

RESOLUTION 2020

Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN)

The Delegates of the Member Organisations of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) adopted the following resolution at their Assembly of Delegates on 24 October 2020:

Resolution on ensuring the protection and safeguarding of autochthonous national minorities and language communities and their cultural heritage in times of crisis and on the provision of essential information in minority languages related to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened already existing inequalities between autochthonous national minorities and language communities and the majority population in Europe and has highlighted the disadvantage of many national minorities in accessing basic services. During the pandemic the responsible authorities often failed to provide members of autochthonous national minorities and language communities relevant information in minority languages.

Despite the recommendations of international organisations, in most European states minority communities and language groups had limited access to vital emergency information in their mother tongue. On top of this, in many cases the pandemic exacerbated already existing discriminative practices and increased the occurrence of hate speech and stigmatisation.

On 30 March 2020 the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages called on public authorities to communicate in the languages of national minorities all relevant information on SARS CoV-2 and on the measures they take. Respectively, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities recommended the use of minority languages in health services and in official communication on the health crisis and their official responses. Subsequently, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities later published a number of recommendations on how the authorities should approach the COVID-19 situation in a social context, urging approaches that are inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of our societies. FUEN welcomed these recommendations. Unfortunately, they have been taken into account only in few cases.

The large-scale “Do you speak Corona?” survey carried out by FUEN in April 2020 with the cooperation of the European Parliament’s Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages highlighted the extent to which communication in minority languages is guaranteed or is missing in the Member States of the European Union. The survey sought out and evaluated the availability of information concerning the pandemic, the provision of health information, the existence of emergency hotlines in minority languages and the availability of online education in the mother tongue.

The results of the survey were disappointing and worrying. Only in roughly half of the cases was general COVID-19-related information provided in the language of the minority and linguistic community, and in the majority of those cases, minority organisations and minority press were the ones providing information instead of the competent state or regional authorities. Similarly, important health-related information was also available in minority languages in only half of the cases. The picture varied greatly between states and regions. Those participants in the survey who considered the availability of information in their mother tongue to be insufficient were among others the Macedonians in Albania, the Germans in Estonia, the Frisians in Germany, the Pomaks and Western Thrace Turks in Greece, the Molise Croats in Italy, the

Kashubs in Poland, the Aromanians, Slovaks, Czechs and Hungarians in Romania, the Catalans in Spain and the Greeks in Ukraine.

Another conclusion from the FUEN COVID-19 survey was the lack of access to mother tongue online education in about one third of the countries, which had ensured minority language education for their national minorities before the outbreak of the pandemic. The lack of necessary infrastructure and capability to provide quality online educational materials and tools was a significant obstacle identified by many minority communities. In many regions' schools are poorly equipped with digital equipment, they lack or have only limited access to internet, which represents an obstacle to the enjoyment of the right to education.

The right of access to information is considered essential for the equal treatment of national minorities and language communities in order to ensure their full participation in society. European states should pay attention to their needs when taking urgent measures and should make available relevant information in their mother tongue in the same manner as they do in the official language(s) of the state.

Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance that European governments fulfil their national and international obligations also in difficult circumstances and do not reduce but maintain financial support for their autochthonous national minorities and language communities. Rather, states should develop a strategy for the protection of minorities in times of crisis, so that language diversity and cultural heritage can be safeguarded in spite of the many restrictions in times of pandemic. In particular, the quality of education in minority languages should be maintained. It is particularly important to provide financial support for the economically vulnerable minority press.

The FUEN Assembly of Delegates calls on the national governments of Europe:

1. to provide all information on emergency, security and health measures, restrictions and legislative changes related to the pandemic in the languages of autochthonous national minorities and language communities;
2. to ensure that all their citizens, including citizens belonging to autochthonous national minorities and language communities are treated equally also during the pandemic and to especially ensure equal access to medical care and basic infrastructure particularly for those living in segregated residential areas;
3. to fully comply with national and international obligations regarding the protection of minorities and ensure that autochthonous national minorities and language communities receive adequate support to face the health crisis;
4. to develop innovative approaches and programmes which enable minorities to have access to culture in times of crisis and which fully guarantee the learning and teaching of and in minority languages without loss of quality;
5. to uphold the financial support for national minorities and to increase it where this is necessary for protecting lives and for the conservation of cultural heritage, including through support for minority media and cultural institutions;
6. to ensure that hate speech, stigmatisation and xenophobic reactions are effectively combatted;
7. to monitor and fight against cases of intolerance, xenophobia, antigypsyism and discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religion or culture;
8. to take results-oriented measures to eliminate discrimination and intolerance as part of an overall government policy to promote and protect minority rights, including in times of crisis.