

Multilingualism: The language of the European Union

SUMMARY

Some 7 000 languages are spoken globally today. However, half of the world's population shares just six native languages, and some 90 % of all languages may be replaced by dominant ones by the end of the century.

The harmonious co-existence of 24 official languages is one of the most distinctive features of the European project. Multilingualism is not only an expression of the EU countries' cultural identities, it also helps preserve democracy, transparency and accountability. No legislation can enter into force until it has been translated into all official languages and published in the Official Journal of the EU. Crucially, the provisions relating to the EU language regime can only be changed by a unanimous vote in the Council of the EU.

The EU is committed to promoting language learning but has limited influence over educational and language policies, as these are the responsibility of the individual EU countries. In 2016, over one third (35.4 %) of adults in the EU-28 did not know any foreign languages. A similar proportion (35.2 %) declared that they knew one foreign language, while just over one fifth (21 %) said they knew two foreign languages.

The European Parliament is committed to ensuring the highest possible degree of multilingualism in its work. Based on the 24 official languages that constitute the public face of the EU, the total number of linguistic combinations rises to 552, since each language can be translated into the 23 others. Currently, over 600 staff employed in translation and over 270 in interpreting take care of the translation and interpretation needs of the 705 Members of the European Parliament. Internally, the EU institutions mostly use just three working languages: English, French and German.

The overall cost for delivering translation and interpreting services in the EU institutions is around €1 billion per year, which represents less than 1 % of the EU budget or just over €2 per citizen.

Following the success of the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe designated 26 September as the European Day of Languages. This is an update of a briefing published in 2019.



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Global linguistic diversity

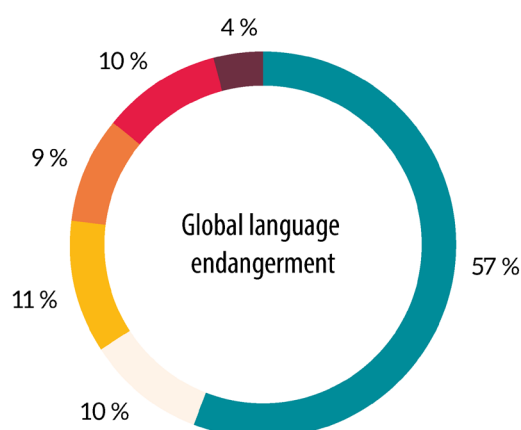
Between 6 000 and 7 000 languages are [spoken](#) in the world today. Giving a precise figure is impossible, since the borderline between a language and a dialect is not well defined. Strikingly, 97 % of the world's population [speaks](#) about 4 % of the world's languages, while only about 3 % speaks the roughly 96 % of remaining languages. Half of the world's 7.8 billion [inhabitants](#) share just [six native languages](#). Some 3 % of the world's languages ([255](#)) belong to Europe. The highest number of living languages – 2 165 – is found in Asia.

Unless current trends change, some 90 % of all languages spoken today may be [replaced](#) by other dominant ones by the end of the century. The UNESCO [Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#) reveals that 40 % of languages spoken in the world are endangered (see Figure 1). Worryingly, at least 2 000 of the world's endangered languages have under 1 000 speakers, and 4 % have disappeared in the past 70 years.

Did you know that...

Silbo Gomero, also known as *el silbo* ('the whistle'), is a transposition of Spanish from [speech to whistling](#), used by inhabitants of La Gomera island in the Canaries, to communicate across the deep ravines and narrow valleys of the island. The only whistled language in the world that is fully developed and practised by a large community of more than 22 000 people, *el silbo* enables messages to be exchanged over a distance of up to 5 kilometres. Taught in schools since 1999, Silbo Gomero was inscribed on [UNESCO's](#) List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

Figure 1 – Degrees of language endangerment



Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational Language Transmission
Safe or data deficient	Language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted.
Vulnerable	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.
Severely endangered	Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
Critically endangered	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
Extinct since 1950	There are no speakers left (included in the Atlas if presumably extinct since the 1950s)

Data source: [Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#), UNESCO, last updated in 2017.

