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Strengthening measures to protect and revive highly endangered languages

Report¹

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

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Summary

Linguistic diversity, a precious part of Europe's cultural heritage and a fundamental element of European cultural diversity, must be preserved and promoted. Everyone has an inalienable right to use his or her own language and each language represents distinctive historical, social, cultural and ecological knowledge, as well as a unique human experience and view of the world. However, a large number of languages spoken in Europe are highly endangered and some are even predicted to vanish within this century unless measures are taken to reverse the process of language shift among their speakers.

This negative trend is deeply disturbing. Linguistic standardisation is a threat to the cultural identity of Europe, which is and must remain multifaceted. The Parliamentary Assembly is therefore invited to call upon:

- the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to intensify the Organisation's efforts aimed at providing policy guidance and technical support in this field;
- member states to further their commitment, make best use of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148) and develop targeted, inclusive action plans to preserve and revive highly endangered languages.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 11517](#), Reference 3427 of 14 April 2008.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Languages are a most valuable part of cultural heritage and linguistic diversity is a fundamental element of cultural diversity which should be preserved and promoted. Various international legal instruments contribute to their protection, not only through the general principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of language in relation to fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, but also in a more direct way by enshrining the right to maintain and use one's own language as a component of the right to participate in cultural life.
2. Thus, Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, states that: "In those States in which [...] linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture [...] or to use their own language." A similar provision is included in article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which a child belonging to a linguistic minority or "who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture [...] or to use his or her own language".
3. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005 stipulates in its article 7 (on measures to promote cultural expressions) that Parties shall endeavour to create in their territory an environment which encourages individuals and social groups "to create, produce, disseminate, distribute and have access to their own cultural expressions, paying due attention to the special circumstances and needs of women as well as various social groups, including persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples". In addition, according to the following article 8, Parties may take all appropriate measures to protect and preserve cultural expressions which are at risk of extinction, under serious threat, or otherwise in need of urgent safeguarding.
4. Finally, languages (and language diversity) are also to be protected as an indispensable vehicle for the transmission of the "intangible cultural heritage", as stipulated in article 2, paragraph 2, of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
5. Notwithstanding the provisions on language protection contained in several of these human rights standard-setting instruments, some 230 languages have become extinct during the last fifty years and many more are at risk and predicted to disappear within this century. These are, in particular, languages of small communities, which are used only by a limited number of persons, usually the most elderly, and no longer taught by parents to their children. Such languages, which are at present no longer transmitted to the next generation, cannot survive without sustained support by the competent authorities and the immediate adoption of measures designed to reverse this trend.
6. The situation in Europe is particularly worrying: European language diversity is relatively poor in comparison with others regions of the world and most European languages are in danger.
7. The protection of cultural heritage, including languages, is among the key aims of the Council of Europe. The preamble of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148) highlights the value of multilingualism and emphasises that the protection of historical languages which are in danger of extinction contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe's cultural wealth and traditions, as well as to the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity.
8. The Parliamentary Assembly has already highlighted, and stresses again, the need to preserve the culture and language of minority groups. It refers, among others, to its [Recommendation 1775 \(2006\)](#) on the situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed peoples, [Recommendation 1521 \(2001\)](#) on Csango minority culture in Romania, [Recommendation 1333\(1997\)](#) on the Aromanian culture and language and [Recommendation 1291 \(1996\)](#) on Yiddish culture.
9. The Assembly recalls that each language mirrors a unique historical, social, cultural and ecological knowledge, and an inimitable human experience and view of the world. Hence it is seriously concerned by the negative trends observed in language diversity and vitality. Only new impetus and increased effort both at European and national levels may lead to a reversal of these trends and to a revitalisation of highly endangered languages.

2. . Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 October 2010.

10. The Assembly considers that immediate action is required in this field. This is essential not only because the right of everyone to use their own language is an inalienable right and must be protected effectively, but also because linguistic standardisation is a threat to the cultural identity of Europe, which is and must remain multi-faceted.

11. Therefore, the Assembly calls on member states to:

11.1. provide continued support to the revival of languages traditionally used in their territories and in particular those which are highly endangered, so as to ensure the enjoyment of the language rights without discrimination and develop inclusive policies and targeted action plans seeking, in particular, to:

11.1.1. raise people's awareness of the importance of preserving these languages and interest vis-à-vis the culture they underpin;

11.1.2. encourage transmission of these languages to the younger generations and the improvement of children's fluency in their native language;

11.1.3. encourage the use of these languages in daily communication and in a wide range of domains;

11.1.4. support learning of these languages at all levels of education;

11.1.5. collect and process statistics on these languages while ensuring protection of privacy;

11.1.6. collect, preserve and make accessible public documents and all kinds of material in these languages.

