



“Hki Fi Sanna”

Non Governmental Organisation

for the revitalization of Cypriot Maronite Arabic- An endangered language

&

“Kermia Ztite”

Cultural Society of Cypriot Maronites

Monitoring the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by Cyprus

2nd cycle of the monitoring mechanism

**Meeting with the delegation of the Committee of Experts of the Council of Europe
for the preparation of the evaluation report on the measures taken
by Cyprus to meet obligations under the Charter**

***[Comments in accordance with Article 16.2 of the
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages]***

***The current stage at which the implementation of the European Charter for
Regional and Minority languages finds itself, with respect to
Cypriot Maronite Arabic (henceforth CMA).***

1. The Maronite community is deeply disappointed by the fact that the Cyprus Government has not so far declared its undertaking to apply part II of the Charter to its language, despite doing so with respect to the Armenian language, a situation which has led to feelings of unfairness.
2. We would like to express our continued concern regarding the immediate risk of the extinction of CMA and ***our deep disappointment with respect to the content of the Second Periodical Report of the Republic of Cyprus*** (submitted in January 2008). Unfortunately, despite the Recommendation of the Council of Europe and the report of the Committee of Experts, the Cypriot government takes a lukewarm and indeterminable approach to the status of CMA.
3. ***The Republic still has to answer such basic questions as:***
 - i. Does the Republic agree with the Recommendation of the Council of Europe?
 - ii. If yes, why does it not say so explicitly and officially?
 - iii. If it does not agree, why not?
 - iv. Why is this done with one language - Armenian - and not with CMA?
4. The Cyprus' Second Periodical Report was supposed to give details of the effective measures and decisions taken to implement the recommendations of the Council of Europe (Recommendation RecChL(2006)3 , adopted on 27 September 2006 at the 974th Meeting of the Ministers' Deputies) and the observations of the Committee of Experts (as outlined in their Report ECRML 2006(3)).

Disappointed
with the
content of the
2nd report of
Cyprus

What was
expected
from the
Government

5. Specifically, the Government *was expected to declare explicitly and unequivocally in its Second Periodical Report* that:
- I. it specifies Cypriot Maronite Arabic (CMA) as **a minority language and as an expression of cultural wealth**,
 - II. it undertakes **to apply part II of the Charter to the CMA language**,
 - III. it will implement specific measures aiming to **strengthen the teaching of CMA at primary school level**,
 - IV. it will:
 - i. adopt a structured policy for the protection, promotion and revitalization of the CMA language, and
 - ii. provide a decisive role to the community in the implementation and drafting of this policy.
6. We submit, and it is apparent from that Report, that effective measures have *not* been put in place and indeed that the aforementioned recommendations have been largely ignored. There have been vague oral promises that CMA will be recognized and that the Maronite community should be patient because of the ‘political sensitivities’ (we are not clear what these are and no official cares to elaborate).
7. The Maronite community has been patient. But frankly it is demoralizing for the community and especially for the non-governmental organizations and activists struggling to revitalize the language. This lack of official recognition essentially undermines our efforts (and indeed our responsibilities!) to promote the language and ensure its non-extinction. Is this what the Cyprus government wants? We ask for the Council of Europe’s help to pressure the Cyprus government to undertake its responsibilities.
8. We note that the Report prepared by the Law Commissioner makes various unfortunate claims based on incorrect information. It should have been clear to anyone acting in good faith that such claims are not valid. For example, the claim in section 3.4 of the Report that ‘Cypriot Maronite Arabic is only spoken by elderly Maronites, who live in the village of Kormakitis’ and that there is ‘very limited’ interest for CMA classes among students at primary school level. Such claims are based on incorrect information, without looking at the facts on the ground and without taking into consideration the reports submitted (by the NGO “Hki Fi Sanna” and the Representative of Maronite community in the Cyprus Parliament) to the Office of the Law Commissioner and the Ministry of Interior. This construction of ‘facts’ upon which a policy of inaction is legitimated is not a new tactic but sadly a recurring one; note that the first Cyprus State Report described CMA as only a “dialect spoken by few people” and thus expendable.
9. Additionally, the Report contains various statements of doubtful relevance to the issue of endangered language protection. For example, the principles on which the Cypriot education system is based and the general support to the Maronite community, financial or otherwise, which as specified by the Council of Europe Committee of Experts in its findings ‘is not specifically targeted towards’ the CMA and cannot therefore be considered a substitute for the very specific issue of endangered language promotion and protection.

