

I wish to highlight a major challenge to the continued cultural survival of the North-Frisian minority living in northwestern Germany, namely the lack of digital presence of the language. The Frisians are recognized by Germany as a national minority. German law guarantees support and protection of the Frisian language and culture. It specifically guarantees the possibility to use the Frisian language in contacts with the local- and regional government. North-Frisia [Nord-Friesland] is organized in twelve local governments and one regional government. All these authorities have elaborate websites through which citizens are informed and where they can access government services. However, none of these websites are in Frisian; not the information, nor the services. If you want to interact with the government in Frisian you must go to a physical office. The digital government services that a Frisian speaking citizen has access to are all in German.

The linguistic exclusion also encompasses digital office and productivity tools, which are unavailable in North-Frisian. An example: the Sorbs are also a recognized national minority in Germany. In April 2023, they announced the final incorporation of the Sorbian language into the Microsoft Office digital products. This joyous feat was the result of a community partnership program where Sorbian cultural organizations cooperated with Microsoft engineers in creating a language model for Sorbian. We have also shown interest in this community partnership program and Microsoft gave us an overview of what they need in order to create a language model for North-Frisian. This includes one million parallel translated sentences and a great deal of other resources. The North-Frisian community does not possess or receive those levels of resources, which leaves the rights to use North-Frisian in the digital realm truly virtual.

At the moment, the North-Frisian community is linguistically excluded from the digital public sphere. If this digital gap is not closed, the minority rights of the community will be illusory. We hope that the United Nations can help linguistic minorities with less resources to bridge the gap between physical and digital presence, thereby ensuring continued survival of the language.

Thank you,

Jeroen Zandberg

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