11.2. In implementing these policies, make full use of opportunities offered by the media and new information technologies, and facilitate networking, joint action and partnerships, including between public and private institutions, in the development of targeted cultural activities and initiatives.

B. Draft recommendation³

1. Referring to its Resolution ... (2010), the Assembly notes that, after the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148 – “the Charter”) entered into force on 1 March 1998, its Committee of Experts, which monitors and supports the implementation of this convention, contributed to raising awareness and encouraged national policies seeking to revitalise endangered languages in many European countries.
2. However, despite the positive impact of the Charter and the valuable work of its Committee of Experts, many European languages are seriously threatened and require increased protection in order to guarantee linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe.
3. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that immediate action is required in this field to encourage and support all member states – be they Parties to the Charter or not – in developing and implementing policies aimed at the revival of highly endangered languages. In this respect, it is important to make the best use of the wide knowledge and unique experience of the Committee of Experts of the Charter, as well as the potential of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz.
4. Therefore, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
 - 4.1. entrust the Committee of Experts of the Charter to identify, collect together in a single publication and disseminate best practice, and to develop concrete guidelines on key issues concerning languages traditionally used in their territories and in particular those which are highly endangered, such as:
 - 4.1.1. establishing a sound legal and administrative framework for the protection of these languages;
 - 4.1.2. raising the social status of these languages and encouraging their use at home and in daily life;
 - 4.1.3. education policies in support of these languages and teacher training;
 - 4.1.4. transfrontier exchanges and cross-border co-operation;
 - 4.1.5. the role of media and new information technologies (including access to media, partnerships with media, creation of specialised websites, setting-up of databases, distance learning of languages at risk);
 - 4.1.6. collecting, safeguarding and making available all kinds of material on these languages;
 - 4.2. adopt, on the basis of these guidelines, a recommendation to member states on “strengthening measures to protect and revive highly endangered languages”;
 - 4.3. reinforce the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz so that it can play a central role in co-ordinating work to save highly endangered languages and provide support, for example, with:
 - 4.3.1. the creation of networks at European and national levels to share ideas and facilitate cross-fertilisation;
 - 4.3.2. the development of targeted initiatives such as national forums, national or regional specialised centres or libraries, publications on cultural and artistic heritage linked with these languages and publication of specialised dictionaries.

3. . Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 October 2010

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Kumcuoğlu, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1.1. My mandate and scope of the report

1. On 14 April 2008, a motion for a recommendation on strengthening measures to protect and revive highly endangered languages, presented by Mrs Hurskainen and others (Doc. 11517), was referred to the Committee on Culture, Science and Education for report. I was appointed rapporteur by the committee in May 2008.

2. The motion clearly defines the issue to be considered: language diversity is particularly threatened in Europe and there is an urgent need to intervene rapidly to avoid a situation where many European languages will become extinct within the next few generations. In fact, at the present time, many European historical languages are spoken only by the oldest members of the community and are no longer transmitted to the next generation. These languages – which are referred to as “highly endangered” in the present report – cannot survive without sustained support from public authorities and the immediate adoption of measures designed to revitalise them.

1.2. Preparation of the report

3. On 20 May 2009, the Committee on Culture, Science and Education held an exchange of views with representatives of UNESCO's programme on endangered languages and of the Council of Europe secretariat of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

4. In the accomplishment of my task as rapporteur, I was assisted by Mrs Sumru Ozsoy, Professor in the Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Bogazici University, Istanbul (Turkey), who prepared a background paper and presented it at the committee meeting on 10 and 11 May 2010 in Istanbul. I thank her for her contribution. In addition, the present report builds on detailed and valuable information published online by UNESCO⁴ and the publication *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*.⁵ My analysis and proposals are also based on evidence gathered and guidelines delivered by the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (“the charter”), which are available on the Council of Europe website. Dr Stefan Oeter, Chairperson of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (“the committee of experts of the charter”), was invited to present his views and provided me with very useful information and comments – for which I am thankful to him – namely on the positive impact of the charter and policy measures to recommend to Council of Europe member states in order to strengthen the protection of highly endangered languages.

5. Following a decision taken by the committee at its meeting on 10 and 11 May 2010 in Istanbul, a short questionnaire was sent to 11 countries⁶ where the existence of highly endangered languages is reported, but which have not ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The aim was to have a more complete picture of measures implemented in countries which are not subject to the monitoring procedure foreseen in the charter. To date, five delegations (Bulgaria, France, Georgia, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the Russian Federation) have replied. Looking for additional information on the other targeted countries, I examined the replies sent by some of them⁷ to the questionnaire that the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights sent to national delegations of member states that have not ratified the charter, within the framework of the preparation of its report on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.⁸

4. . In particular: the report on “Language vitality and endangerment” (prepared in 2003 by the UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages) and the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Online version: www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00206.

