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## High-level conference

### ***Council of Europe norms and standards on national minority rights: Results and challenges***

**Strasbourg, 29 June 2021**

**Speech by Vesna Crnić-Grotić,  
Chair of the Committee of Experts on the European Charter for Regional or Minority  
Languages**

***Question 1: From your experiences in your respective monitoring bodies and research institute, how has the impact of Covid-19 interacted with the concrete and specific challenges which national minorities are facing today?***

Thank you Ms. Markovic, to give us the opportunity to mention the important developments and lessons learnt through these particular times in the field of protection of minority languages.

At the very beginning of the pandemic the Committee of Experts on the Language Charter was among the very first to react to the possible violations of its undertakings. We warned (not just the states parties) about the importance of communication in regional or minority languages in the situation like that of the unforeseen health crisis in 2020. We issued a public statement after we had received news, with the help of civil society, that a number of states neglected their obligation to use regional or minority languages in issuing public announcements and information as well as giving orders relevant for the protection of public and individual health. Being able to use your language to understand measures taken by authorities and to express yourself in this language for health-related reasons is at the heart of the Charter's approach, especially now. Seeing that these rights and freedoms were not

guaranteed entailed, for speakers of minority and regional languages, the sentiment of being left behind by the authorities.

The issue of continued access to education in minority or regional languages, as well as the teaching of those languages in the new circumstances, drew the attention of the Experts Committee. In the statement issued in July 2020, the Committee reviewed what strategies had been put in place regarding education during the pandemic. In most states, online education and TV learning became a key method to prevent the complete interruption of education process. In the opinion of the Committee of Experts, states parties to the Charter should develop comprehensive strategies for distance education, to complement physical courses in and of regional or minority languages, especially for children and young people at the age of compulsory education.

From what we have witnessed, for those strategies to be effective, state authorities should improve capacity-building of all stakeholders. Thus, the creation of these measures comprises the need for open access to and use of online learning tools as well as quality content in regional or minority languages. This can only be accomplished if, in parallel, the specific needs in terms of IT equipment and the internet access of the most disadvantaged groups of learners are taken into account.

These emergency responses are now becoming more permanent, as great progress has been made by all stakeholders in the education sector to respond to the ongoing crisis. We continue to monitor the implementation of the Charter and through our monitoring work, we try to promote genuine equality of opportunities in access to education by means of information technologies and encourage the participation of various stakeholders.

***Question 2: What are the results of these two treaties after more than 20 years of implementation and monitoring by these two committees, and what do you see as the remaining obstacles to more complete national minority protection going forward?***

I think it's important to highlight that to this day, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, along with the Framework Convention, is the only legally binding instrument on these particular issues at an international and the EU level. As we know, the Minority Safepack initiative, a European Citizen Initiative aiming at creating a legal framework to protect minorities in the European Union, was rejected by the European

Commission. This decision contributes to highlight the importance of the Charter of Languages, as well as the Framework Convention, in creating a solid legal framework protecting the fundamental human rights of speakers of regional or minority languages and national minorities.

We continue to set standards for the protection and promotion of regional or minority languages together with the 25 states parties. Concrete recent developments show that states are continuing to engage with the Charter and see its importance. Indeed, two states have recently extended the protection of the Charter's Part III to include Manx Gaelic in the United Kingdom, and Danish, North Frisian and Low German in Germany. From a state perspective, this shows the continued relevance of the Charter as a tool for protecting and promoting regional or minority languages domestically.

Regarding the implementation of the Charter and the Expert's Committee recommendations another encouraging sign that our work is fundamental is the increased attention from the minorities' associations on this international treaty. I emphasize here the importance of our usual monitoring process that includes the on-the-spot visits and direct contacts with the representatives of the speakers, something that has been missing during the pandemic.

In some cases, the fact that speakers of regional or minority languages had called for the extension of protection shows the continued significance of the Charter to the speakers of these languages. The protection of rights through international instruments is valuable to both states and speakers.

Nevertheless, some issues remain to be addressed.

We are aware of the fact that the ratification process of both instruments has not progressed for more than 10 years. The lack of new ratifications shows that continuous political support is needed to call on increasing the number of State Parties. The Committee of Experts would also like to see the full implementation, in co-operation with the speakers, of its recommendations. Too often, the Committee finds itself repeating the same recommendations in cycle after cycle. Bringing stakeholders from authorities, minority languages speakers, and the expertise of the Council of Europe will help support national capacity building in States parties and a better realization of the Charter's goals.

Now, going further, I would like to mention some challenges and opportunities. The Committee of Experts has analysed recent developments on digitisation and new technologies. They offer such opportunities and challenges for speakers of regional or

minority languages. Their use entails new ways of learning regional or minority languages and offer possibilities such as e-administration or the so-called 'e-state' which may allow for regional or minority languages to be used more easily between speakers and the authorities. Social media is also a way for regional or minority languages to develop, through exchanges among younger speakers who use their regional or minority language socially.

But it is vital to ensure that these benefits are shared between the speakers of the state or majority language, and regional or minority languages. Advances in e-administration should ensure that regional or minority languages are part of the language platforms; translation software should, and does, increasingly include minority languages; online education, as I've mentioned in the Covid-19 context, should be a benefit shared across society.

As for the media, whilst social media may have had clear benefits for the speakers of regional or minority languages, we should recall the importance of traditional media – for example broadcast media or newspapers – in diffusing information and knowledge across all sections of the population. The presence of regional or minority languages in this sphere still has a powerful role to play, even as new technologies and new media develop.

To conclude, the Committee of Experts looks forward to continuing its cooperation with states in its monitoring activities, as well as with speakers through its on-the-spot monitoring visits. I want to highlight once more how vital these visits are for effective monitoring work and I'm glad to report that we are slowly resuming them.

On behalf of the Committee, we are very grateful that minority issues and minority and regional languages questions are such a high priority of the Hungarian Presidency.

Thank you.