Conclusions

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The biggest problem for minority languages is that they are minority languages. If there are no continuous efforts to protect and promote them, the sheer weight of the majority language and culture will press the minority languages and cultures out of public space and into the far corners of society. Minority languages need their champions, but also acknowledgement from the authorities and the majority population that they are worthy of concern and care.

The countries that signed the Charter considered that the historic minority languages of Europe “contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe’s cultural wealth and traditions”, and that the protection and promotion of these languages “represent an important contribution to the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity within the framework of national sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

Most European countries have adopted language policies. In those countries that are party to the Charter, we see a good correspondence between national policy goals and the obligations they have taken upon themselves under the Charter.

However, there is a need for an outside, independent evaluation on how measures are working, how legislation is implemented, what the concrete situation is in the school, in the courtroom, in the home for the elderly. The evaluation is carried out by the Council of Europe, through the evaluation
reports from the Committee of Experts and the recommendations from the Committee of Ministers.

So far, the Committee of Experts has adopted 85 evaluation reports, hopefully 88 by the end of this week. It has carried out almost 80 on-the-spot visits, where there have been more than 470 meetings with government bodies, around 620 meetings with local and regional authorities, around 850 with language NGOs and around 1.000 with representatives from schools, courts, medical services etc., in addition to independent experts. The Committee of Ministers has forwarded close to 380 recommendations.

If we look more closely at the Committee of Ministers’ recommendation, we notice a slight decrease in numbers. The average number of recommendations for the first round is 5.4 per country, while the average number per country in the third round is 4.8. There is also a development from general to more specific recommendations.

In the evaluation under Part III, the Committee of Experts concludes under each undertaking. Is it fulfilled, not fulfilled or partly fulfilled, or is there insufficient information to conclude? A look at a few countries indicates that the performance of the countries improves throughout the monitoring. I will give some examples from key undertakings in the Charter to illustrate this development: Article 8 on Education and the undertakings under Article 10 dealing with regional and local state and municipal administration.

- Austria chose 14 undertakings for Burgenland Croatian within this part of the Charter. In the first monitoring round 5 undertakings were fulfilled and 4 were not fulfilled. In the third monitoring round the numbers were 7 and 2.
- Croatia chose 17 undertakings for Italian. In the first monitoring round 8 undertakings were fulfilled and 2 undertakings were not fulfilled. The fourth monitoring round showed 13 fulfilment cases and no non-fulfilments.
- Germany chose 14 undertakings for Upper Sorbian. In the first monitoring round five of them were fulfilled and one not fulfilled. In the fifth round 10 were fulfilled and two were not fulfilled.
- The Netherlands chose 18 undertakings for Frisian. In the first monitoring round 10 were fulfilled and 7 were not fulfilled. In the fourth round 11 were fulfilled and 2 were not fulfilled.
• Finally, Slovenia chose 20 undertakings for Italian. In the first round 9 were fulfilled and 3 were not fulfilled. In the fourth round 16 were fulfilled and there were no cases of non-fulfilment.

If we lump these examples together, we see that in the first monitoring round 45% of the obligations were fulfilled and 20% were not fulfilled. Figures from the last monitoring round show that 70% of the obligations were fulfilled and only 6% were not fulfilled.

The tendency is quite clear: There is a substantial increase in the fulfilment cases and a similar, significant reduction in the non-fulfilment cases. We observe that the countries party to the Charter is gradually doing a better job in protecting and promoting their minority languages.

This positive development is of course not created by the Council of Europe alone. The main work is being done within each country, primarily by the authorities and the minority language users. However, I believe that the outside, independent reminders and evaluations done by the Council of Europe plays an important part. The ongoing conversation between the Council of Europe, national authorities and representatives of the speakers is probably the key to the positive development we observe.

When we evaluate the protection and promotion of the regional and minority languages in the countries party to the Charter, we must also take a critical look at the work that we, the Council of Europe, is doing. How can we make our contributions better and more effective? Let me mention some factors that I believe will improve our contributions to the monitoring:

• The Bureau and the committee members must be more involved in the organising and productions of reports, in view of the limited capacity of the secretariat.
• The reports must focus more on best practises and good results, also from other countries.
• The time span between the on-the-spot visits and the publication of the evaluations reports must be shorter. That means for example that the Committee of Ministers should decide that these reports will be made.
• The state reports must be delivered on time. A short time span will keep the momentum of the work, and if we improve our part of the work, it will be easier for the Council of Europe, and for the speakers of the
minority languages, to put pressure on the states to deliver their next report on time.

The protection and promotion of minority languages requires continuous efforts from all parties. The most important work is nevertheless done by the speakers themselves. The languages must be used, in public and private, in order to survive and thrive. When all parties concerned work together, we see that there is a positive development. The Charter is an integral part of this cooperation, and it is our task to ensure that the Charter continues to contribute positively to the protection and promotion of the regional and minority languages in Europe.