5. . Lewis, M. Paul (ed.) (2009) *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th edition, SIL International, Dallas. Online version: www.ethnologue.com/.

6. . Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Russian Federation, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Turkey.

7. . Azerbaijan, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.

8. . See Doc. 12422 (Rapporteur: Mr József Berényi, Slovak Republic, EPP/CD).

1.3. Aim of the report

6. The present report is, on the one hand, designed to raise awareness of the danger faced by many European languages and stress the need for an unremitting commitment to safeguarding these languages and avoid irremediable losses in language diversity. On the other hand, the report considers how to deal with this issue effectively and points towards action which must be taken without delay by the Council of Europe bodies and national authorities, within their respective responsibilities, to preserve and revive languages which are at risk of extinction.

7. There is no doubt that the ratification and effective implementation of the charter remains fundamental to reaching this goal: member states which have not yet done so should be urged to ratify this convention and be offered the assistance they may require to this aim. However, the present report does not focus on this issue, which is being dealt with by the report of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the charter.

8. The present report is intended to appeal to all the countries concerned – regardless of whether or not they have already ratified the charter – for an immediate review of language policies in the light of standards set in the charter and to encourage, wherever required, immediate action to enhance the protection and promotion of highly endangered languages. This is essential to ensure the effective enjoyment by all persons of their language rights without discrimination and the preservation of this important part of Europe's cultural heritage.

2. The issue at stake: serious threats to linguistic diversity

2.1. Negative trends in linguistic diversity

9. The historical process of state building was not dependent on – and in fact virtually disregarded – linguistic factors. This gave rise to linguistic diversity in individual states all over the world. Today there are approximately 7 000 living languages⁹ which, however, differ considerably with respect to the size of the respective linguistic communities. In fact, according to the statistics found in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, around 94% of the world's languages are spoken by about 6% of the world's population.

10. Linguistic diversity varies according to regions and countries. Approximately 2 000 languages (nearly one third of the world total) are spoken in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Papua New Guinea, with a population of less than 4 million, there are 830 indigenous linguistic communities. Indonesia, India, China, Mexico, Brazil and the United States are examples of countries which have great linguistic diversity.

11. On all continents, the number of languages has been constantly decreasing over the last few centuries for a number of reasons, including disease, natural catastrophes, ethnic rivalry and wars. However, at present, globalisation and urbanisation (which affect all regions of the world) are the two main reasons, though possibly in conjunction with other factors, leading to language endangerment.

12. Data collected by UNESCO and included in its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, clearly show that linguistic diversity is in jeopardy. Some 230 languages have become extinct over the past fifty years. Even as recently as a few months ago, the international news agencies reported the passing away of the last speaker of the Bo language in India.

9. . Different estimates appear in studies or surveys, which account for 5 000 to 10 000 languages in the world. Most frequently, estimates are 6 500 to 7 000 languages. The *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* statistics include 6 909 living languages. A number of factors are responsible for the uncertainty in positing an exact number of languages. In the majority of cases linguists are still far from having determined whether two linguistic systems are dialects of one language or in fact two distinct languages. Linguistically, the difference between a language and a dialect is based on mutual intelligibility, lack of which indicates distinct languages. However, as the explanatory memorandum of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages indicates, the question also depends on psycho-sociological and political phenomena. A further difficulty is that linguists are far from having provided in-depth analyses of all inventoried languages. Finally, even in our present times of technological and scientific advancement and of an emerging global society, the presence of hitherto unknown linguistic communities is still being discovered. Such is the case of the Metyktire tribe of Brazil who revealed themselves to the rest of the world as recently as 2007. With only 87 members, the tribe had until then remained in the depths of the rain forests.

13. More than 1 000 languages across the world are at present significantly threatened and it is generally agreed that, if trends are not reversed, up to 3 000 languages that are today endangered to different degrees, will probably no longer exist within the next fifty to one hundred years. Countries with the greatest linguistic diversity are also those which have the greatest number of endangered languages.

14. The situation is particularly worrying in Europe, where linguistic diversity is poorer than in other regions of the world.¹⁰ Over the last century, as a result of modernisation and rampant globalisation, the number of languages spoken in Europe has significantly decreased. In the last fifty years some 20 languages have become extinct (most of them in the Russian Federation's Asiatic regions).

15. As an example, in 1992, Ubykh, a north-western Caucasian language, became extinct when its last speaker died in Balıkesir (Turkey) at the age of 84. Ubykh was a language with an extremely complex phonological system. Its last speaker attempted to transmit the history and the culture of the Ubykh through the many Nart sagas (legends of giants and heroes) he took every opportunity to recite. The epics of the Ubykh now live only in the recordings made by linguists.

