

European Regional Forum on Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities

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JAN 4Q1, European Parliament

Speech of Lívía JÁRÓKA, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Distinguished Guests,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

it is my pleasure to welcome you all on behalf of President Tajani at this prestigious conference in the premises of the European Parliament.

I was very honoured when President Tajani asked me to address you at the beginning of the forum as this topic is very close to my heart. Being myself a minority, I fully understand and feel the struggles of minorities. On the other side, this very reason of belonging to a minority community gives me the responsibility to do the utmost to promote their rights.

According to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the respect of the rights of persons belonging to national and linguistic minorities is one of the founding values of the EU. In addition, Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly prohibits any discrimination based on membership of a national minority. Having in mind these articles, also the relevant international agreements and the constitutions of many Member States, we would think that the minorities in the European Union have equal rights and face no discrimination. Well, the situation is not so ideal. The practice is lagging behind. But not just the practice. The Lisbon Treaty entered into force 10 years ago, yet we still lack a common comprehensive framework for the protection of national and linguistic minorities.

I welcome the fact that we do not lack enthusiastic, committed and highly acknowledged experts - many of them present today. Therefore I am convinced that we will have a fruitful discussion today while setting forward-looking goals.

Being in the European Parliament, let me start my opening speech with some achievements, those positive steps that have been taken by this House in the last 5 years. First of all, let me mention two EP resolutions which were adopted last year:

- the resolution of 7 February 2018 on protection and non-discrimination with regard to minorities in the EU Member States, and
- the resolution of 13 November 2018 on minimum standards for minorities in the EU

These resolutions draw attention to the situation and needs of national minorities, emphasizing the crucial role of education and language for minorities and proposing future actions.

I also have to praise the work of the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages which is one of the most active intergroups of the European Parliament, holding a total 35 meetings during this legislative period. Even though Intergroup are not official bodies of the EP, they can still make a difference, as they keep on the agenda the pressing issued. The Minority Intergroup managed to put on the European agenda the best

practices as well as the most problematic issues that traditional national and linguistic minority communities experience all over the European Union.

The Minority Intergroup on its last meeting adopted a declaration for a better future of minorities in the EU. This declaration calls for

- a comprehensive and common European protection and monitoring system for autochthonous national and linguistic minorities
- a European Commissioner responsible for autochthonous national and linguistic minorities and
- a consultative body of the European Parliament in matters of national and linguistic minorities

By establishing these 3 goals we would ensure that there is a European awareness and political will to make things happen. To show towards Member States that the EU Institutions are taking this issue seriously.

The main role lies with the Member States. Culture, public administration and education - which are essential for minority existence - fall within the exclusive competence of the Member States. It is without debate. However, as parts of the provisions of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages fall within the competences of the EU, it can rule on a variety of issues that affect persons belonging to national minorities - so there is a space and opportunity to take steps also at European level.

Another reason for European action is that in recent years, there has been a large number of petitions submitted to the European Parliament concerning minority rights, which explicitly means that EU citizens belonging to minorities expect more to be done at the European level for the protection of their rights.

Furthermore, let me also mention the very important and emblematic Minority SafePack, signed by 1.2 million European citizens. This initiative is another example of the will of the EU citizens to strengthen the legislative framework governing minority policies at the EU level - this is a huge achievement which I am sure will be raised and discussed by the colleagues.

When talking about minority rights, we should never forget the Copenhagen criteria. I remember those times when we are still candidate countries and we had to fulfil these criteria before joining the EU. We thought, after accession we would not have to worry about the respect of minorities anymore. Reality was a surprise though. Once a candidate country becomes a Member States, no one is monitoring the minority rights anymore, which lead in some occasions to backsliding in guaranteeing these rights. This has to be changed.

The rights of persons belonging to minorities are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and independent; whereas protecting and promoting minority rights is essential for peace, security and stability and for promoting tolerance, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation among all persons living on a given territory. Ensuring minority rights and granting access to them directly contributes to the democratization and the strengthening of the rule of law.

When talking about minority rights, the EU has to protect minority rights within its territory, but the EU has to promote the protection of minority rights outside the EU as well. In order to use a very concrete example, let me mention the backlash of minority rights in one of our neighbours: the Ukraine. Unfortunately, we could witness in the last years that, despite international obligations, Ukraine began the process of narrowing minority rights by restricting

the use of minority and regional languages. The first step was the Law on Education being adopted on 5 September 2017, then on April 26, the Verkhovna Rada passed a strict new law mandating the use of the Ukrainian language in public places, businesses, the media, education and a range of other institutions, thus restricting the use of the minority languages just to the private sphere of life. We have to send a strong signal that if the Ukraine takes its intentions and ambition on European integration seriously, than it should respect the rights of every citizen, should treat everyone equally and must fulfil its international obligations.

As the EP resolution on minimum standards for minorities in the EU stated, the protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities can help build a sustainable future for Europe and contribute to guaranteeing respect for the principles of dignity, equality and non-discrimination. We have to underline that benefits are not limited to minorities, since this protection and promotion will bring stability, economic development and prosperity to all. And this should be our motive. Helping the minority brings wellbeing and prosperity to everyone.

In addition to this, we also have to bear in mind that national and linguistic minorities are an essential part of the European diversity. While we praise our diversity in some areas, we sometimes forget that minority-linked diversities are as much important as other diversities. It is our strength and it is in fact our motto: "United in diversity". And this motto actually makes it our duty to step forward and make real changes for the national and linguistic minorities.

Finally, let me emphasize that sometimes we politicians make a mistake that we fight for creating rights, however implementation is lacking behind. Without granting access to these rights, mere existence of rights is not enough. Therefore, we have to ensure sufficient resources, tools and appropriate measures and last but not least, empower the local level. On so many occasions we have seen that local projects and initiatives have a secret power and a huge added value. They are the ones that can really make a difference. However to make these projects flourish, the Union and the Member States need to create a friendly environment.

The EU has set example as a forerunner in so many fields already. I strongly believe that it will accept the challenge, make another great example and serve as role model for other countries in the field of promoting and ensuring minority rights too. There are numerous tools and initiatives already on the table. Therefore, I call on the Commission, Member States and all relevant stakeholders to take these initiatives and with the ambition of becoming a role model for the world, to create a common comprehensive framework for the protection of national and linguistic minorities. As at the end, this contributes to a well-functioning and prosperous Europe. And this is the interest of Union as a whole.

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, I am looking forward to the fruitful discussion and debate today. Looking at the agenda, it is going to be an interesting day with plenty of occasions for excellent brainstorming.

Thank you for your attention!