

Perspectives of Language Policy and Language Rights in the EU

24 - 25 November 2006, Bratislava

The EU continues to develop in the areas of economic, currency and security integration. The member states have already agreed on nine common policies. However, a comprehensive language policy has not yet been agreed upon. There are no clearly formulated principles, rules and responsibilities for common EU communication for the member states that would guarantee equal status for member states' languages at both official and political level. The most recent EU enlargement, taking to 21 the number of official working languages has increased the urgency of resolving this question. In the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and the Baltic States there is concern that the preferential position of English and French has negative consequences for democracy and efficiency and does not serve all languages equally. Prof. François Grin clearly and cogently argues in his September 2005 report that the current dominant position of English leads to transfers of at least 17 mil. EUR annually to the British economy. The question therefore arises as to whether Slovakia and the three other Visegrad countries can afford to subsidise two wealthier countries. This situation underlines the problems of providing equality in the use of languages and citizens' language rights, implementation of multilingualism and promoting effective, non/discriminatory means of communication.

In Slovakia, the EU language issues have been discussed within the National Convention on the EU since the beginning of 2004. Slovakia does not have an institutional base that would deal with these issues comprehensively and in detail and recommend a strategy for language policy. The House of Europe, a non-government organization has initiated the creation of working group for a language policy in integrating Europe. The proceedings and voting are led by two vice-chairmen, one of whom represents the state sector (in this case the Ministry of Foreign affairs SR) and the other the non-government sector. The group analyses the situation in language communication in Slovakia and the EU.

This working group submitted three recommendations to the Slovak government in autumn 2004:

1. To create an expert team that would prepare a document "Language Policy Strategy for the Slovak Republic as an EU Member State" for wider discussion.
2. To organize an international language conference in Slovakia.
3. To co-operate with neighbouring (V4) countries on these issues and create a V4 working group for EU language policy

The expert team which was set up suggested, and is implementing, two projects through the House of Europe Bratislava.

The first project, implemented with grant contributions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of SR, aims to create a framework for the Language policy strategy of the Slovak Republic. The framework, to be completed in co-operation between the expert team and the central bodies of state administration, will be submitted to the Government by the beginning of 2007, for approval by the government and parliament. The main objective of this strategic document is to formulate the language vision of the Slovak Republic that would provide a basis for institutional completion and for elaboration of language policies in particular areas.

The V4 working group for EU language policy has been active since 2005. In its two meetings (Bratislava, December 2005 and Prague, February 2006) its members opened the discussion on current EU communication problems. The group mainly discussed the attitude of V4 countries to the European Commission document "New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism".

The second project aims to organise an international language conference for the Visegrad countries. It is to be held in Bratislava, 24 – 25 November 2006 with the title: “Perspectives of Language Policy and Language Rights in the EU” with financial contribution from the International Visegrad Fund.

There are several reasons for organizing this conference:

1. To continue discussion initiated at the 4th Nitobe Symposium on “Language Policy Implementations of the Expansion of the European Union”, held at Vilnius, 30 July – 1 August 2005 and thus to contribute to the fulfilment of its conclusions.
2. To contribute to the discussion of the document “New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism” issued by the European Commission on 24 November 2005.
3. To link up with the discussion on the conclusions of the “Brussels Declaration on Language Teaching” issued by the European federation of National Institutions for Language, EFNIL on 25 November 2005.
4. To discuss the issues outlined by the 10th European Commission conference DG interpretation “New Strategy for Multilingualism” held in Brussels, on 10 March 2006 CIUTI Forum Geneva conference “Languages in Changing World – between language Rights and Economic Requirements of International Communication” held on 24 March 2006. The representatives of V4 member states would be encouraged to formulate conclusions and recommendations that would be accepted by all four countries and would provide a framework for their language policies.

The conference is organized by the House of Europe and under the auspices of Dušan Čaplovič, Slovak Deputy Prime Minister and Ján Figel', EU Commissioner for Education, Culture and Multilingualism.

Conference thematic blocks

1. EU languages as experienced by EU insiders and outsiders: how is language policy decided on and experienced?
2. What do globalization, Europeanization, and the expansion of English mean for the maintenance of national languages and linguistic diversity?
3. Can international language communication benefit from the option of a planned language?
4. The formulation and implementation of language policy in the Visegrad countries as member states of the EU.

Working languages

The decision on working languages illustrates the complexity of language issues. The main working language of the conference are Slovak, as the official language of the host country; English, as the generally perceived language of international communication; and Esperanto as an example of the planned, neutral language option. Participants of three other Visegrad countries will be able to contribute to the panel discussions in their official languages (Czech, Hungarian, Polish) and all conference documents will be, in co-operation with the Nitobe Center, translated into the languages of all participating countries.

For more details contact:

Ivo Samson, Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, samson@sfpa.sk

Danica Lauková, danica.laukova@gmail.com , tel: 00421 905 122552

or

www.euractiv.sk