16. Today, many European languages are endangered.¹¹ Around 20 historical communities have less than 100 speakers. For example, speakers of Ume Sami and Pite Sami (Sweden) and of Ter Sami (Russian Federation) number only 10 in each of these communities. Similarly, the number of Karaim speakers (another highly endangered language, which has already become extinct in Crimea) is estimated to be (according to 2001 records) less than 10 in western Ukraine and 50 in Lithuania.

2.2. Language vitality, level of endangerment and highly endangered languages

17. According to the 2003 UNESCO report "Language vitality and endangerment", there are six major factors which may be used to assess language vitality. These are:

- intergenerational language transmission;
- absolute number of speakers;
- proportion of speakers within the total population of the group concerned;
- trends in existing language domains;
- response to new domains and media;
- materials for language education and literacy.

18. Three additional key factors are also considered in the same report which impact on language vitality:

- governmental and institutional attitudes and policies, including official status and use;
- community members' attitudes towards their own language;
- amount and quality of documentation (including audio and video recordings).

19. The assessment of language vitality (and level of endangerment) must take account of a combination of these factors and not look at them in isolation, though it is commonly accepted that the viability of a language is determined primarily by intergenerational transmission, as the vitality of a language clearly lies in the youngest generation.

20. Language endangerment arises from situations where a language is no longer (or no longer perceived as) functional within the community in which it served as the major means of communication for generations. The language instead yields its status to the linguistic system of another (dominant) group and it is no longer transmitted to the next generation.

10. . According to the Ethnologue: Languages of the World statistics, there are 234 living European languages. However, this figure refers to languages which originate in Europe (intended geographically and not politically) and not to all languages spoken in European countries.

11. . Among the most endangered languages and dialects in the member states of the Council of Europe are Breton, Languedocien, Auvergnat and Limousin in France (where more than 20 historical languages are in danger, and 13 of them severely); Gaelic in Scotland and Ireland; Eastern and Northern Frisian in Germany; Kashubian in Poland; Livonian in Latvia; nearly all Sami languages in Scandinavia; Ladino in Turkey; Pontic Greek in Greece and Turkey; Italkian, Meglenitic, Arvanitika and Tsakonian in Greece; Molise Croatian in Italy; Leonese in Spain; Crimean Tatar and Gagauz in Bulgaria; Karaim in Ukraine; Istriot in Croatia; Votian, Vepsian, Western Mari, Karelian, Komi-Permyak, Enets, Nenets, Nganasan, Selkup, Evneki, Even, Sibe, Chukchi, Yukagir, Sakha and Komi in the Russian Federation as well as the non-territorial languages Yiddish and Romani.

21. The intergenerational transmission factor is, in practice, closely interconnected with other factors and in particular with the number of speakers. The significance and impact of this should not be overlooked: it is evident that the smaller the absolute number of speakers, the more the risk for a language to become extinct increases, and the more difficult it becomes to reverse the tendencies. However, a negative trend in intergenerational transmission is in itself a critical alarm signal and, whatever the initial number of people speaking the language, this will decrease dramatically with each new generation.

22. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* defines (in addition to "safe" and "extinct") four levels of endangerment based on intergenerational language transmission:

- vulnerable (most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain areas, and namely to family life at home);
- definitely endangered (children no longer learn the language as the mother tongue at home);
- severely endangered (the language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; parents may understand but do not speak it to children or amongst themselves);
- critically endangered (the youngest speakers are grandparents, who speak the language partially and infrequently).

23. The present report is intended to focus only on the most threatening situations faced by historical languages traditionally used in European countries. Based on the above-mentioned factors, it is possible to say that a language (and its capacity to perpetuate itself) is exposed to extreme levels of risk when it is spoken only by a limited number of people who mostly belong to the oldest (grandparent/great-grandparent) generation. In such cases, the parents have ceased to use it and no longer teach it to their children, meaning that the language cannot replace itself demographically.

24. When an historical language is no longer transmitted to the next generation, its extinction may only be a matter of years and there is no possibility of recovery if the language in question is not strongly protected and supported by the national authorities. This is what will be referred to as a highly endangered language.¹²

25. In general, given the inter-related and self-reinforcing dynamics produced by different risk factors, it is also the case that highly endangered languages do not benefit from a presence in the media and on the Internet, and they are used only in a few social domains (namely at home or on traditional ceremonial occasions). These domains are typically unrelated to higher social status (prestige, power) even within their own ethno-cultural community, which is a reflection of the relative powerlessness of the majority of their users and maybe also of the fact that community members have lost interest in supporting their mother tongue.¹³

2.3. The need to revive highly endangered languages

26. In the history of humanity, languages have always declined and become extinct. This is not a new phenomenon. However, the pace of this process has increased tremendously over the last few centuries and is pervasive across the world. There were more than 1 100 Indian languages in Brazil in the 16th century and there are now fewer than 200. The scale of decline is similar in North America and in Australia.

