

Celebrating the 10th anniversary of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Presentation by Alexey KOZHEMYAKOV, Head of the Secretariat of the Charter,
Council of Europe

Lulea, Sweden 17 October 2008

Dear colleagues and distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to welcome you all on behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe under whose patronage the “Liet Lavlut” festival will take place tomorrow. I should also like to express our gratitude to the Swedish Bureau of Lesser Used Languages for their organisational efforts to hold this conference in excellent conditions and, I must confess, in very particular circumstances when we consider the exciting closeness of the Arctic Circle...

Let me start my presentation by reading a short and recent message made by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg last May on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Charter, and which summarises the European approach to the place of these languages in modern Europe: “... we are marking the 10th anniversary of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This Charter is designed to protect and promote regional and minority languages as a key aspect of cultural heritage in Europe and to allow people who speak a regional or minority language to use it in private and public life.

The underlying philosophy of the Charter is that minorities are not an accident of history or an exotic and suspicious group of people, but an integral and essential part of Europe’s mosaic.

The existence of a minority is a question of fact - not definition. We must not only tolerate a minority, we must respect it. The extent to which the majority protects and promotes the rights of the minority – and that includes the opportunity to use their language - is a measure of the level of democratic development in a particular country.”

As you all know the Charter has a cultural vocation, which means that not only the respect for cultural diversity of speakers of minority languages should be guaranteed, but also that the society as a whole should develop its awareness of such diversity of languages and cultures as an important element of common cultural wealth. The respect of certain cultural values, linguistic in our case, contributes to the further development of the innovative concept of cultural rights in Europe.

Returning to the origin of the Charter we should remember that the “cultural strategy” of its elaboration and drafting was a subject of debate at the time, and

sceptics were saying that this approach of not “protecting linguistic minorities, as specific groups” was excessively timid and not always convincing. However time proved that even when the treaty does not provide the “legal bedrock to secure individual rights” and “a special status to the speakers” it can be an efficient instrument in this field when specific legal rules are developed for that purpose.

Another important particular feature of the Charter - and once more the 10th anniversary provides an excellent occasion to recall this - is the role which the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe played in establishing the Charter. The Congress was a kind of “cradle” where the initial ideas of the Charter were discussed, opinions confronted, and finally the starting point of the drafting took place. As a recognition of this role, the Charter kept the word “regional” in its title, which reflects how important the role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of the Charter should be, while the final responsibility for implementing the Charter lies with the national authorities.

It seems to me to be appropriate to have made reference to the history of the Charter, which underlines how well this conference and its programme reflect the core issues at stake : regional or minority languages, culture, the role of regional authorities, and the involvement of NGOs. And as an authentic bridge between theoretical discussion and practice, the conference will culminate in the Liet Lavlut festival. Let me wish the conference every success in achieving the objectives of this remarkable event!

Thank you for your attention.