



25 + 60 YEARS YEN & FUEN
/ WE ARE - LIVING DIVERSITY IN EUROPE

60 YEARS FEDERAL UNION OF EUROPEAN NATIONALITIES
FUEN JUBILEE CONGRESS BRUSSELS 2009

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Speech Hans Heinrich Hansen 2 October 2009

**Speech - FUEN-president Hans Heinrich Hansen at the
Assembly of Delegates**

Dear Friends

Many of you here are not as old as FUEN – and that is a good sign!

And when we pass review of the organisation over these few days it is nothing more than a bit of history. We, the older ones, have lived this history, so for us it brings back memories and experiences; for us it is more present, because it is also a piece of our own history.

That said, when I think of YEN, I see a truly refreshing renewal, and also the desire to carry on the tradition of FUEN. So thanks also to you young people.

Here at the conference of delegates I want to say loud and clear: FUEN may be 60 years old, and that is an age where one begins to see things more philosophically and be a bit wiser.

But that does not mean that we have lost our passion or our rage about certain things – such as the Slovakian language law. Quite the opposite: because of our experience we can do something about it. And that's what we want to do at this congress.

We are the voice of the autochthonous national minorities, and you give us this voice. And I thank you for this.

Five presidents have left their mark on FUEN. Four of them are with us today. Yesterday afternoon you experienced them with Martha Stocker as wonderfully lively, compassionate and wise people.

I'll say it again, because I am personally very pleased that here today we have been able to bring together all the presidents from 1977 to 1996.

I regret that my predecessor Romedi Arquint could not also be here in Brussels. In his speeches he always placed FUEN in a great philosophical and progressive European context, and thus rendered the idea of minorities a great service.

But there cannot be joy without sadness. There have also been several deaths over the last year, and I would therefore ask you to stand up and join me in remembering those who have passed away.

Of those no longer with us I would like to mention two well-known personalities by name. Joseph Martray died in June at the age of 95. He was the first secretary-general of FUEN, from 1949 to 1952, and he was the founding father of our organisation.

Armin Nickelsen passed away in June 2006 at the age of 74. He was the first full-time secretary-general of FUEN, from 1987 to 1999. Armin's great ability to communicate and smooth things out made it possible to release a lot of tension in FUEN and establish a lot of internal relationships.

We will remember the deceased with honour.

Address

The amended Slovakian Language Law has created quite a stir in recent weeks – also throughout Europe. The intention of this law is, in my opinion, a blatant example of backing away from standards that have been achieved.

FUEN has quite clearly stated its position on this.

A minority language must be protected and nurtured. To restrict its use, or even make it a punishable offence, as is the case here, is a violation of everything FUEN stands for, and should also be a violation of the fundamental principles of the EU.

It is also conspicuous that the EU is not getting involved here, and not clearly coming out on the side of the Hungarian minority.

When countries do not come out on the side of minority protection and back-pedal on standards it is a European problem.

When it comes to the protection of minorities, the EU has to lead the way – but it must also practise what it preaches.

FUEN is an organisation that goes beyond the EU. It is an NGO, which means we do not have to be as diplomatic as the EU, which means that FUEN can speak out louder and clearer than the EU

We propose that we should send all the European heads of government a letter asking them to advocate sustainable protection of minorities.

The credo should be “Don’t make the mistake of avoiding the issue of the autochthonous minorities or ignoring it as something unimportant. History has shown that if you do, it will seriously boomerang on you.

The European minorities are an expression of the much-quoted diversity in Europe. We are the salt in the soup.

With our cultural and linguistic diversity we shape the continent – a continent that will and must not be a united Europe in the sense of the United States of America. The Europe, I want to see is a Europe of many cultures and languages – but not a Europe that is just a collection of nation states. Europe is much more, and here in front of this gathering of delegates I will repeat our offer to the institutions of the EU that we, in the dialogue forum, and also in other contexts – such as fact finding missions, and our idea of working to secure peace by promoting dialogue between the democracies. FUEN and the EU can work together in all these areas, and in many more areas!

Yesterday clearly showed that our strategy of getting our teeth stuck in as lobbyists at European level is working. We were able to organise a meeting of the European Dialog Forum in the European Parliament with several MEP’s, and in the presence of 150 of our congress guests. With this we are showing that we must be taken seriously in European politics. We want to work together and we want to help shape things.