27. There is an evident link between this trend and the rise of global languages. It was observed that "minority languages and cultures have been crushed when they find themselves in the path of the 'steamroller' of those languages".¹⁴ Of course, English comes to mind immediately, but it is worth noting that it is not alone. Other dominant languages played the same role against historical languages in different regions of the world: Spanish and Portuguese in South America are an example, but also Russian, Chinese and Arabic have threatened and extinguished several languages in their respective areas of influence.

12. . In substance, highly endangered European languages in the context of the present report include European historical languages classified as "critically endangered" and most, if not all, of those that are "severely endangered" according to UNESCO's terminology.

13. . It is worth noting that, according to Fishman's eight-stage intergenerational disruption scale, the most threatened languages are those which are used only: 1) by socially isolated old people; 2) by a socially integrated population beyond child-bearing age; 3) only orally, with no literacy. Fishman Joshua A. (1991), *Reversing language shift: theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, United Kingdom.

Another author suggested that fewer speakers, fewer domains of use and structural simplification are three symptoms of language death. Dorian Nancy C., "Language shift in community and individual: The phenomenon of the laggard semi-speaker", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 25, 1980, pp. 85-94.

14. . David Crystal; interview by Jack Scholes, published in *New routes*, DISAL, January 2001.

28. One might wonder if it really matters. What is the significance of linguistic diversity and why encourage member states to take precautionary steps to safeguard languages that are in danger? The starting point in answering these questions is to understand that “every language is a unique vision of the world”. “The world is a mosaic of visions, and each language captures something of the way a certain human community has come to perceive the world.”¹⁵

29. Languages are not only a principal means of communication but also the tool to express thoughts, ideas, memories, emotions and to transmit cultural and social knowledge. Each community develops its own system of thinking, philosophy and understanding of the world in which it lives. The community’s language mirrors this exclusive world view and is a distinctive expression of the corresponding culture. For this reason language is very closely related to the individual and collective cultural identity of its speakers, who may equate the loss of their language with a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity.

30. Linguistic communities reflect their own culture, values and customs, and pass them on to the younger generations, predominantly through language. As an example, most of the poems in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, are based on material collected from rune singers in villages in the wilderness of northern Karelia. The lexical wealth of a language offers a categorisation of the world unique to the members of the linguistic community. For example, Eskimo-Aleut languages have several ways of expressing different forms of condensation in the winter.

31. Thus, languages are the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity and linguistic diversity constitutes one of the most important aspects of cultural diversity. The loss of a language means the unredeemable loss of a unique historical, social, cultural and ecological knowledge, of an inimitable human experience and view of the world.

3. The policy response: protect, and support recovery of, highly endangered languages

3.1. Reversing language shift

32. It has already been mentioned that factors threatening language vitality are diverse. Dramatic events, such as diseases, natural catastrophes or conflicts may decimate a community. Ethnic rivalry, persecutions and military domination may lead to the forceful splitting up and transplantation of one community into communities using other languages. Globalisation and urbanisation lead to a similar result, though for different reasons: they provoke the displacement of members of small communities (namely from rural to metropolitan areas) and oblige them to confront more powerful and bigger communities, their “aggressive” cultures and dominant languages.

33. As a matter of fact, language endangerment is also a question of contacts and, eventually, of competition between different linguistic groups. Today many linguistic groups are part of larger communities where the overwhelming majority speaks a different language which has (contrary to their own) an official status. Typically, the mastery of the official language provides social and economic advantages to the members of the weakest community while, in contrast, historical and other minority languages are marginalised in social and economic life.

34. This marginalisation process is spurred on when government policies impose the use of the official language in education, official business and the media; the result is also the same when government policies promote national languages disregarding the others. Of course, the national language has an important role to play in ensuring national cohesion and integration, and has strong significance as a marker of identity and membership of the overall “national community”. There is nothing wrong in promoting it. However, the particular role of state languages and their overwhelming presence in the public sphere and in the mass media has significant impact on other languages and may jeopardise their vitality. This has to be carefully considered.

15. . See David Crystal, *ibid*. The idea that language shapes the way a given cultural community views the world has also been captured by what is referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf drew attention to the relationship between language, thought and culture. They did not formally write the hypothesis, and it is not really supported with empirical evidence; however, examining their writings about linguistics, researchers have found two main ideas: first, a theory of linguistic determinism (the language you speak determines the way that you will interpret the world around you); second, a weaker theory of linguistic relativism (language merely influences your thoughts about the real world).

35. For social integration, but also for competitive reasons, most European countries and their citizens tend to privilege not only the use of the national official language, but also the mastery of international or important neighbouring languages. Thus, as a consequence of external social, economic and/or cultural pressure (or, even worse, subjugation) the languages of the smaller communities lose value within the respective societies.

