

MINISTER ANNA-MAJA HENRIKSSON'S SPEECH AT THE SEMINAR OF
THE SWEDISH ASSEMBLY OF FINLAND ON THE EUROPEAN
LANGUAGE CHARTER on 12 April 2012

Professor Stefan Oeter, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is a central part of the Council of Europe's minority protection system. The application of this so-called

Language Charter is monitored in the involved states to a varying extent depending on the level of the state's commitment to the Charter. When it comes to Swedish, which Finland in the context of the Language Charter has identified as a less widely used official language, Finland has rather extensive commitments in Part III of the Charter in addition to the general commitments of Part II. The same applies to Sami, which Finland has identified as a language used within a given territory. In order to be able to carry out the practical monitoring, the Committee of Experts for the Language Charter must gather a wide variety of information about the Finnish public administration and court system as well as the society in general. It is obvious that the Committee of Experts has done thorough work when compiling this current report for the fourth monitoring cycle. The recommendations of the Council of Ministers and the observations of the Committee of Experts will be examined in detail in Finland.

It came as no surprise to Finland that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe felt obliged to recommend a number of measures concerning Swedish, Sami and Romani. It was likewise expected that not even nearly all of

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the observations of the Committee of Experts could be concluded with the statement that a specific undertaking has been completely fulfilled in Finland. Naturally, we had hoped that Finland, before this fourth monitoring cycle, could have done an even better job, also with regard to other languages than those that I mentioned before. In many cases, the commitments have been fulfilled only in part, which means that we must take additional measures in the areas pointed out in the monitoring report. However, I am pleased to see that some positive development has taken place with regard to the recommendations that the Committee of Ministers gave during the third monitoring cycle in 2007, although far from all of the recommendations can be considered to be fulfilled.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Measures to improve language protection are being planned and taken as we speak. I would like to introduce to you a few examples of the measures taken during the reporting period. A strategy for the development of two vital national languages is being drafted, and the Ministry of Education and Culture has recently put forward a proposal for a programme for the revitalization of the three Sami languages. In 2009, the Institute for the Languages of Finland

adopted a political plan of action to promote Romani, and this work was continued within the Government and resulted in a Government Resolution on guidelines to promote Finland's policy on Roma. In 2010, the Finnish Association of the Deaf and the Institute for the Languages of Finland adopted a sign language policy programme, and in 2011 a working group at the Ministry of Justice drew up a report on the linguistic rights of sign language users. In this sense, it can be said that attention has been paid to all the languages mentioned

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in section 17 of the Constitution, but even other languages, such as Karelian, have been taken into consideration to a certain extent.

Once again, the report highlights the problems relating to the accessibility of social and health care services and emergency call centre services in Sami and Swedish. In the recommendations and observations attention is drawn, for instance, to the insufficient language skills of the staff. The recommendations and observations also include a number of objectives concerning education in the languages covered by the Charter in Finland. It is emphasised in the report that what really matters is the practical fulfilment of the commitments according to the Charter, not the form of the national legal rules. We truly have a well structured set of legal provisions on different languages, but good legislation is not enough.

We are aware of the fact that we in some cases are unable to comply with our own legislation; it has become evident in the Government reports on the application of the language legislation in 2006 and in 2009. That is why it is so important that we now are committed to drawing up a long-term strategy for the national languages in order to ensure access to services in both national languages. These problems would surely be discussed in Finland regardless of the recommendations and observations of the Council of Europe, but the European Language Charter makes it easier for us to focus on the core issues in a systematic manner. There are no blind spots in this monitoring process. The Charter covers all the relevant issues and therefore also the monitoring is targeted at these issues. Finland submits the reports required for the monitoring of compliance with the Charter in a positive spirit and strives to establish a dialogue with the Council of Europe. Finland welcomes this kind of

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international monitoring and wants to work actively to eliminate all obstacles in the way of fulfilling the commitments according to the Charter. This active role is reflected also in the National Action Plan on Fundamental and Human Rights for the years 2012-2013, which was recently adopted by the Government and which in many parts concerns similar issues as the Charter.

This dialogue between Finland and the Council of Europe is not important only on an international level, as communication between the State and the international monitoring body. Instead, Finland can use the observations also internally to systematically evaluate the sufficiency of the different measures in

a way that resembles a language impact assessment. The dialogue has also produced domestic recognition: the White Paper on Municipality Structures, produced by the Ministry of Finance and released in February, makes the point that the binding international commitments of Finland establish a minimum standard for linguistic rights. The White Paper has, in fact, taken into consideration the Language Charter in a way that makes the Charter a relevant part of the drafting process from the very beginning. Due to the three-year-long reporting cycle of the Language Charter, the period of time between the State reports is of course quite long, but at the same this enables us to identify longterm

development trends that are comparable. It also means that every Parliament and Government will, during its term, be an object for this evaluation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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The Language Charter is a very special human rights instrument, because it aims to protect languages - both regional and minority languages - instead of establishing rights for an individual. However, this protection can not be realised without people. That is why the Government has engaged in a dialogue with representatives for the languages covered by the Language Charter in Finland. As a part of this dialogue, the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers will be translated into the relevant languages. It is also very positive that the report itself is translated into Finnish and Swedish and distributed here today. It would also be essential to translate at least the parts that discuss other minorities into their own language. The Government hopes that the recommendations and observations of the international monitoring body can be communicated to the practical level, where the commitments are intended to be fulfilled. By spreading the information included in the recommendations and observations, it is possible to stimulate the debate on a national level on the fulfilment of the basic linguistic rights.

According to the Programme of the Government of Prime Minister Katainen, Finland's status as a bilingual country is a strength and resource. For that reason, a long-term language strategy will be prepared under the lead of the Prime Minister in order to develop two viable national languages. On the basis of this National Language Strategy, concrete measures will be specified for the Government's term of office. In the educational field, this means that the National Language Strategy must be taken into account within the discussion concerning language instruction in the two national languages, including the hours of instruction devoted to the different languages offered in the schools. One specific objective in the Government Programme is that the teaching methods of the national languages will be developed in such a manner that the focus will be on communication skills. I am convinced that also in these pursuits

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of the Government, the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers and the findings of the Committee of Experts will be of great value.
Thank you for the recommendations and observations.