

First Europe-wide survey on policies on language functionality in Europe – ELIPS helps to compare the situation in 24 countries

Most European countries have policies and actions to ensure that public authorities communicate efficiently and inclusively. These policies concern the use of plain language, terminology, easy-to-read language and gender-neutral language, among others.

What kinds of similarities and differences are there in these policies and actions? You can find answers to this question in the data survey *European Languages and their Intelligibility in the Public Sphere* (ELIPS), a pioneer project mapping the engagement of public authorities throughout Europe in domains relating to communication with citizens.

The survey covers the situation in most countries and language areas that are represented in the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL). It contains information on 27 official languages spoken in 24 European countries. The data were collected in 2018–2019 and published in 2021.

The results are useful for governments and policy bodies when comparing their national situation with other countries'. They are of interest to all organizations and specialists working in the domains covered by the survey, and they can inspire academic research as well.

Terminology and plain language are well-established fields

In most participating countries there is public interest both in terminology and the use of plain language by governments and in public administration. Accordingly, there are institutions responsible for terminology management as well as for maintaining plain language policies and providing plain language services.

Explicit policies for terminology and plain language are usually laid down in recommendations by central governments or in legal provisions and regulations. Some countries even give their citizens the right to refuse unclear information.

There are various methods to help public administrations comply with the policies in practice. Most countries have terminology and plain language guidelines, terminology databases and extraction tools as well as terminology and plain-language related web services. In addition, civil servants get specific training in language use, effective writing and communication. In many countries they can also use templates and style checkers, complexity-of-text predictors or other kinds of digital tools to help ensure that the message is understood.

Campaigns, prizes and competitions are popular ways of promoting plain language policies: they are used in more than half of the countries. Awards are given for the clearest text, the best author or the best promoter of plain language. In Wales, it is possible to obtain a quality seal.

In one third of the countries, the effect of plain language policies is measured using indicators such as user satisfaction or efficiency. For example, the authorities in Norway have developed an online toolbox with methods for user involvement and measuring results.

Despite the great interest and wide range of activities in plain language and terminology, only half of the national language institutions in the countries in the survey are involved in international cooperation in these fields.

Interest in inclusive communication could increase

Over the last few years, sensitivity towards aspects of inclusive communication has increased in Europe as well. This can be seen in the ELIPS survey in such fields as easy-to-read language as well as social, cultural and gender diversity, which are considered essential elements of inclusiveness. In the policies for good

communication in Europe, these fields are still less well established or more recent than plain language or terminology.

Nowadays, most European countries have official guidelines on the use of gender-neutral language and other gender aspects but only some have instructions on cultural diversity, sexual preferences, disabilities, mental health, religion, nationality or age. Beside general instructions, civil servants do not usually have the possibility to learn more about aspects of inclusive communication: in their training, gender equality, cultural diversity and avoidance of stereotypes are the least taught subjects.

Easy-to-read language is a special variety for addressing those with reading or comprehension barriers. Although more than half of the countries in the survey have legislation or general recommendations concerning this kind of language, only one fifth have a body responsible for the use of easy-to-read language by public institutions.

Conclusions: more cooperation is needed

Communication by authorities affects citizens' access to rights, their legal protection and, finally, their trust in society. Good communication makes it possible to participate in society and to interact with authorities. It also helps administrations to function efficiently.

According to the results of the ELIPS survey, most European countries have policies related to the functionality of language used in public administration. However, policies on various aspects of good language are quite fragmented and they are developed mostly on a national scale without active cooperation with other countries or institutions of the European Union.

In order to improve the current situation, the researchers have three suggestions:

- increase coherence and convergence between the various domains, for example between plain language, terminology and easy-to-read language actors
- improve the sharing of experiences and practices between the various countries in Europe and
- ensure more continuity and interaction between national and European policy levels.

The project group is planning a second data collection round. The aim is to see how the sectors covered by the survey have developed and whether some of the suggested improvements have taken place. The group also hopes to obtain answers from more countries and to gather information on how the authorities use new forms of communication.

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Link to all the results of the ELIPS survey: <https://elips.efnil.nytud.hu/>

More information on the ELIPS project: <http://www.efnil.org/projects/elips>