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Mailed from Brussels X

EUROFOCUS

CULTURE: Defending minority languages and culture in the European Union

Euro-MPs want legislation to preserve and develop minority languages and cultures.

Have you ever heard of "friisk-seeltersk", "euskara" or "gaeilge"? And more to the point, have you heard anyone speak them? Because they are among the 30 or so native tongues spoken by millions of citizens of the 12-nation EU. Some of them are little known, to be exact; even so, they are a way of expressing oneself, of communicating one's emotions and feelings - in short, they represent the culture and heritage of a considerable number of human beings.

The languages mentioned earlier are listed in a booklet published by the European Bureau for the Lesser Used Languages*, together with their English and French translations. "Friisk" for example, is the language spoken in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany) and "seeltersk" is spoken in Lower Saxony (Germany), while "euskara" is Basque and "gaeilge" Irish. Clearly, not all these so-called minority languages are like Cornish, which is only spoken fluently by an estimated 200 people (but is undergoing something of a revival, with the publication of a new Cornish language dictionary, with the help of a grant from the EU). An estimated 4% to 5% of people in Ireland use Irish regularly, although as many as 31% can speak it, according to the 1986 census.

The fact remains that minority languages and cultures have never been pampered in Europe. The most gains of the last few years have been secured after a hard fight against strongly centralizing states, that are deaf even to the most legitimate of demands - that of being allowed to express oneself in one's mother tongue.

Euro-MPs began to take an interest in the problems of minority languages some 15 years ago. Since then the European Parliament has adopted a number of resolutions, of which the latest has just been adopted by 318 votes to one, with a mere six abstentions. It calls for a political and financial commitment, by the Member States as well as the EU Council of Ministers and European Commission, to preserve and develop this feature of Europe's linguistic and cultural heritage.

This is no easy task, given the subject's complexity. It must be pointed out that the very expression "minority languages" is far from satisfactory. Thus while Catalan is a minority language in Spain, it nevertheless is spoken by an estimated

six million people - that is to say by as many people as speak Danish, which is one of the official languages of the European Union. Similarly, German is a minority language in Belgium, Denmark, France and Italy; but it is not only the majority language in Germany itself but also the most widely spoken language in Europe.

But even if one accepts this not very precise definition, one must still make a distinction between the five major categories of lesser-spoken languages. The five are:

- (1) the national languages of two small EU Member States which are not the official working languages of the EU: Irish and the native language of Luxembourg;
- (2) the languages spoken by small communities, without a state of their own, lodged within a single Member State, such as Breton in France and Welsh in the United Kingdom;
- (3) the languages spoken by small communities, without a state of their own, but which are to be found in two or more Member States, such as Basque in France and Spain and Occitan in France, Italy and Spain;
- (4) the languages spoken by people who are in a minority in the Member State in which they live but are in a majority elsewhere: German has already been mentioned, but another example is that of Danish in Germany and Turkish and Albanian in Greece and
- (5) the languages which cannot be identified with a specific territory, such as Yiddish, spoken by Jews, and Sinti and Roma, spoken by gypsies.

As for the distribution of minority languages, they are most numerous in Italy, which has 11. France is next, with 8, followed by Spain (6), the United Kingdom and Greece (5 each), even if in Greece these minorities are really cramped. As for their legal status, they enjoy none in France and the United Kingdom, although the latter does allow Welsh to be used to a limited extent in courts and government departments. German, French, Slovene and Ladin enjoy legal status in Italy, in the framework of international treaties or regional autonomy. The most open and liberal legislation would seem to be the Spanish, taking into account the number of languages in the country. Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands

and Denmark have made considerable progress also. As for Portugal, the problem does not even arise, given that it is the only country to have no other language but the official one.

It obviously would be a pity to let a part of our cultural heritage simply disappear; but it would be particularly unjust to require millions of people to express themselves in a language which is not entirely their own, even though they may speak it correctly.

The report of the European Parliament obviously stresses the need to avoid doing harm to the main national languages of the European Union, as could happen if minority languages were to be vigorously encouraged. To prevent this from happening it is necessary to make sure that the teaching of the main languages is not affected. But the report also calls on the governments of the 12 Member States to grant appropriate legal status to the less widespread languages and cultures and to ratify the European convention on regional and minority languages. It also asks them to promote the use and development of these languages in schools, the courts, government departments, the media, in the study of place names and the other sectors of public and cultural life.

Euro-MPs have also asked the European Commission to introduce a programme, based on the LINGUA programme, in favour of minority languages. All existing programmes in the educational and cultural fields - such as ERASMUS, TEMPUS, MEDIA, etc. - would take account of the new programme, while both Commission and Council would bear this cultural heritage in mind when drawing up regional policy and allocating the funds provided by FEDER.

Speaking on behalf of the Commission, Mr. João de Deus Pinheiro hoped that the decisions would be taken in as decentralized a manner as possible, in keeping with the subsidiarity principle. He reminded Euro-MPs that the budget devoted to minority languages had risen from ECU 100,000** to ECU 3.6 million last year. While the budget clearly remained inadequate, it nevertheless had made it possible to reach a large number of people through positive actions.

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** 1 ECU = UK£0.75 or IR£0.78

SOCIETY: Equal rights for homosexuals

Euro-MPs ask Member States to end all forms of discrimination against homosexuals.

By 159 votes to 96, and 18 abstentions, the European Parliament adopted a resolution which calls on all Member States to eliminate measures which discriminate against, and in particular "criminalize", sexual relations between individuals of the same sex. As for the age of consent for homosexuals, it must be the same as for heterosexuals. Euro-MPs particularly called on the U.K. to abolish the discriminatory measures aimed at reducing the spread of homosexuality, and asked for the restoration of freedom of opinion, information and press on homosexual issues. The European Parliament's report also presses for equal treatment in such matters as legal and administrative standards regarding social security, adoption law and inheritance and housing rights.

Euro-MPs asked the European Commission to submit a draft recommendation to the EU Council of Ministers on homosexual rights. Its main points would be: (1) the abolition of differences as regards the age of consent for a sexual act, thus ending the discrimination between heterosexuals and homosexuals; (2) an end to the penalisation of homosexuality as indecent behaviour or an offence against public decency; (3) the abolition of all forms of discrimination at work or in the civil service as well as in criminal, civil and commercial law; (4) the elimination of electronic databanks containing information on the sexual orientation of individuals, gathered without their knowledge and permission, and a total ban on the communication and on any abusive use of such information; (5) the abolition of barriers and obstacles to the marriage of homosexual couples or the creation of an equivalent legal institution, which fully guarantees the rights, benefits and duties of marriage and which enables such unions to be registered and (6) an end of all limits on the rights of a homosexual to be a parent or to adopt children or be their guardian.

Addressing the Euro-MPs on behalf of the European Commission, Mr. Bruce Millan supported them in their opposition to all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation. He reminded them, however, that while the Commission can take steps against discrimination between men and women, or between citizens of different nationalities, it has no power to take action in the area in question.