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Minority languages – an asset for regional development

Committee on Culture and Education
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Summary

The regional and minority languages of Europe constitute a valuable and underused resource for the development of Europe's regions.

Language minorities play an important role in economic exchanges, particularly in the cultural industries, and are often key actors in developing transborder cooperation. Regions which promote the minority languages present in their territories are reaping benefits in terms of economic growth.

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.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Members not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress



A. DRAFT RESOLUTION²

1. Linguistic minorities are an asset for the economic and cultural development of a region. They represent an enormous potential that is often neglected. When this potential is properly harnessed, it can stimulate cultural and economic activities and make a strong contribution to the prosperity of the region.

2. Most speakers of regional and minority languages are plurilingual. Plurilingual speakers have been shown to consistently out-perform their monolingual counterparts. This is both because of the cognitive skills that accompany language learning and also because language skills are increasingly in demand in many sectors.

3. Europe's border regions are home to many linguistic minorities. These minorities are often the key to developing transborder cooperation, which is an important component of European integration. Those regions which have promoted the minority languages in their territories have reaped benefits in terms of growth in their own and neighbouring regions.

4. Europe's regions need to recognise the added-value that regional and minority languages represent. They have an important contribution to make to cultural tourism and heritage work.

5. Language is a key aspect of cultural identity. It is central to the collective memory of the population and the process in which complex cultural identities are transmitted. When linguistic minorities are accorded full recognition of their languages, and are able to express themselves in the public sphere as in the private, the resulting self-confidence has a knock-on effect both in terms of economic activity and cultural creativity.

6. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages are valuable instruments for protecting and supporting Europe's minority populations, which deserve to be better known and systematically implemented.

7. The health of its languages is a key indicator of a region's cultural development and vitality. It is a sign of a mature democracy that languages of all minority groups are given proper status, recognition and support.

8. In the light of the above, the Congress calls on local and regional authorities to:

a. ensure that regions have language policies that adequately protect and promote the autochthonous languages present in the region;

b. encourage greater use of regional and minority languages in education, administration, the media and the economy;

c. encourage regional and minority language competency in public sector employment;

² Preliminary draft resolution and preliminary draft recommendation approved by the Committee on Culture and Education of the Chamber of Regional Authorities on 15 October 2009.

Members of the Committee:

KH. Lambertz (Chair), *V. Moreira* (Vice-Chair), *R. Aliyev*, *L. Andrysiak*, *M. Aygün*, *I. Babicova*, *E. Campbell-Clark*, *E. Costello*, *M. Da Luz Rosihna*, *G. Dalleres Codina*, *D. Davidovic*, *J. Demeter*, *B. Kristo*, *B. Machaczek-Stuth* (alternate: *G. Krug*), *P. Manzini*, *G. Marmo*, *M. Miallot Muller*, *F. Mukhametshin*, *V. Nersysian**, *O. Olavsen*, *V. Oluiko*, *B. Petrisch*, *C. Raimbert**, *G. Reljic**, *G. Rink*, *V. Simelis*, *I. Tzaki*, *P. Zambakhidze*.

NB: The names of members who took part in the vote are in italics.

Secretariat of the Committee : A. Bartling and T. Lisney

d. provide adequate financing to ensure the provision of regional or minority language education from primary level upwards;

e. support the establishment of bilingual schools which combine education in a national language with education in a regional or minority language;

f. promote regional or minority languages through a broad range of cultural activities, such as theatre performances, exhibitions, literary festivals and song competitions;

g. encourage and promote transfrontier agreements on language education and educational exchanges, with a view to increasing transborder economic cooperation.

B. DRAFT RECOMMENDATION³

1. Regional and minority languages are not luxuries: as well as being an integral part of Europe's rich cultural heritage, they have a vital role to play in increasing the integration and economic prosperity of the greater European area.

2. For the economic potential of these languages to be realised, governments need to ensure that they are properly supported and that their use is encouraged in all sectors of society. Regional and minority language representatives should be fully involved in the economic development of their regions at all levels, for the benefit of all.

