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Speaking notes for Andrew DAWSON (United Kingdom, ECR), Congress rapporteur

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Report on “ The use of languages by local and regional authorities”

Strasbourg, France, 31 October 2019

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to present to you the report on “The use of languages by local and regional authorities.”

For many years now the Congress has been working to support and sustain regional and minority languages in Europe. We believe that such work contributes to the improvement of mutual understanding and can also contribute to democratic participation.

One of the striking aspects of the increasing diversity of our towns and regions is the increasing linguistic diversity. As a result, our local and regional authorities are finding themselves confronted with more and more language issues in the conduct of their affairs and the provision of public services.

The growing diversity of Europe’s societies, spurred on by increasing mobility, migration and freedom of movement, represents a challenge for local and regional authorities in the conduct of their affairs.

But what do we mean when we talk about “minority languages”? Is it only the native languages or does it also include those languages that have arrived with recent immigration or even with recently re-drawn borders? The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages restricts its application to those languages which have been present in a territory for over a hundred years. I don’t know about you, but I believe that such a distinction is becoming increasingly academic in this day and age.

We propose that public services be provided to all linguistic minorities present in a given territory, as far as is reasonably possible. As local politicians, our duty is to serve our citizens as best we can, according to the needs of the moment.

But language acquisition and interpretation doesn’t come cheap. We cannot possibly offer a full range of public services in every language that is spoken in our communities.

When local or regional authorities are working on integration, social inclusion and citizen participation issues, it is not useful to always make a distinction between traditional minority languages and migrant languages.

The Congress itself has language issues regularly brought to its attention, as the body entrusted with assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, as local authorities assert the

right to make and apply their own language decisions and policies, according to their own needs, and as a result find themselves in disagreement with higher level authorities.

Local and regional authorities sometimes perceive the use of languages to be undue restrictions on this use by central authorities. This issue has featured in several complaints that the Congress has received in its work, monitoring the implementation of the Charter.

This has prompted the Congress to look more closely at how local and regional authorities can and should approach language issues raised by their citizens.

Our reference text for this is the text I mentioned earlier, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which came into force in 1998, and it itself a child of the Congress. We believe that territorial authorities should be free to decide what languages to make use of in the conduct of their affairs and the provision of public services. Language should serve as a tool for communication. It should never be used as a barrier or as weapon.

This Language Charter was conceived to protect and promote the historical regional or minority languages of Europe. It was adopted, on the one hand, in order to maintain and to develop the Europe's cultural traditions and heritage, and on the other, to respect an inalienable and commonly recognised right to use a regional or minority language in private and public life.

Our experiences is that linguistic diversity is an asset for our towns and regions, to be valued and enhanced for the benefit of all. Supporting and promoting minority languages can contribute to social cohesion and mutual understanding between language minority speakers and speakers of the official languages.

We should bear in mind that each language has its own history and perceptions. Many languages are threatened with extinction, many have been lost already. When we lose a language, we lose part of our identity and cultural heritage.

Some governments are making laudable efforts to protect and develop their minority languages. The Sami language in Lapland and the Celtic languages of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany are striking examples of that. Governments are working to save these languages because they realize how important they are for our culture and heritage, our sense of who we are.

I would like to cite the Gaelic in Ireland as example of a language that was for decades considered a dying language. Few Irish people still speak Gaelic as their first language. But the Irish government places great emphasis on saving the language and has made it a compulsory subject in elementary schools. In this way, all Irish people are able to become familiar with their literary national heritage in the same language it is preserved, in books and even up to 1200-year-old manuscripts.

So, what more can be done do to strengthen the position of minority languages? Let me you're your attention to some of the recommendations that can be found in the report:

The Congress calls on the member States of the Council of Europe to ratify the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, if they have not yet done so.

Member States should also encourage and assist local and regional authorities to:

- provide service to all linguistic minorities to ensure adequate access to public service and democratic bodies.
- Take inspiration from the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in the conduct of their business and the provision of public services and to apply these provisions to all linguistic minorities on their territories as far as is reasonably possible.
- Provide language training and recruit officials competent in the relevant languages.
- Provide information about political rights and electoral information in the relevant languages.

- Provide information about public services in the relevant languages, such as health, education, employment services and taxes.

Dear colleagues,

Regardless of where we come from or what political party we represent, I believe that we share a desire to improve the services we are delivering to our citizens and to improve their quality of life. To do so we need to ensure excellent communication in our communities and to overcome language barriers.

To ensure the best possible access to and participation in the democratic processes in our local government bodies, we need to take into account all the languages that are spoken in our regions.

I look forward to hearing your views on this issue and urge you to support this text.