

Letter dated:

Flensburg, 27 March 2002

From:

FUEN - Federal Union of European Nationalities

To:

European Commission

**Subject: White Paper on European Governance
Proposal from the FUEN**

Dear Sir/Madam

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) is delighted at the White Paper setting out the European Commission's initiative to open up the political decision-making process and to involve more organisations and people in shaping EU policy.

The FUEN welcomes this move and would be happy to contribute to the debate. It also gives it a much-appreciated opportunity to explain briefly its activities and aims:

About the FUEN

The FUEN is an independent umbrella organisation for national minorities in Europe. Since its foundation in the year 1949, it has won respect as a discussion partner for governments and parliaments in many countries of Europe and in European and international institutions as a result of its unswerving commitment to democracy and the legal order, its tireless efforts to protect ethnic groups more effectively and its support for peaceful dialogue.

The Secretariat General of the FUEN is located in Flensburg — the political and cultural centre of the Danish minority in Germany. It has a democratically elected Board comprising representatives of minorities in five different countries. The current President is a Rhaetian from Switzerland. The Vice-Presidents, who have seats on the Board, are representatives, respectively, of the south Tyroleans in Italy, the Croats in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Germans in Denmark and the Sorbs in Germany, together with a Swiss resident representing the Hungarian minorities in Central Europe. In addition, a representative of YEN, the Youth of European Nationalities organisation, is also present at meetings of the Board. A German from Denmark is in charge of the Secretariat General.

In accordance with its statutes, the FUEN is at the service of ethnic groups in Europe and its aims are to maintain and promote the national identity, language, culture and history of national minorities. It pursues this aim with peaceful means, taking a decisive stand against separatism and any shift of national borders by violent means and striving to bring about neighbourly, peaceful coexistence of majorities and minorities in States or regions. Since 1949, the FUEN has been convinced that a minority can enter into a peaceful and constructive dialogue based on free, democratic and constitutional principles to negotiate political formulas for building a harmonious relationship with the majority of the population .

The FUEN therefore supports all activities geared to reconciling conflicting interests peacefully and promoting democracy.

In recognition of its efforts to protect European minorities, the FUEN was awarded consultative status at the Council of Europe in 1989 and at the United Nations (UN) in 1995. It is also represented at the OSCE conferences (formerly CSCE) which deal with national minorities and ethnic population groups.

The FUEN is the largest and only umbrella organisation for national minorities and ethnic population groups in Europe. Since May 2001, it has had 40 full, 21 associate and 23 correspondent members. Four state institutions subsidise the FUEN with annual contributions whilst four scientific institutes provide material and intellectual support. The member organisations undertake to pursue the fundamental aims of the FUEN's policy. Their activities are based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law, and they reject violence and separatism. The official languages of the FUEN are English, French, Russian and German.

What contribution can the FUEN make?

In its role as a forum and umbrella organisation for national minorities, the FUEN can make a positive contribution to the above debate since it is a large NGO which itself represents the minorities and also has an important part to play in lobbying on behalf of national minorities in individual states and in Europe.

Minorities are the vanguard of a united Europe. The FUEN has been able to acquire a good deal of experience in the countries wishing to join the EU and is willing to offer help at any time, either in hearings or other forms of consultation.

The FUEN sent a questionnaire to its affiliated associations asking how much they were involved in the decision-making processes for the national reports on the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Similar questionnaires on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities will also be circulated and analysed.

The FUEN's proposals

The FUEN's strength lies in the fact that its members are themselves minorities. It would therefore be wise to make use of the FUEN's knowledge and bear it in mind as a representative of many national minorities and ethnic population groups when appointments to relevant bodies are being made.

The FUEN can, in its capacity as an association for minorities, be a valuable adviser and mediator in settling disputes, since it can look back on a long history of dealing with similar conflicts between majorities and minorities and between people in a position of strength and weakness, one example being its fact-finding missions to the Caucasus.

Enlargement of the European Union has brought the question of fundamental principles sharply into focus. The European Convention under the leadership of the former French head of state Valéry Giscard d'Estaing is supposed to make proposals for comprehensive reform.

The FUEN is convinced that upholding and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence amongst populations is one of the key principles of the Union.

The EU is therefore requested

Not to make the criteria for accepting new members, such as the Convention for the Protection of National Minorities or the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, more difficult, especially in the light of the fact that some of the EU States do not themselves comply with the standards they set;

when applying the principles, to extend equal treatment to national minorities and language communities without their own state;

to set up within the EU a contact point for questions relating to national minorities and language communities without their own state;

not to solve the problems of national minorities and language communities without their own state on the basis of individual human rights but, increasingly, to seek collective rights for them. We therefore demand that individual rights are replaced by collective rights;

to incorporate the Charter of Regional or Minority Languages into the Charter of Fundamental Rights;

to have a binding definition for the concept of national minorities enshrined in the additional protocol on the European Convention of Human Rights .

Summary

The EU's White Paper is a step in the right direction but one that is long overdue and that we need to press ahead with all the more urgently. The FUEN would be happy to help the European Commission in this process and promises its active support.

Yours faithfully

Romedi Arquint
FUEN President

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