

Konrad Fuhrmann

Opening speech

A language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Or to say this in the minority language the quotation was initially formulated, in Yiddish: “A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot”.

This expression brilliantly demonstrates the close link between official language and repression: to begin with, all our languages were regional or minority languages, until a nation state chose one of them to become the official language across its territory or at least part of it. Since the rise of the modern nation state, this evolution has usually been accompanied by violence against all other languages spoken in the country. In this way, the relationship between official national languages and all the other regional or minority languages remains tense, even though this attitude is now in the process of changing in most countries. Nevertheless, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages clearly highlights that “the protection and encouragement of regional or minority languages should not be to the detriment of the official languages and the need to learn them”. I am therefore extremely curious to find out what the experts will say about this persisting uneasy relationship between official and regional and minority languages in Europe.

When the European Community was founded, its very first law – Regulation 1 – addressed the concept of languages, but uniquely the official ones: “Regulations and other documents of general application shall be drafted in the official languages.” It was up to the Member States to decide which language they wanted to be recognised as an official language at European level. Therefore, when Ireland joined the Community in 1973, Ireland did not yet require full status for Irish, though the language naturally remained official language in Ireland. In 2007, Irish was then initially adopted as a further EU treaty language and since this date, it has been an official language of the EU, but with limited status.

Subsequently, the European Commission established a clear policy of multilingualism based on the motto “unity in diversity”. This policy supports every language and culture present in Europe, including those of regional, minority and migrant communities. Naturally, the individual Member States are still primarily responsible for drafting their own linguistic policy, with the Commission merely delivering guidance. The Commission contributes to: “the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity” (Article 149 of the Treaty of Rome). Under its reduced remit, however, the Commission does all it can to protect and promote linguistic diversity, including supporting minority and migrant languages. In the Communication on Multilingualism published in September 2008, the Commission concedes: “Member States are the key decision-makers on language policy, including on regional and minority

languages, for which the Council of Europe's *European Charter for Regional or Minority languages* provides a comprehensive framework". The Communication nevertheless emphasises: "Each of the many national, regional, minority and migrant languages spoken in Europe adds a facet to our common cultural background." For this reason, grants can also be awarded to projects promoting minority languages under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. In fact, this programme provides support for all modern languages.

In this sense, the Commission continues to support regional and minority languages, together with the official languages of the European Union. Since 23 October 2009, the *Commission Civil Society Platform* has also addressed the concepts of linguistic diversity, language learning and intercultural dialogue and given minority languages a voice, where they are represented by EFNIL, EBLUL, FUEN and the Mercator network. Thus, we wholeheartedly promote regional and minority languages, leaving the tricky issue of their national counterparts to the individual Member States.