3. The Council of Europe has valuable legal instruments for protecting and promoting Europe's minority populations. These deserve to be better known and more systematically implemented.

4. The Congress,

a. mindful that the economic and cultural value of Europe's regional and minority languages remains largely unrecognised and that there is still too little attention given to regional and minority languages by the governments of member States;

b. bearing in mind the work of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages;

c. bearing in mind Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)7 on the use of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the promotion of plurilingualism;

d. bearing in mind the evidence that the promotion of regional and minority languages can provide an important stimulus to a region's economy;

e. bearing in mind Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1383 (1998) on Linguistic Diversification;

f. bearing in mind Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1740 (2006) on The place of the mother tongue in school education;

³ See footnote 2

5. *Therefore invites the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to:*

- a. recognise that language minorities are an important economic and cultural asset;
- b. recognise the economic benefits of promoting regional and minority languages and take this into account in their economic policies;
- c. recognise the role of linguistic minorities in transborder cooperation and involve them in fully in transborder projects and planning;
- d. recognise that the languages of immigrant groups are an important asset for establishing cultural and economic links with countries of origin.

6. *The Congress invites the Committee of Ministers to ask member States to:*

- a. take action to ensure that regional and minority languages do not decline, and to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn these languages from an early age in school;
- b. encourage and support the provision of regional and minority language courses in adult and continuing education;
- c. encourage and promote the use of regional and minority languages in cultural industries and cultural tourism;
- d. promote education in the mother tongue for all minority groups, including migrants;
- e. set up language promotion councils to encourage language diversification and the development of regional and minority language use in regions.
- f. sign and ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages if they have not yet done so.

C. EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Introduction⁴

1. About 60 of a total of 90 European languages are regional or minority languages (hereafter referred to as minority languages) with more than 100 million speakers. That means, that nearly one out of seven Europeans is a native speaker of a minority language.⁵
2. Minority language speakers usually also speak the national language of their country. This puts them at an advantage compared to those who have the national language as their mother tongue, one in two of whom can speak no other language.⁶
3. Minority languages are a major component of the cultural diversity of Europe. Preserving this diversity involves preserving minority languages. Their preservation is a major factor in regional development, which depends on the political and legal status granted to minority languages in their regions of origin and can be extremely important for the socio-cultural, economic and ecological development of the region.⁷

⁴ The main author of this report was Prof. Dr. Christoph Pan, "Südtiroler Volksgruppen-Institut", Bozen-Blozano, Italy.

⁵ Pan / Pfeil: National Minorities in Europe. 2003, p. 10, 34 ff.

⁶ European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union: Multilingualism: Between Policy Objectives and Implementation. Study of the Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies, p.5.

⁷ The most important standards regarding the linguistic rights of minorities and the status of minority languages are the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and in the European Charter of Regional or Minority

4. The preservation of minority languages is covered by the international legal principle of positive discrimination.⁸ This means that adequate measures should be taken in all areas of economic, social, political and cultural life, to promote full and effective equality between speakers of a minority language and the speakers of the national language. The measures adopted in accordance with this principle should not be considered to be an act of discrimination.

Interdependency of minority languages and regional development

5. There is an essential correlation between regional development and minority languages: minority languages depend on regional development, but also represent a cultural asset, which can be a strategic tool for regional development. This interdependency can be described as follows:

What can regions offer minority languages?

6. Economic existence: minority languages without speakers are dead languages: languages live by being spoken. The preservation of minority languages is therefore only possible in economically developed regions, whose population is not threatened by migration. The 2009 UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger gives a comprehensive overview of the languages which are threatened with extinction.

7. Use of a language in education and administration. Like all languages, minority languages need to develop, otherwise they will die. A precondition for development is the official status of the language. If minority languages cannot qualify for official status at the national level because of the small number of speakers, then at least they can be given official status at the local or regional level.⁹ A prerequisite for such status is that minority languages are taught and learned. Regions can ensure both official language status, and the teaching of the language.

What can the minority language offer to the region?

8. Regional advantages: the presence of a minority language makes an area multilingual. This offers additional attractions for tourism and especially for cultural tourism, as well as strategic, linguistic and cultural advantages to exploit the potential of cross-border cooperation.

