

Motion

Addressing Linguistic Discrimination in Youth International Mobility and Participation

signed by: World Esperanto Youth
Organisation (TEJO)

co-signed by: National Youth Council
of Catalonia (CNJC), Youth of European
Nationalities (YEN)

Preamble

Linguistic diversity is a fundamental aspect of European identity and youth participation at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels. The recognition of this feature is shown in its inclusion in the Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union¹ and in the 2022 Recommendation of the Council of Europe². It plays an essential role in giving access to education, cultural life, social organisation and active participation.

However, today's Europe paints a different scenario. In our continent, discrimination on the basis of language use is taking place in ways that many Europeans experience directly or indirectly³. We experience that discrimination in government offices and schools, but also in supermarkets and even inside the ordinary household. It is no secret that the existing language policies in the continent have long been shaped by centuries of linguistic imperialism⁴.

Through deliberate policies, certain languages have been systematically prioritised over others and benefited their speakers as they gained hegemonic language privilege that now provides them with a better socio-cultural, political and economic position. Conversely, people who do not speak these languages often have to spend a great deal of time and resources in learning them in order to even have the opportunity to be heard, understood, and, most importantly, be able to participate in situations that demand the use of those hegemonic languages.

This pattern is evident both within individual states, where dominant national languages have marginalised regional and minority languages⁵, and at

the transnational level, where a few languages have unilaterally acquired hegemonic roles in international institutions, business, and communication. More often than not, this imposition disenfranchises millions of citizens by taking away their means of being heard. Not being able to communicate in their languages pushes them away from being represented in decision-making processes across national and European institutions.

These unequal relations derive from a structural problem. Although individual actions may contribute to such situations, the issue is mainly created by wider societal imbalance and systems of economic and social oppression. This linguistic discrimination follows a pattern of discrimination based on other characteristics such as ethnicity, socio-economic group, or religion⁶, which can lead to hatred against a specific group, and the apparition of intersectional discrimination.

This dynamic, therefore, continues to reinforce hierarchies between languages, diminishing the presence and status of other languages and treating their communities as if they were second-class citizens in their own countries. While this motion focuses primarily on linguistic inequalities within Europe, it is important to acknowledge that the legacy and consequences of linguistic imperialism extends well beyond the continent⁷. Centuries of European colonialism saw a few select European languages being imposed over indigenous and local languages.

Those European languages have not only displaced the use of local languages in education, sciences, and everyday communication, but have also severely stunted the development of these languages and their speakers' ability to express themselves meaningfully.

1 European Parliament. (2000). Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union. Brussels: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

2 Council of Europe. (2022). The importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture. Recommendation No. CM R (2022) 1. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

3 Hardy, S., & Shraepen, T. (2024). The state and effects of discrimination in the European Union.

4 Phillipson, R., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2022). Communicating in "global" English: Promoting linguistic human rights or complicit with linguistic imperialism. In *The handbook of global interventions in communication theory* (pp. 425-439). Routledge.

5 Pettai, V. (2024). Educational Reform in Estonia and Latvia: An End to Russian-Language Schools?. *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online*, 21(1), 313-332.

Yasar, R., Bergmann, F., Lloyd-Smith, A., Schmid, S. P., Holzinger, K., & Kupisch, T. (2024). Experience of discrimination in egalitarian societies: the Sámi and majority populations in Sweden and Norway. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 47(6), 1203-1230.

6 Magazzini, T. (2024). When ethnicity is "national": mapping ethnic minorities in Europe's framework convention for the protection of national minorities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 47(9), 1812-1833.

7 Fanon, F. (2015). *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Média Diffusion.

Problem statement

Language barriers perpetuate inequalities among young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, minority groups, and peripheral and rural areas. They prevent them from participating in international learning mobility opportunities and a wider range of European programmes, and, in the process, hinder a rights-based approach to youth participation. They also result in fewer opportunities for young people to participate in public life, in the exchange of knowledge, collaboration, and advocacy at the regional, national, and transnational levels. Overall, language barriers become tall barriers that have partly denied access even to human rights themselves.

