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Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Framework
Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European
Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

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The topic of Media during the Language Charter's and Framework Conventions' Anniversary Discussions

Strasbourg, 18-19 June 2018

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Introduction and reference to the forthcoming Media report of the Committee of Experts

The short presentation below aims to relate the task of monitoring the Language Charter to dramatically changing conditions in the media field and in the social communication between citizens, but also regarding the services offered by public authorities and the commercial market of services and goods in the fields covered by the Language Charter. The presentation is based on a forthcoming report on these aspects, in particular on the media field. The report was initiated by the Committee of Experts in 2016, since it could see the need for reassessment of some of the articles under the Language Charter, most notably in the media field.

The report tries to map and describe the situation, offer an analysis of the monitoring process, and present orientations or recommendations on how to possibly update the monitoring. Even if the media field makes up the core of the report, basically consisting of the challenges for the media article under the Charter (Art. 11), also other articles (Art. 7 in Part II, and Articles 12 and 14 in Part III) are treated. Still, it seems that these articles are not the only ones concerned by the recent processes of digitization. It is rather easy to connect the changes, based on the analysis of two main processes, *digitization* and *marketization*, also to the fields of education, for example to distance education (Art. 8), and administration (Art. 10), both under Part III.

The short presentation during the Anniversary event 18-19 May 2018 concentrated on the description of some main concepts and challenges, which will be given below. These are core concepts in the report and in the understanding of what the ongoing dramatic changes have brought about. The concepts will be accompanied by a framing discussion on their implications and on the monitoring process. First, however, a basic demographic and technology use background is given.

People and new technology¹

In the world there are about 7 Billion people living. 3,640 Billion of these are NOT speakers of English, Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic or Russian. Of the 80 % most popular websites, 55 % are in English, followed by between 4 – 6 % coverage in French, German, Japanese, Russian or Spanish. The corresponding figure for Chinese is slightly less than 3 %. More than 50% of world wide web sites are in English. The most important social networks are based in the USA. A study in 2016 by Instituto Cervantes concluded that about 241 million users speak English on Twitter, but also that 78% of them speak English as their second language.

Some researchers and writers (M. Luepke, H. Monteagudo) think that a solution for minority and endangered languages on Internet is the potential of multilingualism.

¹ Most of the statistics and data on use of technological devices are based on a presentation by Xurxo Salgado, during a minority language conference in Valencia in May 2018, arranged by the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity and the Valencian authorities (see www.npld.eu). The way the data are presented is modified for this presentation. The text also differs somewhat from my oral presentation during the Anniversary days 18-19 June.

There are about 6900 languages in the world.² Half of these are estimated to disappear during this century. Ironically, these lists and atlases over the world's disappearing languages are made possible through the use of new media and the internet. One of the common characteristics of endangered languages is, namely, that they are not visible in their languages in the internet. According to the UN, only 500 languages are used online, among which Google search supports 348, Wikipedia 290, Facebook 80, Twitter 28 and LinkedIn 24 languages. Some experts are of the opinion that in terms of volume of languages on the internet, it is reaching saturation.³ 80 percent of the world's population requires content to be available in only 92 languages; Wikipedia is getting closest to this number, with 52 languages supporting about 100,000 articles. The European context at large offers several scenarios: there are 121 separate languages listed by Wikipedia, including many threatened, minority languages.⁴ This figure is obviously too low, since for example, Sami is classified as only one language, whereas there are, depending on what type of division that is made for Sami, there are nine Sami languages.⁵ Also other languages are not listed, like Meänkieli in Sweden, Livonian in Latvia, Torlakian in Albania (and in some other countries of the Balkans) or Arbanasi in Croatia.⁶ Depending on the definition of Europe in the Wikipedia article (fn. 2), languages in Georgia, for example, are not included, thus Georgian, Bats, Homshetsma, Laz, Mingrelian, Svan, Udi, Urum in Georgia, and so on, are not listed under the languages of Europe. To conclude, without being too specific, the number of languages in Europe, in a wider sense, is presumably clearly higher than 200. The Language Charter deals with about 170 minority language situations, which however implies that in principle the same language may be a recognized minority language in several states, like Croatian, Hungarian, Italian, German, Romani, Ruthenian or Swedish. Varieties of many of the state languages are in fact minority languages in another state. The point here is that some of the aspects dealt with in the media report also apply to such minority language contexts. For example, access to the internet varies widely among the different demographics in the different states. The Charter also covers (2018) 50 languages that are unique cases of minority languages. According to one source,⁷ the average household access to internet in the EU is 87%. The two top countries are Iceland and the Netherlands with 98 % access, and an additional eight countries have from 97 to 93 % (Norway, Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Sweden, Finland, UK, Germany and Switzerland). Six countries have from 75 to 67 % (Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria). There thus exists a sort of digital divide between countries, but the access is further divided within the countries, due to different access among the populations of the individual countries (cf. below for a discussion). The daily internet use among individuals in Europe, in 2016, was 71 %.⁸ This has most certainly increased during the last two years. The use of cell/mobile phones is now dominating the new technology field, and has passed the use of laptops/computers. The use of Smartphones is becoming dominant in the market, in addition. More than half the world now uses a Smartphone; almost two-thirds of the world's population

