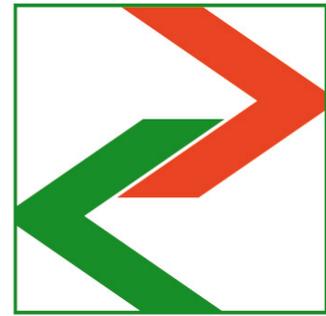


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Asociación de Regiones Fronterizas Europeas (ARFE)
Association des régions frontalières européennes (ARFE)
Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)
Comunità di lavoro delle regioni europee di confine (AGEG)
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Contribution to the draft Statement on the decision of the European Parliament on minority protection and the measurements against discrimination in an enlarged Europe

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1. Introduction

We explicitly welcome the opportunity for the European organisations to express themselves in the CoR Commissions. This underlines the good cooperation that has existed for some time now and that will be improved through the agreement between the CoR and the European Regional Organisations.

We would like to congratulate Mr. Boris Sovic and Mr. Eberhard Sinner, on their draft statement. They have dealt with the subject „Minorities” very carefully in their first draft, but have nevertheless addressed the most essential points. I am sure that this paper can further be developed.

The perspective from which AEBR approaches this subject is perhaps a little bit astonishing.

In many areas, Europe is shaped by its common history and culture, but also by its national borders. In the enlarged EU, approximately 32 % of the population live on 40 % of the surface area in border regions.

Border are often „scars of history.“ They have left behind a „patchwork of historical landscapes“. These borders often separated joint cultures and populations, thus creating minorities on one side of the border, which had a lot in common with their neighbours beyond the border.

In other cases (e.g. after World War II through the banishment of the population), people nowadays living on both sides of the border cannot look back on a joint history and culture. Poles were resettled from today Ukrainian areas to the Polish Western border with Germany, or population groups (many Sinti and Romanies) from the East of the Czechoslovakian Republic to the Czech border with Germany. There, they were living so to speak as “minority” in their own state without having any ties to the area to which they had been resettled. Furthermore, they had no cultural or other things in common with the neighbouring population beyond the border.

Minorities thus play an important role in cross-border cooperation. Therefore, the European Charter for Border and Cross-Border Regions, which has to be accepted by each member of AEER, refers already in its preamble to the minority protection and the contribution of cross-border cooperation to the protection of minorities.

2. Let me formulate some theses:

- Borders are common meeting points, but at the same time also places of separation. The distinctions do not only arise due to different competences, structures, social legislation, but also very often due to the variety of languages and cultural differences.
- Borders can either create conflicts or lead to integration. They are places of separation or meeting places: e.g. Finland/Russia, Denmark/Germany, The Netherlands/Germany, Finland/Sweden, Spain/France, Austria/Italy, Italy/Slovenia, Slovenia/Austria, Romania/Moldova or Hungary with all its neighbouring countries.
- Minorities are always more expensive than majorities.
- On the other hand, minorities are part of the common cross-border regional development policy and of the social policy. That is the only way to avoid conflicts between minorities and majorities (minorities are important, but as a Danish mayor once said „the tail, i.e. the minority, should not wag the dog, i.e. the majority.“
- Europe’s wealth is its diversity. Wealth should be cultivated and enhanced. This diversity cannot only be found in the language and the cultures, but also in our daily life, i. e. also in minorities living among us and which are an indispensable element in the cross-border cooperation.
- At the border, the language is often the most important instrument to gain full knowledge about traditional and cultural habits and living conditions. This applies across the border, but also for minority languages living on both sides of the border (e.g. in the German/Danish border area, in the Basque Country/Aquitaine etc.).

- Language knowledge is elementary to become aware of similarities and differences, e.g. in culture, tradition and way of life.
- This knowledge about differences and similarities is a precondition for actively involving the minority in all social groups and all forms of cooperation, and this also in all areas of life on both sides of the border.
- Minorities, which actively participate in social processes on both sides of the border and across the border, create added values in the socio-cultural and economic life.

3. What practical possibilities can be recommended for the future?:

- Provision of funds from European programmes in the framework of regional/local development, like in INTERREG programmes, which render financial support cross-border projects in favour of minorities.
- Involving minorities in political and social groups (e.g. schools, libraries, facilities for adult and adolescence education, preservation of monuments, if possible and appropriate in cultural clubs, churches etc.);
- Lasting and recurring dissemination of knowledge about the historic, socio-cultural and traditional background of minorities;
- Inclusion into cross-border partnerships, youth meetings, family reunions, sport events, seminars, ecumenical meetings;
- Incorporation of minority languages in the syllabuses of all school forms and kindergartens (e.g. D/NL) in neighbouring border regions particularly as facultative options;
- Unhindered access for minorities to public services on both sides of the border (Example: the German/Danish border area with own schools, libraries, cultural centres etc.);
- Supporting the minority e.g. by mutual commitments to preserve the individual culture and corresponding facilities;
- Minimum guarantee for political presence of minorities in local and regional parliaments (e.g. at least one seat, even if the minority population is very small).

4. The border, meeting point of languages, cultures and minorities

The circle is closed under this headline.

The experiences of cross-border cooperation show that each new growing generation has to be trained, to overcome prejudices against the neighbour and minorities, because

stereotypes, which are often imparted via media, cannot be removed with a single action in one generation. Socio-cultural cooperation is the driving force and the lubricant in the process of step-by-step integration of minorities while protecting their cultural identity.

Socio-cultural cooperation between different population groups helps to get to know the unknown. Getting to know somebody helps to understand him (for that purpose, the language is very important). Only if someone can understand others, he can also comprehend why they act differently. And only if there is comprehension, confidence can be developed. Confidence is the basis for all kinds of cross-border cooperation and is therefore also a key-element to protect minorities. The developments on the Balkans would have been different if a genuine cross-border cooperation had taken place there early enough.

Some minority conflicts in Europe have been uncramped through the opening of borders during the European Integration Process and through cross-border cooperation (e. g. South Tyrol, Basque Country, Ireland, Northern Ireland, German/Danish border region, Hungary with all its neighbours etc.).

Involving minorities in cross-border cooperation is a touch-stone for:

- esteeming partnership and subsidiarity,
- balance, tolerance and equality in spite of different partners,
- a peaceful cooperation, respecting the differences and considering the non-discrimination of minorities.

We therefore ask to address the subject „cross-border cooperation and minorities“ in an independent chapter in the further elaboration of the CoR statement.