

The European Bureau for
Lesser Used Languages

Brussels Information Centre



To the
benefit of
Europe's
languages

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages is a non profit association, created in 1982 on the initiative of some members of the European Parliament and of different cultural organizations for the promotion of the "other" languages of Europe.

On 16 October 1981, as a result of a series of motions on regional languages and cultures, the European Parliament voted the Arfé resolution, which was the first major milestone on the road to the definition of a strategy in favour of lesser used languages.

Today, the Bureau consists of a Secretariat which is located in Dublin, of an Information Centre, which was opened in Brussels in 1992, and of an Education Secretariat based in Luxembourg-city since 1994.

Besides the Bureau has Committees, broadly representative of the main interests within lesser used language communities, in eleven of the EU member States (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom). Contacts have been made with Finland, Greece and Sweden.

President: Helen Ó Murchú, Ireland

Secretary General: Dónall Ó Riagáin, Ireland

Main objectives

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages seeks to preserve and promote the autochthonous languages of the European communities and the linguistic rights of their speakers.

Its guiding principle is to place an obligation on those in power (State, Regions, etc.) and to guarantee, through a legal framework, all necessary services in assuring a normal life to linguistic minorities.

Leading activities

The European Bureau is concerned with improving the **cooperation and the exchange of information** for lesser used languages. Together with member State Committees, the Bureau has organized several cultural events and meetings in different European countries.

As a matter of fact, **study visits** - which are reserved for those who play the role of 'multiplier' in their community, such as teachers, journalists, cultural promoters, students - have played a very effective role in establishing contacts between the regions and have also contributed to an exchange of information between a large number of people and institutions.

Since 1984, the Bureau has published a quarterly newsletter, **Contact Bulletin**. This publication serves as a link between members of the different State Committees and is a widely distributed source of information about European minorities.

The Bureau enjoys a close working relationship with the European institutions, particularly the European Parliament and the Commission. Since its establishment, it seeks **legal and political supports**, in order to heighten the public awareness at European, state and regional level. It also searches for **financial assistance** for projects of direct, immediate benefit to lesser used language communities. The Bureau has become the representative and the spokesperson of the needs and the entreaties of these communities.

The Bureau collaborated to put in place structures which provide ongoing support for lesser used languages. These include **Mercator Network**, which has contributed towards a fundamental documentation on four specific subjects: education, media, linguistic rights and general bibliography. A **Children's Publishing Secretariat** promotes and facilitates the publication of children's books in lesser used languages. **Euroskol** is a biennial gathering of primary school children who receive their education through the medium of a lesser used language.

The subventions

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages is funded by subventions from the European Commission, the Irish Government, the Government of Luxembourg, the Provincial Government of Friesland, the French and the German-speaking Communities of Belgium.

BIC: a service of the Bureau in the heart of Europe

The Brussels Information Centre - BIC - was created from the need to have a representation of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages in the centre of European decisions : Brussels.

May 1992 saw the opening of BIC and since then the staff of the centre is working towards one very ambitious project: to collect in one place the essential literature concerning linguistic minorities and to spread the information about lesser used languages within the perspective of a growing awareness of autochthonous cultures. In this particular moment of European history, these cultures represent a link between the idea of a united Europe proud of the diversity of its peoples.

The staff

The Brussels Information Centre works with a team of four people:

Myriam Alkain, manager

Helga Janssen, secretary

Wolfgang Jenniges, documentalist

Silvia Carrel, information officer

BIC projects

The **establishment of a Documentation Centre** is the leading BIC objective. The literature is scattered all over Europe and it is not always very easy to find it. Brussels will be the heart for access to documents, books, magazines, periodicals, press reviews and newspaper articles concerning lesser used languages. During 1993, the Centre published a **Select Bibliography**, a first attempt on the part of the Bureau at collecting basic references on the various autochthonous regional or minority languages of the European Union.

In order to facilitate the exchange of information about EU activities and to raise public awareness, BIC sends out press releases and organises press conferences about current events. Besides, it has published a series of information brochure about specific and general subjects.

These include: *Unity in Diversity*, the general brochure of the Bureau providing an overall picture of the languages of the European Union; *The Sound of Europe*, emphasising the intellectual and developmental advantages in young bilingual children; *Language Rights, individual and collective*, about the use of lesser used languages in public administration; *Mini-Guide to the lesser used languages of the EC*, a booklet giving basic information about these languages - the region where they are spoken, their distribution, their status, their position in public services, in education and in media; *The Vallée d'Aoste, a range of resources*, the first volume of a monographic series about lesser used language communities. Moreover, a series of posters in 24 lesser used languages have been spread out all over Europe.

Another BIC program is the promotion of several cultural events to acknowledge the richness and the fertility of minority and regional cultures: a sort of trip through the "other" Europe, which already "visited" the Sorbs in Germany, the Irish community, the Basque country and the minorities in Finland.

