

Assessing the European Union's support to Regional and Minority Languages

*10 years after the Alfonsi Resolution
(2013-2023)*

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

With the support of

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1. Main goals of report

The goal of this report is to analyse the **EU's support to Regional or Minority Languages** (RMLs) over the *Europe 2020* decade, and more specifically after the 2013 *European Parliament Resolution on Endangered European Languages and Linguistic Diversity* – the so-called *Alfonsi Resolution*. The Resolution noted that Europe's endangered languages do not receive enough specific attention within the Commission's multilingualism policy and that funding for these languages has been diminishing over the years, a situation that must not be allowed to continue into the next multiannual financial framework (2014-2020).

All studies undertaken show that Regional and minority languages are under serious threat of extinction"¹. One of the major threats to linguistic diversity – and especially to RMLs – is that new technologies are limited to a handful of major world languages, supported by machine translation and different other tools such as deep learning, to the detriment of the great majority of smaller languages. The real danger comes from an approach to linguistic diversity that includes some dominant languages but excludes all other.

This report analyses the evolution of the EU support to RMLs over this period.

2. Analytical approach: public policy analysis

The report follows a **public policy analysis perspective**. This means that any public policy must be evaluated to check whether it is delivering the expected results. Just like any other policy – environment, energy, education, etc. – the EU language policy, and specifically the language policy applied to RMLs, must be evaluated to assess how effective the actions taken (or not taken) are.

One may question the feasibility of evaluating the EU support to RLMs as the EU has no general legislative competences. It must be said that the Commission has the power of initiating

¹ [European Day of Languages: Digital survival of lesser-used languages | Think Tank | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](http://europa.eu)

proposals and making recommendations on any issue deemed relevant at EU level, including language issues, even if it has no competences in the field. A practical example: in the field of education, article 165 of the TFEU states that the Union shall contribute to the development of the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States. RMLs are also “the languages of the Member States” as the article is not restricted to the official languages of Member States. This is just one example showing that there is ample room for action, if there is a will.

Also, all political statements claim that Regional and Minority Languages are part and parcel of Europe’s diversity. Here are some examples of the different Commissioners over the past decade:

- “Regional and minority languages are part of the European Union policy landscape on learning about diversity and language learning” – responded the current Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Mariya Gabriel (2019-2024) when the European Parliament (EP) asked the Commission about EU support to Europe’s RMLs in 2022².
- Former Commissioner in charge of languages, Tibor Navracsics (2014-2019), committed himself at his hearing before the EP in 2014 to promoting all languages during his mandate, including RMLs, in the following terms: “I hope we can work together to make full use of this great opportunity to promote all of Europe’s languages, no matter how many people speak them [...] We will do our best to preserve and protect minority languages”³.
- Along the same lines, the previous Commissioner in charge of multilingualism, Androulla Vassiliou (2010-2014), identified languages, including RMLs, as one of her political priorities for her mandate in the following terms: “Language learning and use help us both professionally and socially, opening people’s minds to the cultural diversity

² Parliamentary Question (PQ) [E-000590/2022](#) *EU support for the promotion of multilingual education with special regard to regional and minority languages* (February 2022).

³ Commitments made at the hearing of Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. 1 October 2014. Available here: [IPOL BRI\(2014\)529090 EN.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

which is an integral part of the EU's wealth. We must support not just the EU's official languages but Europe's regional and minority languages”⁴.

This report wishes to analyse how/if these statements translate into policy actions.

The **public policy analysis contains four main steps**, which have been used to operationalize the analysis. This is called the public policy cycle. It is a **process-oriented analytical model** which views policy making as a series of activities divided into 4 different steps:



1. **Agenda setting.** This section analyses whether a specific subject – Regional or Minority Languages in our case – are perceived by public authorities as an element of concern that needs to be included in the public agenda.
2. **Policy formulation.** This section analyses the **policies formulated** taking a wider context into account (political, economic, legal context). The political context influences policy priorities and objectives, the institutional context defines the [legal] framework under which objectives can be pursued, the economic context determines the types, structures or resources allocated whereas the social context influences the perception and the definition of the needs. This section will therefore analyse whether languages, and RMLs in particular, are a policy priority for the EU or not.
3. **Implementation.** This section analyses the **actual policies executed**. This phase analyses the actual policy actions and how they are related to the intended results as

⁴ *My Political Priorities (2010-2014)*, by Androulla Vassiliou. Available [here](#).

well as the rationale for why the policy maker does what it does considering the objectives formulated in phase two. This section analyses the concrete policy actions developed by the EU on RMLs.

4. **Evaluation of results.** The last step of the policy cycle focuses on the **final assessment** and revolves around the idea of how effective results have been.

