

Towards a new EU Multilingualism Strategy

by Brenda Azzopardi

Language policy is quite an important issue in the European Union. The promotion of language learning has become a tool to motivate people to succeed throughout their lifetime. Member State nationals are taking full advantage of their EU citizenship and of the single market to learn other languages to facilitate their educational and professional skills, amongst other things, while discovering, at the same time, the culture and history of the language they are learning.

The European Commission set out these benefits in its 1995 White Paper *'Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society'* where one of its main objectives has been to stimulate all EU citizens to be proficient in at least three languages, one of them being their mother language. Moreover, in 2005, it reaffirmed its commitment to multilingualism by adopting its first-ever Communication to set out the importance of language skills to worker mobility and the competitiveness of the EU economy.

During 2008, as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, multilingualism is being further promoted as a medium for inter-religious dialogue and cultural understanding. Multilingualism policy benefits from an allocation of 1% of the EU budget. At the ministerial conference on 15 February this year, Ministers came together for the first time to specifically discuss multilingualism policy at EU level. It took place under the joint chairmanship of the European Commission and the Slovenian EU Presidency.

The European Commission's idea of promoting the learning of a personal adoptive language, which is supported by the European Commissioner Orban, and proposed in the report of the High Level Group of Multilingualism, has produced mixed reactions among the ministers. During this ministerial conference, ministers aimed to list areas in which new linguistic measures are needed both at national and at European level and to come to an agreement on common measures to be taken during the next five years. The conference concluded that it is vital for European citizens to be encouraged to learn two foreign languages, and that this should be the basis of the EU's new multilingualism strategy due for publication in September.

Following the largest EU enlargement in 2004, the challenge of addressing the sustainability of an EU language policy will now fall under the proposed strategy. It has been indicated that most of the funding for the multilingualism portfolio goes to translation and interpretation, and many websites have become multilingual. Under the new strategy, the Commission will also make an effort to come up with a comprehensive language policy to engage cultural and national identity, business issues and integration of migrants under its cap.

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