on the economic and cultural benefits of language learning.

Actions for Multilingualism in the Commission's Relations with Citizens

2.18 **calls on** the Commission to intensify its information and awareness-raising campaigns, informing EU citizens about its linguistic and cultural diversity, its literary and artistic heritage and its core set of shared values and to place particular emphasis on awareness-building amongst the younger generation of European citizens. It also recommends that EU citizens taking up employment in other European countries should be given more support in learning the language of the host country, including language for professional purposes;

2.19 **reiterates** the importance of stimulating an awareness of the value of linguistic diversity amongst opinion multipliers and therefore calls on the Commission to further strengthen its awareness campaigns on multilingualism amongst these groups.

Brussels, 14 June 2006

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Michel DELEBARRE