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Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France
Palais, room 1

18 – 19 June 2018

Opening session 18 June 2018

Ms Edita Ziobiene, Interim President of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

Dear participants,

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation to the Croatian Chairmanship and the Council of Europe secretariat for the organisation of this 20th anniversary conference.

This conference is about innovation.

This theme is well-chosen.

After being in force for 20 years, we should speak about the Framework Convention and whether its practices still lead to the most optimal results.

Having said this, the Framework Convention is a pretty robust legal instrument. With its relevance confirmed on a daily basis, its multilateral approach to minority rights remains the sole feasible manner in which to prevent national minority issues from becoming a source of discontent between European states.

In the course of 20 years, in all, much progress has been made for national minorities, although this progress has not been without setbacks and is certainly not irreversible. It is my strong conviction that much of this progress can be attributed to the Framework Convention as well as to the Language Charter.

Nevertheless, it would be irresponsible not to reflect on the future of the Convention. After all, the world has changed significantly since 1998. In a few keywords: mass migration, EU enlargement, political shifts within state parties, and digitalisation.

All of this in a geopolitical context where national minority issues are once again causing irritation between states.

The Framework Convention has been given some spicy food-for-thought in the form of a recent publication by the European Center for Minority Issues (ECMI). This publication, drafted by Ms Stephanie Marsal and paid for by the Council of Europe, is called "*FCNM 20 years of dealing with diversity. Is the Framework Convention at a cross-road?*" It contains interviews with prominent figures in the world of minority rights, some of them here today. Many of the interviewees reflected about the future of the Framework Convention and came up with original ideas. It is a good read for policy makers, minority representatives, members of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention and all others interested in the topic. The publication comes at a very timely point, as the FCNM will be entering its fifth monitoring cycle, which is a good moment for reflection.

For the Language Charter, such reflection currently takes place in the Committee of Ministers. The current Committee of Ministers debates serve as a source of inspiration for the Framework Convention. In particular, we have taken attentive note of the proposal on the issue of publication

upon receipt of reports and are listening carefully to debates as regards country visits, which are, as you know, an essential element for a high quality Advisory Committee Opinion.

‘He who does not change is the architect of decay,’ it was once said, and moving into the future, we must re-evaluate the instruments which we have at our disposal in order to ensure that the hard-won minority rights and protections put in place over the past 20 years remain of paramount importance to member states, and remain enforceable and effective even as society radically changes.

I thank you for your attention.