Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council — European Year of Languages 2001'

(2000/C 156/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the proposal from the European Commission on the proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year of Languages 2001 (COM(1999) 485 final);

having regard to the European Commission's decision of 25 October 1999 and the Council's decision of 30 November 1999 to consult the Committee of the Regions on the subject, under Article 149 and 150 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to its Bureau's decision of 15 September 1999 instructing Commission 7 (Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport and Citizens' Rights) to draw up an opinion on the subject;

having regard to the Draft Opinion (CdR 465/99 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 7 on 3 December 1999 [rapporteur: Mr Pella (I-EPP)];

whereas in the preamble to the EC Treaty, it is stated that the Member States are: 'Determined to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating';

whereas article 18 of the EC Treaty establishes the right of every citizen of the European Union 'to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States', and whereas the ability to use foreign languages is essential to the ability to exercise that right;

whereas the Council Conclusions of 12 June 1995 emphasised that 'linguistic diversity must be preserved and multilingualism promoted in the Union, with equal respect for the languages of the Union and with due regard to the principle of subsidiarity', and whereas Decision 2493/95/EC of the European Parliament and Council, adopted on 23 October 1995 and establishing 1996 as the 'European Year of Lifelong Learning' highlighted the importance of the role of lifelong learning in developing language skills, among others, throughout an individual's lifetime;

having regard to the content of the Socrates programme, established on 14 March 1995 by Decision 819/95/EC of the European Parliament and the Council and modified on 23 February 1998 by Decision 576/98/EC, designed to promote the improvement of knowledge of the languages of the Union and thus contribute to greater understanding and solidarity between the peoples of the Union;

having regard to the Leonardo da Vinci programme, established on 6 December 1994 by Decision 94/819/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, which has, building on the results achieved under the Lingua programme, supported activities aimed at developing linguistic skills as part of vocational training measures; whereas the programme is to move into its second phase, established on 26 April 1999 by Decision 99/382 EC of the Council;

whereas a multiannual programme to promote the linguistic diversity of the Community in the information society was established by Council Decision 96/664/EC of 21 November 1996;

given that the variety of European languages is an inheritance to be preserved,

adopted the following opinion at its 32nd plenary session of 16 and 17 February 2000 (meeting of 17 February).

1. **Introduction**

1.1. *Substance of the European Year of Languages*

1.1.1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the European Commission's proposal for a decision to make 2001 European Year of Languages.

1.1.2. This stance stems from the Commission's repeated insistence that the cultural diversity of the Member States is the key element in the EU's cultural wealth.

1.1.3. To grasp the strategic importance of the European Year of Languages 2001 for the establishment of a genuine and effective union between the peoples of Europe, it is enough to remember that the basic distinguishing feature of cultural identity is the language spoken by the people belonging to a community.

1.1.4. The Commission's 1995 White Paper 'Education, training, research: Teaching and learning: towards a learning society' established as its Objective Four proficiency for all in three Community languages, and the Commission's 1996 Green Paper 'Education, Training, Research: The obstacles to transnational mobility' concluded that 'learning at least two Community languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the single market'; to understand a culture, one must first know the language spoken by the people of that culture.

1.1.5. Notwithstanding the need to assess the possibility for individuals to learn two Community languages, a notion that the Committee believes to be somewhat unrealistic in many cases, the fundamental message to be spread in all the Member States is the basic principle that to know another culture it is first necessary to know the language spoken by the people of that culture.

1.2. *Existing Community action in the field of language education and vocational training: similarities and differences regarding parallel objectives of the Socrates and Leonardo programmes*

1.2.1. The European Union launched the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes specifically to further the economic and social integration of the Member States. Both programmes feature aspects designed to promote language learning.

1.2.2. The language strand of Socrates offers Community aid for the initial and in-service training of language teachers, for the development of new teaching materials and for joint educational projects, such as exchanges for young people.

1.2.3. The Leonardo programme promotes job-related language learning by means of transnational pilot projects and exchange programmes. Both programmes give priority to the less-widely used, learned and taught languages.

