

Greeting from the
Minorities Commissioner
Renate Schnack
on the Opening of the
60th Annual Congress of FUEN
14 May 2015, 10:00 am,
Komotini, Greece

Blocking period: Beginning of speech!
The spoken word prevails!

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Mr President, Dear Hans Heinrich,
Delegates of the Minorities of Europe,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 60th Annual Congress of the Federal Union of European Nationalities starts today here in Komotini. That is a number that you can be justifiably proud of.

And that is why it is also a great pleasure for me to bring you the warmest greetings from Minister-President Torsten Albig and all the Schleswig-Holstein state government.

But I am particularly pleased that around 150 delegates have come here from 20 European countries, to discuss the

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current situation of the national minorities in Europe and also future challenges.

Today, this solidarity of the minorities across borders is more necessary than ever before. Every day we can read, hear and experience how there is pressure on minorities throughout Europe, on social, cultural, linguistic, and time and again also on the national minorities.

It must not be taken for granted that the obligations emanating from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities or the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages will be honoured. Their protection

imperatives are not felt by many members of national minorities in their everyday life.

And this is why the *Minority Safepack* initiative, initiated by FUEN in association with minority organisations from many European countries, is so important. In Schleswig-Holstein we are following this initiative with considerable attention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am of the firm conviction that the strength of a democratic society is reflected in how it treats its minorities. I do not just share this conviction with the minister-president, the ministers, and the state secretaries of the state government.

I also share it with the German head of state.

On 22 March 2013, the German president, Joachim Gauck, gave a speech in the Schleswig-Holstein state parliament in which he made the pivotal comment that:

“Minority protection is not an act of courtesy, minority protection is an expression of our democracy.”

The state of Schleswig-Holstein has been committed to this principle for many years. Protection and support of the traditional minorities, the Danes, the Frisians, the German Sinti and Roma have constitutional status. And we maintain close and friendly links with the German minority in Denmark.

This principle is also valid when it is about people who come to us from other countries, regardless of their reasons for coming. Whether they come to live and work, as immigrants, refugees or short-term guests.

Meet every person with openness, with interest and with respect: this is the philosophy that shapes Schleswig-Holstein's minority policy as well as its refugee, immigration and integration policy.

We have managed to place minority policy on a level playing field. Support is not *granted*, it has its foundation in law and it has structures in which the minorities can confidently represent their interests and take their affairs in their own hands.

But above all stands the guiding principle: We are allowed to be different! Cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity need not be frightening. It enriches a society and every one of us as well.

FUEN also tirelessly lobbies for the dissemination of this idea and for respect for one another. This is not an easy path. You will always be having to combat setbacks and unexpected resistance. Despite all this, things will move ahead!

I wish the 60th annual congress a successful and peaceful outcome!