[IE] Effect of New Languages Bill on Public Service Broadcasters

IRIS 2002-5:1/22

Tarlach McGonagle
Institute for Information Law (IViR), University of Amsterdam

The Irish Government recently published its long-awaited Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Comhionannas) (Official Languages (Equality) Bill), 2002. The primary objectives of the Bill include the promotion of respect for Irish and English as the official languages of the State; the promotion of equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use, especially in parliamentary proceedings, legislation, the administration of justice, in communicating with or providing services to the public and in discharging the functions of public bodies.

For the purposes of the Bill, the main national public service broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) qualifies as a public body. So too does the exclusively Irish-language radio station, Raidió na Gaeltachta, as does the principally Irish-language television station referred to in the Bill as Teilifís na Gaeilge (now actually known as TG4).

If enacted, the greatest impact of the Bill on the aforementioned public service broadcasters will concern RTÉ, as the other two routinely conduct their business through the medium of the Irish language anyway. Its impact will, however, be mainly in administrative terms, as broadcasting in the Irish language by RTÉ is the subject of specific provisions in the Broadcasting Act, 2001 (see IRIS 2001-4: 9). Section 28(2) of the Act, for instance, obliges the public broadcaster, inter alia, to "provide a comprehensive range of programmes in the Irish and English languages that reflect the cultural diversity of the whole island of Ireland and include, both on television and radio [...]."

By way of contrast, the present Bill focuses instead on measures aimed at increasing the use of the official languages in the day-to-day operations of public bodies, for example by making certain documents of public interest (eg. policy proposals or annual reports) available simultaneously in both languages (Section 11). The Bill also envisages a duty for public bodies to ensure that members of the public can communicate with them and receive services from them in either of the official languages (Section 9).

Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland), 1937, stipulates that the "Irish language as the national language is the first official language". It also states that the "English language is recognised as a second official language" and that provision "may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof." According to the most recent census information available (1996), only 43% of the population consider themselves able to speak Irish and over two-thirds of these persons are school-goers.

Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Comhionannas), 2002 (Official Languages (Equality) Bill, 2002), No. 24 of 2002, April 2002

http://www.gov.ie/bills28/bills/2002/2402/default.htm

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026