1.2.4. In some respects the initiatives listed in the Commission proposal as being the best suited for inclusion in the package of measures for the European Year of Languages mirror the objectives of the two programmes, but in other respects they are radically different.

1.2.5. In 2001, all the Community languages will be promoted, and in particular those that are not currently widely used, including minority languages, backing up the European Year's key principle: that all languages are to be equally respected.

1.2.6. From this angle, the measures are an extension of the projects already underway, though Socrates and Leonardo only cover the Community languages, Irish and Letzeburgesch. The real difference is in the target groups.

1.2.7. Owing to limited funds, measures under Socrates and Leonardo are restricted to well defined categories of the Community population (teachers, trainers, students, decision makers and academics). The European Year of Languages will be aimed at the general public.

1.2.8. This will make the European Year of Languages one of the largest European integration initiatives ever launched on a Community-wide scale.

1.2.9. The Committee has already given its full approval to implementation of the Socrates and Leonardo education and training programmes. The second phase of Socrates will involve new measures to promote linguistic diversity and improve the quality of language teaching and learning. In the second phase of the Leonardo programme, the priority given to language teaching and its profile will be further strengthened. The Committee hopes that these second phases, due to begin during 2000, will dovetail successfully with the preparatory phase of the 2001 European Year of Languages.

2. **General comments**

2.1. *Aims and objectives*

2.1.1. The Committee broadly endorses the aims of the European Year of Languages and the means chosen to bring it about. The main aims are:

— to raise awareness of the richness of linguistic diversity within the European Union;

— to familiarise the widest possible public with the advantage of having skills in a range of languages, namely real freedom of movement within Europe, increased employability, and heightened competitiveness for European companies on the world market;

— to encourage lifelong learning of languages and related skills;

— to collect and disseminate information about the teaching and learning of languages.

2.1.2. The objectives can be traced back to the principles enshrined in the Treaty:

— encouraging mutual understanding between the diverse cultures that form Europe's heritage;

— promoting free movement within the European Union.

2.2. *Target groups*

2.2.1. The main aim of the European Year of Languages is that of involving as large a number of people as possible, i.e. the European general public, in order to convince everyone, irrespective of their age, class or occupation, of the importance of language learning. This vast target group will for instance include:

— people from a particular region or who speak a particular language;

— people who live near linguistic borders;

— occupational groups;

— schoolchildren;

— parents of schoolchildren;

— social partners;

— unemployed people.

The COR strongly believes people with disabilities should also be included.

2.3. *Description of actions*

2.3.1. Major actions

2.3.1.1. The Committee is pleased to note that the European Year of Languages initiatives will include special events and approves of the plan to ask language learning institutions to hold open days. It is also a good idea to hold common events in all the Member States, for instance to inaugurate and close the Year.

2.3.1.2. The special events must be organised in such a way as to avoid becoming projects that are of removed from their context and therefore unable to involve the general public. Furthermore, they must be entertaining and interactive rather than didactic, for example by including performances in various languages. Such events should also be assured of adequate television coverage.

2.3.1.3. The Committee welcomes the fact that, rather than relating to specific languages, several of the Community schemes and activities conducted during the European Year will be aimed at putting across a general message, celebrating diversity and promoting language-learning in general.

2.3.2. Specific actions

2.3.2.1. Specific actions will include:

— the development an immediately recognisable logo accompanied by a short and pithy slogan, suited to individual languages and cultures; the Commission is to design the logo in conjunction with the Council of Europe; the logo will be available to any projects financed to any degree by the European Community and to projects which are financed wholly by local organisations, but comply with the objectives of the European Year of Languages;

— the use of television, the ideal medium for the initial task of raising public awareness; the cost of direct advertising time is prohibitive, but it may be possible to obtain television time free of charge;

— the organisation of European competitions for schoolchildren and adults;

— the creation of a web site dedicated to providing information on the European Year of Languages; this site would hold all the information published on the initiative and would link up to the sites of the Commission and the Council of Europe and to national sites, enabling interaction with the public;

— fairs and exhibitions;

— interviews and press conferences;

— the preparation of posters, leaflets and brochures for mass distribution; the advertising space needed for poster campaigns will have to be given free of charge by the organisations concerned;

— the direct involvement of public figures and celebrities, as spokespeople for the European Year of Languages.

