Prof. dr. sc. Vesna Crnić-Grotić
Chair of the Committee of Experts
of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Conference "Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe"

Strasbourg, 18 – 19 June 2018

Dear Secretary General, Madame Minister Pejčinović Burić, dear ambassadors and other guests and colleagues, welcome to the 20th anniversary of the entry into force of the two instruments dedicated to the protection of minorities and their rights. We have to be reminded that they still represent the highest legal protective mechanisms in this field in the world. This year we also mark the 20th anniversary of another important political instrument – the Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities.

The importance of this conference from the point of view of the monitoring bodies under the FCNM and the Charter is, in my view, very high. It brings a spotlight to the instruments that have seemingly lost some of their appeal and attraction. In recent years it has become apparent that the interest of the member states of the Council of Europe for the protection of minorities has grown weaker. It is shown by the stagnant numbers of states parties – the FCNM has 39 states parties, the last ratification instrument was made in 2005. The ECRML has had 25 states parties since 2010 without new signatures or ratifications leaving 22 member states outside this circle, including the states with the post-accession commitment to ratify it.

Have the times become so nice to the minorities and their languages that there is no need for these special treaties? My colleague from the AC will probably address the FCNM, but from the point of view of the Charter, minorities, together with their languages and other special traits, are becoming more and more endangered with the rise of populism and intolerance in too many states in Europe. There are social movements and even official policies whose objectives are to cut down minority rights, including their right to freely use their languages in public life. At the same time, equally unacceptable, even some minority-language speakers adopt the same pattern of behaviour and develop a similar level of intolerance for the majority population and the official language of their country. In the implementation of the Charter we have had to reiterate that the protection given to a minority language and the culture it represents is based on the need for social equality and integration, not exclusion.

After 20 years of the implementation of the Charter, nevertheless, good practices were developed; awareness of the existence of plurilingual and multicultural societies was raised, especially among the majority. “New” traditional languages were recognised as their speakers became aware of the possibilities offered by the Charter; languages were assisted in their efforts to survive and develop and spread the domain of their use.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank those states that submitted their minority and linguistic policies to the international monitoring helping us develop new standards in the protection of minorities and their languages. In my view, this is something in the interest of Europe as a whole. At the same time, I would like to invite all other states to join us and show that they care!

I would also like to thank the government of my country Croatia for accepting sponsorship of this conference showing their clear intention to support the Croatian minorities and their linguistic rights.

Thank you for your attention!