

Intervention of the APFF at the Forum on Minority Issues of the UN Human Rights Council

Geneva, 25-26 November 2014

Madam President,

The Association for the Promotion of French Culture in Flanders (APFF) would like to underline the fact that the only goals of its intervention are the respect of cultural rights and the minority status for the French-speaking minority in Flanders and that it has no political agenda.

In the nineties, violent demonstrations took place in Flanders, in Ghent specifically, at conferences of *Exploration du Monde* which were organised in French. The purpose of the flamingant extremists of the TAK (Taal Aktie Komitee) and the VVB (Vlaamse Volksbeweging) was, as they wrote, to « *put a knife to the throat of Exploration du Monde and to demand its withdrawal from Flanders* ».

During the demonstrations, resounding to the chants of « *Franse ratten, rol uw matten!* » (French-speaking rats, get out!), several people were thrown to the ground and suffered injuries from glass shards. The date that will remain in everyone's mind is that of the 18 of October 1994. Over 250 extremists came with four ambulances and swore that they would not leave until they were full of victims. As *Exploration du Monde* was no longer able to ensure the safety of its staff and spectators, it had no option but to withdraw from Flanders.

These events seriously upset the 310,000 francophones living in Flanders and, as a result, the number of cultural activities organised in French was significantly reduced, all the more so as the Flemish authorities seized the Arbitration Court to prohibit the French-speaking Community of Belgium from continuing to subsidise activities organised in French on Flemish soil. At the same time, Flanders announced that it would not financially support francophone associations.

What is the situation twenty years on, as :

- 1) The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in Recommendation 1492 (2001) listed Belgium among the countries that « *have significant minorities which must be protected, and whose rights are not officially recognised* » ;
- 2) In Resolution 1301 (2002), following the Nabholz report, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised the existence of a French-speaking minority in Flanders and recommended that Belgium ratify « *without further delay* » the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities ;
- 3) During its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of 2011, the United Nations recommended that Belgium ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and sign the Charter on Regional or Minority Languages.

It must be noted that nothing has changed. Belgium has still not ratified the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe for the Protection of National Minorities. This is all the more disturbing, if not unacceptable, that Belgium is chairing the Council of Europe for six months and claims to have placed human rights at the heart of its action. It is also worth noting that Belgium's position in relation to the UN recommendations on minorities is not clear.

The truth is that Flanders will not acknowledge the French-speaking minority on its territory. It also stated once again in black and white, in its latest government agreement, that it will not ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

In these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that flamingant extremists continue to harass the francophones in Flanders as soon as they make a move, whether it be in the Flemish periphery of Brussels, in Renais/Ronse or in the Fourons/Voeren. This could one day lead to a tragedy. José Happart, a former unappointed¹ bourgmestre, recently told the press : « *I sometimes think, looking back at the pictures, that we were lucky that there were no casualties in the Fourons/Voeren* ».

(continued overleaf)The leader of the Flemish nationalists, Bart De Wever – winner of the last elections with 31.88 % of the votes – will not diffuse the situation. Already in 2008, he declared : « *There is not French-speaking minority in Flanders, only immigrants who have to adapt* ». His separatist party, the N-VA, is currently in the majority in the Federal Government and has never made any secret of its total opposition to any positive step towards the protection of national minorities in Belgium.

To end the process of forced assimilation of the French-speaking minority in Flanders and prevent any risk of violence, the APFF calls on Belgium to open a wide debate on minority issues within the framework of the national report to be submitted to the United Nations, as part of its next Universal Periodic Review (UPR) early in 2016. The APFF also requests that the civil society be involved. Indeed, Belgium pledged to work in close collaboration with civil society to prepare its report.

To date, the APFF has not been invited to participate in any consultation whatsoever and Belgium must submit its report within one year! It should also be noted that Belgium has still not established a National Institute of Human Rights (NHRI). We risk ending up in the same situation as in the 2011 UPR when Belgium had simply dismissed the question of minorities by not addressing it in the document it presented to the UN.

Finally, The APFF requests that Belgium restore the language census of the population based on scientific criteria, in order to have precise information regarding the use of languages and the evolution of minorities in different regions of the country. How many French-speaking people currently live in Flanders ? The *Dedicated Research* survey of 2009 states the number of 310,000 as it is limited to people whose mother tongue is French ? 367,000 taking into account people who speak French perfectly and who have one French-speaking parent ? It is worth investigating this question further, if only for the fair distribution of grants to associations, as well as access to cultural centres, i.e. without discriminating against the francophone minority in Flanders.

We thank you for your attention,

For more information

Please visit our site (<http://www.francophonie.be/ndf>).

About the APFF

The Association for the Promotion of French Culture in Flanders (APFF) has no political objective and has absolutely no intention of questioning the linguistic status of Flanders. It simply wants French, one of Belgium's official languages, to have the right to be used in Flanders in the same way as any other language.

The APFF promotes French culture in particular by publishing the magazine « *Nouvelles de Flandre* » on its website (<http://www.francophonie.be/ndf>). Here you can also find a calendar of activities in French and the addresses of French-speaking resources in Flanders, as well as articles and information on French culture in general. A newsletter, a paper version of the magazine, is also published every three months.

Anyone who is interested in the APFF can become a member. The annual membership fee is 15 EUR for Belgium and 30 EUR for abroad, payment to be sent to the APFF's account number 210-0433429-85 (IBAN : BE89 2100 4334 2985 – BIC : GEBABEBB). Members and donors receive the « *Nouvelles de Flandre* » magazine every three months.

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