

CATALAN AND THE SO-CALLED “MINORITY” LANGUAGES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

There are thirty-six “regional or minority” languages in the European Union, spoken by twenty million people

The European continent and the British Isles have experienced innumerable changes in their frontiers, annexations of territories and population movements throughout their history. One of the consequences of this is that almost all states are multilingual.

According to the Euromosaic report commissioned by the EU, within the fifteen-member European Union, there are thirty-six so-called “regional or minority” languages, distributed in fifty-nine linguistic population groups with different levels of legal and social recognition. None of them are fully recognised at a state level.

In the European Union, some 20 million people speak one of these languages, in addition to the official language of the state in which they have citizenship. Almost 50% live in Spain and 23% in France, with the rest being found mainly in Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands.

Only six “minority” languages have more than one million speakers

Of the thirty-six so-called “minority” languages, only six have more than one million speakers (as is shown in table 5). There are two more spoken by over half a million (Basque and Welsh), while another six are spoken by more than 125,000 people and less than half a million (Frisian, Friulian, Luxembourgish, Finnish, Breton and Corsican).

Catalan is the most widely spoken language in comparison with the so-called “regional or minority” languages in the European Union

Catalan is the most important language in terms of the number of people who speak it in comparison with all the so-called “regional or minority” languages in the European Union and it is the only one which is spoken by more than 7 million people.

Because of historical and political reasons, Catalan is often included within this group of languages even though its situation is very different from all the others because of its demographic situation, legal status, socio-linguistic situation and linguistic regulation.

Table 5 compares Catalan with the “regional or minority” languages with more than half a million speakers.

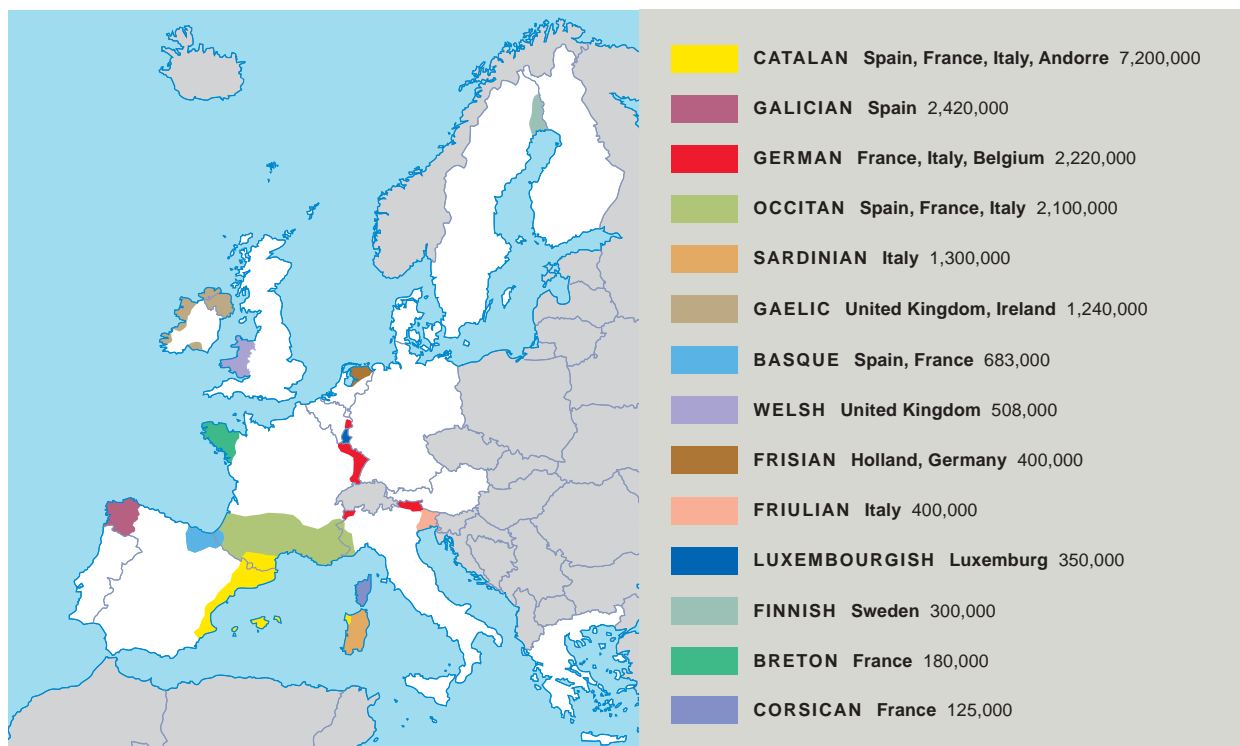
Table 5. Catalan speakers and speakers of some “minority” languages

LANGUAGE	SPEAKERS	STATES
Catalan	7,200,000	Spain, France, Italy, Andorra
Galician	2,420,000	Spain
German ¹	2,220,000	France, Italy, Belgium
Occitan	2,100,000	Spain, France, Italy
Sardinian	1,300,000	Italy
Gaelic	1,240,000	United Kingdom, Ireland
Basque	683,000	Spain, France
Welsh	508,000	United Kingdom

SOURCE: IDESCAT and EUROMOSAIC report.

⁽¹⁾ German is the most spoken language in the EU with a total of 92,420,000 speakers. Outside Germany and Austria it is recognised as a minority language.

The map below shows the fourteen “minority” languages of the European Union with more than 125,000 speakers. Among these, there are three which stand out for their degree of modernisation and the maturity of the economy in their territory: Catalan, Basque and Luxembourgish.



Only six of the so-called “minority languages” exceed half a million of speakers. Catalan is above these six with over seven million speakers

SOURCES: Euromosaic. Own research from the 1996 Official Population Statistics