

EU: Minority Protection — Initiative Seeks To Set Higher Standards (Part 1)

By Breffni O'Rourke

Just six weeks after the European Union's historic enlargement, a group of experts is appealing to EU heads of state and government to do more to protect ethnic minorities. **They** fear the preservation of **Europe's** scores of minority cultures could be neglected as **the** bloc absorbs **new** members from **Central** and Eastern Europe. **In** their Bolzano **Declaration**, the experts call for measures that could influence minority protection well beyond the EU's borders. **RFE/RL** reports **in** the first of a two-part series.

Prague, 16 June 2004 (RFE/RL) - If you happen to be from the Cornwall region of southwestern England, you probably know a few people who still speak the ancient Cornish language.

Likewise, if you come from Spain's Galicia region, some of your older relatives may possibly speak Galician, but they don't know how to write it. Your children, by contrast, may be taking lessons in the local tongue, but rarely bother to use it.

These are just two examples of ancient European cultures on the brink of extinction. Now, a group of experts from across the European Union has started an initiative to ensure that Europe's scores of minorities are not thinned out or washed away entirely by the pressures of modern life.

The initiative, called the Bolzano Declaration, is aimed not just at preserving disappearing cultures. It also seeks to improve the lives of those minorities that are often today at the center of controversy, such as Europe's Muslim communities and the Roma and Sinti populations.

The panel of 16 experts has appealed to the heads of state and government of all 25 EU member states to take steps to improve minority protection and cultural diversity. They note that EU authorities took an active role in improving the conditions of minorities in the 10 accession countries in the years when these states were negotiating their entry.

But the experts say in their Bolzano Declaration (<http://www.eurac.edu/pecede>) that there is no longer the same "coaching process" continuing on minority rights now that the accession countries are safely in the EU.

The rapporteur for the expert group is Gabriel von Toggenburg of the European Academy in Bolzano, Italy. As he explains, "There are two reasons why one has to push now for cultural and ethnic diversity within the Union. The first one is that after [the accession of new members on] 1 May, the question arises whether the union will uphold the strong momentum in the area of minority protection which has been developed during the accession process. Or whether the union — and more so, the member states — decide by consensus that they will 'escape' to a sort of inactive policy, which would see the union retreat from this area of policy," von Toggenburg says.

The second reason for launching the initiative, says Toggenburg, is that the EU leaders are about to make a fresh effort to finalize an EU constitution, and the Bolzano Declaration calls for extra safeguards to be built into that document.

The chances for the declaration look good. The EU's Irish presidency announced on 13 May that

there "seems to be a likelihood of broad consensus" to include the protection of minorities under the list of values the EU and its member states are founded upon, according to Article 2 of the new constitution.

However, the declaration goes further than that. It calls also for inserting a clause in the constitution that allows for affirmative actions at the national level. This would give member states the possibility to prevent or compensate minorities for disadvantages they might suffer or might have suffered in the past, without putting the principles of the EU's common market into doubt.

The task of minority protection is not a small one, considering that there are nearly 50 million people who belong to some 150 minority groups in the EU -- out of a total population of 450 million people.

An official with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Neil Melvin, notes a certain paradox in the situation. Because of the demands of the EU accession process, some of the eastern accession states now have higher standards for minority protection than the old EU members.

"Indeed, what has often happened is that it's not just a transfer from west to east of standards, but also sometimes a transfer the other way — of positive experience in eastern countries to which perhaps not all countries in the EU had signed up to," Melvin says.

Another OSCE official, Sally Holt, points out the international implications of any move to improve EU standards.

"The development of any standards for the protection of human rights and minority rights generally is a positive thing. And as the EU expands, these developments are good not only for the EU states, the members, but also for the states on the Union's borders. And obviously, due to the enlargement process, the number of countries affected is becoming larger and larger."