On 24 February 2015, Csaba Sógor MEP organized a conference entitled “Language, Identity & Power: What Future for Minority Languages in Europe”, with Herbert Dorfmann (EPP) and Jill Evans (EFA/Greens) MEPs, in cooperation with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), the European Free Alliance (EFA) and the Centre Maurits Coppieters (CMC).

The International Mother Tongue Day, observed annually on 21 February, provided a symbolic backdrop for the discussions. With around 60 participants, from various European minority groups, EU institutions, Council of Europe, and human rights NGOs, the conference was a definite success, shining a light on Europe’s unrecognized, unprotected and even endangered languages. The conference was also well-attended by MEPs across different political groups, including Tatjana Ždanoka (EFA/Greens), Mark Demesmaeker (ECR), József Nagy (EPP), Pál Csáky (EPP), Iuliu Winkler (EPP), Josu Juaristi Abaunz (GUE/NGL), Krisztina Morvai (NI), as well as former MEP François Alfonsi.

In their opening remarks, MEPs Csaba Sógor, Herbert Dorfmann and Jill Evans reminded the audience about the significance of multilinguism as an engine for the European Union to engage with its citizens, stressing that linguistic diversity in Europe cannot be underestimated, but should instead remain a question of fundamental rights, equality and democracy. While the importance of linguistic diversity is widely recognized, a lot more needs to be done in order for minority and regional languages to survive and thrive.

“We have seen a shift in recent years, including in my own European political party, the EPP, to increase attention to the issues traditional minorities are facing today. However, national governments are still responsible for the preservation and promotion of minority and regional languages. More can and should be done on a European level to incentivize this” stated Csaba Sógor.

An introductory speech was given by Mr Vicent Climent-Ferrando (NPLD), focusing on the legal landscape for minority language protection in Europe. He demonstrated the vast array of attitudes, approaches and recognitions of languages across Europe. In his speech, he noted that while the European institutions do recognize minority languages, he conceded that many minority and migrant languages are excluded from regional protection mechanisms, such as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.
The conference looked into the use (and misuse) of language as a political tool, both as a cause and a possible solution to intercultural conflicts and tensions. Mr Zoltán Kántor (Research Institute for Hungarian Minorities Abroad) took the floor and questioned, why does protecting mother tongues matter? He explained that States tend to follow a policy of linguistic and cultural homogenization, while minorities tend to resist assimilation. This analysis raised the question, who has the power to decide and implement language policy?

Mr Sebahattin Abdurrahman (Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe) talked about the particular case of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, providing the audience with examples of linguistic discrimination in education, health care, and public spaces. He stressed the importance of dialogue between State actors and minority groups in order to determine the needs and concerns of under-represented and under-recognized communities.

Mr Rudi Janssens (Free University of Brussels - BRIO) provided an account of linguistic protection and promotion in the Belgian context with a particular focus on the bilingual case of Brussels, concluding that multilingualism is cementing Brussels society through the instrumental use of language, and with it, diminishing confrontations between linguistic groups.

Mr Paul Videsott (Free University of Bolzano) opened the second panel by introducing the audience with the case of the Ladin community in South Tyrol - one of Europe’s smallest and most endangered ethnic and linguistic minorities. He discussed how education in Ladin is crucial for the survival of the community, since language is an essential element of cultural identity. He concluded that the protection of linguistic minority rights is a human rights obligation in areas of such as education and social dialogue.

Similarly, Mr Hannes Wilhelm-Kell (Lausatian Alliance) shared his own personal experience of learning Wendish, calling for more State funding and support in education, since school subjects exclude any mention of Wendish history, literature, and art.

The conference came to a close with the speech by Mr Johan Häggman (multilingualism expert), who dissected stipulations of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, noting that its scope is very limited and does not establish any new powers. “Language policy is a competence of Member States and there is no legal basis for a European competence yet”, he said. He also explained that funding tools are very limited, and accessing financial support has become increasingly difficult for language organizations.

The conference explored the different possible arrangements for linguistic minorities in Europe, evaluating how the European Union and the Council of Europe could strengthen minority and regional language protection and promotion within their legal framework. Many speakers agreed that the European Parliament has the right to initiate legislation, but it doesn't use it sufficiently in terms of linguistic minority protection and promotion.

The high turnout to the conference showed the importance of implementing legal frameworks and concrete measures aimed at protecting and promoting regional and minority languages in Europe. Future activities on this topic are planned in order to raise more awareness and develop concrete strategies to reach these goals. Furthermore, the EPP Group is organizing a hearing on national minorities in Europe on the 22nd of April.

A report on the conference, including transcripts of all speeches, will be available soon.