Note: Data from the original source do not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

Running a multilingual EU

In the EU, [multilingualism](#) is understood as 'the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives'. The EU's multilingualism policy has three goals:

- to **encourage language learning** and promote linguistic diversity. Indeed, multilingualism aims to prevent discrimination between citizens whose languages are spoken by a large number of people and others using less widely spoken ones;
- to **give citizens access to EU legislation**, procedures and information in their own languages. Multilingualism makes it possible for Europeans to participate in public debates and consultations;
- to **promote a multilingual economy**. The efficiency of the single market is based, among other things, on a multilingual mobile workforce.

Even though the term 'multilingualism' does not appear in the Treaties, the concept is rooted in the basic legal texts of the EU. The very first [piece of legislation](#), adopted by the Council of the European Economic Community back in 1958, determined the official and working languages of the European institutions. It specified that no European law could enter into force until it had been translated into all official languages and published in the EU's [Official Journal](#). The [EU language regime](#) can only be changed by a unanimous vote in the Council of the EU.

All language versions of an EU law have the same legal value, unlike UN or OECD documents, where only the original is the authentic version. Legislation and documents of major public importance or interest are produced in all 24 official languages. Other documents – such as correspondence with national authorities and decisions addressed to particular individuals or entities – are translated only into the destination languages.

Citizens addressing the European institutions may use any official language and are entitled to a reply in the same language.

For increased efficiency, the European Commission operates internally in three 'working' languages – English, French and German. The situation is somewhat different in the European Parliament (see section on the European Parliament below).

In the digital age, choosing the right language (coverage) for a website is increasingly important. It is interesting to note that the European Commission is under no legal obligation to provide extensive translation of its websites into all official languages. However, for ease of access, the Commission offers information in as many languages as possible.

Language regime of other multinational bodies

The EU's law-making function and the direct involvement of its citizens in its affairs explain why it uses more languages compared to other multinational bodies, such as the UN or NATO, which operate only at inter-governmental level and have no legislative function. For instance, unlike the EU, the UN, with 193 members, has [six official languages](#). The [Council of Europe](#), with 47 members, publishes its official documents in English and French only, while [NATO](#), with 29 members, uses mainly English, despite having two official languages.

Use of official languages on European Commission websites

Increasingly, Commission websites offer machine translation, aiming to strike a balance between respect for speakers' native languages and practical considerations such as resources. Thus, urgent or short-lived information may appear first in just a few or even just one language, with additional languages being added at a later stage. The same is true of technical information, the final choice depending on the target audience.

Commission services [argue](#) that all content is published at least in English, since research shows that this enables around 90 % of all visitors to access the Commission websites in either their preferred foreign or their mother tongue.

From a broader perspective, multilingualism is of high relevance to a wide range of policy areas, such as employment, innovation, education and social inclusion.

Following the success of the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe designated 26 September as the European Day of Languages. It was introduced in a [Commissioner's portfolio](#)¹ as a fully fledged policy area for the first time in 2004.

Preserving diversity

National languages are a fundamental feature of a country's cultural identity and an important element of its sovereignty. The EU operates as a 'family' whose members preserve their cultural identity, a principle that is reflected in the EU motto 'United in diversity'. When acceding to the EU, new Member States declare which of their languages will become an official EU language.

Currently, the EU has three alphabets (Cyrillic, Greek and Latin) and 24 official languages (see Figure 2), which are listed in the Treaties ([Article 55\(1\) TEU](#)). English is still one of those languages, even following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU on 31 January 2020. In fact,

English will remain an official and working language of the EU institutions as long as it is listed as such in [Regulation No 1](#) from 1958. English is also one of the official languages of Ireland and Malta.

Linguistic diversity is part of Europe's DNA. Alongside official EU languages, national sign languages and the languages brought by various waves of migrants, complete the linguistic picture of the EU. It is estimated that citizens of at least [175 nationalities](#) are now living within the EU's borders.