² UNESCO's list of endangered languages;
<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/FlyerEndangeredLanguages-WebVersion.pdf> See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/apr/15/language-extinct-endangered>. Visited 2018-06-25.

³ See fn. 1.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Europe#List_of_languages. Visited 2018-06-25.

⁵ Lia Markelin (2018), *Some current issues facing the indigenous Sami in the Nordic countries. In: Perspectives on minorities in the Baltic Sea area*, pp. 21-44. Helsinki: Magma.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_endangered_languages_in_Europe. Visited 2018-06-25.

⁷ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/185663/internet-usage-at-home-european-countries/> . Visited 2018-06-25.

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/topics/3853/internet-usage-in-europe/> Visited 2018-06-25.

now has a mobile phone; more than half of the world's web traffic now comes from mobile phones.⁹

The latest data show that about one-third of the world's population - 2.5 billion people - now access social media services via mobile devices each month; this figure grew by 581 million in the past year alone, a major portion of which concerned South East Asia and China.

Presentation of main concepts and reasoning in the forthcoming Media report

Digitization: (web/Internet, cell-phones, other types of social communication via new media and new technologies); functions of e.g. social communication and media move to the Internet, thus creating new types of media and using new technologies.

Marketization: private media and commercials and commercial channels/producers are taking over, public service show a decreasing input.

Web 2.0: the digital revolution round that took place round 2005, and which was not foreseen and realized to take place at that time. This has dramatically changed social communication patterns, modes and content.

Results of the report's discussions

Different **demographics** ("digital natives", vs. "analogue natives") are developing, with a differentiation in access of, knowledge about and use of the new media. In this process, ComEx, State parties and NGOs have all been hesitant to react or to proactively present solutions to the developing inequalities regarding media access. Plainly put, younger vs. older make up the endpoints on a continuum, but it is not that simple, since also states are changing at different pace between themselves and even amongst themselves.¹⁰ One of the effects is a direct impact on the consumption of print media and analogue media – these are losing ground, since younger generations are not socialized to their use, and instead grow up with new technologies. It has been foreseen, for example, that the print media in the Nordic countries will fade away in 5-12 years.

Media convergence: this means that text media use visual and audio aids and support on-line and to an increasing extent, and vice versa, for example public service needs to adapt and use digital print versions and online versions of their products. This reflects an adaptation to the new demands of some target groups and for their more specifically developed products, very much based on market values, in which process the both traditional media and public service media, lag behind, and especially so for regional or minority languages (RMLs).

General consumable media are thus replaced by **niched** and specialized media, which are accessed on demand. This also means that the content is coproduced by the consumers, which calls for a new concept, **prosumers**. This change may concern how for example, that news, sports, children's programs, drama, documentaries become more specified; the niched media are not produced easily for RMLs. **Interactive/participatory social media (prosumers pro consumers and producers)** are furthermore quickly developing – often RML media may become more dependent on these, but the provisions may fail to offer access to the whole spectrum of niches for these.

Concepts like **station, channel and program** are **becoming obsolete**, partly due to media convergence; the separation of one type of media from another, is becoming blurred. This is one of the obvious areas in which the development has direct impact on the Charter and its monitoring.

⁹ See fn. 1.

¹⁰ See fn. 5.

The growing use and habit of **searching media, on demand**, has other consequences. The open debate and public discussions are replaced by in-group views and search for confirmation. The order of this seems to be that this first hits mainstream media, then RML media. This creates more or less **divided public spheres**. This also influences the position of classical **public service journalism**, and the need for training journalists. This still needs a high level of professionalism, but also adaptation to the new employment structures, a result of both digitization and marketization: for RMLs this means that the need for language competent journalists and professional media producers need to take into account the changes mentioned, but also that the future employment will rather be part-time and patchy, based on freelancing conditions, than journalist conditions based on training and employment for full-time and long-term perspectives. The fast developing and increasing use of **social media**, and **cell-phones**, adds to the differentiation of the needs for digital natives and the non-digitals. Computers with internet are now beginning to lag behind cell-phones and Smartphones. Functions available in majority languages may not be so for RMLs. This also may create, which process is only in its initial phases, changes in oral vs. text communication.

