

EU expansion

Pending successful referendums in nine of the 10 countries invited to join the European Union (EU) this year, the EU will become a 25-member state with the biggest single market in the world. What does this mean for language learning? AMY BAKER investigates.

In Copenhagen in December last year, the future of Europe was changed forever with the historic decision to admit 10 new member states into the EU. Opinion in the newly welcomed countries ranged from positive to doubtful, however Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Cyprus, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta are likely to become EU members in May 2004.

The implications for language learning are significant. Agencies in many countries agree that demand for language learning will rise, if business and exchange opportunities spring up in the EU and immigration procedures become easier. 'Joining the EU will surely incite students to study abroad,' says Stefan Horny of Eurolingua in Slovakia, 'because there will be no visa for travelling to the UK.'

Katalin Rosztoczy, Managing Director of Arany Oroszlan in Hungary, agrees that business competition will boost demand for overseas study. 'Without [language competence], we will not reach our goals in the business world,' she says. 'As I see it, if Hungarians want to improve their language skills, they prefer an intensive way to study - language holiday type programmes.'

Any increase in the take-up rate of language courses is likely to be linked to the culture of a country and its spending abilities. In Lithuania, Giedrus Mazurka, of East West Consulting, suggests that there may be little direct impact in his country of EU member-

ship. 'I do not think the [booking rate] will increase a lot,' he says, 'as some people will go for jobs [overseas] or work-related programmes, while at the same time improving their languages.' Karel Klusak of Intact in the Czech Republic comments, 'Lots of Czechs realise that when we join the EU, it will be too late to start with their studies.'

One area that agents believe will spark interest among their clientele is paid work experience programmes. 'We think [EU membership] might improve the situation, and definitely [bookings for] work placement and internship programmes which so far are only unpaid for non-EU students,' says Maaja Lauringson from Language Learning Service in Estonia. Rosztoczy in Hungary adds, 'With EU integration, a new educational division, paid 'work and study', will be the most popular among Hungarian students.'

Entering the higher education system in an EU country might also become more appealing for students, agents affirm, as the costs should be lower. 'A lot of students are interested in university study overseas, but at the moment it is impossible because of financial reasons,' says Erzsebet Guelmino of Egida agency in Hungary. Mazurka adds, 'I think a lot of [Lithuanians] will make plans for future studies in other EU countries as after joining the EU, [the cost] will become cheaper.'

In Cyprus, Demertios Christodoulides of DRC Solutions points out that almost all Cyp-

riot students want to study abroad, either by going overseas after their secondary education or by studying at local educational institutions first and then pursuing postgraduate studies abroad. EU integration will mean 'more higher study options with less cost,' he says, forecasting a rise in demand. Christodoulides also paints a picture of improving 'socio-economic characteristics' in Cyprus following its acceptance into the EU. This factor may lead to rising demand across the board for language tuition.

Klusak says, 'There may be more students for junior courses and executive programmes as well as [young adults] but this will not be due directly to our EU membership, simply to improved economic conditions and a stronger currency.' He predicts that Malta's weather and price advantage may prove to be a lure for juniors and executives. 'Malta is a very strong competitor in these customer categories,' he says. 'One-to-one tuition is very cheap there as is [the] cost of hotels, and juniors are attracted by the sun.'

Francis Stivala, of NSTS Student Youth Travel in Malta, points out that most Maltese people are already multilingual, speaking Maltese, English and Italian and learning French, German or Spanish at school. 'One of the major assets the Maltese can contribute to the EU, should Malta accept to join, is this unique ability to speak so many languages,' he says. '[Translation] opportunities will open up only after [integration] and should this asset be realised, then demand [for language learning at home or abroad] will arise later.'

Profiles of the potential EU members

Cyprus (Greek Cypriot area)

Population: 767,314
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 2.6%
Unemployment rate 3%.

Czech Republic

Population: 10,256,760
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 3.4%
Unemployment rate 8.1%.

Estonia

Population: 1,415,681
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 4.7%
Unemployment rate 12.4%.

Hungary

Population: 10,075,034
Economic situation: GDP

growth rate 3.9%
Unemployment rate 6.5%.

Latvia

Population: 2,366,515
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 6.3%
Unemployment rate 7.6%.

Lithuania

Population: 3,601,138
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 4.8%
Unemployment rate 12.5%.

Malta

Population: 397,499
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 4%
Unemployment rate 4.5% (figures relate to data for 2000).

Poland

Population: 38,625,478
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 1.5%
Unemployment rate 16.7%.

Slovakia

Population: 5,422,366
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 3%
Unemployment rate 19.8%.

Slovenia

Population: 1,932,917
Economic situation: GDP growth rate 4%
Unemployment rate 11.5%.

Source: CIA World Factbook 2002, all population estimates as of July 2002, economic statistics as of 2001 unless indicated.