EU countries are also committed to the preservation of regional or minority languages. The critical [threshold](#) for the survival of a language is estimated at 300 000 speakers. According to [UNESCO](#), there are 221 endangered regional and minority languages in the EU (see Figure 3). However, they are not languages spoken within a particular state. Their protection and promotion is ensured by the European [Charter](#) for Regional or Minority Languages adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe in 1992, and signed and ratified by [16 EU countries](#). Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Bulgaria have yet to sign the charter. France, Italy, and Malta, meanwhile, have not ratified it. Therefore, while they are committed to respecting their regional and minority languages, they have not taken any specific measures for their promotion in public life, for instance in the media or in cultural activities.

The charter protects and promotes languages; however, any [claims outside this scope](#) are explicitly excluded from its remit. It also encourages countries to cooperate in order to promote the regional and minority languages they share, such as Basque – in use in both Spain and France.

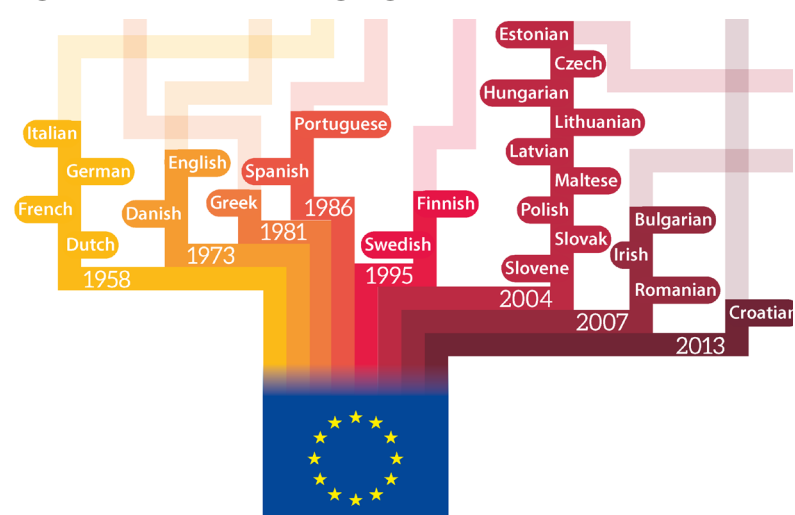
Central and eastern EU countries exhibit a greater number of regional and minority languages, reaching 18 in Romania, 17 in Poland and 16 in Croatia. In most EU countries in this area, regional and minority languages are the official languages of their neighbours. This is the case for German in Poland and Czechia, and for Hungarian in Slovakia and Romania.

Three European regional languages – Catalan, Basque and Galician – enjoy the status of semi-official (or co-official) languages. Concretely, this means that based on an [agreement](#) governing their use in EU documents, translations are provided by the Spanish government, as and when needed and at its own expense.

Interpretation from (but not into) Basque, Catalan/Valencian/Balearic and Galician is provided upon request for certain Council formations with regional representatives, as well as in the plenaries of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.

Catalan and Basque, together with, among others, Corsican, Occitan and Breton, are regional languages in France but do not enjoy official status there, which affects their promotion accordingly.

Figure 2 – Official EU languages since 1958



Data source: [Article 55, Treaty on European Union](#).

Irish language achieves full status as an official and working EU language

Until recently, a [derogation agreement](#) limited the volume of documents translated into Irish, owing to a shortage of translation staff. This derogation expired on 31 December 2021, thus putting Irish on an equal footing with the rest of the EU official languages. The EU institutions have over 170 Irish-speaking linguistic staff and their number is expected to increase to approximately 200 by early 2022.

The platform of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) – a forum allowing European citizens to debate Europe's challenges and priorities – is fully multilingual, and participants can submit ideas, comments, and register events in all EU official languages, as well as in the co-official languages of Spain.

Already in 2000, the authors of a [study](#) warned that the major threat to linguistic diversity – most notably on the Internet – would come from multilingualism limited to half a dozen main languages supported by machine translation to the detriment of the great majority of smaller languages. The real danger thus would tend to come from a façade of linguistic diversity favouring some dominant languages but excluding all others.

Adoption of a [single EU language](#) has sometimes been considered, but democracy, transparency and accountability require that all EU citizens understand clearly what is being done in their name.

Moreover, respect for linguistic diversity is enshrined in the Treaties ([Article 3\(3\) TEU](#)) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU ([Article 22](#)).

