

Speech by FUEN President Hans Heinrich HANSEN at the *Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages*, Strasbourg, 11 June 2015.

Salutation

I am pleased to be in the Intergroup again, and I am especially pleased that the Intergroup has been able to re-establish itself this winter with so many Members. Many of you will know our organisation, FUEN. But as the Parliament and therefore also the Intergroup has many new faces, I would like to start with presenting FUEN.

Since the time it was established more than 65 years ago, FUEN is active for the protection and promotion of the autochthonous minorities and ethnic groups in Europe. With more than 90 member organisations from 30 countries of Europe it is the largest umbrella organisation and also the voice of the member organisations affiliated to FUEN.

The minorities of Europe want to make their own contribution to shaping the future of Europe and strengthening European civil society. The European minorities represent a potential that to the present day is neither well known, nor sufficiently used. Although their contribution to linguistic and cultural diversity is clearly visible, a fact often overlooked is that minorities possess expertise that can contribute to economic and regional development.

FUEN works to resolve conflicts before they erupt, and to strengthen minority communities in their efforts in the various regions using European initiatives. We promote dialogue and active participation in society. Our network is supported by critically minded, enthusiastic people and active organisations.

So far that sounds all great. But all of us here together know that in the vast majority of European states minority rights are not respected and that many regional and minority languages are endangered.

Every year, FUEN organises the largest annual congress of the autochthonous minorities in Europe – where 150-250 representatives of the European minorities meet each other. Our 2015 FUEN Congress took place one month ago in the region of Western Thrace in Greece, where minority rights are unfortunately in a sorry state.

I thank Nils Torvalds, who attended the congress in Komotini, just like Csaba Sógor and Herbert Dorfmann and who played an active part in the programme.

Greece does not recognise the West Thracian Turks as “Turkish”, as a national minority, but as “Moslem”, and thus as a religious minority.

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In 1923, with the blessing of the League of Nations, 1.2 million Greeks were inhumanly expelled from their home in Turkey and sent to Greece, and inversely, 600,000 Turks were jacked out of their homes in Greece.

It was then that the minority rights of the 150,000 Turks in Western Thrace were guaranteed under the Peace Treaty of Lausanne, and the region was awarded to Greece.

As we know, nowadays all Moslems are suspected and stigmatised across the world, because some fanatical individuals and groups behave so inhumanly. And this causes discrimination against a whole religion.

It is therefore all the more important that the Turkish minority is recognised in all its complexity. In this case, complexity is more than religion. They are, and call themselves, Turks; but to this very day their clubs and associations are not allowed to use the word “Turkish” in their names. Despite three judgments of the Strasbourg Court against Greece in 2008, the issue has still not been resolved.

Ukraine

After the Balkan Crisis, the situation of the autochthonous minorities in Europe is once again an item on the political agenda. With the West-East conflict in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region, the protection of a minority has once again been misused as justification for military operations.

A year ago, I was in the midst of the troubles, but before the outbreak of the war, in Kiev for three days, where I was taking part in the Kiev Security Forum. There I also met with several minority representatives, so that I could get an insight into their situation. The impression I got was that the minorities had no problems with the state or with each other. But the war has changed things. Nowadays one hides one’s Russian identity, and an atmosphere of fear and insecurity prevails. And while we do not have a solution to this crisis either, it is our joint mission, to give a voice to the national minorities, to individuals and to groups.

We are very much aware of the gravity of the situation in Ukraine. But we try to do what we can do as an NGO, to make a contribution to improve the situation. At our congress in Greece, we discussed the situation in Ukraine with the government commissioner for minorities Gennadiy Druzenko and with representatives of several Ukrainian minorities.

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As a European minority umbrella organisation, with members in the EU, in Ukraine and in Russia as well, FUEN can be an effective platform for the discussion of the problems. The idea was raised to organise a series of meetings in the House of Minorities of FUEN in Flensburg between representatives of organisations of national minorities in Ukraine and Russia. The pilot will take place next week in connection with the Forum “Minorities in border regions”, that we organise in cooperation with the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR).

FUEN is now an address when it comes to minority policy. It was Germany’s foreign minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier, who expressed this most clearly at the ceremony in Berlin to celebrate 60 years of the Bonn-Copenhagen declarations, and I quote:

“We also want to use your expertise for our foreign policy! Here it’s not about just recommending the blind imitation of the German-Danish minority model. The conflicts in this world are too complex for that. But I believe that your experiences in the north of Germany and in the south of Denmark can help identify important factors on the path to defusing minority conflicts”.

Many minorities and regions are still for waiting for their capability to be used. I could mention several examples of minorities in Europe, that are not recognised, that are not respected, discriminated or whose infrastructures are cut away for financial reasons. Where regions or administrative offices are merged, where calls for autonomy are seen as a national security risk. I mentioned Western Thrace in Greece. We just heard about the Poles in Lithuania and later during this meeting we will hear about the imposed merger of regions in France.

There are good examples too.

I come from a region that this celebrated 60 years Bonn-Copenhagen Criteria this year. These Declarations opened the door to peaceful coexistence of minorities and majorities in the German-Danish border region. There are other good examples in Finland, Belgium and in South Tyrol.

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Our relationship with the EU and the European Parliament

I always like to use the quotation “Show me how you treat your minorities and I’ll tell you how democratic your society really is”, This is the basis for democratic dealings on an equal footing. And this is why we called for a Minorities Commissioner in the EU.