The varied linguistic and cultural patrimony of Europe is the rich common heritage of each European.
Raising general awareness and providing information have been tasks of the Bureau from the beginning.

Lesser used languages: some dates to remember

If, thanks to the Arfé resolution, **1982** was the year of the creation of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, then **1983** was a watershed year in the history of the political action in favour of minority cultures.

On **11 February 1983**, a new resolution of European Parliament - the second Arfé resolution - invited the European Commission to continue and to intensify its activities in favour of lesser used languages and cultures. For the first time, the European Parliament appropriated money for autochthonous languages. Moreover, since 1983, during the plenary sessions of the Assembly, the European Parliament Intergroup has had regular meetings in order to take stock of Community activities on the matter.

In **1984**, the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe organised a public hearing on the question of minority and regional languages. As a result, it commissioned a European Charter in favour of these languages. The project was drafted by two members of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages.

On **30 October 1987**, the Kuijpers resolution pointed out that EC member State Governments and the European Commission should propose some concrete directives for the conservation and the promotion of the regional languages and cultures of the European Community.

In **March 1988**, the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe adopted the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. And in October of the same year, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe gave a very favourable opinion of it. Also it proposed that it be accorded the legal form of a Convention. This notion was approved by a large majority of Minister's Deputies of the Council of Europe in June 1992.

Since **November 1992**, the Council of Europe has opened a Convention for the signature of the Charter. Thirteen European Governments have already signed the Charter: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain among EU member States; Cyprus, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Malta, Norway and Switzerland among the other countries. Furthermore, Finland and Norway also ratified it, which means that it will be applied to their legislation.

On **9 February 1994**, the European Parliament - with an almost unanimous vote - adopted the Resolution of the Irish deputy Mark Killilea on linguistic and cultural minorities. This text endorses the previous Resolutions and introduces some new elements: to support the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and to call the Member State governments as a matter of urgency to sign and their parliaments to ratify the Convention; to call on the European Commission to put in place as quickly as possible a companion LINGUA programme to meet the need of European citizens wishing to learn lesser used languages, not included in the existing programme; to call on the European Commission to facilitate the immediate publication, after corrections and additions, of the scientific map of lesser used language communities in the European Union; to call on the Council and the European Commission to continue their support and encouragement for European organisations representing linguistic communities, particularly the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages.

On **10 November 1994**, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. While the Convention does not define the notion of a "national minority", it does have an undisputable principle as its starting point: the safeguard and development of human rights and fundamental liberties. The Convention also stresses linguistic freedom and the right "to be taught the minority language or to receive instruction in this language". 22 countries have already signed the Convention: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Roumania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom.

***Article 128, title IX Culture of
the Treaty of Maastricht:***

"The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore".

Europe: a mosaic of languages

The "roots phenomenon"

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages is in a sense the product of a "roots phenomenon", that is, the movement of peoples to seek their identity and respect of their human rights.

A language is like DNA, the genetic code of a people. For this reason, the conservation of an identity depends on the defense and the promotion of a language.

In the European Union there are more than 40 autochthonous languages, which are used daily by at least 51 millions citizens. These languages are part of our cultural heritage. Nevertheless, only eleven are the official languages of the Union: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Sweden.

Lesser used languages have a great responsibility: to preserve the world from a linguistic and cultural monolith. And if the dollar does not speak Occitan or the computer Sorb, it is undeniable that a language is something different from a simple translation or imitation of the so-called majority languages.

Minority or lesser used?

There doesn't really exist a precise sentence or word that embraces all the different realities of Europe. Terms such as "regional", "minority", "lesser used" are not fully satisfactory, because they cannot be applied to each situation. For instance, Catalan is a minority language in France and Spain, but it is spoken by the same number of people as Danish, which is an official language of the European Union.

However, it is possible to draw up five categories of communities where lesser used languages are spoken:

- the national languages of two small EU member States, which are not official, working languages of the Union - Irish and Lëtzbueresch;
- the languages of small stateless peoples who live in one or other State, e.g. Breton (in France), Friulan (in Italy), Frisian (in the Netherlands) and Welsh (in the United Kingdom);
- the languages of small stateless peoples who live in two or more States, e.g. Basque (in France and in Spain), Occitan (in France, Italy and Spain), Lapp (in Finland and in Sweden);
- the languages of peoples, who constitute a minority in the State in which they live, but which are majority languages in other States, e.g. German (in Belgium), Danish (in Germany), Slovenian (in Austria and in Italy), Swedish (in Finland);
- non-territorial languages which have been spoken traditionally in different States but which cannot be identified with a particular area thereof, i.e. Jewish languages and Romani.

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The European Bureau for
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