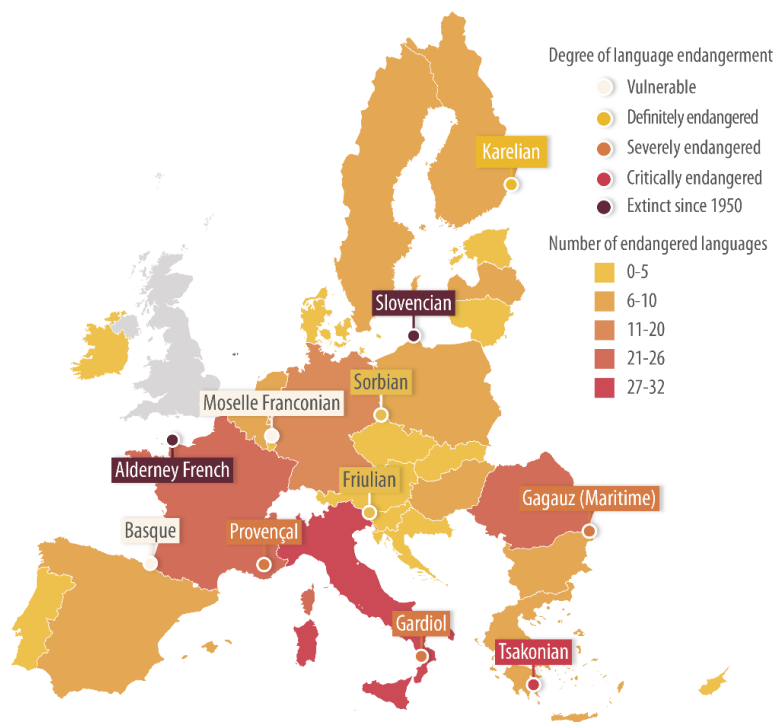
Looked at from the supranational perspective of the EU, effective multilingualism can only be achieved if ways are found for citizens and bodies to communicate with each other – either by using a language other than their native one, or by setting up a comprehensive translation system. The EU has sought to facilitate both modes of communication, by supporting language learning in the Member States and by creating, maintaining and expanding complex interpretation and translation services (see below).

Language learning

The EU promotes language learning but has limited influence over educational and language policies, as these are the responsibility of the individual EU countries. In practice, this means that the EU cannot go beyond recommendations.

In 2002, the EU leaders set the objective of ensuring that Europeans could communicate in two languages in addition to their mother tongue. Education ministers renewed this commitment in May 2019, by adopting one of the components of a new package of legislation, namely a text [recommending](#) the acquisition of a first foreign language for social or professional purposes and, if possible, a second foreign language to enable interaction with a certain degree of fluency.

Figure 3 – Endangered languages in the EU



Data source: [Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#), UNESCO, last updated in 2017.

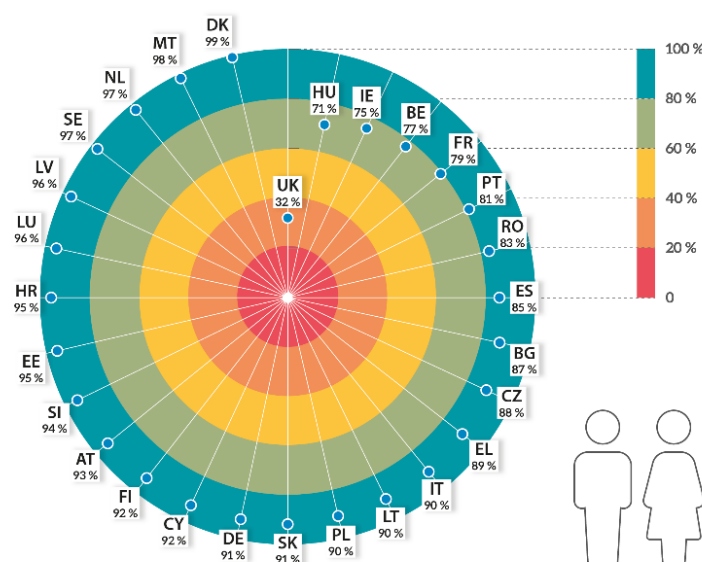
The European Language Label

The European Language Label is an award encouraging the development of new methodologies and initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning. It is awarded annually or biannually to the most innovative language learning initiatives within [Erasmus+](#), the EU's flagship programme supporting education. By encouraging such initiatives, the label seeks to raise the standards of language teaching across the EU.

