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Europe must act to promote equal language rights

Press release by the European Free Alliance

EU institutions must fulfil obligations to all European languages

The European Union is failing to protect the rights of millions of speakers of non-official EU languages, according to a group of MEPs who will hold a major conference at the European Parliament in Brussels on Thursday. They say that the EU could and should do much more to promote multilingualism which they describe as a democratic entitlement of EU citizens.

'Language Diversity: A Challenge for Europe' will hear from academics and language specialists as well as politicians from across Europe. In an innovative first, simultaneous translation will be available in the European Parliament in non-official languages, with Welsh and Catalan being added to the mix of languages spoken at the conference.

The conference is hosted by the European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament which brings together MEPs representing stateless nations, regions and minorities.

The group will call for:

- Official EU language status for Catalan, Basque, Galician, Welsh and Scots Gaelic;
- Stronger measures at EU level to support endangered languages such as Corsican, Breton, Scots and Occitan;
- Action at EU level to tackle linguistic repression.

Catalan, Basque, Galician, Gaelic and Welsh among them total approximately fourteen million speakers yet continue to be denied official status at EU level. The MEPs will also argue that much more support at EU level is needed to secure a viable future for endangered languages such as Corsican and Breton.

Speaking ahead of the conference, EFA Group President and Plaid Cymru MEP **Jill Evans** (Wales) said:

"The discrimination against some languages has to end so that there is equality for all people in the EU. We are constantly talking about how Europe can develop a better relationship with its citizens. There is no better place to start than by using the languages people actually speak. Our seminar will set this issue firmly on the agenda of Parliament."

"I am delighted to be the first MEP to speak the Welsh language with interpretation in the European Parliament. I will be handing the Chair over to my MEP colleague Oriol Junqueras who will be the first to speak Catalan with interpretation. This is an historic day. We have campaigned long and hard for

recognition of our languages in the parliament and this is another step forward."

Corsican MEP ***François Alfonsi*** added:

"The European Union cannot be allowed to just sit back and allow ancient languages which have been fundamental to European history to simply disappear because of narrow political considerations.

"We need a clear commitment from the European Commission, and specifically from Commissioner Vassiliou that she will take action before it's too late. It's unrealistic and unacceptable to say that this is a matter for the member states."

Oriol Junqueras MEP of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya commented:

"Catalan is spoken by over ten million people in the European Union. This means that Catalan is the thirteenth most widely spoken EU language. There are 23 official languages in the EU, however, Catalan is not among them.

"It is a clear symptom of a democratic deficit from the EU which has to be solved. The fact of not recognising Catalan is weakening the EU. The EU should see multilingualism as an opportunity to bring itself closer to its citizens".

Tatjana Zdanoka MEP (PCTVL, Latvia) said:

"It is no longer credible for the European Union to ignore discrimination based on language. We are seeing this particular kind of discrimination being practiced against a variety of language groups in Europe such as Russian speakers in the Baltic, and Hungarian speakers outside Hungary.

"Getting to grips with this increasingly difficult situation will be a key test for the new EU Commissioners responsible for multilingualism and for fundamental rights, and for the new Commission as a whole. I hope that Commissioners Vassiliou and Reding will spell out coherent policies for combating language discrimination in the near future, and take into account the best standards and practice available in this field."

Frieda Brepoels MEP (N-VA, Flanders) added:

"I am absolutely convinced of the added value that multilingualism brings to the European Union. Diversity and multilingualism are fundamental basic principles of the European Union.

"We have to be extremely vigilant in defending the position of all languages in the EU. European citizens must be able to follow the functioning of the institutions in their own language so that they feel more involved themselves and can fully take part in the European project."

Ian Hudghton MEP (SNP, Scotland) commented:

"Scotland's indigenous languages are an important part of daily life for many people - and are an important part of Europe's culture. Just as the use of the Gaelic and Scots languages has been promoted by the parliament and government in Scotland, so they should be encouraged by the institutions of Europe.

"We live in an age of increased globalisation which brings with it certain pressures on non-official and lesser-used languages. It also however brings with it opportunities - and the EU has an important role to play in assuring a long-term future for Europe's rich linguistic tapestry."

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