

4<sup>th</sup> Nitobe Symposium, Vilnius, July 30-August 1, 2005

# **Language Policy Implications of the Expansion of the European Union**

*Concluding Document*

## **Context**

Among the many questions raised by the expanded membership of the European Union is the question of languages. While the Treaty of Rome foresaw equality of status for national languages in EU institutions, the challenges to achieving this in practice are considerable, now that membership has grown to 25 member states with 21 official languages, more than 25 regional and minority languages, and many sizeable immigrant language communities, all with widely varying numbers of speakers. Without a careful, systematic, and well-funded approach to managing the multilingual nature of the EU, the languages and cultural values of some of the smaller states and non-state language groups could come under threat, compromising the principle of equality among EU members and opening the way to new kinds of conflict and struggle within and between nations.

This situation was the focus of the 4<sup>th</sup> Nitobe Symposium, organized by the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems in cooperation with the European Affairs Committee of the Lithuanian Parliament, the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and the University of Vilnius. More than 70 participants from over 20 countries, including nine new EU member states, met to explore the various political alternatives and seek consensus on some basic recommendations on EU language policy under the new conditions.

## **Concerns**

The participants in the Symposium shared a strong commitment to the process of European integration, and in particular to the pursuit of fair, democratic, and high-quality communication among all Europeans. They also shared the belief that current language policies in the EU, both within EU institutions and at the level of national governments, are inadequate to achieving these goals. The following problematic trends appear to be widespread across the EU:

- Failing to treat linguistic issues as a significant aspect of policy-making in such areas as higher education, scientific research, and communications media, to the detriment of the values and needs of small national and non-national language communities;
- Tolerating or encouraging language practices which contravene the principles of multilingualism and linguistic equality, frequently leading to situations in which people with limited or no command of English are unable to participate on equal terms in the EU policy formation process;

- Relying too much on existing language-related institutions and ideas that were never intended to address issues in the European or global context, entrenching a chronic lack of linguistic awareness and expertise in governments at all levels;
- Dramatically reducing the teaching of languages other than English, making it less likely that Europeans will gain a deep understanding and appreciation of the culture of neighbouring countries, and reinforcing a disproportionate presence of British and American cultural products throughout the EU;
- Avoiding open public discussion of language policy, and in particular of viable alternatives to the present situation of official but half-hearted multilingualism coupled with the unregulated and uneven spread of English.

In the context of the 25-member European Union, these failings of language policy were seen as tending to undermine the languages of the smaller states. Speakers at the Symposium noted the existence of significant economic and political burdens imposed on speakers of these languages by the current system, and voiced fears that this would lead in the long run to a loss of status and vitality for all but the largest national languages.

## Commitments

While advocating a wide range of ideas and priorities for addressing these issues, participants in the Symposium agreed on the following five major commitments.

**1. A common framework.** A constructive, realistic language policy framework for the European Union of 25 countries is needed, that would balance the protection and celebration of linguistic diversity with the need for effective, high-quality communication amongst all the citizens of the EU. The participation of a wide range of individuals and institutions, representing many different perspectives and interests, will be vital in order to transform such a vision into reality.

**2. Public and political debate.** In order to generate the necessary political will behind such a common framework, much more effort is needed to raise the level and intensity of public and political debate over language policy. The disadvantages of the current system, the vested interests that sustain it, and a range of positive policy alternatives need to be formulated in ways that can be discussed by ordinary people, reported on in the media, and addressed in practical terms by elected politicians. Long-term political constituencies and coalitions for the promotion of language equality, diversity, and sustainability need to be developed.

**3. Diverse solutions.** The development of a common language policy framework needs to address the following five areas, each of which may involve a different set of solutions and a somewhat different policy process:

- the internal and professional communication of EU institutions, which is closely

connected to the professional culture and self-governance of the institutions themselves;

- the official communication of EU institutions with citizens and governments, which is regulated through the EU policy process involving member states, the Council of Ministers, the European Commission, etc;
- the management of the linguistic situation in EU member states, which comes under the jurisdiction of national parliaments and ultimately answers to the democratic process;
- the management of communication and cultural relations, internal to the EU, by an enormous range of public, professional, commercial, non-governmental, and private organizations and institutions, whose linguistic policies are largely autonomous but often highly constrained by economic and political factors;
- the external communication of EU institutions and member states with non-European states and in international organizations, which is affected by both global and local contexts and in turn may have implications for policy decisions within the EU itself.

**4. Alternative visions.** The development of a common framework, and of policy solutions in particular contexts, will be enriched by informed public debate over competing visions of the linguistic future of the European Union. Among the visions needing articulation and elaboration are the following:

- Drawing lessons from diverse models of multilingualism around the world to better understand the dynamics and potential strengths and weaknesses of the EU language system, and its place within the global language system;
- Defining and defending the status and needs of small national and non-national language communities, both indigenous and immigrant, within the EU;
- Developing policy frameworks to ensure that any widely used lingua franca does not undermine the continued vitality of national languages, the equal treatment of their speakers in EU institutions, and the preservation of cultural diversity;
- Exploring the potential role of Esperanto within an EU language framework, with particular regard to the economic benefits of its use as a pivot language in translation and interpretation, its efficacy as an introduction to foreign language education, and its advantages as a medium of intercultural communication;
- Projecting the future expansion and impact of language and communication technologies, and of innovations in foreign language education, on language learning and use within the EU.

**5. Political and expert collaboration.** The 4<sup>th</sup> Nitobe Symposium provided one of the first opportunities for politicians and experts from a majority of states in the expanded EU to discuss common concerns and priorities in the area of language policy and communication. Progress on the issues identified here will depend on ongoing and increasing collaboration of this kind, including:

- Regular meetings, both at the level of the entire EU, and of groups of states within it, for example through the creation of a language policy conference for the smaller EU states as proposed at the Symposium;
- Development of a research network that brings together work on language economics, sociology, politics, and planning (including education, terminology, legislation, etc.), and can provide timely and well-founded information to policy-makers and the media;
- Ongoing communication by e-mail and other means, with the objective of engaging a growing number of key individuals in the academic, bureaucratic, and political establishments of EU member states in the development of common solutions to shared linguistic concerns

The emergence of the EU as a complex, novel type of international collaboration requires new approaches to the management of multilingualism and efficient, equitable communication. The building of capacity in this area, in the form of ideas, expertise, and institutions, is an urgent priority that deserves attention and resources from national governments and EU institutions alike.

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