36. Eventually, such external endangerment factors also bring about a negative feeling in people belonging to the weakest communities and the traditional languages are progressively abandoned by the new generations. They not only choose to learn the dominant (and socially more prestigious) language(s) – to overcome discrimination and with the hope of better integration and greater professional opportunities – but also come to believe that their language is not worth retaining. When a language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children, it is indeed doomed for extinction.

37. This analysis clearly points to two converging directions which should be followed to reverse language shift:

- transform negative governmental and institutional attitudes and develop proactive supportive policies towards endangered, and in particular highly endangered, languages;
- counteract community members' sense of inferiority and relinquishing attitudes, encouraging a feeling of pride in their own language, enhancing its social status and raising awareness of the importance of using (also) their own language to express thoughts, transmit knowledge and memories and carry out intellectual and creative activities.

38. Policy measures intended to give these results are complementary and mutually reinforcing: they must go hand in hand. As an example, it is clear that official recognition of the importance of an endangered language will encourage the community concerned not to abandon it, but would have little effect without sustained public support for education in this language.

3.2. The impact of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

39. Since 1992, Council of Europe member states have confirmed their commitment to the protection of historical languages by adopting the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. To date, 25 member states¹⁶ of the Council of Europe have ratified this unique convention and eight states¹⁷ have signed but not ratified it.

40. The preamble of the charter highlights the value of interculturalism and multilingualism, and emphasises that the protection of languages at risk contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe's cultural wealth and traditions, as well as to the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity. As stated at the end of the fifth (and latest) biennial report by the Secretary General to the Parliamentary Assembly about the application of the charter: "The application of the Charter is organised on the basis of a friendly and reasonable coexistence of official languages and regional or minority languages. Both are perceived as reinforcing one another in a context of multilingualism and cultural pluralism, and not as being in opposition or competition. This approach wants people to be sufficiently confident of their own identity to take a positive attitude towards other cultural identities."

41. The system established by the charter has been influential in provoking positive developments. For some languages (such as Low German in Germany, Scots in the United Kingdom, Limburgish in the Netherlands or Cypriot Maronite Arabic in Cyprus) the ratification instrument was the first official recognition of their language status in their respective countries. Following its ratification, the charter's implementation – which is monitored by its committee of experts and supported by the valuable work of this body – has contributed to raising awareness and encouraged national policies seeking to revitalise endangered languages in countries parties to this convention. As an example, the ratification in favour of Yiddish (an archaic language which has lost its living character in many European countries) has had a positive effect in the Netherlands, where both the authorities and the speakers realised its cultural value and potential for promotion.

16. . Armenia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

17. . Azerbaijan, France, Iceland, Italy, Malta, Moldova, the Russia Federation and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

42. The monitoring reports show that concrete measures have been taken and the framework for the protection of regional or minority languages has improved in most states parties. The charter foresees an ongoing process. Member states can always adopt more stringent obligations, as is provided for in Article 3, paragraph 2, of the charter, including in the sense that a language initially not taken into consideration may be recognised by a member state after recommendations from the committee of experts and dialogue between the speakers and the authorities. Positive results have been obtained, for example in the case of the Karelian language in Finland, the Kven language in Norway or the Cypriot Maronite Arabic language in Cyprus.

43. On a more general level, two important achievements among others should be highlighted:

- a growing understanding within national authorities of the value of regional and minority languages as an integral part of their national culture and history;
- the acceptance by regional or minority language speakers that their language and culture should be a source of pride.

In short, the charter's implementation encourages the authorities and the speakers to work together (a situation that is observed more and more often in the states parties to the charter) and, in this context, the chances for survival and positive development are more promising even for languages in a difficult position.

44. The system has, however, its limits.

- First, states parties are responsible for deciding whether a form of expression used by a particular group constitutes a regional or minority language within the meaning of the charter.
- Second, to accommodate the diversity of situations and features of various European regional or minority languages, the charter is designed in a flexible manner: all provisions in its Part II apply in their entirety to all regional or minority languages on the territory of a state party, but these core provisions are general and allow the parties a broad measure of discretion as regards both interpretation and application. The provisions of Part III are intended to translate these general principles into precise rules, but they are binding only on those contracting parties that undertake to apply them (and they are not required to accept them all).
- Finally, the committee of experts' recommendations and suggestions are not binding; they are not always followed by timely and adequate responses and practical implementation lags behind.

45. Moreover, 22 Council of Europe member states have not yet ratified the charter and there are no signs that they will do so in the near future. With regard to these countries, in some of them the existence of (highly) endangered languages is not reported. In the others, the non-ratification of the charter does not automatically imply a lack of attention to the situation of languages traditionally used in their territories which are, or may become, endangered.

