



To the Council of Europe
Secretariat of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages
Directorate General IV - Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport
Mr. Thorsten Afflerbach
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, France

To the Council of Europe
Secretariat of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
Mrs. Michele Akip
Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, France

European Parliament
Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages
To MEP Kinga Gal
ASP 12E 154
B-1047 Rue Wiertz 60
Brussel, Belgium

Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, 6 March 2015

Dear Mr Afflerbach, Ms Akip, and Mrs Gal,

I am writing you on behalf of the Europeeske Buro foar Lytse Talen (EBLT), the umbrella organisation of 24 language organisations and institutions working on behalf of the minority languages Frisian, Low Saxon, Bildts and Papiamentu in the Netherlands. As representatives of those organisations, we would like to draw your attention to the points of concern below.

We are seriously concerned about the attitude of the Dutch national government towards the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) and the Framework Convention Regarding the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in the Netherlands. We ask for your support in ensuring that the ECRML and the FCNM are implemented properly in the Netherlands. On the first of March 2014, more than one year ago, the Netherlands should have submitted its fifth state report on the implementation of the ECRML to the Council of Europe. However, we are disappointed that the Dutch government, again, has not fulfilled this periodical duty in time.

The last state report from the Dutch government about the implementation of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages was submitted on 15/09/2011. As far as we know preparations for the fifth report have been started, but apparently the report is still not ready. There has been a request from the Dutch government to be allowed to submit the fifth state report after the due date. The intention was to submit the report before January 2015. Since then a few more months have passed and our worries have increased. For that reason we address the Council of Europe and both secretaries directly. A copy of this letter will be send to Mr. Ronald Plasterk, the Dutch minister of the Interior, and also to the Dutch parliamentary committee for the Interior.

In all the reports of the Council of Europe on the implementation of both the ECRML and FCNM, recommendations are given to the Dutch government to improve the situation of both the Frisian and the Low-Saxon language. In the following paragraphs we present a number of examples on the actual situation and its practical implications regarding Frisian and Low-Saxon.

Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in October 2012

1. Establish a structured dialogue with representatives of the regional or minority language speakers.

As EBLT we can only conclude that there still is no structured dialogue at all between the government and organisations of regional and minority language speakers. There has been correspondence with the minister of the Interior – usually at our initiative – but there is nothing like a *structured* dialogue with clear goals, aims and responsibility. In 2013 the position of Frisian was debated in the Dutch parliament, during a plenary meeting about the new Frisian language law. Unfortunately this happened just once. This means that there is no follow-up nor any serious evaluation at parliamentary level. It goes without saying that this is far from sufficient to ensure the successful implementation of a new language law.

Last year EBLT followed with great interest and some envy the conference organised by the German government, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, about the minority languages in Germany. There is a committee in the Bundestag, which regularly discusses minority language issues and there is an office, working on behalf of the minority languages. EBLT therefore would like to suggest to put the state of the minority languages and the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages on the agenda of the parliamentary committee for the interior at least once every two years. Perhaps a governmental or parliamentary hearing about the state of the minority languages could be the starting point of a more fruitful next period.

2. Continue to strengthen the teaching of and in Frisian at all levels of education.

In the field of education some progress has been made. The number of trilingual – Frisian/Dutch/English – primary schools continues to grow, but the position of Frisian at other primary schools remains rather weak. One of the main problems is the shortage of qualified teachers. In secondary education the position of Frisian is even much weaker. Last year EBLT met several pupils of a secondary school, who were denied the possibility to choose Frisian as a subject for examination. It is quite clear that at several schools children are discouraged to

choose Frisian as a subject for examination. Frisian lacks a secure basis as an ordinary and obligatory subject in many schools for secondary education; according to legislation all schools for secondary education should offer Frisian at least in the first grade. However, according to the data of EBLT and its members, only 50 percent of all pupils in the first class is getting Frisian lessons at regular basis. We would like to add that there is not a public organisation in Friesland to whom those pupils or their parents can turn to in order to help them to get their Frisian lessons.

In the view of EBLT all pupils at all secondary schools in Friesland should have the possibility to choose Frisian as a subject for examination, if they wish to do so. All schools should offer and promote Frisian actively as one of the subjects they can choose. In those cases where the number of pupils is (very) small, schools can try to combine classes or choose other contemporary solutions. In our view both the Dutch government and the Provinsje Fryslân should ensure that all secondary schools teach Frisian at a good level, preparing their pupils for final examination at their school level.

We would like to add that we also see some positive developments. Both ROC's (Regional educational centres) in Friesland have started to give more attention to Frisian as an important subject for students , who wish to work in Friesland in health care institutions.

3. Upgrade the teaching of Low Saxon to the status of regular school subjects and extend the offer of education in this language.