9. Economic incentives: the teaching of minority languages requires schools. These are not only educational, but also economic institutions. Minority language activities in other areas of culture (literature, theatre, museums, music, etc.) also have an economic component.

10. Added value: Multilingualism at a regional level requires an increased investment in terms of schools, administration and the judicial system. This results in additional economic value and also added cultural value in terms of multilingualism, providing both individual and social enrichment.

11. Employment incentives: Cultural activities have a stimulating effect on employment because they include a high degree of creativity and therefore tend to be labour-intensive.

12. Assuming that the norms required for the preservation of minority languages in a given region correspond to European standards¹⁰ and are transposed into domestic legislation, the following facts might be taken on board vis-à-vis regional development:

Languages. The monitoring of the implementation into domestic legislation of the party states is carried out by the Council of Europe.

⁸ As set out in Art.4 para.2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

⁹ In the Autonomous Province of Bolzano – South Tyrol for example, in one of more than 100 provinces of Italy, there are three official languages with a different range: Italian as the national language for Italy as a whole, German as a regional official language with ca. 300.000 native speakers and Ladin as a local official language in only eight municipalities for ca. 20.000 native speakers.

¹⁰ As set out in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Conditions for preserving minority languages

13. The most important aspect of preserving a minority language is maintaining the pool of potential speakers. Other important conditions are the use of minority languages in education, in administration, in the media and in other organizations (business, leisure, etc.).

Maintaining the pool of speakers

14. The use of minority languages in education, administration, the media and the economy involves ensuring that sufficient economic prospects are available in the traditional settlement areas of the speakers of a minority language in a given region, so that the speakers of the minority language can exercise their right to use their language in these key areas and do not have to emigrate due to lack of prospects. This means implementing a regional policy that provides adequate employment opportunities, economic prosperity, social security and a healthy working environment. A minimum level of regional democracy is required if such regional emphases are to be successfully established. The success of the Welsh Assembly in increasing the use of the Welsh language by encouraging its use in all aspects of public life would not have been possible without the devolution that took place in the United Kingdom in the 1990s.

Language development through language use

15. The maintenance and development of languages is a major social challenge. The use of minority languages in administration, at least in dealing with local authorities in the linguistic area in question, is important for their preservation. Minority languages, particularly smaller ones, run the risk of being marginalised by the dominant national language. Where a minority language has been reduced to the function of a language used in the family domain, its development ceases and it is doomed to extinction. A language cannot survive unless its development is constantly encouraged. Official language status can foster language development by forcing the administration to keep pace with social developments and give linguistic expression to the subjects that it deals with. This is why it is vital, especially in the case of small minority languages, that they function as official languages, at least at the local level.

Minority languages as a vehicle for cultural identity

16. The presence of a minority language in a region constitutes a valuable asset which can be economically exploited. Although the resources required to preserve and use minority languages represent an economic outlay, they also represent a valuable investment in regional development due to their benefits in terms of cultural enrichment, promotion of the economy, stimulation of employment and protection of the environment.

17. In the United Kingdom, the promotion of the Welsh language by the Welsh Language Board has been a key element of the revitalisation of the Welsh cultural identity.

Cultural enrichment

18. Individual multilingualism is a source of personal enrichment. With every new language people learn, they open a window on to a new culture, broaden their personal horizons, increase their tolerance and far-sightedness and improve their opportunities for employment and additional income. Cognitive skills, linked to a change of perspective, empathy and creativity are more pronounced in multilingual individuals than in their monolingual counterparts.¹¹

19. The creative potential of multilingual individuals and groups has an important bearing on cultural and religious diversity. As societies become increasingly complex and diverse and less homogeneous, multi-lingual skills are especially helpful for coping with the requirements of linguistically and culturally complex societies.