2.4. *Cooperation with the Council of Europe and the applicant countries*

2.4.1. The Committee looks forward to fruitful cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe. It in particular welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in promoting the Year. Regarding the overall management of the European Year, the Committee believes there should be regular coordination meetings of the Commission and the Council of Europe, in addition to close day to day cooperation.

2.4.2. The Committee appreciates the support offered by the Council of Europe to enable the countries that have applied to join the EU to take part in the European Year of Languages. The hope is that this cooperation will solve some of the practical difficulties their involvement will imply.

2.5. *Administrative procedures and the presentation of requests*

2.5.1. The European Commission's proposal states that a specially appointed advisory committee will be established to process funding requests.

2.5.2. The European Year will involve two calls for proposals. The deadline for the first will be in the summer or early autumn of 2000, and the subsidies will be drawn from the budget for the preparatory year. The second call, for actions that advance any or all of the European Year's specific objectives, will follow with a deadline in Spring 2001.

2.5.3. The Committee reiterates the recommendation it has already made in other opinions that the application forms be made as simple as possible, that sufficient time be allowed for the presentation of proposals and that the procedures for granting funds be speeded up.

2.5.4. The Committee is in favour of giving priority to projects that will clearly contribute to developing European citizenship and that comply with the principles of the 1995 White Paper, including among their priorities early language learning, at pre-school and primary age, the pooling of information on language learning and teaching, and the promotion of initiatives in the field of translation and interpreting in order to facilitate communication between people that speak different languages.

2.5.5. The Committee is fully behind the decision to favour national, regional and local projects for the production of good quality audiovisual information material.

2.6. *Advisory committee*

2.6.1. Article 5 of the proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and the Council provides for the establishment of an advisory committee, comprising two representatives from each Member State. Each Member State will be free to decide whether those representatives are politicians or technicians.

2.7. *Financial appropriations*

2.7.1. Community-level initiatives for the European Year of Languages will be funded entirely from the Community budget, whereas local, regional, national and transnational initiatives will be funded up to a maximum of 50 % of the total cost. The funds made available for such initiatives will total EUR 8 million, plus EUR 4 million to finance the preparatory period, which will therefore be used during 2000.

2.7.2. The following types of action will be financed at transnational, national, regional and local level:

— meetings and events;

— information and promotion campaigns;

— surveys and studies;

— other actions which target one or more of the objectives of the European Year, and cannot be financed under other Community programmes.

2.7.3. The Committee agrees that projects similar to those already funded through other programmes and initiatives should not be financed, so as to make the best possible use of the financial appropriations granted specifically for the European Year of Languages.

2.8. *Role of and contact with local authorities*

2.8.1. It is essential to stress the key role played by local authorities in pre-school activities, youth schemes, community education services and support for cultural diversity in the EU, of which language is a fundamental element.

2.8.2. Local authorities also make a major contribution to establishing and maintaining interregional cooperation and cooperation with third countries, the applicant countries in particular. The Committee is in favour of setting up an advisory committee of two representatives from each Member State, chaired by a Commission representative, insofar as it ensures the vital input of the local authorities.

2.9. *Evaluations and expected impact*

2.9.1. The Committee of the Regions is fully behind the European Year of Languages idea and believes that it will have a significant impact on the public. Languages are a field of vast importance involving a very high number of people and organisations.

2.9.2. The European Year of Languages may have an important multiplier effect, by starting up Community-wide schemes able to attract considerable mass media attention, and sparking smaller-scale schemes, aimed at particular groups, countries or regions.