Despite this commitment, however, the EU still has a long way to go in terms of multilingualism and language learning. According to [Eurostat statistics](#), in 2016, over one third (35.4 %) of adults in the EU-28 reported that they did not know any foreign languages. A similar proportion (35.2 %) declared that they knew one foreign language, while just over one fifth (21 %) said they knew two foreign languages. The percentages of younger people aged between 25 to 34 and those holding university degrees claiming to know at least one foreign language were 73 % and 83 % respectively.

The majority of Europeans do not describe themselves as active [language learners](#), and around a quarter (23 %) have never learned a second language. Over two-thirds of Europeans (68 %) have learned a foreign language at school. Interestingly, a 2018 [survey](#) shows that while, on average, 80 % of respondents (with wide differences among countries) can read and write in more than one language, only 66 % of respondents say they would be able to follow a (higher education) course in more than one language (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Students able to read and write in more than one foreign language, %



Data source: [The European Education Area](#), Flash Eurobarometer 466, 2018.

Schools across the EU have substantial autonomy in terms of how they support the [integration](#) of newly arrived migrant students. Nevertheless, in the majority of EU countries, top-level education authorities issue recommendations on how this integration should take place in practice. Two main models exist: direct integration into mainstream education accompanied by additional support measures, and specific preparatory classes for a limited period before entering mainstream education.

Regrettably, limited linguistic competence remains one of the main obstacles to benefiting from the opportunities offered by the EU education, training and youth programmes. Conversely, enhancing EU citizens' command of foreign languages will enable them to benefit more from the opportunities offered by the single market. Indeed, data from [research](#) indicate that there is a direct link between language skills and employability.

European initiatives supporting multilingual competence

The [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR) provides a transparent and comprehensive reference allowing to assess and compare linguistic levels. It distinguishes between basic user level, independent user level and proficient user level, with the latter enabling a user to work or study in the language assessed.

Multilingualism in the European Parliament

The European Parliament is committed to ensuring the highest possible degree of multilingualism in every possible aspect of its work. For instance, the right of each Member of the European Parliament (MEP) to read and write parliamentary documents, follow debates and speak in their own official language is expressly recognised in the Parliament's [Rules of Procedure](#).

Similarly, all parliamentary documents are published in all of the official EU languages, which are considered equally important.

With the help of its translation and interpreting services, the European Parliament aims to support and strengthen multilingualism and to help bring the EU's policies closer to its citizens. Informing Europeans, in particular about their rights and obligations under EU law, and communicating with them in their own languages, is essential for the transparency, legitimacy and efficiency of the EU.

Meeting the [translation and interpreting](#) needs of 705 MEPs is a considerable challenge. Currently, Parliament's translation service employs approximately 1 140 staff, among them more than 600 translators, making it one of the biggest employers of its kind in the world. About 30 % of the translation work is outsourced to freelance translators.

Parliament also employs some 270 staff interpreters and has a pool of some 1 500 external accredited interpreters, frequently called upon to cater for its needs. This means that between 700 and 900 interpreters are on hand for Parliament's plenary sessions, held once per month in Strasbourg (France). (See Figure 5). During the Covid-19 lockdown, Parliament introduced a unique online interpreting service, enabling Members to continue their work remotely.

Figure 5 – Multilingualism in the European Parliament



Data source: European Parliament, 2022.

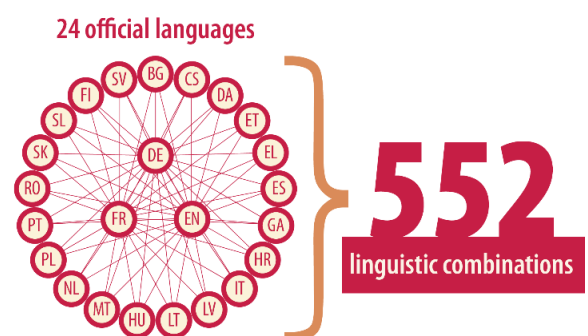
With 24 official languages, the total number of linguistic combinations reaches the impressive number of 552, since each language can be translated into the 23 others.

