

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘protecting and developing historical linguistic minorities under the Lisbon Treaty’**

(2011/C 259/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises the positive effects of minority languages and linguistic diversity in Europe, both for the social and cultural sphere in general and, in particular, on the people and their communities, also helping to foster creativity and innovation in the context of promoting all types of cultural heritage, to the benefit, not least, of economic development;
- underlines the growing awareness of this issue in Europe, as evidenced inter alia by the evolution of Community law, in particular the Lisbon Treaty which has introduced respect for the wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity as a key element in safeguarding and enhancing Europe’s cultural heritage, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights which prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of language or membership of a national minority;
- points to its own fundamental role, the CoR being an assembly where best practices in safeguarding and promoting minority languages and, more broadly, the culture of each linguistic minority as an expression of Europe’s cultural pluralism can be collated and disseminated, to the benefit of all the historical linguistic minorities;
- calls, finally, on the Commission and the Council to take more account of the need for a specific policy on linguistic minorities that is adequately funded and underpinned by a firmer legal basis.

**Rapporteur** Luciano CAVERI (IT/ALDE), Regional Councillor of the Autonomous Region of Valle d'Aosta

## I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

#### General comments

1. would state first and foremost that the European Union has a wealth of historical linguistic and national minorities (also referred to as indigenous or traditional) who speak languages other than those of the state to which they belong;
2. points out that in all EU Member States local and regional governments are playing an ever increasing role, in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, in upholding and promoting this cultural and linguistic diversity, for example across all forms and levels of education, in culture and the media, and in regional development;
3. emphasises the positive effects of minority languages and linguistic diversity in Europe, both for the social and cultural sphere in general and, in particular, on the people and their communities, also helping to foster creativity and innovation in the context of promoting all types of cultural heritage, to the benefit, not least, of economic development;
4. notes that over recent decades, there has been a progressive enhancement of the legal instruments that safeguard and develop these minority languages through international law, such as the United Nations' 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the many declarations, conventions and recommendations issued by UNESCO throughout its existence, the most recent being the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions;
5. pays special tribute to the Council of Europe for the key role it has always played in the field of language policy, and in particular the crucial European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1992 and the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities;
6. also notes the recent resolution of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe of 18 March 2010 (301/2010), entitled *Minority languages – an asset for regional development*, which outlines the positive contribution of these languages to regional development;
7. underlines the growing awareness of this issue in Europe, as evidenced inter alia by the evolution of Community law, in particular the Lisbon Treaty which has introduced respect for the wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity as a key element in safeguarding and enhancing Europe's cultural heritage, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights which prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of language or membership of a national minority;
8. notes that even before the system of protection was put on a more solid footing by this legal basis, the various Community institutions had recognised the presence of some aspects of protection in the principles enshrined in the existing Treaties (the *acquis communautaire*). This was demonstrated at the time of enlargement, when, with the Copenhagen principles, they called for active policies to protect linguistic minorities, in part as a result of the evolutive interpretation in this area by the European Court of Justice;
9. reiterates, however, that although legal developments have provided for greater protection, with due regard, of course, for the constitutional principles of the individual Member States, they do not yet constitute for the Commission a sufficient legal basis to warrant specific budget headings for historical linguistic minorities;
10. takes note of the efforts currently being made by the various institutions, including the CoR, to protect multilingualism in political life and administrative work, including the gradual introduction of minority languages, as illustrated by the agreements with Spain and the United Kingdom;
11. welcomes the Commission's cooperation with a number of organisations working throughout the Union to support linguistic minorities, pointing in particular to the wide-ranging work carried out by the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD) and past cooperation with the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL), before its dissolution, and with the Mercator network, all of which have for many years been addressing the different implications of minority languages and cultures;
12. acknowledges that many European programmes (such as MEDIA, the Culture programme, initiatives to help SMEs, the Structural Funds, development of new technologies) have already funded measures in favour of minority languages, sometimes taking account of policies covering a vast geographical area, such as the Danube strategy and the Alpine Convention (in the context of which the Alpine Space programme has operated);
13. points out, on a negative note, that a 2008 European Parliament study revealed that funding for linguistic diversity had decreased in relation to the growing number of Community languages;

#### Measures needed

14. points to its own fundamental role, the CoR being an assembly where best practices in safeguarding and promoting minority languages and, more broadly, the culture of each linguistic minority as an expression of Europe's cultural pluralism can be collated and disseminated, to the benefit of all the historical linguistic minorities;

15. urges the European Commission to continue working to promote linguistic diversity by supporting the teaching of languages, particularly minority or regional ones, under various headings;

16. calls on the Community authorities to promote the use of these languages in direct contacts between the European institutions and the general public, as a further means of demonstrating that the Union stands alongside its historical linguistic minorities, with particular reference to the EU's websites and online communications;

17. also encourages local and regional democratic institutions to use information campaigns to familiarise local people and Europeans as a whole with the rights of linguistic minorities and the wealth and diversity of its own cultures;

18. calls on the Commission to support local and regional institutions in Europe in terms of developing teaching, by means of various materials and tools such as teacher training tailored to the needs of each individual linguistic community;

19. recommends that minority or regional languages become an integral part of Union policies, programmes and cross-cutting priorities, with special reference to policy on the audio-visual sector, education at all levels, the cultural sector and language learning, together with policy on territorial cooperation, regional development, the tourism sector and youth exchanges;

20. proposes to the Commission and consequently to the Council that, in the forthcoming programming period,

minority and regional languages play an appropriate part, in the context of regional policy, in the next framework programme on research, in the Culture and MEDIA programmes, and in programmes in the cultural, educational and training sectors, and in particular in the action programme on lifelong learning (LLP), and that the same should apply in areas such as the Structural Funds, the Digital Agenda and everything that touches upon helping individuals and communities to achieve their maximum;

21. alerts the Commission to the need to have an overall, regularly up-dated framework of measures in support of the historical linguistic minorities (including by revising the Euro-mosaic studies). This should include providing opportunities for exchange and mutual knowledge, in the interests of robust cultural cohesion within the overall blueprint for European integration, viewing the significant contribution by regional and minority languages as a further piece in the 'European jigsaw';

22. calls, finally, on the Commission and the Council to take more account of the need for a specific policy on linguistic minorities that is adequately funded and underpinned by a firmer legal basis;

23. recommends that Member States, who have a key role to play in language policy, show sensitivity to the linguistic diversity that exists in their countries and take the approach of developing their historical linguistic communities, in the knowledge that giving recognition to cultural heritage and all the other values they represent (history, language and cultural wealth) is conducive to peaceful coexistence and a richer European identity.

Brussels, 30 June 2011.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Mercedes BRESSO

---