



SPEECH TO CONGRESS 2015 IN KOMOTINI

Salutation

I am very pleased to be here together with you, the great family of member organisations under the FUEN umbrella; this time in Komotini, with the West Thracian Turks.

And we thank all those who have put so much energy and warm-heartedness into preparing the FUEN annual congress.

Romano Prodi, President of the Commission of the EU from 1999-2004, once said that in the EU we are all minorities. That is of course the truth with reservations. Since 2004, the EU has grown to include a further 13 states, which have, regardless of population size, a significantly better status as Europe's ethnic groups and small nations.

When we held our congress in the German-Danish border country a year ago, we were in a region, in which the minorities are a recognised part of the population. That is not the case here in West Thrace. The West Thracian Turks have to struggle for recognition and respect. This is very visibly expressed by the fact that no official representative of the majority population is taking part in the opening of this congress.

Please forgive me, Ms Sibel Mustafaoglu, as deputy mayor of Komotini I naturally do not count you among them – you are of course an official representative of the city, and high-ranking one. I am very pleased that you got the post. You, like the rest of us, are a member of a minority. You are, if you like, and I hope you do, one of us.

You are most welcome, but you must understand that here it is about the principle of respect and recognition. I cannot remember when we ever had a congress opening without a high-ranking representative of the majority population from the state, the region or even the city.



Today a high-level ceremony is taking place in Komotini (Komotini became part of Greece on 14 May 1920). This is actually a virtually a perfect confluence of two events, where both of us – the city of Komotini and FUEN, the biggest international umbrella organisation of autochthonous, national minorities in Europe - could have profited. We would have liked to have postponed the opening of our congress so that both would have been possible: us attending the ceremony, and also having a representative speak at the opening of our congress.

I have to make this very clear: there really is a lack of respect, in that it appears that it was not deemed necessary to even reply to our invitation.

I believe that the situation here in Greece in these very difficult times is especially difficult for minorities, but I must add that times are not that rosy for many of our minorities.

After the Balkan Crisis, the situation of the autochthonous minorities in Europe is once again an item on the political agenda. With the West-East conflict in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region, the protection of a minority has once again been misused as justification for military operations.

A year ago, I was in the midst of the troubles, but before the outbreak of the war, in Kiev for three days, where I was taking part in the Kiev Security Forum. There I also met with several minority representatives, so that I could get an insight into their situation. The impression I got was that the minorities had no problems with the state or with each other. But the war has changed things. Nowadays one hides one's Russian identity, and an atmosphere of fear and insecurity prevails. And while we do not have a solution to this crisis either, it is our joint mission, to give a voice to the national minorities, to individuals and to groups.

In France, the Bretons have to put up with the fact that their homeland will in future be divided into two regions. This has broken apart the Breton homeland, because administrative districts are powerful instruments that become anchored in people's minds.

The Bretons asked for our help, but we could not help them because France is a centralised state, and what Paris dictates often pays too little attention to concerns on the ground. And this affects minorities particularly hard.



The Alsatians have to put up with their homeland being swallowed up into the vast region of Eastern France. This creates a different point of reference, and subsequently endangers their identity. The name Elsass or Alsace will probably only continue to exist on the labels of bottles of good wine.

The great values of the French Revolution, and we are all envious of them for that, namely freedom, equality and fraternity, obviously have no room for minorities – neither for Bretons, Occitanians, Germans, Catalans, Basques or the Flemings. And now Parisian centralism is threatening the existence of their languages. There are some regional initiatives for language preservation, but they are not particularly effective and do nothing to halt the cultural loss.

France has failed to ratify either the European Charter of Linguistic Rights or the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

In Romania, the Hungarian minority faces harassment by the government. When RMDSZ was part of the government, Romania had started to make restitution for the property of churches and local communities that had been nationalised by the communist regime. On the basis of this law, a few hundred buildings, school, community centres and libraries were returned to their rightful owners. And last year, without any conclusive evidence, a Romanian court ruled that one of these schools should be nationalised. This interrupted the whole restitution process, which means a restriction of the rights of the Hungarian community in Romania.

And on top of this, every call for autonomy is declared to be a risk to the state's security.

And as the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the ratification of the language charter in Romania took place without any participation by the minorities, it was not exactly evidence of a positive minority policy.