46. Information provided by some of these countries shows that they do not oppose the use of minority or regional languages and that their legislation may already enshrine good principles and standards for the protection of minority or regional languages spoken in their territories, although this legislation does not necessarily cover all the endangered languages.¹⁸ Moreover, in these countries, efforts are also made to monitor the situation of endangered languages, collect relevant material and support academic studies and targeted publications.¹⁹

18. . In Italy, Law No. 482 of 15 December 1999, which covers a large number of minority or regional languages, de facto incorporates in the domestic order the key provisions of the charter, although its ratification has not yet followed.

Many, though not all, of the standards enshrined in the charter are already implemented in France and this even if the ratification of this convention is not on the agenda, given that it would require a constitutional revision.

19. . The French authorities sustain and promote the value of regional and minority languages in different ways: the Ministry of Culture and Communication upholds (including with financial aid) the value of the languages of France through interventions in a wide range of areas (ethnological heritage, theatre, music, museums, archives, cinema, audiovisual, information technologies, publications, etc.); the "Observatory of linguistic practice" (Observatoire des pratiques linguistiques), established in 1999, implements monitoring as well as project evaluation and support activities of linguistic practice; the documentation centre of the "Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France" continues to bring together a rich collection of material on the languages of France; publications and artistic creations in regional or minorities languages may be eligible for direct financial support.

In Georgia, the government supports the collection and publication of various material existing in the Botha Neo-Aramaic, Buts and Udi languages, which can be studied at university level; research on these languages is carried out by scientific and academic institutions.

3.3. The urgency of reinforced action at European and national levels

47. Despite the charter's valuable positive impact (and, more generally, despite various measures already enforced by European countries) too many European languages are still highly endangered and in need of better protection: further action is needed in order to guarantee linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe. Lack of immediate response to the problem could lead to the extinction of languages in regions where they have been traditionally used for centuries. It is urgent to adopt more ambitious policies at national level and reinforce action at European level to revive all highly endangered languages.

48. Coherent policies in this direction should build on refined analysis concerning the target groups and the extent of problems they encounter, which in turn requires the availability of reliable data on the highly endangered languages and their communities.

49. There is also a need for formal political recognition of all languages at risk and for awareness-raising campaigns targeting the communities concerned and the public at large, to enhance the social status of highly endangered languages and explain to people why each language is a unique cultural treasure which must be safeguarded.

50. National and local media have a crucial role to play in this respect. The Assembly has on various occasions stressed that ensuring access to the mass media (particularly television programmes) in the mother tongue would be extremely beneficial for languages at risk.²⁰ Thus, the presence of highly endangered languages in the mass media should be fostered; Internet offers a very high potential which is probably untapped.

51. Finally, action must be taken to collect and preserve a whole range of material (literature, publications, sound and video records, etc.) on highly endangered languages²¹ and make them available. Here too, new information technologies could be helpful.

52. The cost of national policies aimed at supporting endangered languages is probably a stumbling block, even more so in periods such as the present one, where one might easily be tempted to say that there are other demands and priorities. It would be a mistake to claim that financing for programmes to halt language shift is not a problem. However, doing nothing is just not acceptable. Today, there is consensus on the need to preserve the environment and biodiversity; it must equally be recognised that preservation of cultural diversity and heritage, including languages, is not a luxury, but a necessity.

53. Acting only in isolation, Council of Europe member states may find it too difficult to adopt and implement the measures required to revive languages at risk within their territories. For this reason, it is important to strengthen action at European level.

54. To this end, the knowledge and expertise of the committee of experts of the charter (and of its secretariat) are real assets which could be offered to all member states. As an example, the committee of experts could be entrusted to prepare stock-taking thematic reports to identify best practice and develop

In "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", the Megleno-Vlach language has been declared, by government decree of 15 October 2009, a cultural heritage of special interest and exceptional importance; this enables the National Language Institute and other institutions to submit projects to the Ministry of Culture for the protection of this language.

In the Russian Federation, the situation of languages of the population groups living in the country (including indigenous peoples) is regularly monitored. A large number of measures have been implemented recently regarding small indigenous peoples of the north, Siberia and the far east of the country to protect, inter alia, their languages. For instance: a new network of educational institutions, which includes different models of nomadic schools, is being formed; targeted model education programmes have been drawn up; the use of alternative forms of education, such as external studies, family or remote studies, has grown significantly; to implement the new education models for the peoples of the north, Siberia and the far east, teachers were recruited and assisted in the development of specific professional teaching skills and abilities. Ongoing targeted projects include the creation and support of an electronic library for Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples, support for the publication of magazines for small indigenous peoples and the organisation of a training seminar for journalists from these peoples.

