



Facts about multilingualism

General

In Europe one speaks rightfully about a **jumble of languages**.

The Council of Europe – comprising 47 European and neighbouring states – speaks about 220-230 indigenous languages and language groups. According to the Council of Europe the Basque language is seen as the most ancient spoken language in Europe today.

According to **official numbers of the EU** there are – next to the 23 official languages of the European Union – more than 60 regional or minority languages; their number of speakers is estimated at 40 million citizens. Christoph **Pan** estimates the number of languages in Europe at about 90 languages, of which 37 are spoken as a national language and 53 languages must be regarded as “stateless” languages.

Moreover there are approximately 175 nationalities living in Europe and some “hybrid” languages are developing as a mixture from the languages of immigrants and the languages spoken in the countries. According to the EUROMOSAIC study that was ordered by the European Commission the **critical limit for the survival of a language lies at 300 000 speakers**.

The **largest language groups** in Europe are Russian with over 110 million speakers and German with about 90 million speakers, followed by Italian, English and French (not taking into account the number of Russians in Europe and Asia with over 131 million speakers).

Among the **large stateless languages** are Catalan and Occitan with each around 6 million speakers. These languages have more speakers than for example Finnish (5 million), Danish (5 million), Norwegian (4 million) and Croatian (4,5 million), which are state languages. But also Welsh, Basque, West Frisian, Breton and some languages in Russia like Bashkir and Chuvash lie above the critical number of speakers. Below this limit are the large majority of regional and minority languages, like Ladin, Rhaetian, Upper and Lower Sorbian, North Frisian and Kashubian.

Worldwide half of the 6000 existing languages are endangered according to UNESCO.

Regional and minority languages

The **autochthonous, national minorities / ethnic groups** of Europe are a significant political, cultural, linguistic, economic, regional and intellectual factor in the regions of Europe. In many regions of Europe the minorities and the regional and minority languages (RML) contribute to a natural situation of bilingualism and multilingualism.



To the autochthonous, national minorities/ethnic groups belong the minorities that came into being as a result of developments in European history, as a result of the changes of state borders and other historical events (Slovenes in Italy, German-speaking South Tyroleans, Alsatians in France). To the autochthonous, national minorities/ethnic groups also the peoples of Europe belong who have never established a state and who live as a minority in the territory of a state (West Frisians in the Netherlands, Sorbs in Germany, Ladins in Italy and Rhaetians in Switzerland).

Many smaller and smallest languages in Europe are critically endangered. It is necessary to preserve these languages as irretrievable heritage of Europe and to use their potential at the same time. Only by involving the different cultural, linguistic, political and intellectual characteristics of Europe and its minorities Europe can grow together, become more than a mere economic union.

This needs apart from adequate protection and support from the national states and the international organisations also awareness for the value of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Until now – also because of too little knowledge and visibility of the regional and minority languages – this awareness has been insufficient. The aim of the network RML2future and its campaign “**language diversity**” is to raise awareness for linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Europe.

Linguistic diversity

To protect and to preserve indigenous languages is part of the universal human rights. Each human being has the right to his or her own language. Language is the basis of your own identity, a means of communication and part of the cultural heritage.

The preservation of linguistic diversity is a universal and European goal. This goal has been enshrined in the Fundamental Rights Charter and the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union as well as in the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe. On the world level legal and political documents of the United Nations protect the use of languages. Specific reference is made to the concept of endangered languages of UNESCO.

Multilingualism and linguistic diversity are basic values of the European Union. This has been enshrined in Article 22 of the European Fundamental Rights Charter. It reads: *The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.*

Multilingualism in the EU

Based on recent research, the **European Commission** defines multilingualism as “both the ability of a person to use several languages, as well as the coexistence of different language community within one geographical area”. *Source: Communication from the Commission 2005 (596).*

The objective is that each European citizen knows his own mother tongue and learns two additional languages. This is summarised as **Mother tongue plus 2.**



A survey of the Eurobarometer 2012 shows that the number of European two- and multilingual citizens has decreased compared to the year 2006: Slightly more than half of Europeans (**54%**) (**-2% since 2006**) is **able to communicate in at least a second language**, a quarter (25%) (**-3% since 2006**) speaks at least two additional languages and one out of ten citizens (10%) can communicate in at least three languages. In contrast 44% of EU citizens do not know any language other than their mother language. Moreover there is a domination of English as a foreign language.

Source: EUROBAROMETER 2006, 2012.

Multilingualism within the European Union is predominantly seen as a key skill for economic competitiveness and labour mobility. But the preservation of linguistic diversity also brings with it an important contribution to maintaining the irretrievable cultural heritage of Europe.

FACTS

In the 45 states belonging to Europe, there are more than 300 national minorities numbering about 100 million people (Source Pan / Council of Europe 47 states with 800 million people www.coe.int).

FACTS EU

In the 27 states that are member of the EU there are 150 autochthonous, national minorities. (EU 27 states with 495 million people / Source www.europa.eu)

FACTS

In each of the 36 European countries that have over 1 million of inhabitants, there are at least three minorities, in other words: the countries of Europe do not have a homogeneous national populace!

FACTS

Ninety languages are spoken in Europe, of these 37 are official state languages and 53 are so-called "stateless" languages.

FACTS

The critical limit for the survival of a language lies at 300 000 speakers. This means that around 80% of all the languages of European minorities are critically endangered.

FACTS EU

The EU counts 27 member states with about 500 million citizens and 23 official languages and it has 60 regional and minority languages that are being spoken by 40 million citizens.

FACTS

With over 110 million native speakers of Russian and 90 million native speakers of German these two languages are the most used mother tongues, followed by English, French and Italian.

FACTS EU

Eurobarometer 64.3: Europeans and their languages
Survey in EU-countries in 2005:

44% monolingual

56% speak one other language

28% speak two other languages



QUOTES

“Tell me, how the minorities in your country are treated and will be able to say in what sort of country you live.”

Ivar Hansen (†), president of the Danish parliament

“He who doesn’t know foreign languages, doesn’t know his own.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.”

Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

Sources: EUROMOSAIC, EUROBAROMETER 2006 and 2012, Eurostat 2006, Pan, Christoph: National Minorities in Europe, Handbook 2003. <http://www.coe.int>, <http://ec.europa.eu>, <http://www.ethnologue.com>, www.unesco.org, www.fuen.org