



INTERNATIONAL LEGAL GUARANTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES AND PROBLEMS IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON MINORITY EDUCATION

Speech by Maud de Boer Buquicchio Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

150 years ago almost to the day, in the village of Smiljan in what is today the Republic of Croatia, a boy was born to the family of the local orthodox priest. His name was Nikola Tesla, and as years went by he grew up to become one of the most important and respected scientist in the world. Because of his work on alternating current, radio and other essential parts of our daily modern lives, he is, for many, the person who invented the 20th century.

Those interested in his work are invited to visit the exhibition in the lobby of the Palais de l'Europe, but the reason why I mention Nikola Tesla here is not directly related to his scientific work, but rather to his thoughts on his own identity. Decades ago, when the notion of minorities in Europe did not yet exist, or was regarded with utmost suspicion, he said that he always felt proud of his Serbian origins and his Croatian homeland. This, in a nutshell, expresses the Council of Europe approach to national minorities as an asset which is enriching our societies and building bridges, not walls, between different countries in Europe.

Today, the entire world is happy to use Tesla's alternating current to run its computers, dishwashers and TV sets, but his thoughts on identity and tolerance between minorities and majorities, in spite of some evident progress, are still struggling to gain universal acclaim and acceptance.

I should therefore like to thank the Chairmanship of the Russian Federation for taking the initiative of organising this seminar on minority education.

Recent violent attacks on national minorities in several Council of Europe member states, together with a heated and often intolerant debate on issues related to ethnic minorities and several others, show that our governments must remain vigilant and work even harder to defeat bigotry, violence and populist manipulation.

The key is education because it plays a vital role in promoting tolerance by raising awareness about others' cultures, religions and languages. Education helps to breakdown negative stereotypes and prejudices. Yesterday, I visited the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, in Heidelberg. It became clear to me once again that learning more about Roma and Sinti, their history, culture and daily life, is crucially important in allowing them to live their identity. The ball, as it is very often the case, is largely in the court of the majority. Education contributes to reducing the dividing lines within today's multicultural societies. Questions related to one's identity are growing in importance against the background of challenges brought on by globalisation.

The questions related to the protection of national minorities and their full and meaningful integration into all aspects of our societies has been, is, and will remain on the top of the Council of Europe agenda. The final Declaration adopted by the Heads of State and Governments of the Council of Europe at their Third Summit in Warsaw clearly states that the protection of national minorities contributes to the development of democratic stability.

The Council of Europe has developed several tools to ensure that the rights of minorities are properly protected. The main instrument is of course the Framework Convention, which is a unique tool to advance minority rights in education and other key fields. It also serves as a catalyst for improved intercommunity relations. I am therefore delighted to announce that this year the number of State parties has increased to 39, and I hope that the scope of the Framework Convention and its important monitoring mechanism will continue to grow because it is in the clear interest of minorities and majorities alike.

This seminar brings together governmental experts, researchers and representatives of civil society. It is meant to be a work shop not a talk shop. Through a series of thematic sessions, we will examine several specific aspects of the implementation of the Framework Convention in Council of Europe member states. These include content and equal access to education, minority language teaching and other important dimensions of intelligent, progressive and effective minority policies. At the end of the day, we expect to have a clearer picture of what has been done, and even more importantly, what still needs to be done and how.

Without any exaggeration, we may say that a successful integration of minorities with full respect of their rights guaranteed by relevant Council of Europe instruments represents one of the most important challenges for our societies today. Nikola Tesla invented the 20th century. It is up to us to invent the 21st century.