

Conference Securing Linguistic Rights in Practice,  
The National Museum of Finland, 12 April 2012,

**Welcome address by Christina Gestrin, MP,  
Chair of the Swedish Assembly of Finland**

Distinguished Minister and professor Oeter, dear representatives of minority or regional languages in Finland, and other participants,

As the Chair of the organizer of this conference, the Swedish Assembly of Finland, I am truly happy to see such a large crowd of participants committed to the promotion and protection of the minority and non-territorial languages in Finland. The languages covered by the European Charter in our country are nine: my own mother tongue Swedish, that despite its status as the other national language of Finland is monitored by the Charter as being the less widely used one, the three Saami languages spoken in Finland, the Kaló language or Romani, Russian, Karelian, Tatar and Yiddish.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is an important tool to evaluate the situation of all these languages, highlighting positive developments, but also drawing attention to backlashes or serious deficiencies needing to be addressed by the Government and the authorities responsible.

The European Charter and the monitoring process set in place by the Council of Europe, give the opportunity not only for the authorities, but also for the nongovernmental

organizations to engage in an open dialogue on what needs to be done in safeguarding our languages. The Swedish Assembly of Finland has, as many other NGOs, actively engaged in this process since the very beginning: giving official statements on the state reports of the Government and the Council of Europe, meeting with the Committee of Experts, and also keeping continuous contact with relevant authorities. With visible and positive results, I would like to add!

We therefore waited eagerly for the fourth evaluation report on Finland to be published. The work of the Committee of Experts has, as usual, been highly efficient, and the report on Finland presented is thorough and to-the-point. There was, however, a considerable delay in the publication of the report due to the Finnish part of the process, which means that some of the findings are already out of date. This is somewhat disappointing.

Reading the report we had a strong sense of *déjà-vu*, as the recommendations by the Committee of Ministers to Finland proved to be almost identical to those presented in the former round, already in 2007. This poses questions about the implementation of the recommendations. Has this little happened in the last five years? The *déjà-vu*- situation is strengthened by the fact that the same occurred with the two reports of the Finnish Government on the implementation of the Language legislation – in 2006 and 2009. Also here the recommendations to the authorities were presented in identical wording...

Despite the official status of the Swedish language, the report notes deficiencies in the right to use Swedish in courts and in emergency situations,

and in the right to have access to social and health care in Swedish. Since these are matters of life, health and basic legal rights, it calls for immediate action. Urgent measures are also needed to strengthen the Saami and Romani languages, especially in the educational field. Not to speak of the fact that many of the smaller minority languages in Finland are in real danger of extinction.

It is now time for the Finnish Government to turn its commitments to promote and protect the regional and minority languages into concrete, practical action. This is central especially in connection with the profound structural reforms of the municipalities and of the social and health sector during the coming years. This is one of the reasons for the Swedish Assembly of Finland to arrange this conference. Finland has still a lot to improve. I hope this conference will be a step forward to a more systematic implementation of the Charter. This should be done in a constructive dialogue between the Committee of Experts, the Finnish authorities and the NGOs.

On behalf of the Swedish Assembly of Finland I warmly welcome you all to this conference about Securing Linguistic Rights in Practice.