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## LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION RIFE ACROSS EU

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Calls for legislation to be drawn up, or even for a Language Commissioner to be appointed, have been made, in order to combat a rising number of discrimination cases across the European Union.

At an event hosted by the GUE/NGL and EFA-Greens in the European Parliament last week, several MEPS and officials from other international institutions met to debate language discrimination in the EU and share examples of how it affects EU citizens.

Josu Juaristi MEP (GUE/NGL), who hails from the Basque Country, pinpointed a case in which the Spanish parliament refused to even consider a bill because it had not been translated into Castilian (standard Spanish) from its original Basque, despite Spain having signed and ratified the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Juaristi's countryman, Paul Bilbao-Sarria, later highlighted that the Spanish Constitution may give citizens the right to speak their own languages, but that Spaniards have a duty to speak Castilian; a provision that has led to cases of Basque-speaking children unable to communicate with Castilian-speaking doctors; a staggering 1,000+ cases of discrimination were recorded last year alone, in a number of sectors.

### **France: a rogue nation**

The Basque Country, much like its language, is a unique case, as linguistic rights vary depending on what side of the French/Spanish border you reside. France, which has not yet ratified the Council of Europe's charter, was branded a rogue state by Alexis Quentin from the Occitan institute, who also criticised France's legal framework, which means that language schools are not provided with funding until they have been running for five years.

### **MAKE TURKISH AN OFFICIAL EU LANGUAGE, CYPRUS TELLS EU**

Greek-Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades has asked the Dutch EU Presidency to add Turkish to the bloc's 24 official languages, in order to boost attempts to reach a reunification agreement on the Mediterranean island.

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Liadh Ní Riada MEP (GUE/NGL), who notably went on a language strike last year when she refused to speak anything but her native Irish in European Parliament meetings in order to highlight the

dismantling of Irish by her national government, said that road-signs should only be in Irish, particularly in Irish-speaking regions. When English is included, she said that it lowers the status of the language.

Most of the events attendees also disputed the use of the term minority languages. Ramon Tremosa MEP (ALDE) said that Catalan should not be labelled as a minority language since the term suggests that there is a linguistic hierarchy. He also made the point that FC Barcelona, one of the largest and most successful football clubs in the world, tweets in Catalan and has more than five million followers.

In a similar vein, Davyth Hicks, the Secretary-General of the European Language Equality Network (ELEN) and a Cornish speaker, said that there are more than 60 regional and minority languages across the EU, spoken by 55 million people, which amounts to 10% of the blocs population.

### **EU does little, should do more**

In terms of how to address the issue, Hicks argued that the EU should draft legislation similar to other laws that protect other entities, like the Birds and Habitats directives.

Others suggested setting up an independent observer to ensure that the non-discrimination principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights are completely respected or even appointing an Ombudsman or Commissioner to protect linguistic diversity and rights.

The Commission previously had a Multilingualism Commissioner between 2007 and 2010, when Romanias Leonard Orban held the position. It was short-lived partly because many in the executive thought it overlapped with other portfolios.

Conchúr Ó Giollagáin, an expert in the Scots language, said that it was remarkable that Gaelic languages such as his, as well as Irish and Welsh, had survived, given the ethnocide they have experienced. The professor recommended that an emergency commission be set up in order to change the attitude that less-spoken languages are a mere aesthetic add-on.

### **IRISH TO BE GIVEN FULL OFFICIAL EU LANGUAGE STATUS**

Although it has been an official language of the EU since 2007, Irish will now be gradually upgraded to a full working language of the European institutions.

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Generally, the EU was accused of doing little to intervene on behalf of languages. But Kristina Cunningham of the European Commissions DG Education and Culture insisted that the executives hands are tied when it comes to linguistic discrimination.

The Lisbon Treaty only grants the Commission the power to legislate against discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation [ ] not language.

Cunningham also said that even if the institution were granted the competence to do so, it is ten times more difficult to propose something now than under the previous Commission.

When asked by a member of the audience whether the executives failure to act in this area would lead to more anti-EU sentiment, she replied that if it does, it is because of national governments

scapegoating the EU.

Both Cunningham and Iryna Ulasiuk of the OSCEs high commission on national minorities stressed that sanctions and punitive measures are not the way to convince member states to promote linguistic diversity. Davyth Hicks disagreed. He argued that sanctions should be levied against states that do not comply with the charters.

Hicks also cited a 2015 infringement procedure opened by the Commission against Slovakia based on discrimination against Roma children. Although the case was officially opened because of the alleged lack of access to education on racial or ethnic grounds, ELEN insisted that it had, at least, some linguistic discrimination aspect to it.

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