As it is not always possible to translate directly from a source language into a target language (for instance, from Maltese into Bulgarian), a system of 'relay' languages has been in use since 2004. It involves translating the text first into English, French or German and only then into another language (see Figure 6). This system is also applied in interpreting.

Sign language interpretation is also provided in plenary debates, in accordance with the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), ratified by the EU in 2011.

The legislation adopted by the European Parliament affects nearly 450 million people in 27 countries. For this reason the 24 language versions of each

Figure 6 – Linguistic combinations in the European Parliament



Data source: European Parliament, 2022

act must be identical and as clear as possible. Verifying the linguistic and legislative quality of the texts is the job of the Parliament's team of 75 lawyer-linguists. Throughout the legislative procedure, working with their counterparts in other institutions, they ensure the highest possible quality and consistency of legislative texts in all EU languages.

The 24 official languages of the EU are the European Parliament's public face. Internally, the EU legislator operates with streamlined procedures in the name of efficiency, speed and cost, and in general uses three working languages: English, French and German.

Parliament's translation services use specific IT applications to minimise the risk of human error and to speed up the production of texts. Document repositories and reference databases are created so that parts of texts already translated can be re-used (see box).

In 2018, Parliament's translation service processed over 2.7 million pages. If printed out and piled up, the stack would be nearly as high as the Eiffel Tower.

A 2013 European Commission estimate of the total [cost of translation and interpretation](#) services delivered in all of the EU institutions – including the European Commission, European Parliament, the Council, Court of Justice of the European Union, European Court of Auditors, European Economic and Social Committee, Committee of Regions – stood at around €1 billion per year. This represented less than 1 % of the EU budget or just over €2 per citizen per year.

The EU institutions are continually striving to improve efficiency and maximise the use of resources to keep the cost of these services at reasonable levels.

European Parliament position

In 2018, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on language equality in the digital age, drawing on a [study](#) on the same topic commissioned by Parliament.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) complained that a lack of adequate policies at EU level meant that there was a widening technology gap between well-resourced languages and less-resourced languages, with over 20 European languages in danger of digital language extinction. Indeed, lesser-used European languages are at a significant disadvantage, owing to a substantial lack of tools, resources and research funding.

Parliament also underlined the increasing digitalisation of European society, leading to disparities in access to information, particularly for the low-skilled, the elderly, people on low incomes and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, Members asked why language technologies (see last section) were not at the top of the European political agenda, despite respect for linguistic diversity being enshrined in the Treaties.

Noting that the digital single market remains fragmented by a number of barriers, including language barriers, the MEPs stressed that the EU was lagging behind on language technologies, as a result of fragmentation, inadequate investment, poorly coordinated research, insufficient funding and legal barriers, with the market currently dominated by non-European actors unable to address the specific needs of a multilingual Europe.

The difference between translators and interpreters

European Parliament interpreters render one language into another orally, in real time, during meetings. Translators, on the other hand, work with written documents, producing an identical version of the document in the target language. They are also involved in other linguistic tasks, such as adapting texts for podcasts and subtitling and audio recording in 24 languages.

Interactive Terminology for Europe

[Interactive Terminology for Europe](#) (IATE) is the EU's terminology database. With over 8 million terms in 1.2 million entries, IATE is the reference in the terminology field, and is considered to be the largest multilingual terminology database in the world. It offers extensive data in the 24 official EU languages, and also in Latin. Users connect to IATE from over 180 different countries. Some 50 million queries are run in IATE every year.

While language technologies can benefit both private companies and public bodies, just 16 % of European citizens made online purchases from other EU countries in 2015. In this context, Members drew attention to the fact that language technologies could help to improve communication and boost economic growth. Members also insisted on the importance of European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) having easy access to language technologies, in order to grow their businesses online by accessing new markets.

More recently, in 2020, reacting to a European Citizens' Initiative, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the 'Minority SafePack – one million signatures for diversity in Europe'. Such initiatives are an opportunity for citizens to identify and articulate their aspirations and to ask for EU action, thus enhancing EU integration.

