



Colloquium on regional and minority languages – summary



Strengthening support for regional and minority languages (RMLs) within a plurilingual context: a colloquium 7 November 2023

Introduction

Organised as part of the ECML's cooperation with the European Commission, the colloquium had 46 in-person participants (representatives of government agencies and NGOs, language education professionals) and two additional online participants for the panel session.

The [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) (ECRML), which 20 member states of the Council of Europe have not yet ratified, defines regional or minority languages (RMLs) as languages that are “traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the state’s population” and “different from the official language(s) of that State”; the definition “does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants”. Not all the languages referred to in the course of the day met this definition.

The Council of Europe has a long record of support for minority languages via the [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#) and the ECRML. As a consequence of its foundational values – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – the organisation has always been concerned to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity and to promote language education. Recent years have seen a shift of emphasis from foreign language learning to plurilingualism, and [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)1](#), on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in February 2022, puts language education in the political spotlight.

Fifty million people in the European Union speak a regional or minority language, so linguistic diversity is important to citizens; it is also foundational to the EU. The European Commission has no general powers regarding minorities or their status: these powers lie with member states. The EC's function is to monitor the implementation of EU law, and it tries to support linguistic diversity with the means available to it. In particular, it promotes language learning through Creative Europe and Erasmus+ and funds projects that foster RMLs. In 2023 and 2024, moreover, the European Language Label is prioritising projects on RMLs that promote active citizenship. Also, the EC's research programme supports linguistic diversity, exploring how to use digital tools to support RMLs.

The programme

The colloquium was divided into two main sections, the first comprising a series of case studies and the second combining group discussion with the thoughts and reactions of a panel of officials, NGO representatives and experts.

The case studies

Table 1 provides an overview of the case studies.

Table 1 – Overview of case studies presented at the colloquium

Presenter(s)	Country/territory/ region in focus	Languages mentioned
Government agencies		
Kim Buxton Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training	Norway	Northern Sami, Lule Sami, Southern Sami Kven, Finnish Romani, Romanes
Darja Farič Klemenčič National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia	Slovenia	Hungarian Italian Romani
NGOs		
Thierry Delobel FLAREP (Fédération pour les Langues Régionales dans l'Enseignement Public)	Réunion Guyana Metropolitan France Basque Country	Réunion creole 12 out of 40 languages recognised as languages of France, including Guyanese creole Corsican, Flemish Basque
Annalisa Schaniel and Andreas Gabriel Lia Rumantscha	Switzerland	Romansh
Julien Noël Service des Langues régionales endogènes de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles Romain Berger Haute École de la ville de Liège	Belgium	Walloon
Examples from the classroom		
Ada Bier University of the Basque Country	Basque Autonomous Community Friulia Venezia Giulia	Basque Friulian
Ágnes Antal Nyustin Mayor of Vyškovce nad Ipľom Szabina Szabó Balázs Principal of the village school	Slovakia	Hungarian, Romani, Czech

The case studies presented on behalf of government agencies in Norway and Slovenia described educational provision arising from the status of the RMLs in question; in both countries the numbers of learners involved are small and lack of qualified personnel sometimes makes it difficult to fulfil legal obligations.

The case studies presented by NGOs were concerned with the provision of support for communities of language users and for language learners outside as well as inside national education systems. In some cases, the numbers of speakers/learners were again small (Romansh, Walloon), but in others the numbers were large (Basque in France; Réunion and Guyanese creoles in the French overseas territories).

The classroom example from the Basque Autonomous Community and Friulia Venezia Giulia showed that learners of Basque and Friulian find challenging project work highly motivating; it also gives them a powerful reason to use the language. The example from Slovakia reported on a plurilingual approach to education in a school that is participating in the Council of Europe's [Romani-Plurilingual Policy Experimentation](#). The school's pupils comprise speakers of Slovak, Hungarian, Romani and Czech, and the inclusion of all these languages in the life of the classroom benefits curriculum learning and promotes social cohesion.