3. Results

Results on phase 1: Agenda setting

The analysis of phase one – **Agenda setting** – has shown that the *Europe 2020* decade has prioritised **languages from an economic perspective and neglected RMLs**. Languages appear explicitly mentioned in **three** of its seven flagship initiatives: a) *Youth on the move*, which links languages to mobility and youth employment across Europe; b) the *Digital Agenda for Europe*, which speaks of the need to develop a new generation of web-based applications, including for multilingual content and services and c) *the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs*, where languages are considered a strategic element for economic growth and jobs.

The analysis has shown that **RMLs are not mentioned in the European Commission’s agenda in any of the three priorities for the Europe 2020 decade**. They are only present in political speeches and in EU rhetoric on linguistic diversity but absent when it comes to setting the agenda for the *Europe 2020* decade.

The decade has also witnessed the consolidation of two dimensions when it comes to languages: a *utilitarian dimension* and a *sentimental dimension*. The utilitarian dimension has been completely prioritised as if has focused on the purely functional importance of language skills and the economic value of languages for the economy, growth, and jobs. The sentimental dimension refers to the symbolic value of linguistic diversity as a cornerstone of the EU project, which is perceived as principle of EU governance but does not come with a strategic programmatic frame. The term *multilingualism* is usually used to refer to the utilitarian dimension of languages whereas *linguistic diversity* often appears to refer to the principles and values of the EU when it comes to languages.

Through constant initiatives such as resolutions and Parliamentary Questions, the European Parliament has noted the alarming rate at which RMLs are disappearing and repeatedly requested the Commission and the Council to take more action in the field of RMLs over the 2020 decade. The Commission justifies the fact that RMLs are not included in the EU agenda on the grounds that it has no competences on languages and that it is the sole responsibility of its Member States.

We have observed through the analysis, however, that Member States and the Commission have cooperated in the field of language learning through the *Open Method of Coordination*, the EU instrument used to identify “good policy practice from among the grand reservoir of diverse policy approaches in the European arena and propose common actions”. Within the OMC, different working groups have been consolidated over the 2020 decade to cooperate at EU level in the field of foreign language learning. However, no working group has been proposed to promote RMLs at EU level, which exemplifies the lack of political will to include RMLs in the EU’s policy agenda.

From a civil society perspective, the *Europe 2020* decade has witnessed that is probably the most ambitious, **far-reaching attempt to influence the EU agenda on RML** issues: the **Minority SafePack**, an initiative that includes a series of concrete policy recommendations on RMLs addressed to the European Commission within the framework of the European Citizens’ Initiative. Over the decade, the initiative has faced political and legal opposition: the Commission has refused to take additional measures to promote RMLs, an argument that has been supported by the Court of Justice of the EU. Unsatisfied with the political and legal decision, FUEN has recently submitted an appeal (2023) to revisit the Commission’s decision. What was a political proposal from the civil society to place RMLs on the EU’s agenda has turned into a long and thorny political and legal battle which, at the time of finalising this report, remains open.

Results on phase 2: language policy formulation

The analysis of phase two – **language policy formulation** – has shown that **Education and Languages technologies** have been – and currently are – the two policy areas where languages have been prioritised during the *Europe 2020* decade. The European Commission has



undertaken a series of statistics, benchmarks, indicators and guidelines on language competences such as the *European Survey on Language Competences* (2012) or the *Eurobarometer on Europeans and their Languages* (2012), which have compiled data on language competences for the first time at EU level. These benchmarks and statistics have generated the need to adopt an EU policy framework aimed at solving the lack of language competences by Europeans: The *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages*.

The new dominant frame on languages has completely neglected RMLs. No benchmarks, statistics or indicators have been promoted at EU level to monitor the current state of affairs of RMLs, to measure their level of endangerment or to make specific proposals or recommendations.

There is also a **lack on data on specific funding** for RMLs, which does not allow us to offer a detailed, fully-fledged analysis of the number of RMLs projects funded by the EU. The absence of easily accessible figures only allows us to provide approximate figures. The figures analysed in this report show that funding for RMLs continues to be irrisory.

The lack of EU support to RMLs does not match the increasing demands by part of the EU population on stronger action at EU level. Other than the *Minority SafePack Initiative*, EU citizens participating at the Conference on the Future of Europe (2022) have demanded additional protection for RMLs. To these requests we must add the numerous civil society and governmental organisations such as FUEN, NPLD and ELEN requesting more actions at EU level. This shows that while the civil society demands a stronger EU involvement in RMLs, the Commission refuses to take additional measures to promote them and widens the gap between the society and the EU institutions.

