

Speech from the APFF at the UN Human Rights Council Forum on Minority
Issues.

Geneva, 28th November 2012

Madame Chairman,

let us start by saying how delighted we are to be able to participate in this 5th Forum. It is practically the only opportunity for the some 300,000 French speakers who live in Flanders to have their voices heard, meet with UN high officials concerned with their issues, and establish contact with other minorities.

To put our speech into context, our Association for the Promotion of French Culture in Flanders has filed a complaint for the non-respect of cultural rights and minority status for French speakers in Flanders, pursuant to Human Rights Council procedure 1503.

Our complaint refers to the Nabholz Report and Resolution 1301 by the Council of Europe, which already back in 2002 recognised the existence of a French-speaking minority in Flanders, and recommended that Belgium ratify the Framework Agreement on the protection of national minorities without further ado.

According to Madame Nabholz, the cultural problems for French speakers in Flanders stem above all from the lack of a cultural agreement between the French and Dutch speaking communities. It is for this reason that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also recommended that such an agreement be reached urgently.

Where are we ten years later? Nowhere! The situation is totally stationary. Flanders refuses to acknowledge a French-speaking minority within its territory. The fact that Flanders would refuse to ratify the convention on minorities was even written black on white in the government agreement. And as if that wasn't enough, the Minister for Culture for the Wallonia-Brussels Federation announced an impending cultural agreement with Flanders, yet failed to address the issue of a French speaking minority in Flanders.

Our complaint is currently under UN review. According to the procedure detailed in resolution 5/1 of the Human Rights Council, complaints which have not been rejected are transferred to the States concerned, so as to obtain the views of the latter concerning the alleged violations. We are kept informed at every key stage of the procedure as to whether the procedure will be pursued. However, this is all we know.

To date, we have no idea of the arguments put forward by Belgium. We are therefore not in a position to respond. Add to this our lack of legal expertise. This is a major weakness, even if the UN services have always

done their best to respond to our questions. Let us not forget that we are up against a country with its own experts and representatives within the UN and funding at its disposal. We are fighting an uneven battle, it is the clay pot against the iron pot. And on top of all this, we are required to respect the confidentiality of the procedure.

We perfectly understand the need for confidentiality when the complainant's safety is threatened. In our case however, this kind of confidentiality is counter-productive. Only when international public opinion points the finger at Flanders will they react.

If not, we could find ourselves in the same situation that arose during our country's Universal Periodic Review. In its report, Belgium did not include the non-ratification of the Framework Agreement on the protection of national minorities. There is considerable risk that the same might happen during the mid-term review that our country is committed to presenting in 2013.

We thank you for your attention.

For more information

We direct you to our website (<http://www.francophonie.be/ndf>).

About the APFF

The Association for the Promotion of French Culture in Flanders does not pursue any political goal and does not intend to question the linguistic status of Flanders. The association only wishes that French, one of Belgium's official languages, have the same right in Flanders as any other language.

For the APFF, the promotion of French culture is achieved through the publication of its magazine *Flanders News* on its website (<http://www.francophonie.be/ndf>). The events calendar, address book and resources of French culture in Flanders, articles and general information on French language and culture can also be found here. A newsletter, the paper version of the magazine, is also published every three months.

Anyone interested in the APFF can become a member. The yearly subscription is 15 EUR for Belgium and 30 EUR for outside Belgium, to be transferred to the APFF's account 210-0433429-85 (IBAN: BE89 2100 4334 2985 BIC : GEABEBB) Members and donors receive the *Flanders News* magazine every three months.

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