

National Minorities Convention: satisfactory but could do better, says Rainer Hofmann

*Five years after it came into force, there have been no serious violations of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, says the Chair of its Advisory Committee, Rainer Hofmann, but its application is certainly not up to his highest expectations.*

**Question:** *The Convention covers very many fields, such as education and the use of minority languages, relations with various authorities, cultural life or transfrontier contacts: are there fields in which its practical application is easier than others?*

**Rainer Hofmann:** In our view, religious freedom, freedom of association and prevention of any “forced assimilation” are the fields which are best respected, particularly as these aspects are already included in the general principles of human rights guaranteed by all the States. In contrast, educational and media policies and questions connected with representation of minorities at national level are frequently more problematic.

**Question:** *These three areas are in fact on the conference agenda: what tangible proposals for improvement do you intend to put forward?*

**Rainer Hofmann:** Our main task is to evaluate the policies being conducted. The signatory countries have developed differing structures for national minorities. As regards the media, for example, some States impose population “quotas” before minorities are able to express themselves in their own language on radio and television. We think that these quotas are sometimes too strict and that these rules should be relaxed. With regard to education, there are numerous models: some countries give priority to simultaneous or successive education in the minority language, others make it a “first foreign language”, while still others separate the two teaching methods completely. We should like to preserve this variety, while at the same time seeking to achieve a harmonious balance between the national language and the minority language. The same is also true with regard to participation in public life: whatever the approach taken, it is essential that minorities feel that they are listened to and understood by the majority, without the latter suspecting that they are working towards “separatism”.

**Question:** *Are the Convention’s current supervisory and operational mechanisms adequate to ensure that it is implemented as fully as possible?*

**Rainer Hofmann:** We should like the monitoring reports drawn up for each country to be published rapidly in the States concerned, so as to facilitate dialogue and exchange with both the minorities concerned and the central authorities. This would improve the transparency of our work. In addition, we would like firmer support from the Committee of Ministers, especially in confirming our opinions. Finally, our Secretariat needs additional resources to carry out all the tasks assigned to it, especially since many more countries have recently ratified the Convention!