

European Commission: Irish Broadcast Fund Promotes “Cultural and Regional Identity”

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In June 2005, the European Commission decided the question whether the Irish Language Broadcast Fund would be authorized as a legitimate form of state aid. In approving the Fund, the Commission said that “The fund meets the criteria for aid to be compatible under state aid rules set out in the Commission's Communication on certain legal aspects relating to cinematographic and other audiovisual works” (see IRIS 2001-9: 6 and IRIS 2004-4: 4). Aid to promote culture may be authorised where such aid does not unduly distort competition, according to EC Treaty state aid rules (Article 87(3)(d)).

The background to the Fund lies in the 1998 agreement (popularly known as the “Good Friday Agreement”), reached between the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland in the context of the “peace process” involving Ireland.

The Agreement addresses the issue of minority languages; it sets up the North/South Language Body (known in Irish as An Foras Teanga or in Ulster-Scots as Tha Boord o Leid) as one of the original six North-South Implementation Bodies. The Agreement, in particular, commits the UK Government, having signed the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, to “...in relation to the Irish language, where appropriate and where people so desire it [...] seek more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland”. To facilitate such production, the UK Government in Northern Ireland established the Irish Language Broadcast Fund.

The Fund is worth GBP 12 million over five years and will “deliver at least 90 hours of Irish language broadcasting per year, to an audience of 25,000 people in Northern Ireland. It will also enable at least 15 people to be trained each year in production and broadcasting skills”. Another GBP 12 million is being made available for the Ulster-Scots Academy. The fund is administered by the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission and whilst it “will grant aid to a wide range of production activities capable of being delivered by present and developing delivery platforms - including analogue, digital, online and interactive” it should be noted that “radio broadcasting is not within the remit of this fund”.

The criteria for funding are: a minimum of 60% of the spoken word within the production must be in Irish, every production must be subtitled in English. The product must be of artistic quality and should be capable of being delivered by present and developing delivery platforms - including analogue, digital, online and interactive platforms. It should reach a substantial audience in Northern Ireland.

Aid beneficiaries will be independent, audiovisual production companies and in exceptional cases broadcasters.

"State aid: Commission endorses Northern Irish Language Broadcast Fund", Press Release of the European Commission IP/05/691 of 8 June 2005

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