In spite of this very clear recommendation the status of Low Saxon has not been upgraded yet. There is also no clear policy of the Dutch government towards the safeguarding and promotion of the Low Saxon language. From the part of the government no steps have been taken to extend the offer of education in this language.

As you know, the Low Saxon umbrella organisation SONT is striving to get Low Saxon upgraded to part III of the Charter. Until now the minister of the Interior is still refusing the repeated request of SONT in spite of the full support of provincial and local authorities. Jurists and other specialists repeatedly proved that Low Saxon already fulfils 37 relevant paragraphs. Therefore there are no real arguments against the implementation of part III. EBLT insists on implementation, possibly with your help.

Other issues

4. The position of Omrop Fryslân

Omrop Fryslân is the only public broadcaster which produces professional radio and television in the Frisian language. This gives Omrop Fryslân an indispensable role and responsibility as one of the main promotors of the Frisian language. Because of its activities during the period 2008-2012 the Committee of Experts stated in October 2012 that the first article in the media paragraph about the broadcasting of Frisian was fulfilled. Unfortunately the situation has deteriorated rapidly since then. Redundancies forced Omrop Fryslân to let people go and produce less television programmes. At present all regional broadcasters are negotiating a national plan for reorganisation and a further cutback of 17 million euros.

For Omrop Fryslân this presumably means new redundancies for an estimated 1.3 million euros (10 % of the annual budget) in the year 2017. On top of that Omrop Fryslân will lose its independent position. Secretary of state Sander Dekker wants to merge all regional broadcasters into one national organisation with large regional units. According to this plan Omrop Fryslân should merge with neighbouring RTV Noord (Groningen) and RTV Drenthe, and no longer be an independent foundation with its own Board and CEO. This might mean that the direct Frisian control over the only broadcaster in the Frisian language would disappear. For Omrop Fryslân this operation will again mean less staff and less money to produce programmes in the Frisian language.

Until now the Dutch government has not taken any measures yet to safeguard the position of Omrop Fryslân. In 2013 Mr. Dekker received a report from the Committee Hoekstra 'Tijdelijke commissie Borging Friese Taal in de Media' about radio and television in the Frisian language with very clear recommendations, but until now none of those recommendations has been implemented. (The committee Hoekstra was appointed by mr. Dekkers predecessor in a previous government.)

The position of Omrop Fryslân is particularly vulnerable because the position and the need for Frisian radio and television is nowhere arranged or even mentioned in the current Dutch Media Act. The new Frisian Language Act 'Wet gebruik Friese taal', which came into force in 2014, has a very limited scope and only arranges the use of Frisian in court and public administration. The use of Frisian in public radio and television is nowhere legally founded. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of a creative, sustainable and independent Omrop Fryslân for the future of the Frisian language and culture.

5. The visibility of Frisian and bilingual topographical signs.

The Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention was a bit disappointed when they saw very few bilingual signs during their on the spot visit to Friesland in 2013. They therefore formulated the following recommendation: *The Advisory Committee calls on the authorities, in close consultation with Frisian associations, to step up their efforts aimed at ensuring that the local authorities apply the existing possibility regarding bilingual topographical indications throughout the territory of the province of Fryslân.* This recommendation is still valid and actual.

Unfortunately EBLT hardly noticed any stepping up of efforts to expand bilingual signage from the part of the authorities. EBLT is therefore currently preparing its own proposal to improve the visibility of Frisian. As soon as this is ready we will send it to all relevant organisations, including the Council of Europe.

Our wishes to the Council of Europe

We kindly ask you to appeal to the Dutch authorities on the points we have mentioned above. EBLT will do the same with the *Kamercommissie voor Binnenlandse Zaken*, the standing committee for internal affairs of the Dutch parliament. Also we would like you to endorse the conclusions and recommendations of the Hoekstra-committee on the position of Frisian in the media.

EBLT is glad that the new language law 'Wet gebruik Friese taal' came into force in 2014. Simultaneously we are somewhat disappointed about the lack of effect of this law until now. No budget was made available for promotion, such as a professional language campaign, no clear goals were formulated and the Dutch state has remained very reluctant in setting a good example by using the Frisian language actively in its communication with the citizens. Moreover the scope of the new law is too limited. At this moment it is quite urgent that the future of Frisian broadcasting is ensured in the Dutch Media Act.

We ask for your support in ensuring that the ECMRL and the FCNM are implemented properly in the Netherlands. As an NGO representing 24 organisations EBLT is prepared to play an active role in order to safeguard, develop and promote the regional and minority languages of the Netherlands.

Yours sincerely,



Froukje de Jong-Krap, president of the Europeeske Buro foar Lytse Talen (EBLT)

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Useful links

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)

www.coe.int/minlang

Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)

www.coe.int/minorities

Periodical reports The Netherlands and recommendations Council of Europe

<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/#Netherlands>

Europeesk Buro foar Lytse Talen

www.eblt.nl

Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning

www.mercator-research.eu