20. Multilingualism is also of value to majority language speakers, who can benefit not only by learning the state languages of neighbouring regions, but also their minority languages, which will enable them to participate in neighbouring cultures. This was one of the reasons why the 2002 Barcelona European Council for at least two foreign languages to be taught from a very early age

¹¹ Herdina / Jeßner : A Dynamic Model of Multilingualism : Perspectives of Change in Psycholinguistics. 2002.

throughout the European Union.¹² Research suggests that bilingual speakers perform better in the labour market both in terms of employability and of earnings.¹³

Promoting the economy

21. Tourism: multilingual areas provide an additional tourist attraction because they can more easily and more specifically activate tourist potential from a variety of cultural areas to which their languages give them access. The presence of a minority language is often accompanied by cultural resources in the form of buildings, historical remains and customs and traditions in the countryside, villages and architectural complexes. These can be effectively promoted in cultural tourism, which concentrates on the educational and recreational dimensions, provides useful development opportunities and constitutes a welcome alternative to mass tourism.

22. Transfrontier co-operation: multilingual regions often share borders with other cultural and linguistic areas and therefore possess natural locational advantages for the many different development possibilities which transfrontier co-operation can provide for regions.

23. The Haut-Rhin department in Alsace is actively promoting a bilingual policy in order to stimulate employment in the region. The city of Mulhouse in France is a close neighbour to the German-speaking Swiss city of Basel, which has the highest GDP in the world. Transfrontier employment is a significant factor of the economy of Alsace.¹⁴ According to the Forum "Bilingualism, an asset for employment and economic development" held in Mulhouse in May 2009, in 2007-2008 the region lost 2,000 transfrontier jobs because of the decline of bilingual French-German speakers.¹⁵

24. Economic importance of cultural activities: the presence of multilingualism in a region encourages cultural activity in the respective languages in areas such as education, music, literature, arts, museums, theatre, film, design, radio and print media. All these activities have an economic component, creating jobs and thus generating income, producing goods and services and thus acting as a stimulus for the economy.¹⁶

25. Schools as businesses: schools are not only the main places of learning and training but also important economic enterprises which employ a large staff. Thanks to projects to extend and convert schools and build new ones, and purchases of equipment and school materials, "schools as businesses" provide trade for many different economic sectors. Teaching a minority language sets a whole series of additional activities and investments in motion, relating to the recruitment of teachers and non-teaching staff, training and further training for teachers, production of teaching aids, provision of literature, classrooms and libraries, school transport, and much more besides. Extra jobs increase local purchasing power and consequently reinforce the local business cycle and stimulate local and supra-regional demand.

Stimulating employment

26. Creative jobs are hard to replace with machines. Activities and investments in the cultural field, which embraces not only education, schools and the conservation of the cultural heritage but also cultural tourism, are characterised by their high degree of creativity. Where the creative side of any given activity outweighs its repetitive aspect, this activity can be described as "mechanisation resistant". The advantage of cultural activities is that their creative dimension can only be dealt with by people, not machines. The rule of thumb might therefore be that the greater the creative dimension of an activity, the greater its resistance to automation and the less risk there is of human labour being "rationalised away". For reasons of employment policy, therefore, projects involving a structurally high proportion of creativity and human labour should be prioritised over projects entailing high capital intensity or low standards of qualification.

¹² Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002, Presidency Conclusions, Part I, pt. 44 (SN 100/1/02 REV 1)

¹³ Blackaby, David et al. : The Welsh language and labour market inactivity, 2006

¹⁴ OLCA, the Office for the language and culture of Alsace, points out that 25 million German speakers live within 250 km of Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace, compared to 6 million French speakers

¹⁵ Dernière Nouvelles d'Alsace, 16 May 2009

¹⁶ A study commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economy and Technology shows the remarkable economic importance of the cultural and creative industry. In 2008 this sector produced a gross added value of 2.5 % (63 billions Euro) and a turnover of 132 billions Euro, corresponding to 2.6 % of the gross domestic product and making cultural development the third biggest branch after machine building and the auto industry.

27. Multilingualism creates added value and “added labour”: An official multilingual policy in a region gives rise to additional expenditure due, for instance, to the extra administrative facilities required for each language. Texts must be drawn up in more than one language and sufficient staffing must be available for multilingual facilities and services.