And when we're talking of negative examples, I'll come back not just to Greece, but also to Turkey. This year, we Germans and Danes are celebrating 60 years of the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations: a Magna Carta for minorities. They came into being when West Germany applied to join NATO. This needed Denmark's consent, and they were only prepared to give their consent as long as there was a solution for the problem of the minority south of the German-Danish border. This declaration was signed on 29



March 1955, and was the start of a peaceful development in relations between majority and minority. In September of the same year, many Greek citizens of Istanbul were subjected to a pogrom that caused devastating destruction of Greek property and the subsequent exodus of tens of thousands of Greeks out of Turkey. Today, despite both being members of NATO, there are still many unresolved minority issues in both countries.

In 1923, with the blessing of the League of Nations, 1.2 million Greeks were inhumanly expelled from their home in Turkey and sent to Greece, and inversely, 600,000 Turks were jacked out of their homes in Greece.

It was then that the minority rights of the 150,000 Turks in Western Thrace, here where our congress is taking place, were guaranteed under the Peace Treaty of Lausanne, and the region was awarded to Greece. But Greece did not recognise the West Thracian Turks as “Turkish”, as a national minority, but as “Moslem”, and thus as a religious minority. Nowadays all Moslems are suspected and stigmatised across the world, because some fanatical individuals and groups behave so inhumanly. And this causes discrimination against a whole religion.

We are happy that we were and are able to get to know the other, warm-hearted, friendly, cordial and open side of Islam here with you.

Fanaticism, and let me be very clear about this, drives a whole religion into isolation. It is therefore all the more important that the Turkish minority is recognised in all its complexity. In this case, complexity is more than religion. They are, and call themselves, Turks; but to this very day their clubs and associations are not allowed to use the word “Turkish” in their names.

We call this an arbitrary discrimination of their rights, and this has brought Greece up before the European Court of Human Rights. Despite three court judgements against Greece in 2008, the issue has still not been resolved.

The contractually regulated autonomy granted to the West Thracian Turks in Greece regarding education and religious issues existed until 1967, and despite the end of the military junta and the return to democracy in 1974, the Greek government has still not restored these rights to the West Thracian Turks.



If a state reduces the identity of a minority to their religion, one might expect that at least the religion be awarded the necessary respect. A practical example of what happens in school shows that this is not the case.

A Greek teacher at a Turkish-Greek school asked the pupils to draw a picture of Mohammed, in a region where over 90% of the population believe in Islam. At the latest, after the caricature dispute ten years ago in Denmark, everyone must understand the significance of such a demand. There are no images of Mohammed in Islam.

A teacher at a school who is confronted daily with issues resulting from different faiths, must be especially aware of this. Our West Thracian friends have seen this as a provocation, and we cannot rule out that fact that it may well have been meant as a provocation.

The Turkish minority newspapers that reported the story were taken to court and fined for libel, fines that were ten times what a Greek newspaper has to pay if convicted of the same offence.

The Greek government also forbids the Turks from electing their own mufti, who is instead appointed over their heads.

This is somewhat contradictory, and looks rather like pure arbitrariness.

There is simply a lack of respect for those that are different, and in my eyes that is discrimination.

Let me establish the following here: A nation that does not protect identity and incorporate it into the overall population can never be sustainably successful in global terms.

And only nations that protect diversity within their borders can live in peace with other nations.

Salutation



Jean Monnet, the man behind the idea of a united Europe, described his aim in 1950, that: securing peace in Europe through “communitisation”.

The idea was: “When business and industry amalgamate, then at some stage politics will follow as well”.

Business has come together, but what about politics?

Do governments have any creative possibilities, and if yes, do they use them for the benefit of the people or are politicians nowadays already the unintentional minions of industry?

- When it comes to the question of power, who rules? Business or politics?

We want a democratic economy and not economic democracy.

The Greeks are going through a serious economic crisis that, because of the ruthless austerity programme imposed by the EU and the rescue of many banks, has resulted in the Greek people feeling humiliated. That is bad, and there are parallels in European history, which the Germans in particular should not forget.

I am of the opinion that Greece has to be helped. Greece is fighting for many things, but also for a different, a more social Europe. And that is what I want too.

