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Item 4: Effective practices for education in, and the teaching of, minority languages

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Dear honored participants! Ladies and gentlemen!

I would like to contribute to the success of the Forum as an empirical sociologist. I argue that empirical research should become a major tool in minority rights advocacy.

The Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities has conducted a complex research program on Hungarian language education in Romania. This is an in-depth case study for countries where the internal legislation guarantees the right for native language education and where an extended state financed network of minority schools exist.

In Romania the last Law on Education:

- Recognizes the right of native language education at all levels
- It calls for a rather strong form of minority language education. In Hungarian schools practically all subjects are thought in Hungarian, except the Romanian language and literature.
- The law even encourages the formation of separate minority language schools.
- Moreover, it guarantees some weak forms of minority control over the educational process.

Actually, a state financed system of Hungarian schools exists. The vast majority of Hungarian students learn in Hungarian and they are enrolled in increasing numbers in separate Hungarian language schools.

The question is whether minority rights advocacy has anything to do in this case? The answer is definitely positive. However, a shift is needed from “claiming more rights” to

- the problem of law implementation and
- quality assurance

Problems of law implementation were already stressed by minority rights NGOs. The 4th opinion on Romania of the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities also emphasized shortcomings in law implementation.

However, I would like to focus on quality assurance. My recommendations refer to this issue. The argument is as follows:

One can hardly deduce from international law that states should opt for such strong forms of bilingual education, as Romania did. However, if their internal legislation recognizes the right for native language

education and they establish state financed minority language schools, they should also undertake efforts to provide equal resources and education of equal quality in minority language schools. The opposite leads to the marginalization of the minority group and cannot be regarded otherwise than structural discrimination, even if this is not intended.

Consequently, minority rights advocacy should understand institutional processes and should monitor the quality of education in minority language schools. We focused exactly on this issue. Taking into consideration also the recommendations of the European Regional Forum we defined as structural discrimination the following situations:

- If students learning in minority languages end up with lower quality or fewer textbooks
- If minority-language schools have a lower quality infrastructure
- If in mixed schools minority-language classes are put in lower quality buildings or less equipped classrooms
- If the level of qualification of the teaching personnel is lower in minority language schools
- If minority students systematically achieve lower performances in student assessment programs and, more importantly, in the official processes of examination
- If minority students are not provided with satisfactory opportunities to learn the majority language

We found that several aspects are not problematic, while in other dimensions it would be an exaggeration to interpret the problems as structural discrimination. But now, I would like to focus on three problematic aspects that are crucial:

- First, the qualification of the teaching personnel of the Hungarian and mixed language schools is evidently lower compared to the national average. The difference is more striking in the upper secondary education but in lower secondary and primary education is also present.
- Second, the quality of infrastructure does not differ among Romanian and Hungarian language medium schools significantly. However, there is a significant difference inside the mixed schools with both Hungarian and Romanian language classes. According to our exhaustive survey, classrooms used by Hungarian language classes are less equipped with modern teaching equipment, such as white tables, internet connection, computers, projectors, smart TVs. According to qualitative field visits, Hungarian classes tend to be placed in smaller and more peripheral classrooms. The linguistic landscape is also profoundly asymmetrical. This is why many Hungarian parents prefer to enrol their children in separate Hungarian language schools
- Third, we found a strange contradiction in the school performances of Hungarian speaking students. On the one hand they tend to perform slightly better compared to the national average at international student assessment programs, such as PISA. On the other hand, their performances are dramatically worse at official examinations. Last year the passing rate at baccalaureate exam of the Hungarian students was only 54 (fifty-four) percent compared to the national average of 63 (sixty-three). This exam is needed for tertiary education enrolment, while failing to pass it limits considerably one's labour market prospects. And here we find one of the major factors contributing to the marginalization of the Hungarian community. This is why they are severely underrepresented among university graduates.

These results are connected to Romanian language examination and this leads to my concluding remarks. In Romania educational legislation is quite pluralistic at a first glance. It calls for a strong form of minority language based bilingual education and it actually allowed the formation of a quasi-parallel system of Hungarian language education. However, profound asymmetries were maintained. Hungarian parents are pushed to choose separate Hungarian language schools because of these asymmetries and, consequently, Hungarian pupils are educated in an increasingly “Hungarianizing” institutional environment. However, at the end of the process they are examined through tests elaborated for Romanian monolinguals. This is conducting to a slow social marginalization of the Hungarian community that should be interpreted in the more general framework of the Romanian minority policy regime that might be called unequal accommodation.