The short Bulgarian reply does not mention concrete measures adopted to revive Gagauz. However, it indicates that the National Council for Co-operation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (a governmental advisory and co-ordinating body) aims at developing and implementing the policy of integration and protection of the rights of Bulgarian citizens belonging to ethnic minorities.

20. . See Assembly [Recommendation 1333 \(1997\)](#) on the Aromanian culture and language, [Recommendation 1775 \(2006\)](#) on the situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed peoples and [Recommendation 1521 \(2001\)](#) on the Csango minority culture in Romania.

21. . The Assembly has already highlighted the importance of such actions in its [Recommendation 1291 \(1996\)](#) on Yiddish culture.

concrete guidelines on key issues to help effective policy design and implementation. This work could lead to the preparation of a recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states including these guidelines.

55. In addition, the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz could play a central role in co-ordinating work to save endangered languages. The centre is already developing projects of direct interest in the teaching and learning of endangered languages.²² It could be strengthened to further develop its action in this field and provide support to networking and the development of targeted initiatives.

4. Conclusions

56. Highly endangered languages are an invaluable part of Europe's cultural heritage and linguistic diversity is a fundamental element of European cultural diversity which must be preserved and promoted. Protecting and reviving highly endangered languages is therefore a need to which the Council of Europe and its member states should respond. Taking effective action is a matter of political will, but also of effective policy design and timely policy implementation. More commitment is needed, but also better use should be made of available resources, and these resources should perhaps be increased.

57. All member states concerned should streamline their policies towards the support of linguistic diversity and the revival of highly endangered languages, so as to ensure the enjoyment of language rights without discrimination. These policies should be proactive, inclusive and innovative, and they should be accompanied by targeted action plans.

58. In implementing their policy to revive highly endangered languages, member states should make full use of opportunities offered by the media and new information technologies. They should also be capable of facilitating networking, joint action and partnerships (including between public and private institutions) in the development of targeted cultural activities and initiatives such as stage performances, creative writing, publications, summer schools and short-term educational and sports programmes.

59. The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers should give the intergovernmental sector the means to support the design and implementation of member states' policies in this field. In addition to what the committee of experts of the charter is already doing, it seems necessary to develop thematic guidelines building on best practices and to reinforce the ability of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz to deliver programmes in support of historical languages at risk.

22. . See, in particular, the project on "Minority languages, collateral languages and bi-/plurilingual education" on the website: <http://ebp-ici.ecml.at/>; and the project on "Majority language instruction as a basis for plurilingual education" on the website: <http://marille.ecml.at/>.

Appendix

Table 1 – Some of the highly endangered languages of Europe

Language Family	Languages	Countries where language is spoken
Uralic	1. Sami Languages 2. Livonian 3. Votian, Ingrian, Karelian, Lude, Vepsian, Western Mari	1. Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russian Federation 2. Latvia 3. Russian Federation
Indo-European	1. East Frisian, North Frisian, 2. Cornish, Manx 3. Breton, Gascon, Auvergnat Languedocien, Limousin, Normand 4. Kashubian, Vilamonian 5. Carlot Italkian, Meglenitic, Tsakonian, Arvanitika 6. Molise Croatian, Griko 7. Leonese 8. Cappadocian Greek 9. Istriot 10. Yiddish	1. Germany 2. United Kingdom 3. France 4. Poland 5. Greece 6. Italy 7. Spain 8. Greece 9. Croatia 10. Non-territorial
Turkic	1. Karaim 2. Crimean Tatar 3. Gagauz	1. Lithuania, Ukraine 2. Bulgaria, Ukraine 3. Bulgaria
Semitic	Cypriot Arabic	Cyprus

Source: UNESCO, Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.

Table 2 – Distribution of languages and their populations by world areas

Area	Living languages		Speakers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Africa	2 110	30.5	726 453 403	12.2
Americas	993	14.4	50 496 321	0.8
Asia	2 322	33.6	3 622 771 264	60.8
Europe	234	3.4	1 553 360 941	26.1
Pacific	1 250	18.1	6 429 788	0.1
Totals	6 909	100.0	5 959 511 717	100.0

Source: Lewis M. Paul (ed.) (2009), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th edition, SIL International, Dallas. Online version: www.ethnologue.com/.

In this table, a living language is one that has at least one speaker for whom it is the first language; each language is counted only once. A language that is spoken in more than one country is counted under the area of its primary country (area of origin).

Concerning the speakers, the "Number" column gives the total number of people who use those languages as their first language, regardless of where they may live. For instance, the population for Europe is nearly twice the actual European population. This is because some of the European languages are now used as a first language in other parts of the world due to the colonial expansion of the last few centuries. The total at the bottom of the column approximates the total world population; however, it is somewhat less than the actual world population, because *Ethnologue* lacks population estimates for about 4% of the languages and because it does not automatically extrapolate population estimates to the current year, but waits for reports from reliable sources.