Our co-operation in the EU, OSCE, the Council of Europe, in all the relevant monitoring processes – PR work, involvement in European discourse, drawing up recommendations etc. are tasks where we can do our bit and in which we would like to be much more intensively involved.

There is no need to be afraid of us - the autochthonous minorities in Europe, We do not make any territorial claims nor wish to destabilise the states we live in. We live in European regions, and we want these regions to flourish.

Officials should not see us as a threat, but as potential for the development of these regions.

In some regions in Europe this potential offered by the minorities has been recognised, and the minorities are accepted as teammates in the development of the region.

This is where we come in, because we have a lot to contribute when it comes to the development of Europe.

Surveys and analyses of the election results for the EU parliament have shown that the number of pro-Europeans is greater in minority regions as the national average. This should give those in power something to think about, those who always dream of a European public and a European civil society – the European minorities would make a stable building block in such a pan-European foundation.

Let me give you another specific example of our European dimension, our language project. In the area of natural bilingualism and multilingualism the minorities in Europe represent an enormous reservoir. Minorities know all about living in several cultures, they are, if you like, the prototypes of the modern European. They have a close-knit relationship with Europe and their regions.

They start out in life speaking more than one language, they use the languages of the neighbouring regions, and they learn more languages and acquire expertise, which is prerequisite for living together in a multicultural society.

In the future, people will accomplish a great deal of things in life using several languages – everyday life as well as in career or education.

Language is as emotional as it is functional.

Language is native country and the big, wide world.

Address

In finishing off let me come back to us, to FUEN, to our general secretariat and our working conditions.

Over the last couple of years we've made a great leap forward, we are sought-after dialogue partners and we are consulted by many political organisations. Our experience is in demand when it comes to the groundwork for political decisions.

This is because we have become more professional. We have appointed two new members of staff, Jan Diedrichsen and Susann Schenk, a German North Schleswiger and a Sorb. Together with Frank Nickelsen they make up the General Secretariat of FUEN. I hear from many sides that that there now blows a different, newer, more powerful wind, that the foundations on which FUEN stands have become much broader, because it is more professional.

This does us good, and it does the General Secretariat community good.

This professionalism and this new drive are important if we want to continue positioning ourselves as the European representatives of the autochthonous minorities.

We want to be the ombudsman, the civil society representative of the minorities

We want to be the co-operation partner for the European decision-makers; we are after all the biggest umbrella organisation for the European minorities.

But this all requires sufficient resources.

At the moment we are hearing a lot of nice words from all sides, they would fill volumes – but unfortunately funding is short supply. The development of FUEN is in danger of stalling because we are lacking money and 80 % of the work we do is looking for the funds we lack.

If we want to continue this road to success we need to be able to plan reliably.

This year we have used up far too much energy in generating money, and I can tell you that the money is not flowing as richly in public budgets, in many funds and foundations as the officials like to imagine.

We often felt like we were in a shunting yard. Often we hear - No, sorry, we can't help, but you can go there and there, – too often.

These are well-meant pieces of advice, but you yourselves know what it feels like. It is not about not needing time for finance acquisition, but everything should be in reasonable proportion. The way it has been this year, the real work is suffering, and that cannot be allowed.

I ask you all to do your bit in helping to consolidate FUEN's finances. I know it is harder for some than for others, but nothing is impossible. It is simply not right that the General Secretariat always has to spend so much time reminding people that they have not paid their membership fees. We have always been very generous about this because we understand your situation, but it has to stop sometime, because we are at the end of our tether.

So, that is my position, and that's enough of that. But there is one other thing that is very important: I ask you all to go to your respective governments or organisations that are well disposed towards you and canvass for the FUEN cause – not just for pleasant words, but for money as well.

Next year, even without the rear cover of the forthcoming elections in Germany, and without the 60th anniversary in the background, to go through the same hassle to get the money all over again is more than we can take, and it puts our staff in a position where they are uncertain about their future, and this is unacceptable.

But I don't want to finish off on such a negative note, because we have too many reasons to rejoice – especially the fact that with our combined energy we have been able to celebrate such a wonderful anniversary in such a generous setting.

But now it's time to get back to work – and this afternoon a bit more party when we drive to Eupen at the invitation of the Germans in Belgium.

We're looking forward to that very much, and here and now I would like to say a big thank you to the German-speaking community in Belgium.

Thank you!