

Elizaveta Snegireva
Ph.D., Assistant Professor
Kyiv

STATUS OF ENGLISH IN THE EU: POST-BREXIT LANDSCAPE

Post-Brexit status of the English language has been igniting dispute and commotion of attitudes across Europe for several years now. Opinion is divided on the subject: after Brexit, can or cannot English retain its status as one of the EU official or working languages?

On the one hand, preserving English as an official language of the EU can be problematic after Brexit. In the EU, every member-state enjoys the right to choose one official native language. Malta and Ireland are the only two countries in which English is official, but when they joined the Union, Malta chose Maltese and Ireland chose Irish as their official languages. This means that after the UK finally “brexits”, there remain no member-states that have opted for English as their official EU language.

Therefore, with Brexit optimistically to be fully finalized and legalized by the end of 2020, English would lose ground as one of the EU official languages. Consequently, one may realistically predict that German and French would become dominant languages of the Union.

On the other hand, the EC (European Commission) officially stated that despite Britain's decision to leave the EU, there was no plan to reduce the use of English in the community. Additionally it was mentioned that T&I (translation and interpretation) services remain unaffected.

To some degree, this decision was based on statistical data on the foreign languages young Europeans learn. According to Eurostat [Special Barometer], on average, in 2015 just over 85% of students in higher secondary education in the EU studied English as a foreign language. In comparison, under 20% of students were studying either French or German. In Sweden, Liechtenstein, and Romania, nearly every student learns English as a foreign language.

For a fleeting moment after the Brexit referendum, French-speaking Paris and Brussels imagined that French could regain its historical standing on Europe as the language of diplomacy. What one witnesses in reality, though, is rather paradoxical. No matter how small in terms of population Malta and Ireland stand, they continue to list English as their official EU language (alongside Maltese and Irish). As to the other EU member states, English remains there as a widely-spoken second language, making officials in their respective nations, in particular in Eastern Europe, very much willing to continue to use English as the major communication means in the EU.

To (dis)equilibrate the EU language landscape even further, one should consider the fact that the EU utilizes the notion of an "official" language alongside a "working" language. After Brexit, member states representatives in the European Council will have to vote whether to keep English both a working and an official language. To take a binding decision, the vote must be unanimous. Whether this happens, only time will show.

REFERENCES

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