Claims based
on incorrect
information

Other general
support cannot
be considered
a substitute

Actions of the community to revitalise it's language

10. The NGO 'Hki fi Sanna' ('Speak Our Language') has already submitted a specific action plan to the Ministry of Interior as invited to do so last November, and copied in the Law Commissioner. However, neither this action plan nor any of our proposals have been taken up by the government or at least mentioned in the Report. Furthermore, the Report does not mention that last December in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Education, the CMA alphabet (devised by linguist Professor Alexander Borg—a product of his long research in CMA) was presented to the public during a festive event and that translation of small texts began nor does it mention the various actions of the native speakers, indicative of their willingness and commitment to revitalize their language such as the creation of the platform "Sanna" (our language) whose specific objective is the protection and revitalization of CMA.
11. The community has been very active and has so far achieved a great deal given the limited financial resources and assistance available to it. Furthermore, it has submitted comprehensive and realistic recommendations to the relevant departments of the Government. We are perplexed at what more is required from us.
12. For the record, the actions of the community so far have been the following. It has:
 - a. submitted to the relevant departments of the Government an Action Plan for the revitalization and protection of CMA (July 2007)
 - b. organized with success CMA learning courses for adults. (September 2007)
 - c. organized a high impact and in fact quite emotional event introducing an alphabet for CMA, which it commissioned itself from Alexander Borg. (December 2007)
 - d. created the NGO «Xki Fi Sanna» with over 300 members, aiming in taking joint action with the Government of Cyprus to protect and revitalize CMA. (June 2007)
 - e. created the platform «Sanna» (Our Language) in which almost all the NGOs of the Maronite community participate. (November 2007)
 - f. organized a CMA language summer immersion camp in Kormakitis for children aged 7-16 , attended by 90 children and 10 volunteers (teachers and assistants). (August 2008)
 - g. for the last two years is in close cooperation with two linguists, Professor Alexander Borg (CMA researcher and author of two books and several articles on CMA) and Professor Brian Todd Bielenberg, experienced in practical programmes of revitalizing endangered languages in America.

Measured taken by the Government for the revitalisation of CMA are insufficient

13. Although one current initiative of the NGO "Hki Fi Sanna" (Let's speak our language) for a CMA language summer immersion camp for children in the village of Kormakitis has received partial government financing (5.000 euro , total budget 8.449) , events and other actions organized in the past such as the CMA lessons for adults found no financial support whatsoever or just promises.
14. Despite the Ministry of Education and Culture setting up a committee of experts in which cultural society "Kermia Ztite", NGO "Hki Fi Sanna" and the Representative of Maronites in the parliament are represented, this committee has to date proved unable

to facilitate any projects, mainly due to the lack of legal obligation which is exactly what is required at this stage in order to overcome the various bureaucratic obstacles and move on with a sustained effort of protection and revitalisation.

15. Furthermore, despite the genuine interest of the expert members of the committee, concerns have already been expressed that they cannot continue indefinitely on a pro bono basis.
16. The current President of the Republic of Cyprus promised to the Maronite community just before the election that “he is aware that CMA has not been supported through the education system and that this is an easy problem to be solved”. We are still waiting for this ‘easy problem’ to be solved.

Strengthening the teaching of CMA at primary school level and the will of the community to assist.

17. So far no specific measures have been taken aiming to strengthen the teaching of CMA at primary school level. The language of instruction in the St. Maronas primary school is Greek. Classes follow the general curriculum of other Cypriot schools. A voluntary teacher currently offers an optional **extracurricular class** of Cypriot Maronite Arabic once a week in the afternoon, which is attended by 21 pupils.
18. The Parents Association of the Maronite Primary State School has made a request to the Ministry of Education and Culture for the teaching of Cypriot Maronite Arabic to become part of the regular curriculum.
19. There is no teaching in or of Cypriot Maronite Arabic at pre-school or secondary school level, nor in higher education. There are no teaching materials nor possibilities for teacher training either. In fact, immersion techniques can be used more effectively, especially at pre-school level, but are not being used.
20. The community neither has the knowledge nor the expertise and financial resources required for the planning and development of appropriate teaching materials and teaching programmes. The Maronite teachers as well as the NGO “Hki Fi Sanna”, the cultural team “Kermia Ztite” the platform “Sanna” and the office of the Representative of Maronites are determined to work hard towards this aim, in whichever way possible, with the help of experts in endangered language revitalization and teaching of minority language, such as Professor Brian Blienberg)

Delaying approach to the recognition of CMA and adoption of effective measures

21. It is more than clear to the Representative of Maronites in the Cyprus Parliament and all the native CMA speakers that their language, an integral part of their identity and culture, is in urgent and immediate need of protection and for this reason they are determined to revitalize it. CMA is a seriously endangered language and such a bureaucratic and delaying approach to its recognition and adoption of effective measures may prove fatal for its survival and revitalization. (note that the Charter was ratified by Cyprus in 2002, the Second Periodic State Report was submitted in 2008 and the next periodic report will most probably be submitted not earlier than 2011).

Published articles and other material on CMA

22. The above issues have been thoroughly analysed by two independent researchers, in their articles published in Cyprus Mail (daily newspaper) on the 4th February 2008 and “Kinotikos Tipos” on March 2008 respectively. We find these two articles very interesting and persuasive. (“Why does the government refuse to protect Cypriot Maronite Arabic” -Professor Costas M. Constantinou University of Keele- “Cypriot

Maronite Arabic: What future?" by Professor Alexander Borg- Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel) The above articles and other pertinent material can be found on the official website of the NGO "Hki Fi Sanna" (<http://sana.squarespace.com>) and the official website of the Representative of Maronites in Cyprus Parliament <http://www.maronitesofcyprus.com>

Conclusion

23. Unless our endangered language is recognized and supported soon we cannot ensure its non-extinction. We respectfully ask for your help and believe that only an unequivocal statement from the Committee of Experts and the Council of Europe that the Republic of Cyprus is not meeting its Charter obligations with regard to the CMA will bring about the radical change in the official minds and hearts that is urgently required. We are a small community of historically Arabic speakers at the edge Europe. It is most important for a multicultural Europe that aspires to be what it preaches to protect our identity. Our language should not disappear and our community deserves justice.