

High-level event of the UN General Assembly for the closing of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages

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Terveh teilä, hyvät rahvas!

Mr. President,

Distinguished representatives of Member-States and indigenous peoples,

It is a great honour for me to speak here on behalf of the indigenous people of Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, a socio-cultural region with high linguistic and cultural diversity of indigenous people. This region is represented by indigenous peoples varying in numbers from several hundreds to several dozens. Preservation of the indigenous languages for most of these peoples is vital and relates to traditional land use, protection of their identity and their development as separate nations. The problems of language preservation are closely connected with major historical events, intergenerational traumas and controversial policies, which lead to the problem of “a lost generation”, when language was no longer passed between parents and children naturally. That is why the indigenous people of our region had high hopes for the International Year of Indigenous Languages expecting that it would help give back hope to the language communities, draw attention of politicians and authorities to the need for urgent actions on revival and support of language diversity.

The education system remains our main priority. At the same time indigenous peoples see it somewhat more broadly and flexibly than governments. The educational standards, highly bureaucratized mechanisms of approval for publication of native languages textbooks and tendencies to develop complicated policy documents in the national language waste precious time, human and intellectual resources and often do not reflect cultural contexts and understanding of the educational process by indigenous people. Integration of the indigenous languages in the state education systems does not always welcome the input from the indigenous people themselves, their free, prior and informed consent. And most importantly, these efforts take too much time and not necessarily bring the required results.

At the same time, we are happy to note that states, also thanks to the International Year of Indigenous Languages, started changing their policies and paying more attention to the issue of indigenous languages. Major projects are implemented, and the infrastructure is developed. In the Republic of Karelia, for example, following the initiative of the Congress of Karelians, a Language and Media Resource Center for Karelians, Vepsians and Finns was established. The attitude of authorities to such successful practices as language nests is changing and they are ready to implement them. There are notable projects aimed at expanding of the use of indigenous languages online and in technology. Conferences for young people are held. The Centre for Innovative Language Technologies is successfully operating in the Republic of Komi. The IT-camp project is implemented in the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Area - Yugra in the places of traditional residence of the Khanty and Mansi peoples.

But there is still no broad agreement on the major question. Are the states ready to admit to their mistakes of the past and invest adequate resources in their correction? Indigenous languages should not be on the outskirts of the national politics and should not be the last to receive funding. Significant investments and political will are needed for major changes. Moreover in the rhetoric and in practice it is necessary to stop referring to the economic factor as the main driver: we should not expect quick economic dividends from indigenous languages, but in the long run their support and thriving will have a positive effect for a lot of aspects of the society life, including health, peace and security, quality education and jobs for all.

There is an understanding in the region that such radical changes can only be achieved by combined efforts and mutual respect of states and indigenous peoples, their organizations and language activists. We support the message of the Strategic Outcome Document of the International Year recently approved by UNESCO's General Conference that the strengthening of civil society institutions and indigenous organizations is a contribution to the preservation and sustainable development of their languages.

We welcome the establishment and support of the Association of Native Language Teachers and its part in increasing the role of indigenous languages in the education system. Participants of the first forum of language activism in the Republic of Karelia agreed that only by combining formal education system and informal projects supported by the linguistic communities by actively involving language experts – musicians, writers, elders – in the educational process it will be possible to preserve the languages.

A major task for the future is creation of an environment for functioning of languages in the natural setting of traditional arts and crafts of indigenous peoples. Elena Lomonosova, representative of the Evenks people, says that without language there will be no reindeer, there will be no life for the indigenous people. Representatives of the Nenets people, another indigenous nation, say that children raised in the family on a camp, in a language environment, acquiring the necessary vocabulary related to reindeer husbandry, can attend to reindeer at the age of 12, while children who are educated at boarding schools will not be able to do it even it at the age of 16. That is why it is necessary to continue such valuable initiatives as nomadic schools.

Mr. President,

I would like to offer a number of ideas that could help, in our opinion, to complete what was not completed due to lack of time in 2019, within the framework of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

First, continuous monitoring of the situation with indigenous languages is necessary, either used or not in the education system. It is necessary to determine the criteria of survivability of languages in such spheres as education, culture, science, media and Internet.

Secondly, a lot of languages do not have writing systems and therefore are excluded from the education system and other public spheres. Efforts are needed to ensure indigenous people's rights to create, maintain and use writing systems of their language created on the graphic base that corresponds to linguistic, historical and cultural characteristics.

Thirdly, it is necessary to accelerate the publication and expertise procedures of the native language textbooks for indigenous peoples. We are also sure that bilingualism in education is vital for preserving the indigenous languages of the region.

Fourthly, the indigenous peoples of the region are looking forward to the population census 2020. Unfortunately, it can demonstrate worrying results of declining numbers of indigenous peoples and native speakers of their languages.

Finally, a lot needs to be done to return the names of toponyms to the indigenous peoples, beautiful names of rivers, lakes, villages in their native languages, for example: Kuujärvi – Moon lake instead of Mikhailovskoye, Venehjärvi instead of Sudnozero, Tunguo instead of Tunguda.

Mr. President,

To conclude I would like to draw your attention to the issue of relationship between vulnerable indigenous languages and more numerous, dominant languages. A unique example is the largest region of Russia, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), where in addition to the two official languages – Russian and Sakha – five indigenous languages have an official status. One of them is the language of the Yukagirs, indigenous people with current number of 1596. Addressing the Sakha people and the Russian people one of the Yukagir elders said, “Remember that the indigenous peoples of the North are at the forefront of the struggle to protect you as a nation. As long as we are there, do not worry, you can even experiment with various programmes to preserve our native language and culture, work with our young people. If we are not here, you are next, and after you the turn of the Russian people will come.”

Deputy head of the Yukagir Association, Vyacheslav Shadrin, notes that the struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples, including their language rights, is the struggle for the interests of all peoples. This is why the issue of language preservation is a constant priority for the indigenous peoples’ organizations. For this reason, the motto of the VIII World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples to be held in summer 2020 is ‘Culture Environment – Identity and Language’.

Until now, the voices of those who say that indigenous languages are underdeveloped, lack prospects and are not the languages of the classic world literature have been louder than the voices of those who believe in the need to preserve linguistic diversity as a valuable part of the global cultural heritage.

Oma kieli oma mieli. ‘My language – my world’, the Karelian proverb about native language says, meaning that without a language there is no identity, no traditional knowledge of the people. We welcome the decision to proclaim the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Every effort should be made to preserve our peoples and their heritage. Thanks to the Year of Languages everybody learned about the problems of languages; and the Decade of Indigenous Languages will make it impossible to ignore them. At the launch of the Year of Indigenous Languages we talked about the fact that we can overcome the pessimism about the future of languages at the global level with the help of the optimism at the level of indigenous communities and the optimism of language activists who are doing their best to ensure that language inequality remains in the past. Preservation of indigenous languages requires a clear and structured language policy developed with extensive participation of indigenous peoples and with their approval.

Thank you!