28. The additional expenditure arising out of multilingualism could be covered by additional recruitment or increased individual staff performance, although the latter requires special qualifications. The so-called “intelligent jobs” induced by multilingualism also provide incentives for higher standards of education and remuneration. More and higher qualified jobs lead to higher demand, and increased individual performance must be rewarded with salary rises,¹⁷ which again increases demand. Both these situations have a stimulating effect, especially on the local market.

Regional democracy

A minimum degree of regional democracy is essential

29. A regional policy aiming at sufficient employment opportunities, economic prosperity and social security, and which at the same time strives to make optimum use of the advantages offered by regional multilingualism, needs a minimum degree of regional democracy.

30. Following the principle of subsidiarity, regional democracy entails assigning to regions those administrative tasks which can reasonably be carried out at the intermediate level between municipal self-government and central administration. It would be useful to provide a common framework for regionalist initiatives and efforts and ensure a degree of harmonisation of the capacities of regional democracy.

31. Minority languages are a decisive factor in forging a regional identity: they give the region a cultural specificity, which is important at a time of globalisation. Promoting minority languages therefore enhances the local population’s self-esteem, which helps reinforce democracy and is important in terms of overall policies to promote democracy. Citizens who are aware of their region’s special cultural status develop a greater sense of responsibility for their region, which also has beneficial effects in terms of economic and entrepreneurial activities.

Best practice of multilingual regions

32. With good governance, the cultural assets represented by a multilingual population can lead to the successful sustainable economic development of a region.¹⁸

33. Regional democracy is particularly necessary in multilingual regions as it enables politicians to create the conditions for promoting multilingualism as an essential component of the regional identity. It is no coincidence that European multilingual regions with legislative powers have experienced sound development, particularly in the socio-economic field.

34. The examples of Catalonia, Alto Adige/South Tyrol and Åland, which have employment levels¹⁹ and per capita income²⁰ significantly above the respective national averages, show that regional and municipal authorities have considerable scope for promoting regional development. Spatial planning and the promotion of economic development are the main areas where regional development can be genuinely boosted, backed up with support measures in the fields of education, social security and the environment. It is the role of regional democratic authorities to guarantee the necessary political flexibility of operation in these fields.

¹⁷ In South Tyrol, Italy, for example, where three official languages are recognized, the employees of the public administration are rewarded for the notion and use of the second or third official language with a bilingual or trilingual bonus to the extent of 10% of the net salary.

¹⁸ Cf. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Resolution 283 (2009): Good governance: a key factor for the sustainable economic development of regions.

¹⁹ In 2007 the unemployment rate in Catalonia was 6.5%, nearly a quarter lower than the national unemployment rate in Spain (8.3%); the unemployment rate in South Tyrol was 2.5%, less than half the national unemployment rate in Italy (6.1%) and the unemployment rate of Åland was 2.2%, nearly three thirds lower than the national unemployment rate of Finland (6.9%). For comparison: the unemployment rate in the EU-27 was 7.1% (Eurostat, Regional statistics).

²⁰ In 2006 the regional gross domestic product (GDP) per inhabitant in Catalonia with 26,300 EUR was 18% higher than the national GDP average of Spain (22,300 EUR), in South Tyrol it was with 32,900 EUR 31% higher than the national average of Italy (25,100 EUR) and in Åland it was with 40,500 EUR 28% higher than the national average of Finland (31,700 EUR). For comparison: In the EU-27 the GDP amounted 23,600 EUR (Eurostat, Regional statistics).

Conclusion

35. The protection and preservation of minority languages have a sustainable effect in terms of promoting culture as well as the economy, ensuring that employment, education and quality of life are nurtured and enhanced, which in turn prevents economic emigration. Minority languages play a fundamental role in the formation and strengthening of regional cultural identity. It is therefore vital to ensure that measures to promote minority languages are properly targeted.

36. Minority languages also play a positive and sustainable role in regional development because preserving these languages necessitates a long-term development strategy based on good management of resources, while taking account of the need to preserve culture for future generations.

37. The efforts to preserve and promote the cultural identities of multilingual regions stimulate an investment which is economically productive and makes best use of resources, is culturally and socially enriching, and ultimately pays for itself in terms of economic impact.