A clear example of the problem can be seen in regard to accessibility of projects. Despite the EU's linguistic diversity, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ programme restrict the submission of documentation exclusively to the country's official languages, disregarding the use of official EU languages, EU working languages, and even the minority languages of the respective states. Also, within the Erasmus+ programme, in projects managed at the level of the European Commission, discrimination persists even among EU working languages. While general statistics⁸ are provided on the number of projects, gender distribution, and budget allocation, a lack of data on the languages used in programme implementation makes it difficult to assess the true impact of linguistic barriers on youth participation. In open activities organised by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), European officials have stated that only English should be used for communication and document preparation. In fact the evaluation criteria for youth projects indirectly penalise the use of minority languages by including a metric on visibility - which sees projects in official EU languages scoring more highly. Conversely, one can argue that by using only English or other major languages, projects' visibility is greatly reduced towards those who often need them the most: young people from marginalized backgrounds.

As Europeans, we need to stress that multilingualism should be seen as an asset rather than a liability or an obstacle. We advocate for the strengthening of linguistic accessibility in youth policies, as well

as for the right of each language community to be regarded as equal and independent, regardless of its legal or political status within individual states, as attested by the importance of linguistic rights as part of fundamental human rights in the Council of Europe's 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, as well as in the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights signed by the International PEN Club and several other international non-government organisations.

Objective

This motion seeks to reduce language barriers by combating language discrimination and promote equal opportunities for everyone regardless of the languages they speak, fostering cross-cultural understanding and empowering youth towards active participation in society. This motion, furthermore, aims to emphasise that European integration is built on the principles of equal rights and dignity among all European cultures and, therefore, that European integration cannot be built upon the dominance of a few select national languages or cultures.

Noting that the European Youth Forum and its member organisations and partners play a crucial role in promoting inclusive participation for all young people, we stress the importance of concrete and collective action to remove language barriers in order to improve active participation in international learning mobility experiences, promote mutual understanding and intercultural exchanges, and accord equal rights and opportunities for young people in Europe as a key, cross-sectorial element for youth rights policy development and promotion.

⁸ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets>

Call to action

The European Youth Forum calls to:

Raise wider awareness of linguistic barriers and inequalities that limit young peoples' participation in international mobility and participation. Promoting linguistic diversity as a fundamental pillar of inclusive youth participation, and international cooperation is essential in advocating for and defending youth rights. To address this, we call for data collection on linguistic diversity for increased transparency on language use in the future EU Youth Programmes, providing a basis upon which to effectively address linguistic discrimination in European youth mobility programmes, better inform policies promoting linguistic inclusion, and promote research and policy development on the impact of linguistic discrimination on international mobility and youth participation.

Enhance and improve young people's linguistic accessibility in national and international participation spaces by providing interpretation, translation, and multilingual resources, as well as access to information and application processes in languages beyond the hegemonic languages, ensuring that all young people – regardless of their linguistic background – can fully engage in the youth mobility programs. It should be done as a minimum by including translation and interpretation costs in Erasmus+ projects.

Foster a more inclusive and multilingual environment by promoting language accessibility measures among the YFJ, its Member Organisations, and partners. Such measures include encouraging participants in their events and meetings to display on their name tags the languages they can communicate in, making interactions more accessible from the start; offering translation and interpretation services whenever possible, with special attention to specific language communities, such as sign language users; and providing information in their events, meetings and communication channels in multiple languages, prioritising those most spoken by the target audience but also providing relevant attention to languages spoken by fewer members of the target audience as resources allow.

TEJO commits to offering non-formal education on combating language discrimination through language rights and inclusion to the YFJ network - education that is essential in enhancing the importance of combating linguistic discrimination, promoting equitable multilingual communication, and fostering truly inclusive spaces where everyone can participate fully from an inclusive and diverse basis.



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