2.9.3. To maximise the impact of the European Year of Languages, major lessons must be drawn from similar past endeavours, such as the European Year of Lifelong Learning, where a few mistakes diminished the programme's capacity to attract outside financing.

2.9.4. During the European Year of Lifelong learning, inadequate resources were allotted to preparing communications products in the various Community languages and to setting up promotional and marketing activities, designed to attract media attention and disseminate information on good practice arising from individual projects. Similar mistakes must not be made during the European Year of Languages.

3. **Specific comments**

3.1. *Language learning*

3.1.1. The success of the European Year of Languages will hinge largely on the preparatory phase in 2000.

3.1.2. Studies and surveys will be needed to understand the behaviour of various categories of people with regard to language learning, to identify the expectations of the groups targeted by the European Year and to gather opinions on possible procedures. Meanwhile, one critical piece of data already available must not be overlooked: in Europe, 51 % of adults and 29 % of young people aged between 15 and 24 do not know any foreign language well enough to hold a conversation.

3.1.3. The Committee has always been in favour of promoting language learning, in view of the contribution this can make to culture and employment. Furthermore, knowledge of languages is a prerequisite for the free movement of people within the EU.

3.1.4. The Committee emphasises the need for language learning to begin early, so that the people become truly European from the earliest years of their lives and grow up in the framework of a multilingual society, which allows people to learn languages throughout their lives, as an integral part of a genuinely European lifestyle.

3.1.5. The Committee welcomes the planned publication of a 'Guide for Language Learners', explaining what to look for in a good language course and suggesting learning techniques.

3.1.6. The Committee stresses the need for European Year of Languages schemes to be coordinated effectively with the measures already in place under other dedicated programmes such as Socrates and Leonardo, which are to begin their second phase in 2000. It also underlines the importance of the Lingua programme in this respect.

3.1.7. The establishment of partnerships between the organisations that will be promoting languages in the various Member States is especially important.

3.2. *Promoting cultural diversity*

3.2.1. The Committee will never cease to stress that the preservation of cultural diversity is an asset for the whole of Europe. This is also the view stated in the 'First European Community Framework Programme in Support of Culture (2000-2004)'. Knowledge of other cultures, through language study in particular, is the only way to halt the spread of worrying developments such as racism and xenophobia.

3.3. *Languages covered by the European Year of Languages*

3.3.1. In line with the principle of the equal value of the Community languages, Article 1 of the draft decision states that the European Year will cover all the official Community languages, plus Irish, Letzeburgesch and other languages recognised by the Member States.

3.3.2. The Committee is pleased that Member States will be free to decide for themselves which languages to involve.

3.3.3. The decision to make 2001 European Year of Languages is welcome for the contribution it will make to protecting linguistic minorities and furthering research into the language situation and applying it in various parts of Europe.

4. **Local and regional initiatives**

4.1. The way in which mass media is harnessed will be critical to the success of 2001, as will, above all, the degree of involvement of the local and regional authorities.

4.2. With a view to involving the maximum number of people, it is clear that the main efforts will have to target the most disadvantaged, who are often not reached by the communication channels used by the ever more modern mass media. The local authorities are essential intermediaries for reaching the less-privileged; their detailed knowledge of local areas and their inhabitants will enable them to make the Year 2001 initiatives really effective.

4.3. The Committee agrees on the need to hold special events, but believes they should be set up by local organisations, as only they will know how to involve large numbers of people from different social backgrounds. Once again, the role of the local and regional authorities is vital. The Committee considers that to maximise the number of people involved, local authorities could be supported in their efforts to integrate the European Year of Languages into their day-to-day activities, for example introducing more multi-lingual customer-driven pilot programmes in the delivery of services or designating staff to coordinate new linguistic approaches to their work.

4.4. As it already stated in its opinion on 'Culture 2000', the Committee is afraid that if too much emphasis is placed on big-impact, large-scale activities the risk will be to focus attention on the main events and wrongly give less importance to local and community events. Care must also be taken to avoid launching measures that are in any way elitist, attracting specialists rather than ordinary people.