The case studies illustrate two distinct challenges posed by RMLs. First, when officially recognised languages have shrinking numbers of speakers, the challenge is to preserve the language by supporting efforts to teach and learn it, whether inside or outside the education system. This applies to minority languages such as Walloon and Romansh, but also to national languages when they have official status in another territory, like Hungarian and Italian in Slovenia. Secondly, when large numbers of minority language speakers are not also proficient in the language of schooling, the challenge is to find a way of giving them linguistic access to education. This may mean developing one or more varieties of bilingual education, as with Basque in France and Spain and with creoles in Réunion and Guyana; but it may also mean adopting a plurilingual approach that brings curriculum and home languages together in the communicative life of the classroom, as in the village school of Vyškovce nad Ipľom.

The morning session also included a presentation by Gabija Kiausaitė of two ECML publications, [Lara's Language Journey across Europe](#) and [Lara's Journey through Europe's Regional and Minority Languages](#), which are designed to raise students' awareness of Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity. As part of its collaboration with the European Commission, the ECML has developed a [multilingual app](#) that has been translated into more than thirty languages. There is a plan to include regional languages next year.

Group work and panel discussion

In the first part of the afternoon, participants were divided into three groups. Their tasks were to discuss the morning's presentations from the perspective of their own context and to formulate a question to put to the panel, which comprised:

- Petra Roter (moderator), president of the advisory committee on the [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#)
- Andreas Stockhammer, [Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research](#)
- Claudine Brohy, former member of the [Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#)
- Vicent Fenollar i Sastre, [Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity](#)
- Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones and Davyth Hicks, [European Language Equality Network](#)

- Cor Van der Meer, [Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning](#)
- Laurent Bergez, [French Ministry of National Education and Youth](#)

The reports from the groups included the following points:

- It is important to include representatives of minorities in policy making, which should be influenced from the bottom up as well as from the top down.
- In education generally it is important to encourage children to take pride in their cultures.
- Migrant languages (explicitly excluded from the ECRML's definition of RMLs) should be treated in the same way as minority languages.
- Different national language policies produce different education policies and thus different approaches to the inclusion of RMLs in education.
- Common challenges facing the inclusion of RMLs in education include a shortage of teachers and lack of motivation on the part of learners. The latter is often caused by the low status of the RML in question.
- It is important to provide support for RMLs outside their ancestral territories.
- There is an important difference between high-status and low-status RMLs.

The questions that the three groups put to the panel were as follows:

Group 1 – What can be done to encourage young people to continue learning RMLs at upper secondary and beyond?

This question reflects the fact that educational provision for RMLs tends to be strongest at kindergarten and primary levels and doesn't always continue into secondary education. Laurent Bergez argued that this question cannot be answered by schools; it requires political action. Cor Van der Meer suggested that it needs to be rewarding to use a RML; financial incentives may be necessary to ensure that the language is used in daily life.

Group 2 – How can we avoid the stigmatisation of RMLs and enhance their status?

Andreas Stockhammer noted that in Austria there is general agreement that from a labour market perspective, it is an advantage to have more than one language. This is a reason for not dropping a minority language at secondary school. Vicent Fenollar i Sastre argued that the best way to raise the status of RMLs is to give them official recognition, which also increases the number of learners; it also helps if prominent individuals use RMLs. Laurent Bergez pointed out that in recent years there has been an increase in bilingual and immersion education in France; he also pointed out that it is difficult to maintain a minority language when it is no longer spoken at home and school is the last point of transmission.

Group 3 – How can we make sure that plurilingual and intercultural education and inclusive education grant linguistic rights to learners who speak RMLs and languages of migration?

Claudine Brohy pointed out that Romansh is spoken by a tiny minority of the Swiss population but has benefited from immigration. When the first bilingual school was established in 1995, only 25% of the students were Romansh speakers. The majority were Portuguese immigrants who preferred to learn Romansh for purposes of integration, so a language of migration, Portuguese, turned out to be an ally of Romansh.

Conclusion: possible future actions

Participants agreed that the colloquium was informative, stimulating and enriching. Future actions might include:

- the development of a number of simple case studies as a way of providing easy access to basic information;
- the establishment of networks of interested parties with a view to exploring the potential for regional cooperation;
- an exploration of ways in which heritage and migrant languages might prosper together.
- an intergovernmental conference that would initiate collaborative responses to the societal and educational challenges posed by all minority languages, regardless of their status.

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