

ECML conference

**“Quality education and language competences
for 21st century society: traditions, challenges and visions”**

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Welcome address

By

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Dear Deputy Mayor,
Dear Mr President,
Dear Ambassador
Distinguished guests and delegates

Talking about quality education and language competences at a time when Europe undergoes its most serious political crisis for decades seems a strange thing to do.

And yet, the developments in Ukraine have exposed the crucial role played by language policy. Language and minority issues have rarely been so much in the news as these days. Language

The decision of the *Verkhovna Rada* on 23 February 2014, following the revolution in Ukraine, to repeal the law on regional languages and thereby to make Ukrainian the sole state language at all levels, was a very ill-advised decision leading many citizens of Ukraine to question whether they would have a future as equal citizens of the country. The Council of Europe, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the governments of many member States expressed serious concerns. Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov vetoed the repeal bill on 28 February, so that Russian retained the status of regional language in 13 of the 27 regions of Ukraine.

We have been following the unfolding events in Ukraine, and between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, with increasing anxiety. At the level of the Council of Europe, I cannot recall a situation in the past where the compliance of a member State with the Statutes of the Council of Europe — in this case the compliance of the Russian Federation — has been put in question so seriously. Also I cannot recall any occasion where the question whether to send observers of the Council of Europe under the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages into a member State has been so hotly debated at a political level.

Where are we today?

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has expressed grave concerns about the situation created by the referendum on the accession of the Crimea to the Russian Federation. What started as a language issue, at least on the surface, has now developed into a geopolitical crisis. We are witnessing the return of the chilling atmosphere of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when Europe was divided and far from a common understanding of democracy and human rights standards.

The current role of the Council of Europe in Ukraine is primarily that of an advisor. We are advising the Ukrainian parliament on constitutional law and on the preparation of a new electoral law for the presidential elections in May. At the same time we are continuing our co-operation in a number of policy areas under the "Action Plan" agreed with the Ukrainian government in November 2013, with hands-on training and capacity-building programmes in several dozen different policy fields with a wide variety of partners. Many of these programmes contain an explicit reference to language issues; there is also a specific project on language policy and social inclusion.

But back to Graz and our discussion on the European development of language competences and quality education.

I would not like to second-guess the reflections we will hear from Professor Widdowson in a minute. Let me just emphasise this: maintaining and enhancing linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe, and promoting the learning and use of languages are very important aims for the Council of Europe.

Languages are a means to support intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and democratic citizenship. We see the adequate development of language competences as a pre-requisite for the unrestricted and fair access to quality education.

Good quality education acknowledges and includes the learners' "own" languages, especially if these are minority or migrant languages. These are important components of successful integration into the world of learning.

All education uses language as its vehicle. Therefore quality language education is key to quality education overall, which in turn is central to full participation in a democratic, diverse society.

This makes it clear why the Council of Europe is giving so much attention to language and education in the overall context of democracy. Democracy is more than laws and institutions. Democracy can only live and prosper if it is supported by committed and engaged citizens. If it is built on democratic competences, and embedded in a wider culture of democracy.

Allow me to say a few words on the role of the European Centre for Modern Languages, which is working here in Graz since 1994. It is an intergovernmental institution, working with decision-makers in member States and bringing together experts to develop

innovative, research-informed solutions to challenges in language education. Formally speaking it is based on an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe. The Austrian authorities fund the infrastructure of the Centre, with modern premises for the secretariat and where the great majority of ECML events are held.

The hallmark of the ECML is the organisation of international language education projects. Through these projects we support the language education in the different learning environments in member States. The projects are coordinated by teams of experts, who ensure that we apply state-of-the-art principles and tools of content-based language education, pluralistic approaches to education, the application of ICT, and testing and assessment, to name just a few areas.

These projects primarily target multipliers in language education — teacher trainers, textbook authors, school inspectors and experts in the areas of curricula development, educational standards, evaluation/assessment and certification.

Participants from the member States are regularly invited to workshops and network meetings. In this way the ECML provides a platform for cooperation with experts, associations and institutions involved in enhancing European language education.

The Centre also supports member States bilaterally, through training, consultancy and tools for competence and capacity-building at national level. And the Centre maintains Europe-wide networks for teacher trainers, researchers and educational administrators.

This work is important, and we are proud to have the Centre here in Graz and to benefit from the unwavering support of the authorities in Austria.

The 32 members of the Partial Agreement are investing into a policy area which is crucially relevant for the entire continent. Allow me to suggest to the 15 Council of Europe member States which are still standing outside the Partial Agreement, to seriously consider membership in the Graz Centre.

Distinguished guests and delegates,

Antoine de Saint-Exupery once reminded us that it is language which is the source of misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings are not exactly what Europe needs today. We need clarity, co-operation and an awareness of the essential role that education and language play for democracy and human rights. This is why we are here today.

I thank the Austrian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and the Austrian authorities for having given us the opportunity to contribute to that cause through our debates here in the wonderful town of Graz.

I thank you for your attention.