Results of phase three: policy execution

The third phase analysed – the **actual language policies executed** – has provided an in-depth analysis of the EU policies and initiatives on languages and has brought to the surface the absence of RMLs in the Commissions' initiatives. In the field of education, examples include the *Online Linguistic Support*, the language learning platform offered for the EU's 24 official



languages plus other non-EU official languages such as Icelandic, Norwegian, Turkish, Macedonian or Serbian; the *Europass*, offered in the 24 official languages plus other non-EU official languages such as Turkish, Macedonian, Norwegian and Icelandic; or the *Juvenes Translatores* contest, available only for the 24 official languages.

As for Language Technologies, none of the products and services offered by the Commission are available for RMLs while most of them are for a number of non-EU official languages. Examples include the *Connecting Europe Facility Automated Translation Building Block* (CEF.AT), a service offered by the European Commission to help European and state public administrations exchange information across language barriers in the EU (available in the 24 official languages + Icelandic and Norwegian) or the *E-translation*, the Commission's machine translation service (available in the 24 official languages + Norwegian, Icelandic, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Arabic and soon in Ukrainian) available for public administrations, universities and companies. It is quite a paradox to note that all the EU-funded LT projects executed conclude that if RMLs (and under-resourced languages) must be included in the new technologies and AI products to avoid their digital extinction while the Commission excludes them from its own LT services.

Results of phase 4: Overall results

The exclusion of RMLs in the different Commission's initiatives is creating a **widening gap between the languages** deemed useful and linked to progress and growth and those perceived as irrelevant and not useful. This, in turn, creates an artificial hierarchy through which languages are ranked and perceived as more or less necessary. The Commission continues to widen language disparities by excluding RMLs in all its LT tools.

It is somewhat surprising to note that, despite the exclusion of RMLs from its own policy initiatives and the repetitive statements on the lack of policy competences on RMLs, the Commission recently launched a specific line of action in 2022 on *Safeguarding Endangered Languages in Europe*, under the Horizon Europe Framework Programme, aimed at enhancing cooperation at the European level between key actors and stakeholders within endangered languages communities. This is the most tangible evidence that that it is perfectly plausible,

even within the current EU policy framework, to develop specific actions aimed at supporting RMLs. It is a matter of political will.

4. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Continue the line of action initiated in 2022 on *Safeguarding Endangered Languages in Europe*, aimed at enhancing cooperation at European level between key actors and stakeholders within endangered language communities. This initiative shows that it is perfectly possible to develop concrete policy proposals aimed at promoting RMLs. All data available show the alarming rate at which regional or minority languages are disappearing worldwide. In the EU, 40 to 50 million people speak one of its 60-80 RMLs, most of which are at serious risk. The EU motto *United in Diversity* should come with a programmatic and concrete frame that must go beyond rhetoric.

Recommendation 2: Include RMLs in all the Commission's initiatives aimed at promoting languages. Many of the current initiatives such as the Online Linguistic Support, Europass, e-translation, *Juvenes Traslatores*, etc. are available not only for the EU's 24 official languages but also for other non-EU languages such as Turkish, Icelandic, Norwegian, etc. The current situation discriminates RMLs, as they are not allowed to participate in these initiatives. This decision has serious consequences for RMLs, as they are perceived as non-useful and unnecessary by citizens, given that they are not allowed to participate.

Recommendation 3: Establish a set of EU-wide studies, benchmarks, statistics and guidelines to monitor the current situation of RMLs in Europe. The 2020 decade has witnessed the proliferation of studies, reports, statistics and polls related to language competences by Europeans. This information has been useful to recommend policy actions in the field of foreign language learning. However, none of these initiatives have focused on RML. At present, we are unable to have an EU-wide perspective on the current level of endangerment of the EU's RMLs.

Recommendation 4: Earmarked funding for RMLs. The information available on funding shows that it continues to be extremely low. The mainstreaming approach to funding shows that small language communities have to compete on equal footing with big ones, which widens the disparities between the big and the small. This report recommends establishing different types of safeguards such as, for example, specific mentions of support to RMLs in the different EU programmes (*Horizon, Erasmus+, Interreg*, etc). This is perfectly possible within the current EU legal framework and would allow for more participation, transparency and visibility of RMLs in the various EU programmes.

Recommendation 5: The reiterative requests for more action from the civil society (CoFoE, Minority SafePack Initiative) must be heard and transformed into concrete policy actions. The gap between European citizens – which have demanded more EU support to RMLs – and the EU institutions is widening. The lack of action might reinforce the feeling that the EU is far, distant and disconnected from people’s lives. Accessibility and closeness to citizens through a more open approach to multilingualism would greatly benefit the EU’s legitimacy.