

Address by

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3rd Intergovernmental Conference on the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants
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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very happy to welcome you, on behalf of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, to this “Agora”, a building not exactly of classical Greek style, but a symbol of the importance that our Organisation attaches to citizenship in our democracies. I am delighted to see that this third conference is being attended by many representatives of member States and partner international institutions, as well as representatives of our European cities, who will give accounts of their activities at a round table session. A most cordial welcome to all of you.

This conference considering the quality of the language education offered to adult migrants once again reflects the importance which the Council of Europe attaches to the opportunity for persons from vulnerable groups to achieve fulfilment and to integrate completely, thus fostering the social cohesion of our European societies.

The conference is clearly, as its title indicates (“from values to policy”), part of the consideration being given to the linguistic rights of new arrivals and the duties of the societies in which they settle. These are not recent matters of concern, for as early as 1968 they led to the adoption of a good number of standards and guidelines by the Committee of Ministers, starting with the Resolution on “the teaching of languages to migrant workers” and continuing up to the recommendations adopted in 2011 on “interaction between migrants and receiving societies” and on “validating migrants’ skills”, to name just those few.

The Parliamentary Assembly, for its part, has also worked hard on these issues and recently addressed to the Committee of Ministers a recommendation concerning the role of language tests in the process of integrating migrants. We shall examine this text shortly, in order to issue a reply to it. I hope that your discussions at this conference will helpfully illuminate this exercise.

As you are aware, our Organisation considers human rights, democracy and the rule of law to be the three fundamental values which must guide member States’ policies, particularly in respect of social cohesion and migration policy. The Council of Europe has defined integration as a two-way process based on rights and obligations: on the one hand, migrants must seek to adapt to their new environment, each pursuing his or her own strategies, in particular learning the language of the country of settlement. But the host country also has a responsibility to facilitate their integration into society, particularly through access to the labour market, taking account of their identity, and to combat all forms of discrimination.

The Language Policy Unit has conducted a very interesting survey on this subject, the results of which are to be presented to you at this conference, showing that a growing number of member States are adopting policies on language education and assessment for immigrant populations. The Council of Europe has drawn up guidelines and instruments in order to help member States to put in place coherent and effective policies in this respect. In this context, in order for

integration to be successful, it is important for the language education offered to take account of each immigrant's own resources, whether in terms of the languages in his or her repertoire or of his or her work experience, and not to reduce language education to its practical and functional aspects.

Major progress has been made in this direction thanks to the efforts of all, both decision-makers and those active in the field. But the fact that adult migrants have learned, are learning or wish to learn the language or languages of the societies in which they have settled seems insufficient. Not in the eyes of the migrants themselves, who are aware of the importance of the language choices that they make for themselves and their children, but for a section of the public in the host countries which regards migrants as a threat to national identity. The results of the European Parliament elections in several of our member States sadly confirm this tendency.

In this regard, I shall point to the recommendations made in the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, endorsed by the Committee of Ministers in May 2008, which suggests that diversity be managed on the basis of the human dignity of each and every individual. One of the things that it emphasises is the prime role of teaching and learning in all their forms and the importance of spaces for intercultural dialogue, and it specifies that "effective integration policies are needed to allow immigrants to participate fully in the life of the host country".

While language education is important, it is incomplete if it does not promote relations between migrants and other citizens by creating opportunities for them to meet on a local basis, at their workplace or in their neighbourhood, as well as in schools and places such as hospitals. Places where mutual understanding can be developed, places where personal experience of intercultural communication can be gained, thereby combating the inanity of xenophobic ideologies, places where contacts can lead to socialising and surprise give way to curiosity and to a wish to learn and to understand.

Let us be clear: our economies need migrants; we know this, although some people are sometimes unwilling to admit it. Migrants are also vital to our societies, which have always benefited from outside input. In a way, this process also applies to languages, which constantly "borrow" large numbers of terms, to the annoyance of certain purists wanting to defend their national language against any outside influence.

I know that it is in this spirit of openness that you have come to Strasbourg, and I feel sure that, by pooling your skills and experience at this conference, you will help to take forward the question of the linguistic integration of migrants both in and for our societies. On behalf of the Council of Europe and in my own name, not only in my capacity as Chair of the GR-C, but also as the representative of our Chairman of the Committee of Ministers and in my personal capacity as Ambassador of Portugal, a country which has for a long time embraced the plurality and diversity of the world's cultures, I thank you most sincerely for your attendance here today.