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E-Language

MULTILINGUALISM NECESSARY FOR THE EU

EU must promote multilingualism as it means opportunities for individuals and companies, says María Badia MEP.

**“The language a person speaks is part of their identity and culture. So learning languages means understanding other people and their way of thinking, and encourages a more open approach to other cultures and outlooks.”
María Badia, MEP**

The EU is today, with 25 countries, home to 450 million people from a range of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In 2007, two more countries – Bulgaria and Romania – will join, and the EU will have a population of almost half a billion.

Today the EU has 20 official languages. But in fact, apart from these 20 official languages, it is estimated that as many as 40 million citizens regularly use a regional or minority language that has been passed on from generation to generation, generally in addition to the official language or languages of the state.

This is the case of Catalan, my mother tongue, which is spoken by around seven million people in Spain, France and the town of Alghero in Sardinia.

In this frame, respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is one of the cornerstones of the EU – now enshrined in Article 22 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

But, apart from the respect and the safeguard of this diversity, if we want a more stable and integrated EU, knowledge of different cultures and languages must be a clear and achievable aim.

We need to promote multilingualism and language learning to improve personal cognitive skills, to reflect Europe’s true identity, and to better communicate and bring people closer together.

In a multilingual Europe, learning languages can be an opportunity. For individuals, it can be an open door to a better career, to the chance of living, studying or working abroad.

For companies, multilingual staff is a necessity of global markets. But multilingualism is more than this.

The language a person speaks is part of their identity and culture. So learning languages means understanding other people and their way of thinking, and encourages a more open approach to other cultures and outlooks. Furthermore, it means opposing racism, xenophobia and intolerance.

2006 is the European year of workers' mobility. Although EU citizens can work in other member states, less than two per cent of the working age population (15-64) lives in a country other than their own.

It is known that the lack of knowledge of languages other than one's mother tongue is the main handicap to developing a real 'mobility culture' in Europe.

In fact, only 45 per cent of citizens can take part in a conversation in a European foreign language. And this data shows that not only is it difficult to achieve the full exercise of the rights and freedoms arising from mobility within the EU, but also the mutual understanding between Europeans and the creation of a real and more cohesive union of citizens.

In this context, what can the EU do to contribute to multilingualism? As a member of the parliament's culture committee, I am strongly convinced of the advantages of several educational exchange programs such as the Erasmus (higher education), the Comenius (school education), or the Grundvig (adult education), which encourage mobility and the knowledge of other cultures and languages.

Concretely, the Lingua Action that gives support to linguistic diversity throughout the EU contributes to the improvement of teaching and learning languages, and promotes access to lifelong language learning opportunities to each individual's needs.

It is important that the EU continues to promote exchanges, school and town twinning, as well as all kind of people contact.

Furthermore, it should improve, especially in budgetary terms and in the quality of language teaching, and encourage the learning of two foreign European languages from a very young age.

The European indicator of language competence can be a positive instrument in measuring the language competence of citizens and it can become an opportunity to progress towards achieving common objectives under the Lisbon strategy in such an important field as language, not only for education and training but also for the construction of real European citizenship.