I would like to point out that the demands that Prime Minister Tsipras is making of the EU, namely the respect for human dignity and dialogue at eye level, must first be fulfilled in his own country and with respect to his own minorities. These factors have not been, and are still not being, taken into consideration by the Greek government when it comes to minority issues, and that does not make the government more credible.

I am convinced that Greece is not the cause of the European crisis, but merely a symptom of the crisis. Europe is going through a crisis of values that we all have to pick up on, all of us who work towards a united Europe.

I always like to use the quotation “Show me how you treat your minorities and I’ll tell you how democratic your society really is”, because this is the basis for democratic dealings on an equal footing. And this is why we demand a minorities commissioner in the EU.



We suggested positioning this job as a portfolio for the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. We were supported by both the social democrat group and by conservative representatives in Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein.

We appealed to both candidates, Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz, to push for this.

Unfortunately, nothing ever came of it. In our opinion the situation has even worsened. We believe that it is a mistake that minority issues are split between four commissioners, and are consequently afforded a lower priority. It is also very bureaucratic and even more complicated to find the right person to talk to. It's much easier to just keep away from minority issues!

Is that perhaps what was intended?

To the best of my knowledge there has never been a commission in which the words minority or language diversity have ever appeared in their political agendas. I make no secret of my disappointment.

On the other hand there is great emphasis on the economy, and this is also reflected in how the biggest dramas of our times are dealt with, namely refugee policy. Here everybody has reached agreements more in economic terms as in terms of humanity. This relates to the Mediterranean, as well as agreement about so-called safe states.

There are no simple solutions for how to deal with the difficult issue of refugees. We know that. But we did expect that the EU would behave more like the courageous, wonderful mayor of Lampedusa and do everything possible to help the refugees.

Yes, things have improved since the refugee summit, but why do numbers carry more weight than destinies? I believe that everyone, politicians and citizens in Europe, are affected by the fate of the refugees. Nobody can remain unaffected by it. And luckily there are many people who overcome bureaucratic hurdles and simply help.

It is always the ordinary citizens who are a source of hope, not the bureaucrats, not the politicians. So give the citizens more influence at last!



Also because I am a minority representative it makes somewhat despondent when I see what big and urgent problems in Europe need to be given priority. There's the Ukraine, the refugee problem, but also of course, the question of whether a cucumber should be straight or bent. These all have priority – and then, yes, there are the minorities as well. Unfortunately we are obliged to observe that the solution of the traditional minority issues is overlooked time and again, or just put into cold storage.

As far as this is concerned, one could use a sentence that I heard in relation to EU refugee policy:

“There is an organised non-responsibility achieved by means of shifting competences”. This sentence seems to me to be absolutely true as regards our attempt to get more of a hearing for the civil rights of the minorities and to implement them as a full European issue.

As far as our attempt to implement the Minority SafePack Initiative, the MSPI, we have reached exactly this point of non-responsibility through shifting competences. As you are aware, the FUEN office, invested a great deal of energy in launching the MSPI through a seven-person citizens' committee, consisting of well-known personalities. As you will also know, after our application was rejected by the commission we decided to have the matter examined before the European Court of Justice.

The legal dispute with the commission will be decided in Luxemburg, and we will see how seriously they take the idea of civic engagement and minority protection in the EU. We expect the court to provide clarification of the matter by the end of 2015 or beginning of 2016. Of the joint plaintiffs, Slovakia has taken the commission's side whereas Hungary supports our position.

Here I should mention another event. Romania has notified the court of its opposition to our MSPI. When Hunor Kelemen, the president of our Hungarian member organisation RMDSZ, deputy chairman of our citizens' committee, and member of the Romanian government where he was both culture minister and deputy prime minister, heard of this, he resigned both his government posts. That is quite the opposite of what politicians usually do. Dear Hunor, before this congress I would like to once again express my deep respect for your consequent decision. Your behaviour is exemplary.

Salutation



Bundesministerium
des Innern



There was a hearing about the European Citizens' Initiative in Brussels on 26 February, at which our lawyer Prof Ernst Johansson was one of the first to be able to state his views, and where the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Frans Timmermans, was also present. I do not know if one can interpret this as a particular sign of respect. We have become modest.

We asserted that the idea of the European Citizens' Initiative was conceived for normal citizens and not for lawyers. And normal citizens must also be able to see why an initiative has been rejected instead of just being given the hackneyed phrase "obviously outside (their) competence".

