

Thematic debate of the 29th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on

**“Regional and minority languages in Europe:
recent developments, challenges and good practices”**

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The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages - Achievements and Prospects

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1. Dear Madam President, dear members of the Congress, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me today to your thematic debate dedicated to regional and minority languages in Europe. I am here as the Chair of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the body in charge of monitoring the implementation of the Charter. It was established when the Charter came into force in 1998 and consists of independent experts from each state party. Together with me today here are the two Vice-Chairs of the Committee of Experts, Mr. Sigve Gramstad and Prof. Stefan Oeter, and Mr Thorsten Afflerbach, the Head of the Charter Secretariat.

2. Before I start, let me use this opportunity to congratulate you on the 30th anniversary of the signing of the “European Charter for Local Self Government”, a document fundamental for development of local and regional self-government and territorial democracy. It is one of the few documents adopted by the entire membership of the Council of Europe showing its undisputable value.

3. I would like to start by thanking and commending the Congress as one of the key players in minority language protection. The Congress was instrumental in the creation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in the 1980s. And the Congress has continuously supported this important work. A recent example of that support is the Declaration on “Regional and minority languages in Europe today”, adopted in February 2014 by the Bureau of the Chamber of the Regions. That Declaration pointed to one of the burning issues connected with the Charter. At present, the Charter has 25 States Parties, which leaves 22 Council of Europe

member states that have not yet ratified. Those include 11 EU member states and 6 Council of Europe member states that are under post-accession commitments. There are also 15 Council of Europe member states that have ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities but not the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The last signature of the Language Charter was made in 2005 and the last ratification instrument was submitted in 2010. There have been no new developments in that regard despite repeated recommendations by Secretary General, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. So we need more support from you.

4. Now you may ask: “Why should we support the Charter?” Well, the Charter is still the only international treaty dedicated specifically to the protection and promotion of regional and minority languages. It covers languages traditionally used on the territory of a state party by a smaller proportion of the population that are different from its official language(s). Immigrant languages and dialects of the official language are excluded from its scope of application, while the “less widely used official languages” may be covered based on a separate state’s declaration. (e.g. Finland for Swedish, Switzerland for Italian and Romansh).

5. The States Parties committed themselves to this international obligation in addition to the already existing national legislative protection. With the Charter they undertook to ensure the use of regional and minority languages in all relevant fields of public life. Besides the traditional presence of these languages in education and culture, regional and minority languages should be used in public administration, media, social and economic life and in transfrontier relations. The role of local and regional authorities is crucial for a full implementation of the Charter. For example, the use of minority languages in kinder-gardens and elementary schools or homes for elderly is usually the remit of local authorities. Furthermore, the use of regional and minority languages in administration is usually mostly present in local administration including putting up bilingual signage on roads and public buildings. Transfrontier co-operation between regions or municipalities where the same language is used can be seen not just as a cultural but a substantially economic gain for both parties. In addition, local authorities play an important role in gathering information during our on-the-spot visits to States Parties in preparation of our reports to the Committee of Ministers.

6. How well have the states parties implemented their obligations? I do not have enough time now to show you some concrete examples from the states parties. However, I would like to share with you some general observations. Many States Parties have marked positive changes spreading from the recognition of “new” traditional languages to the building of infrastructure necessary to protect and promote regional and minority languages: legislation has been amended; new administrative structures have developed; new institutions have been set up; dialogue and permanent contacts between authorities and speakers of regional or minority languages have increased. In summary, we have found a gradually emerging environment of intercultural dialogue and a growing acceptance and appreciation of the value of regional or minority languages as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.

7. However, at the same time we should not avoid looking also at some shortcomings and challenges that have become apparent over the years. First of all, we have noticed that the States Parties have not always been prepared for a structured approach to the application of all the undertakings they had entered into under this Convention. The communication from the central to the local level was a problem in some states, because, as I said, in many cases the implementation depends on local authorities. Sometimes there has been a certain misunderstanding about the scope of the assumed obligations. Problems have occurred also with respect to full implementation of the recommendations made by the Committee of Ministers so they have to be repeated. Finally, we have observed persistence or even progression of intolerance vis-à-vis minorities and their languages in a growing number of countries.

8. Now you may ask: “What exactly should we do?” Well, in monitoring the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Committee of Experts that I chair finds that non-implementation at state level is usually caused by non-implementation at regional or local level. Consequently, regional and local authorities should adopt a pro-active approach in implementing their obligations under the Charter and not wait until guidance is given by the national authorities. Even if your country has not yet ratified the Charter, you can still start by implementing Charter provisions at local and regional level.

9. Now to finish, the important question from your side may be: “Will there be any assistance available?” Well, yes there may be. The Council of Europe is currently stepping up its efforts to provide more direct support to local and regional authorities in implementing the

recommendations made by monitoring bodies such as the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. These so-called “joint assistance programmes” are currently being negotiated with the European Union. Member States are also supported in promoting and implementing the Charter, at national, regional and local level, through expertise offered by the Committee of Experts and the Charter Secretariat. I would like to invite you to make use of that offer.

10. Madame President, ladies and gentlemen, I hope this is one of many following exchanges of views between the Congress and our Committee on the protection and promotion of regional and minority languages. I will conclude with the reference to the forthcoming 25th anniversary, in 2017, of the opening of signing the Charter and invite you to take part in this celebratory occasion.

11. Madame President, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.