We suggested positioning this job as a portfolio for the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. We were supported by both the Social Democrat group and by Conservative representatives from Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein.

We appealed to both candidates, Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz, to push for this. Unfortunately, nothing ever came of it. In our opinion the situation has even worsened.

We had a meeting with the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, First Vice President Timmermans, and he seemed sympathetic to our concerns. In a letter from this week, however, he seems to have learnt the old phrases from the previous Commission. In summary he says that, although the protection of minorities is a principle of the EU (Article 2 of the Treaty) and discrimination of national minorities is prohibited according to the Charter, that this Charter is only applicable when Member States apply EU law and that the Member States retain general powers to take decisions about minorities, in accordance with their constitutions and international law.

In other words, the Commissioner here denies a responsibility for the EU of its own.

We also had a meeting this year with Commissioner Navracsics who is responsible for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. He too was sympathetic to our cause, but could offer us little concrete. Previously his portfolio also included Multilingualism and from 2007-2009 there was even a Commissioner only dealing with Multilingualism. Much has changed; currently there are only three policy officers left working on multilingualism, and they are focusing on school education, not on linguistic diversity.

I make no secret of my disappointment. Unfortunately we are obliged to observe that the solution of the traditional minority issues is overlooked time and again, or just put into cold storage.

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Minority SafePack Initiative

As far as our attempt to implement the Minority SafePack Initiative, the MSPI, we have reached exactly this point of non-responsibility through shifting competences.

As you are aware, the FUEN office, invested a great deal of energy in launching the MSPI through a seven-person citizens' committee, consisting of well-known personalities. As you will also know, after our application was rejected by the commission we decided to have the matter examined before the European Court of Justice.

The legal dispute with the commission will be decided in Luxemburg, and we will see how seriously the judges take the idea of civic engagement and minority protection in the EU.

We expect the court to provide clarification of the matter by the end of 2015 or beginning of 2016. Of the joint plaintiffs, Slovakia has taken the Commission's side whereas Hungary supports our position.

We assert that normal citizens must also be able to see why an initiative has been rejected instead of just being given the hackneyed phrase "manifestly outside the competence of the EU".

Our citizens' committee is not prepared to be fobbed off like that.

Our criticism of the European Citizens' Initiative, which we emphasise in our legal statement, is shared just as critically by many other organisations. It shows that the fundamental idea was good but that the noble aim of citizens' participation cannot be achieved in this manner. To date it has not earned the name Citizens' Initiative.

Let me say this quite clearly: we are very happy that we have some outstanding people in our citizens' committee who support FUEN. We would like to ask the members of the citizens' committee, to create an advisory council that will widen the perspectives of FUEN and provide support for political implementation.

A first conference of this kind will be taking place in Belgium in the autumn of this year. The following meeting is also already planned; in June 2016 the South Tyrolean Prime Minister Kompatscher will invite high-level representatives from European regions to South Tyrol in conjunction with the EUROPEADA, the European football championship of the minorities.

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We know from our experience as minorities that it is now time to take the peoples of Europe seriously and to involve them, but differently. As I have said, here the minorities play a pioneering role and Europe can well use their intercultural expertise.

Dear Members, we need your help

FUEN is a democratically organised umbrella organisation, which has been working for the European minorities for over 65 years, mainly on a voluntary basis, with a small secretariat in Flensburg. There is a strong interest to become member of FUEN, at our latest congress we admitted 3 new organisations and another 20 are examined.

Many of our members have difficulties to make ends meet and therefore the membership fees in FUEN are relatively low. We receive support from some regions and countries, but it is difficult to meet our demands.

As I said in the beginning, our network promotes dialogue and active participation in society. However, often the financial means are lacking to operate effectively.

I therefore ask for your help, to support us to achieve that also the EU make a contribution in order for the minorities to be able to become actively involved on the European level. We hope that we can address you personally to work with us to change the EU funding programmes in such a way that also the minorities in Europe have the chance to participate in these programmes.

In April I was at a hearing about minority issues held by the EPP-group in the LIBE committee. On behalf of FUEN, and from the wealth of experience of the German-Danish border country, I suggested the setting up of a **“Contact Forum at the European Parliament”**, where we can focus the issues and interests of the minorities with respect to the European Union.

Together with you we want to work in a targeted way towards a new minority policy in the EU. With our proposals in the Minority SafePack Initiative, the Minority Manifesto of 2014 and our Programmatic Declaration, we put our ideas already on paper. In this context I also refer to the resolution that we adopted at our Assembly of Delegates in Greece and that lies here before you.



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ФЕДЕРАЛИСТСКИЙ СОЮЗ ЕВРОПЕЙСКИХ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫХ МЕНЬШИНСТВ · UNION FÉDÉRALISTE DES COMMUNAUTÉS ETHNIQUES EUROPÉENNES

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However, we should move away from paper and come to tangible results and therefore we are planning to establish an **office in Brussels** after the summer break in order to be able to reinforce our cooperation with you. For that reason, Frank de Boer, who is sitting next to me, will come to Brussels.

Dear Members, we have many things to do and hope that we have your support. We hope that you are receptive for our cause, and that together we can create a better situation for the minorities in Europe.

“Whoever addresses an issue, changes reality.”

I thank you for your attention.