Our citizens' committee is not prepared to be fobbed off like that.

Our criticism of the European Citizens' Initiative, which we emphasise in our legal statement, is shared just as critically by many other organisations.

It shows that the fundamental idea was good but that the noble aim of citizens' participation cannot be achieved in this manner.

You create an instrument, which is useless or only useful for large organisations. To date it has not earned the name Citizens' Initiative.

After the hearing it is safe to assume that the instrument of the European Citizens' Initiative will be amended.

For all those who would like to concern themselves with the MSPI in more detail I would recommend an excellent summary, which is in short form but contains references to details. Here I would like to thank Frank de Boer, who deserves the greatest praise both as the author of this work and as our legal advisor.

Let me say this quite clearly: we are very happy that we have some outstanding people in our citizens' committee who support FUEN.

We would like to ask the members of the des citizens' committee, to create an advisory council that, as a kind of think tank, will widen the perspectives of FUEN and provide support for political implementation.



The first conference of this kind is taking place in Belgium in the autumn of this year. As you know, FUEN has for years been campaigning for an expansion of the competences of the regions in Europe – away from nationalism to greater responsibility for the individual regions.

The former prime minister of the German-speaking community in Belgium, a member of the citizens' committee, Karl Heinz Lambertz, has the opportunity as deputy chair of the Committee of the Regions to put across his ideas on this where it counts. On the one hand we have the elite of the states that are bringing Europe together, but that is just one, albeit important, side. The other side is just as important:

We know from our experience as minorities that it is now time to take the peoples of Europe seriously and to involve them, but differently. As I have said, here the minorities play a pioneering role and Europe can well use their intercultural expertise. The citizens' committee could point out ways of achieving more subsidiarity. And we are convinced that you can also solve big problems with small details. As Prodi said, in the EU we are all minorities.

Years ago, when they wanted to cut the number of administrative districts, I asked the former Danish prime minister and later NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, if he felt like the chairman of a minority. He gave me a pained smile. I then told him that Denmark's population of 5.5 million constituted just 1% of the population of the EU, whereas we – the German minority in Denmark - make up 8% of the population in our region.

Greece's population of almost 11 million constitutes 2% of the EU but does not see itself as a minority but as a people, as a nation.

Would the nation break apart, if you recognised the minorities that make up 2% of the population for what they are – historically involved minorities? I don't think so.

Salutation

FUEN is now an address when it comes to minority policy. It was Germany's foreign minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier, who expressed this most clearly at the ceremony in Berlin to celebrate 60 years of the Bonn-Copenhagen declarations, and I quote: "We also want to use your expertise for our foreign policy! Here it's not about just



recommending the blind imitation of the German-Danish minority model. The conflicts in this world are too complex for that. But I believe that your experiences in the north of Germany and in the south of Denmark can help identify important factors on the path to defusing minority conflicts”.

And when the Hungarian MEPs from the PPE Group invited me to a hearing about minority issues held by the LIBE committee in Brussels on the subject of the *protection of traditional minorities* and chaired by Monika Hohlmeier, it was good for FUEN. Even though I usually view such hearings sceptically, a former Danish MEP gave me courage by being able to tell me that from her own experience, Ms Hohlmeier had inherited many genes from her father, Franz Josef Strauss, and knew how to put them to use with tenacity.

So on behalf of FUEN, and from the wealth of experience of the German-Danish border country, I suggested the setting up of a “**contact Committee at the European Parliament**”, where we can focus the issues and interests of the minorities with respect to the European Union.

Salutation

None of us were able to choose our parents, where we were born, or which language and religion we grew up with. But what we have learned is that we human beings also have fellow human beings, and that we need them in order to have a happy life. I am here visiting the Turks in West Thrace for the fourth time, and I can assure you that they are wonderful hosts. In the coming days we have serious issues to discuss with one another, but there is also time to relax and to communicate, and that, we hope, will also strengthen the solidarity among ourselves.

There are many problems that need to be solved, but luckily not all by us. We are on the right road, so I would like to finish with an old Chinese saying:

You cannot stop the birds of sorrow and anxiety from flying over your head, but you can prevent them building nests in your hair.
So let us look ahead with confidence and optimism.

Thank you for your attention.