

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 424 (2017)¹ Regional and minority languages in Europe today

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (hereafter “the Congress”), recognising the close relationship between language and culture and in line with Council of Europe priorities, has long strived to support and sustain historical regional and minority languages as a means to promote Europe’s cultural wealth and traditions and linguistic diversity, with the aim of improving mutual understanding, based on the principles of democratic participation, cultural diversity and social cohesion.

2. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148), which opened for signature in 1992 and entered into force in 1998, is the only legally binding European instrument specifically drawn up to protect and promote Europe’s historical regional and minority languages, which are defined as those traditionally used within a State by a group of nationals numerically inferior to the national population as a whole.

3. Regrettably, until now, in 2017, only 25 European States have ratified the charter, and an additional 8 European States have signed it without ratification. This means that 14 European States have so far neither signed, nor ratified the charter.

4. While the parties to the charter remain the States themselves, local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play in its effective implementation. This allows them sufficient room for spontaneous implementation of the principles of the charter in those Member States that have not yet signed nor ratified it.

5. Reaffirming the grounding principles of the charter that still hold true, both observations collected during the past decades of the charter’s existence – including examples of best practice, challenges and tensions – and new developments in society call for a renewal of the methods used for the charter’s implementation, without prejudice to the continuity of its fundamental principles and provisions.

6. Observations and complaints collected since 1998 – when the charter entered into force – show that ratification alone of the charter by any State is not a guarantee or proof of the effective protection of historical regional or minority languages without an effective and consistent implementation in daily practice. In addition, in some cases setbacks have been observed in the level of the protection of regional or minority languages. This highlights the importance of the different types of stakeholders involved in the implementation of the charter, and in particular the essential role of regional and local authorities.

7. An effective implementation of the charter’s provisions therefore requires taking note of the dramatic social and technical changes brought about by digitalisation. Bearing this in mind, ten years after its Recommendation 222 (2007) on language education in regional or minority languages, the Congress has undertaken to look at the contemporary application of the charter in light of the new developments, in order to discuss renewed possibilities for action by local and regional authorities in this regard.

8. The post-2008 economic context has been clearly characterised by a shift in how policies supporting regional or minority languages are perceived. This has resulted in substantial cuts in education and services provided in minority languages. Although national authorities play a major role in these austerity policies (local and regional authorities rarely receive a clearly identified budget from the national level for the protection of regional or minority languages), local and regional authorities should also be reminded of the major benefits that stem from protecting and nurturing cultural diversity, including linguistic diversity. Offering conditions that are attractive for speakers of regional and minority languages, while generally costing little, can act as a bulwark against the loss of skilled workers or brain drain by increasing their willingness to stay in the regions concerned. Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that multilingual regions offer higher incomes to both multilingual individuals and the region as a whole. Last but not least, higher levels of multilingual skills in individuals have been shown to boost creativity.

9. Local and regional authorities are front-line providers of public services. As such, they should co-ordinate their action with their national authorities in order to adequately adapt the effective implementation of the charter. They should take steps to be fully involved and to gain mandatory responsibilities and explicit powers from the governance level in order that they can implement the necessary processes into their daily practice. Similarly, local and regional authorities need to be able to successfully take into account the changes taking place due to digitalisation in the *modus operandi* of almost all sectors of society. These new developments provide both challenges and opportunities for protecting and nurturing Europe’s cultural richness and traditions, including its linguistic diversity. Without neglecting traditional means of support, local and regional public language policies should take into account the digital sector as a means of supporting, as far as possible, the use of regional or minority languages in educational, judicial and administrative settings, in the media, in cultural activities, in economic and social life, and in transfrontier exchanges.

10. In light of the above, the Congress:

a. bearing in mind the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Congress Recommendation 222 (2007) on language education in regional or minority languages, Recommendation 1773 (2006) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe entitled “The 2003 guidelines on the use of minority languages in the broadcast media and the Council of Europe standards: need to enhance co-operation and synergy with the OSCE”, Congress Recommendation 364 (2014) on the role of regional media

as a tool for building participatory democracy, Congress Resolution 282 (2009) on the digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions, and Congress Recommendation 173 (2005) on regional media and transfrontier co-operation;

b. considering that:

i. member States of the Council of Europe should be guided by the principle that diversity is not only a fact, but also an enriching element of society, and that the protection of historical regional or minority languages constitutes the firmest protection of that diversity;

ii. in conformity with the ethos and provisions of the charter, which is characterised by an intercultural and multilingual approach, each category of regional or minority languages (whether official or not) must have its proper place in a democratic, inclusive society;

iii. while the States themselves are the contractual parties, local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play in the practical implementation of the charter;

c. invites local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe member States to:

i. call on their respective national authorities to sign and ratify the charter, if they have not yet done so;

ii. call on their respective national authorities to guarantee local authorities full involvement, mandatory responsibilities and explicit powers, with a clearly identifiable budgetary allocation for the implementation of the processes necessary for their daily practice;

iii. call on their respective national authorities to refrain from bringing the weight of austerity measures to bear on regional or minority language policies, since their impact on public spending has been proven to be minimal;

iv. call on their respective national authorities to refrain from barring local and regional authorities from taking positive action, within the scope of their competences for the promotion of regional or minority languages, and also from a short-sighted interpretation of the protection of these languages, including by abandoning the misconception that protective measures cannot be taken unless they have been separately and explicitly provided for by law;

v. act in favour of safeguarding historical regional or minority languages by facilitating and encouraging their written and spoken use, in both public and private life, as a key resource that needs to be preserved because they are a benefit to the regional and local economy, creativity, vibrancy and well-being;

vi. meet the need for effective co-operation and interaction between local, regional and national governments regarding the protection and promotion of historical regional or minority languages, noting that the lack of a clear division of administrative powers in relation to language issues risks hindering the implementation of good practice at regional levels;

vii. take measures, where and when possible, to consolidate and develop regional or minority language education and teaching of these languages in their regions, by offering attractive conditions (preferably via identified budgets), thereby contributing to the creation of a European space where regional or minority language education is systematically provided in a coherent fashion;

viii. ensure, when and where possible, that regional or minority language speakers are able to benefit from the new forms of distance-learning that exist by developing new software applications that make it possible to ensure service provision in these languages, including by electronic means, by dismantling new digital borders;

ix. secure access to locally or regionally provided public services and procedures in regional or minority languages including, but not limited to, health care and social services, the ability of public authorities to provide digital services in regional or minority languages being essential, given the rapid development of such services in society at large;

x. encourage and support public authorities at national, regional and local levels to consult and co-operate with representatives of regional or minority language speakers in developing and implementing their language policies and language services;

xi. improve, when pertinent, regional and cross-border co-operation in order to provide access to services provided in regional or minority languages in kin-States.

11. The Congress invites the local and regional authorities of member States that have not yet signed and ratified the charter to adopt a local or regional version of it containing provisions which match their competences, and to make use of the charter and the monitoring practices of the *ad hoc* Committee of Experts on Regional and Minority Languages (CAHLR) as a body of best practices and practical examples of how to create the conditions in which historical regional or minority languages are protected and promoted.

1. Discussed and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 19 October 2017, and adopted by the Congress on 20 October 2017, 3rd sitting (see Document [CPR33\(2017\)02](#), explanatory memorandum), co-rapporteurs: Lelia HUNZIKER, Switzerland (L, SOC), and Anna MAGYAR, Hungary (R, EPP/CCE).