

There are still no easy answers to whether limits should be placed on the number of official languages in EU decision-making

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/11/12/there-are-still-no-easy-answers-to-whether-limits-should-be-placed-on-the-number-of-official-languages-in-eu-decision-making/

12/11/2014

The EU has 24 official languages and the Member States have made a formal commitment to maintain linguistic diversity within the EU's institutions. As [David Fernández Vítóres](#) notes, however, there is wide disagreement over whether a smaller number of working languages such as English and French should be used in specific cases. He writes that while multilingualism is important for preserving equality between states, it can also have a negative effect on the overall efficiency of decision-making.



Organisations in which linguistic diversity prevails generally encounter major problems when it comes to deciding which languages should be official and which should not. In fact, such decisions will almost certainly be a cause for conflict. The European Union presents a further peculiarity that differentiates it slightly from other international organisations: because of its integration process, this supranational entity is continually expanding not only politically and economically but also linguistically.

This constant change has a dual effect on one's perception of the current language regime. First of all, the principle of maintaining the current system of having twenty four official languages represented appears to be facing increasingly evident structural and resource constraints. Furthermore, this process of change raises the degree of uncertainty about future consequences of a change to the current language regime, presenting a further source of conflict.

It is certain that for more than 500 million European citizens, the majority of whom live and work in a monolingual environment, the multilingualism policies designed by European institutions are not their main concern. This is not only due to the general lack of interest in European matters in comparison to national matters, but also because citizens believe that the potential impact of these policies on their daily lives is limited. However, any agreement regarding language use in EU institutions necessarily has an influence on the relationships between these institutions and policy makers in Member States and, by extension, will ultimately influence the use of the language by citizens of the Union.



Translation services in the European Parliament, Credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)

The defence of multilingualism in the European Union is based on legal, political, cultural and social arguments. From the legal point of view, it is well known that an essential aspect of the rules of Community law is their immediate impact on the subjective legal status of the Community institutions themselves, the Member States, and the people. In this context, given that all citizens and businesses are required to know and comply with Community law, the problem posed is whether it is acceptable to ask them to acquire this knowledge in a language they do not fully master. Limiting the official languages therefore affects equal rights.

The political realm also contains certain aspects that support the adoption of full multilingualism. Here there are essentially two areas of analysis: languages as a link between the Community institutions and the outside world, and languages as a cause of internal conflict in the political institutions. Included in this framework of reference are political issues such as democratic participation, the prestige of the Member States and the equality of the representatives.

In order to preserve this equality it is necessary to avoid limiting the use of languages, which could result in an unjustified reduction in the political weight of those who cannot discuss topics in their preferred language. To this end a system was established in which there are twenty four official and working languages: i.e. each of the national languages of the Member States.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case, as often the number of working languages varies according to the type of meeting. For example, in the European Council all working languages are given equal treatment in meetings, which is also the case at meetings of national ministers in the Council of the European Union; however at meetings of the Permanent Representatives Committee (COREPER) and certain preparatory groups a limited number of working languages are used. The same procedure applies to the European Parliament, where some meetings offer a limited interpretation service based on the attendees. The Commission has institutionalised a system of three working languages.

Cultural matters also occupy a central position in this debate. The Maastricht Treaty authorised the Union to work in the areas of culture and education, although only as 'support' to actions undertaken by the Member States. For this reason, Community institutions have paid greater attention to cultural diversity and to the plurality of languages, and have made significant efforts to promote and protect this cultural heritage. However, many authors have pointed out that one cannot speak of a European cultural identity as such since Europe's cultural hallmark has been precisely its heterogeneity and multiplicity. In this respect, multilingual communication both inside and outside the institutions can be seen as a further element of support provided by the European Union to linguistic and cultural diversity.

At the other end of the scale, the arguments typically raised against multilingualism in the European Union usually include its high cost and, in particular, institutional inefficiency as a result of using different official languages. However, the most significant cost for the EU is not in maintaining the infrastructure that enables multilingual communication, but is the result of the slowdown of work involving the use of several languages, especially when documents require translation. It is not surprising, therefore, that this multilingual communication in the institutions' internal activities is often carried out in a limited number of working languages.

Although the limitation on working languages can be justified on pragmatic grounds, as in the case of the preparatory work of the Commission, there is wide disagreement as to the formal criteria for deciding which working languages should be used, the optimum number of these needed to establish an effective limited language regime, and what their respective scope of action should be.

As a result, the establishment of linguistic hierarchies has been left to force of habit, which has created an increasingly greater dissociation between the *de facto* and the *de jure* situation regarding the use of languages. In any event, establishing a healthy language regime that integrates the arguments for and against multilingualism is an almost impossible task, especially if we consider that reforming the current language regime requires the unanimous agreement of all Council members.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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