Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment

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This staff working paper accompanies the communication ‘Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment’. The strategies adopted in that communication go beyond the ‘mother tongue plus two’ recommendations of the Barcelona Council in that they extend the scope of multilingualism policy to new areas such as the internal market, enterprise and employment. While the communication sets out the new policy approach on multilingualism, this Commission staff working paper creates a framework by mapping action currently taken in this field by the various Commission departments, paying particular attention to cross-cutting aspects of multilingualism in the Commission, among stakeholder groups and among the general public.

Action currently taken in this field: the report presents an inventory of Community actions in the field of multilingualism. The 2005 communication *"A new framework strategy for multilingualism"* was the first step towards promoting multilingualism in a wider context. It reaffirmed the Commission’s commitment to multilingualism in the European Union and set out a number of specific actions for the Commission and for Member States. Commission actions focused mainly on the following policies and sectors: i) education and training; ii) translation; iii) interpretation; iv) research and information technologies.

Actions concerning education and training ranged from supporting language teaching and learning through Community programmes, making studies available (e.g. on language certification, early language learning, and the impact of shortages of language skills on the European economy) and developing the European language indicator. On translation and interpretation, actions including publishing a multilingual database (IATE), reinforcing initial training for translators and interpreters and launching a Languages portal on Europa. A complete overview of the actions set out, their state of implementation and main output is given in the Annex. This communication **extends the areas covered by the new policy approach on multilingualism to include**:

- culture,
- youth,
- media,
- employment and social affairs,
- single market,
- enterprise policy,
- health and consumer policy,
- justice and home affairs.

Establishing national plans for multilingualism was a new recommendation made in the 2005 communication. The Commission promoted a first exchange of practice in this field through the Working Group on Languages, bringing together Member States’ representatives, in 2006.The two last actions recommended by the 2005 communication — setting up a High Level Group on Multilingualism and holding the first-ever ministerial conference on multilingualism — paved the way for the current communication, to which this paper is attached.

Studies: the policy messages in the communication rely on the findings of a number of studies conducted in this field during the preparation phase, which are reviewed in this paper.

Online consultation: in drafting the communication, the Commission also consulted widely with policy makers, stakeholders and, most importantly, citizens. An online consultation held between 15 September and 15 November 2007, inviting organisations and individuals to give their views and expectations concerning language policy, attracted 2 419 replies, which the Commission took into consideration. The findings of this survey, which forms part of a broad consultation process, have served as a basis for the new Commission Communication which this document accompanies.

The questionnaire covered six different areas, all closely linked to the ways and the extent to which languages are used and promoted within the EU, from learning provision, through social, cultural and economic aspects, to the functioning of the EU institutions. This document presents the main findings of the consultation. The report reveals that the high rate of participation, across such a vast geographical area and mainly by private individuals, clearly shows that the way languages are taught, treated and spoken in Europe is an issue particularly close to people's hearts.

Moreover, the significant proportion of respondents whose mother tongue is not one of the EU official languages provides evidence that multilingualism in the Europe of today is a reality whose complexity goes far beyond the management of 23 operational languages. More than 96% of the respondents agree that the linguistic diversity of the EU calls for special attention from European politicians. According to respondents, the most important factors for successful language learning are an **early start and direct experience of the country of the target language**. Most people think that the linguistic diversity of the EU is an asset to be safeguarded and wish to see it placed in a context going beyond economic and functional aspects, which recognises the identities and cultures represented in languages. Advocates of the cause of **regional and minority languages** think more respect could be shown to these languages especially in education and public services and would like to see the EU adopting a more protective role in this respect. The vast majority of respondents share the view that it is easier to do business abroad if you know the local language and that, therefore, companies have an interest in investing in the development of the language skills of their staff. The majority share the view that migrants should preserve their language of origin and treat their linguistic and cultural identity as a necessary basis for integrating into a linguistic and cultural community different from their own.