In the process, when these changes are implemented, a question arises regarding the type and content of RML media and new media: to what extent is there a need to produce media **on** the RMLs rather than **in** the RML languages? The easiest way out is to produce media **on** the RMLs, whereas the report concludes that the latter option is the only one that follows the intentions of the Charter: media should be produced **in** the RMLs.

How to deal with this in the Charter monitoring?

The main and first principle, also in the new world of digitization and marketization, is that the individual treatment and **ratification** of any language by the States parties **is the starting point**. Following this is the need to take into account the context of each language. In this respect the monitoring has followed the principle, and also taken steps to deal with for example the marketization of traditional media, in the first place. The other and more profound changes caused by digitization have been dealt with as they occur and according to the interpretation of the situation for each language. It would also be slightly anachronistic to say that the monitoring should have taken all this into account, before the effects of the changes could be identified and distinguished.

Another basic feature is that the ratifications and the implications of those, concerning the traditional media and the targets of the earlier monitoring processes, still apply, but also that new ways of understanding the position and support to media should be developed, depending on the new situations based on digitization and marketization that have evolved. The main challenge here is to define the potential supportive position of States parties as promoters and protectors of RMLs in this new situation.

Principles to start out from

Functional equivalence – retain the **functions** of the lost media and analogue communication (for each language) – this is a possible way to deal with the responsibility of States parties, that can also be monitored.

Parity of context – how does the state support the changing media field for mainstream language users? This should also be valid for RMLs, which means that efforts put into the media field in the pre-digital environment should also apply in the digital one. This also means that **regularity of production** of programs, a **spread of content and genres**, and **visibility** of the new media should be prevailed from the context of old or traditional media. Traditional RML media should thus also be retained as long as they are this for mainstream purposes and audiences.

Geo-blocking, the attempt to stop for example broadcasting via analogue or digital media at a national border, is becoming widespread for different reasons, and makes reception even of

digital media more cumbersome. At the same time **transnational contacts** increase for many dispersed RMLs. The geo-blocking problem has some natural reasons, since the protection of copyrights may be a main cause of this, but States parties may find ways to deal with this, in order to make provisions of for example broadcasts or online services available in another state.

Language technologies (for example automatic translations) are becoming more sophisticated, and should be taken into account. For example, if one person of a RML community, but lacking language skills, would like to make use of the RML, this would be possible with the automatic functions. However, if the language in question does not have the translation facilities for the language, a choice faces the user, which may lead to the use e.g. English, or any other majority language, instead. In cases where there is no such choice, the automatic choice is the mainstream languages.

The role of the media for RMLs has not changed, for internal communication, cultural transmission, social coherence of the group, language modifier and preserver etc. Media is still of crucial importance for the use and visibility of the RMLs for their users, but also for the process of making the mainstream speakers acquainted with the RMLs and the cultures they express. Several of these functions are threatened by the new development, even in principle, at least some of the old ways of dealing with for example media, would be less costly and thus more easily accessible for small groups. But as mentioned, the overlapping processes of digitization and marketization do not easily apply measures or choose ways of developing that are beneficial for RMLs. Therefore, there is a constant need for States parties, within the framework of international conventions, to continue shaping solutions that make the protection and promotion of RMLs feasible also in the future, which is already here.

One example or question, finally, of the degree of challenges facing the RMLs, can be found in the realm of automatic on-line systems for digital administration and attempted facilitation of work in many types of professions. Their aim may be to achieve the final improvement and facilitation of working conditions and efficiency, but are instead in constant flux.

Any shop, administration, medical treatment, teacher, politician, pharmacist, car dealer, industrial worker or any authority communication to citizens **use web-based systems** (since they are easy to change and update **centrally**). Obviously the CoE is also concerned by this. For me for example, in my university surrounding, it means that I need to use about 6-7 different systems for reporting, teaching, marking, schedules, holiday applications, travelling and reimbursement, communication, archiving etc. These systems are seldom compatible with each other, and they are either in English or Swedish. They are frequently changed, updated or replaced, without offering the expected optimal solution. This means that the renewal of the systems is perpetual. The admin people at the University need to use about 15-20 systems. Again, these are often separate units. It would be a challenge to have them all, first adapted for example to the five national RMLs of Sweden, and then continuously changed and updated. At least there would be a need to have trained and language competent producers/IT engineers as well as experienced users of the systems in the languages. A follow-up or exchanged system would not be complete, at least not unless the designers of such systems could a) make the systems compatible, and b) replace or change them at longer intervals, also in the RMLs.