5. **Conclusions**

The Committee of the Regions:

5.1. Asks that the Committee of the Regions be offered an active role on the advisory committee to be set up under Article 5 of the proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and the Council;

5.2. Welcomes the proposal to make 2001 European Year of Languages and is pleased to see that language learning has finally been placed at the heart of Community action for the promotion of the mutual knowledge of the cultures of the Member States and the strengthening of the principle of the free movement of people within Europe;

5.3. Underlines that these initiatives will support the process of enlarging the European Union, insofar as they provide for the involvement of the applicant countries. The European Year will offer numerous opportunities to raise awareness of the cultures of the applicant countries, forming a basis for their future integration;

5.4. Welcomes the European Year of Languages for the valuable support it will provide in terms of improving the vocational training of the European public, especially regarding the exchange of vocational skills between the various European countries;

5.5. Stresses that as many Europeans as possible should be involved in the initiatives and recommends that in the interests of effectiveness, publicity methods be tailored to the various social groups present in Europe;

5.6. Is glad the Member States will be free to choose which languages, including minority languages, should be the focus of the European Year of Languages;

5.7. Asks that the regional and local authorities be given an active and incisive part to play in the project and that the funding mechanisms for local initiatives be clearly defined and procedures simplified;

5.8. Stresses the key role of the local and regional authorities as the only bodies in a position to promote cultural and linguistic interaction, as they represent the various cultural and linguistic identities within their Member States;

5.9. Proposes providing the local and regional authorities with contact points to supply information and assistance for the implementation of initiatives within the framework of the European Year of Languages;

5.10. Proposes that the Committee of the Regions be directly involved in drawing up the final report setting out the results of the European Year of Languages, as the local and regional authorities are the only qualified judges of success, in terms of the number of people genuinely involved in the local area;

5.11. Recommends an increase in the percentage contribution to the cost of regional and local schemes;

5.12. Believes that the capacity to use the mass media to maximum effect will be a key factor in the success of the European Year of Languages, as this is the only way to reach a very broad public, providing local news media are also used;

5.13. Is convinced that a truly effective publicity campaign must use not only national television networks but also, and above all, local television and radio stations and newspapers, as well as new forms of media; a large number of field studies have shown that a much higher percentage of people watch local television and buy local newspapers than follow the national media;

5.14. Recommends that special priority be given to small-scale projects, to spawn innovative activities;

5.15. Agrees that high-profile, large-scale events will be required for the European Year of Languages to succeed, but believes that these should be supported and enriched by numerous small scale events held by local and regional authorities, which will be able to reinforce the key message of the European Year of Languages as they are geographically close to the target groups;

5.16. Recommends that the initiatives launched as part of the European Year of Languages place an emphasis on its main objectives, namely:

a) promotion of language learning in general,

b) the equal value of all the Community languages, including minority languages,

c) the principle that linguistic and cultural diversity within the European Union is a real asset for the whole of Europe.

5.17. Welcomes the decision to set up a web site to be dedicated to information on the European Year of Languages; proposes that it be included in the Year logo, in order to ensure the maximum number of people are made aware of the site's existence; also believes that it would be extremely useful and effective to post the web site's details on local and regional authority web sites;

5.18. Calls for early establishment of the basic selection criteria for the various projects, so as to facilitate the task of the local and regional authorities and give them ample time to prepare their projects; asks that most of these criteria be general, in order to give the greatest possible scope for local creativity;

5.19. Asks, in line with the objective of the European Year of Languages, that all the related information be translated into all the languages, minority languages chosen by the Member States included, and produced in audiovisual format for the disabled;

5.20. Asks that the preparatory surveys to be conducted in 2000 be carried out at grass-roots level, in all the Member States and among all age groups, in order to quantify how many and which people are interested in learning foreign languages.

Brussels, 17 February 2000.

The President

of the Committee of the Regions

Jos CHABERT