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Unofficial, But Not Unimportant: The Issue of Regional and Minority Languages

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Key points

- Regional and Minority Languages can be found all across Europe, and their safeguarding is crucial for the EU's prosperity.
- The EU's competences are limited and RMLs are mostly supported through the Union's educational programs.
- The EU can support RMLs more actively, by:
 - demonstrating to its member-states the significance of RMLs
 - making reforms to the budget allocation
 - enabling smaller communities to benefit from the available funding
 - including RMLs to its language learning platforms

Introduction

There are 24 languages that have been recognized as official in the European Union. They are the official languages of the 27 member-states of the EU. Though, it is not uncommon for smaller communities, or even whole regions in some cases, to use a different language for their everyday communication.

“Regional and Minority Languages” is a term that could be used to describe these languages

- According to the **European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages** issued in 1992 by the Council of Europe, the term **“regional or minority languages” (RMLs)** is used to define languages that *are “traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; and different from the official language(s) of that State”* (Part I, Article 1).



Such languages are very common in the European Union. As has the European Parliament stated, about 50 to 60 million people in the EU can speak in a regional or a minority language (Prys Jones, 2014, p.17).

The most widely spoken regional language in the EU is Catalan, which has about 10 million native speakers in Spain and France. Other languages spoken by smaller communities can be found all over Europe, such as the Frisian languages in the Netherlands, the Sami languages in Finland, Basque and Galician in Spain, Sicilian and Sardinian in Italy, Breton in France and many more. Therefore, it is obvious that RMLs have a strong presence in the European continent.

The laws and practices concerning RMLs differ from country to country. They may be recognized as minority languages of the whole country, of a specific region, or they may not hold an official status anywhere. This may have serious effects on people's individual rights, freedoms, and educational opportunities.

The European Union, being founded on the basis of diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism, must act for the protection and promotion of these languages. Events such as the Catalan protests in 2019 come to show that minority rights are an ongoing issue in the continent, and they could possibly lead to serious problems for the Union's cohesion and prosperity.

Legal Framework

The issue of RMLs falls into the broader educational policy of the EU, in which the Union has supporting competences. This means that its legislative bodies are not able to pass laws. This is mentioned in **Articles 165(1) and 166(4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** where it is stated that “The European Parliament and the Council (...) shall adopt measures (...) excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member States”. This proves that the EU can only adopt measures that support and supplement the actions of the Member States concerning the RMLs.

The EU does not specifically mention RMLs anywhere in its Treaties. Nevertheless, the Union's intention to safeguard these languages can be seen in some articles.

Firstly, according to **Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)**, the Union “shall respect its rich (...) linguistic diversity”. The **Charter of Fundamental Rights** also refers to language issues. More specifically, in **Article 21** the EU makes a strong statement that “any discrimination based on any ground such as (...) language (...) shall be prohibited”, while in **Article 22** the importance of linguistic diversity in the Union is repeated.



It is simple to gather that RMLs are included into this legal framework, as no distinction between them and the EU's official languages is being made. The **Article 55** of **TEU** comes to strengthen this argument by providing to the Member States the opportunity to translate this Treaty in any language that “[enjoys] official status in all or part of their territory”.

What has the EU done?

Funding

In 1983, the *Action Line for the Promotion and Safeguard of Minority and Regional Languages and Cultures* was established by the European Commission. It was a funding aimed specifically at the promotion of RMLs in the European environment, even reaching €4 million annually. (Prys Jones, 2014, p.25). This was discontinued in 2002 after a European Court of Justice's rule (C-106/96) stated there was a lack of legal basis for its implementation.

Since then, funding is being given to individual communities or organizations after applying to the EU. It is a bureaucratic procedure which has been criticized by many, since smaller communities have little to no chance of receiving this funding, due to its complexity and the strict criteria the EU has imposed.

No funding is being given directly to RMLs. (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2016, p.10). EU's programs and projects are exclusively responsible for their financing.

In recent years, both the **Committee of Regions** (2011/C 259/06) and the **European Parliament** (2018/2036 (INI)) have expressed their will for further budget support for RMLs in the context of their resolutions of aiding minorities in the Union.

Programs & Initiatives

When it comes to initiatives taken at European level, there is no denial that the designation of 2001 as *The European Year of Languages* (1934/2000/EC) helped the promotion of RMLs. Its main goal was to support linguistic diversity. Initially, it was designed to deal exclusively with the EU's official languages, as well as Irish and Luxembourgish. Studies showed that RMLs benefited from its funding, as a lot of events and actions were dedicated to them.

RML communities can turn to the EU's funding programs to achieve their goals. The *Erasmus+*, *Creative Europe* and *Lifelong Learning* programs are some great examples. Over the years they have offered the opportunity to minorities to share their cultures and languages with a broader audience.



The capitalization of these platforms can be achieved through:

- school partnerships
- student exchange programs
- organization of special events, and many more

Issues that arise

Due to the limited competences of the EU on educational matters, it is up to the member-states to determine and control the extent of the RMLs' use and status in their territory. The EU's programs serve as useful platforms for the promotion of these languages, providing the necessary funding for innovative initiatives and ideas, but in many cases, they are not enough.

Furthermore, not every RML is equally represented in these initiatives. More widely spoken languages, such as Catalan, Occitan and Breton, are most likely to be included in these. On the other hand, languages such as Latgalian (Latvia) or Cypriot Maronite Arabic (Cyprus), which are used by a significantly smaller number of people, are rarely contained.

- The Sami languages are an interesting “exception to this rule”. The Sami communities are made up of active people who are trying to exploit the benefits of any platform that is being provided to them.

A lot of RMLs in Europe are at risk of extinction. For example, Cypriot Arabic language is considered “severely endangered” (UNESCO, 2010, P.41). Not every country takes serious action for the protection of these languages. If the EU does not act, then extinction for some languages and cultures will not be avoided.

Recommendations

1) The European Union can highlight the advantages of linguistic diversity to its member-states.

The Union could encourage the member-states to create the appropriate legal basis for the promotion of RMLs at national level. It could be achieved by issuing Recommendations and Opinions aiming specifically at RMLs.

2) More funding from the EU's educational programs could be allocated directly to RMLs.



Erasmus+ and Lifelong Learning programs are already the main financial sources for RMLs. But given the need for a more effective and organized action towards RMLs for the safeguarding of the Union's values and cohesion, these programs could focus on the development of a special funding for RMLs.

3) Creation of a less strict framework for the grant of the available funding for endangered languages.

This would give the opportunity to smaller communities to exploit the resources provided by the EU. It is clear that the procedure in effect helps the EU control its expenses. Nevertheless, a special clause for languages in danger could be created. This proposal is closely connected with the previous recommendation, as a part of the direct funding for RMLs could be allocated exclusively to these endangered languages.

4) Update of the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) platform.

OLS is a language learning platform created under the Erasmus+ program, used by the participants of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps mobility programs. Its main goal is to help its users reach a higher level in the official language of the country they will go to. This platform could include courses for some commonly used RMLs, such as Catalan. Teachers and translators could be hired using specific funds from these programs.

Conclusion

The European Union has very limited means to act upon RMLs, but its influence over the member-states can be proven beneficial for their promotion and, in some cases, survival. It is an issue that should not be put aside by the decision-makers of the EU, as it is closely related to the values that the Union aspires to defend, such as unity, freedom, and equality. Unfortunately, since 2014, linguistic diversity and RMLs' matters are not included in the EU's priorities (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2016, p.10). In recent years, however, the European bodies have shown their intentions for further development of the EU's educational programs, such as the Erasmus+. This could be a step in the right direction for the protection of RMLs.



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