

Multilingualism and Political Inclusion in the European Union

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Three reasons why the EU is multilingual

1. Languages retain their position as markers of national identity while providing the basis for building a common political community.
 - Instrument in building a European community that is “united in diversity.”
2. Crucial to the functioning of democracy in the EU
 - Offering EU citizens access to information in any official language helps ensure the right and ability of citizens to participate in EU politics...
 - ... by giving them access to the information they need...
 - to understand how decisions are deliberated, negotiated, and finalized
 - to learn about the content and consequences of the laws and regulations they are subject to;
 - to hold their representatives accountable

Three reasons (cont.)

3. All language versions of EU law are equally authentic.
 - There is no “original” version of legislative text that prevails in case of conflict
 - Hence: all language versions are (aim to be) drafted so that they have equivalent effect across all member states.
 - Important corollary of principles of supremacy and direct effect
 - Because the equal application of EU law would be violated if citizens were prevented from understanding and thus invoking the rights conferred upon them through EU law.

Legal foundations of EU language regime

- EEC Council Regulation No. 1 (1958)
 - Official languages: Dutch, French, German, Italian
 - Regulations and documents to be drafted and published in those languages
 - Persons or MS may choose their preferred official language
 - Citizens may request and receive information in official language of choice
 - Documents sent by EU institutions to MS must be in MS language
 - But also: some degree of flexibility for “internal” activities

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A delicate political equilibrium

- Formal commitment to language equality between national languages ...
- ... plus *de facto* "limited multilingualism"
 - Politically not possible to introduce language hierarchy
 - Procedurally necessary to favor shared language
- System accommodates functional needs of EU actors under a "veil of language equality"

Should there be fewer official or working languages?

- Some suggest as much, usually referencing efficiency and costs
 - English (e.g., van Els 2005; House 2001; Archibugi 2005; Cogo & Jenkins 2010; De Swaan 2001; Rose 2008; Van Parijs 2011)
 - ... plus French and German (Ginsburgh and Weber 2005; Ginsburgh, Ortuno-Ortin, & Weber 2005; Kraus 2008; van Els 2001)
 - ... plus Spanish and Italian (Ammon 2006)
 - ... plus Polish (Fidrmuc, Ginsburgh & Weber 2009; Ginsburgh & Weber 2011).

The costs of multilingualism

- Monetary costs:
 - ~ €1 billion, 0.8 percent of the 2018 EU budget, €2.20 per capita
- Indirect costs:
 - Administrative inconveniences, delays in the availability of documents, postponement of meetings, errors and misunderstandings, legal uncertainty
 - (But: not clear that fewer languages would alleviate these problems...)
- Implicit costs: “linguistic disenfranchisement”

Linguistic disenfranchisement

- Gazzola (2016): the EU's current multilingual regime is most efficient...
- ... because alternatives leave large proportions of Europeans linguistically, and thus politically, disenfranchised
 - “English only”:
 - 45% of EU residents (pre-Brexit) have no English and would be left with no access to information
 - 79% of EU residents (pre-Brexit) are neither native speakers nor proficient in English
 - English is not a basic skill in Europe, not even among younger adults (who are more likely to speak foreign languages but do not master them much better)
 - English, French & German:
 - Would disenfranchise 26% to 49% of residents (depending on the indicator used)

Linguistic disenfranchisement (cont.)

- Moreover: reducing the number of official languages would have regressive effects
 - It would make access to information particularly difficult for the least educated people, those with the lowest income status, the unemployed, the retired, the permanently disabled, and residents fulfilling domestic tasks. For example:
 - 17% with tertiary education have no English, compared to 47% with secondary education
 - 21% of employed people have some English, French, or German, compared to 41% of the unemployed.
 - Higher income is associated with more foreign language proficiency
- Hence: translation and interpretation crucial for political participation and social cohesion in the EU.