

Celebration of languages “Sprachenfest”

26 September 2024, Graz

Opening speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am particularly happy to be with you today for the celebration of the European Day of Languages, representing the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its 46 national delegations as well as our Observers and Partners for Democracy. Our political agora portrays, as you can imagine, many national languages, and many more if we count the regional and minority languages represented within our member States!

Today more than ever, I think it is of paramount importance that we underline the relevance of the beautiful linguistic diversity that we have in Europe, and that we encourage the learning of languages not only among our younger generations, but also through lifelong learning.

I would like to share with you a telling anecdote in this respect. Just recently, I met Mr Vladimir Kara-Murza, who as you probably know was sentenced to 25 years in jail because of his anti-war speeches but was liberated this summer in an exchange of prisoners. Whilst he was in the Russian prison, in his isolated cell, Mr Kara-Murza decided to learn Spanish, a language he had always wanted to speak. When he addressed our meeting in Paris earlier this month, he replied to a question in fluent Spanish! He said that learning a language had allowed him to keep his mind active and alert during the months of isolation and despair.

The Parliamentary Assembly has stressed several times that language is in itself a value, and one of our unique cultural assets. Learning a language is a symbol of openness towards another culture.

For me, language is a unique way to picture the world and to express the perceived reality, conveying sometimes complex meanings in one single expression. For example, there are 200 words for “snow” in the Sámi languages, each one with a subtle difference. And there are rare words, encompassing in a few letters a poetic, complex expression – such as “psithurism”, from the ancient Greek, which means the sound of rustling leaves or wind through trees.

As a Greek person I am well aware of all the legacy given by my language to Europe’s philosophy and the etymology of so many words that are currently used in many languages. And as a matter of fact, my history thesis was about the ethnic identity of the Greeks in Venice in the XVIIIth century.

The use of language ensures the cultural reproduction of a community, enables individuals and the community to take part in political and cultural life, and we are firmly convinced that linguistic diversity is a determining tool for achieving greater intercultural understanding.

But it is more than that. In our democracies, the use of one own’s languages is a critical aspect of the personal and collective identity of citizens concerned. Protecting this common cultural heritage is a vector of peace and stability in the European region. I can only commend, therefore, the theme chosen for this year’s celebrations: *Languages for peace*.

Let me also seize the opportunity that is given to me today to commend the extraordinary work done by the European Centre for Modern Languages and its Director, Dr Sarah Breslin, in encouraging excellence and innovation in language teaching and supporting its member States in the implementation of effective language education policies. This year, as has

already been mentioned, we not only celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe, but also mark the 30th anniversary of the Centre and its establishment in the beautiful city of Graz!

All this success would not have been possible without the staunch support of the Austrian authorities, whom I would also like to thank wholeheartedly.

By encouraging, promoting and facilitating language learning, you truly abide to our European Cultural Convention, which for 70 years has aimed to develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of cultural diversity and promote the unity of our peoples, symbolized in our common, European cultural heritage which we must cherish, and celebrate.

Thank you for your attention.