Stressing the need to respect linguistic rights in communities where there is more than one official language, Parliament encouraged the EU to raise awareness on multilingualism throughout Europe, via EU programmes and active promotion of the benefits of multilingualism. Members also invited those EU countries that have not done so, to implement and ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Finally, Members noted that while some 8 % of EU citizens belong to a national minority and some 10 % speak a regional or minority language, every EU citizen should be able to enjoy culture and entertainment in his or her own language. Since linguistic minorities are often too small or lack the institutional support to build up a comprehensive system of media services of their own, Parliament called on the Commission to make an assessment and take the most appropriate measures to support the development of such media services.

Recent developments

In September 2021, the authors of a study on 'Multilingualism in the EU Institutions' presented their preliminary findings to the Members of the Committee on Culture and Education in the European Parliament.

The experts highlighted the need to revise the regulation on multilingualism – in force since 1958 – to adapt it to the digital age. Furthermore, the authors recommended ensuring linguistic equality by providing translations into all official EU languages of those documents impacting citizens most directly, such as guidelines for funding programmes, calls for proposals, and open EU competitions. The final results of the study are expected in April 2022.

In January 2022, the French Minister for Culture, Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin, presented the policy priorities of the French Presidency for the coming six months. Addressing the Culture and Education Committee, Ms Bachelot-Narquin insisted on the idea of strengthening inter-cultural exchanges by means of increased mobility for artists and cultural workers, with a special focus on multilingualism.

Similarly, France wishes to honour multilingualism during its six-month Presidency of the Council of the EU. The aim is to promote, alongside English, the other working languages within the EU institutions. Following in the footsteps of the previous French Presidency, in the second half of 2008 (Year of Intercultural Dialogue and Multilingualism), France would like to see [legislative and negotiating work in the EU Council carried out in French](#) over its six-month term.

The Presidency has been holding its meetings in French, in particular those in preparation of the meetings of the Member States' ambassadors to the EU. Diplomatic sources [argue](#) that this confronts the institution with an efficiency issue, since while interpreting is systematic at formal Council meetings, this is not always the case at preparatory group level. The French Presidency has made certain arrangements to facilitate the implementation of its initiative, notably through strengthening the offer of French courses in Brussels.

The defence of the French language at European level has also been brought to the fore through the publication of a [vade-mecum](#) on the subject by the French General Secretariat for European Affairs. Taking as a starting point the European Treaties, but also the rules of procedure of the various

EU institutions, the document insists on the use of French in all circumstances, whether in formal or informal meetings.

Language technologies and multilingualism

In an effort to bring online content to everyone, no matter where they live and what language they speak, the EU supports research and innovation in the area of [language technologies](#), and their deployment to breakdown language barriers, while preserving and promoting multilingualism.

Language technologies are often linked to the use of machine translation, but they offer much more than that. Specific applications allow for intricate text analysis, including named-entity recognition and anonymisation, dialogue systems, search engines, automatic text summarisation, speech-to-text and more. Such technologies can be customised for any specific use where human language is processed.

Two EU funding programmes are helping to bring language technologies to the next level:

- the [Horizon Europe Programme](#) fosters research and innovation through cross-sectorial [support](#) of language technologies;
- the [Digital Europe programme](#), meanwhile, encourages Europe's public and private sectors to deploy language technologies.

The European language technology industry is instrumental in Europe's strategic and technological autonomy. Public solutions, [such as eTranslation](#), provide basic [tools and services](#) and ensure that language technologies are available to a large number of European public administrations and SMEs. These have been created thanks to the newest AI technologies and have been trained on the large amounts of data available gathered through an EU-wide [language resource collection effort](#).

Combining all these efforts is a major challenge for the EU and a prerequisite for achieving the '[digital decade](#)' transition by 2030.

ENDNOTE

¹ In 2004, Slovakian Ján Figel was appointed Commissioner responsible for education, training, culture and multilingualism. Currently, Commissioner Mariya Gabriel is in charge of innovation, research, culture, education and youth. Although multilingualism is not formally part of the Commissioner's portfolio, language learning falls within her remit.

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