



Report on the Closing Regional Conference

“National Minority Protection in South East Europe - Taking stock of the Project’s results on grassroots level and ways to influence the change on policy level”

16-17 November 2016, Tirana, Albania

The Closing Regional Conference “National Minority Protection in South East Europe - Taking stock of the results at grassroots level and finding ways to influence change at the policy level” was organised two years after the first regional conference that has marked the beginning of the jointly run project by European Union and Council of Europe. The aim, beside the occasion to round up the achievements of the project, was to underline the results and elements of good practice developed in some of the 35 participating municipalities that can serve as role models for others. The conference was also platform that provided guidelines to relevant authorities to prepare and introduce the change at the policy level that is beneficial for whole communities. Expertise and know-how of leading international experts coming from the European Union and the Council of Europe was complemented to national and regional experts and representatives of the participating 35 municipalities.

This was an opportunity to express positive results of the project and solve some of possible dilemmas present among community activists and leaders. It was of huge importance to introduce participants from South East Europe to international instruments and bodies concerned with protection of national minorities. The majority of the selected 35 municipalities are not from the European Union and this was of great significance to provide them with the information of the standards expected in minority protection. It has been stressed that minorities' protection is part of the human rights system that is incorporated in the Copenhagen Criteria that every candidate and potential candidate state for the European Union membership has to fulfil.

Among the instruments for minority protection, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages have been explained in more detail to participants as potential legal framework that could help them achieve their tasks. These two are complementary legal documents; "Framework Convention" providing access to rights while "Languages Charter" protects languages. When implemented in communities they complementary prevent discrimination, achieve equality and enable preservation and development of minority identity. This enables the final outcome where individuals enjoy equality while society is integrated.

The final conference provided forum where results of the small grants scheme have been presented. However it was not only forum for showing off success stories and good results of the project but this was an opportunity to put together minority representatives, local community leaders and case workers, and state agencies officials. It was of particular success session where they sat together around the tables discussing the most important aspects of the project. This exercise and activity put in practice something that is often prevented by huge bureaucratic procedures of governance. They all

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had the opportunity to learn first problems of other institutions and communities involved in the process. They later informed other groups of their particular successes and problems. The result was development of mutual awareness of problems and successful solutions to problems in everyday lives.

Beneficiaries of the implementation and protection of minority rights are certainly minority members but also society in general. Rights are applicable to all and could be seen as minority rights with broader scope and minority rights with narrower scope. It is of utter importance to accept, enable and protect development of multiple identities that should be put in situational context. Thus policies should have dual dimension; individual and societal. The examples are seen in the fields of education where it is implemented as education for minority and education about minority, and the field of media that also has dual dimension as media about minority but also media for the minority. Diversity within minorities should be noted and special care taken to provide protection for diverse sets of needs.

The project has proved and once more underlined the importance of local level in development and protection of minorities. International and national levels have proven their own importance but it is the local level where individual members of numerically inferior minority communities feel and enjoy protection of their rights. The project provided series of examples at local level of not only what can be done but how it has to be done. This came as consequence of trusting individuals and local communities with projects and small grants to implement their projects at local level. This was very positive aspect of the project that reached smaller communities directly from the international level funders because minority rights are not popular and are often underfunded. The project has recognised the importance of baseline funding that provided investment in minority rights, used local knowledge and expertise and was co-operated locally. These elements provided for a success of the project overall.

The aim of the Project to improve everyday lives of everyone in community has successfully been achieved. Exchange of experiences and ideas was of great benefits for communities as all the countries are in the process of developing capacities to join the European Union while municipalities from Croatia are already part of it. Thus one learning process has been helped and lessons learned approach is especially beneficial for the communities outside of the European Union. This particular approach has been proven as positive because it has been acknowledged there is no top down solutions and there is no blueprint but only patterns and mechanisms that have to be adopted to secure benefits for societies as whole and not for minorities only.

Legislation is in place to prevent discrimination of minorities and to achieve equality. When general principles and grassroots initiatives are put together in practice the best results are being achieved. This is what happened with this particular project. The beneficiaries have been minority members and societies as whole. It relied upon and it encouraged local co-operation. The project has showed what can be done and how it can be done.

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It is of great importance that projects are led by municipalities. This will provide for building of capacities at local level which are necessary condition for the success. The fact that the awareness of minority rights is rather low makes the process of capacity building at local level even greater priority. By focussing and working at local level special feeling of ownership of the project has been created which is of great importance. However, working at local level can also create some additional problems. The communities are small and ties between members of communities are stronger. Personal grievances, therefore, are also stronger and can be an obstacle to development of the project. This was exactly the case in one of the 36 selected municipalities for the project and resulted in the success in 35 municipalities and abandonment of the project in one municipality where personal grievances and political rivalry at local level presented themselves as too much of an obstacle even though benefits would be for the whole community.

The Albanian part of the project was implemented in local government units. The municipalities of Dropull, Permet, Fier and Shijak were not met with significant obstacles in achieving their aims. However, on Rrethinat (municipality of Shkoder) activities have been temporary delayed due to technical, organizational reasons. The process of administrative division coming out of the new territorial and administrative reform and the local elections in June 2015 caused delay in terms of use of funds for the activities and propped restructuring in some of the municipal task forces. In Rrethinat (municipality of Shkoder), due to administrative problems with banking and access to funds, activities have been suspended. This resulted in the language course being interrupted during the last quarter.

The implementation of the small grants projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued according to the agreed action plans, with progress being achieved by all the local governments. Some of the local governments faced challenges to complete their respective tendering procedures, which caused certain delays in the project implementation. Regardless, National minority Day has been established annual celebration in Sarajevo, television shows in minority languages have been broadcast in Prijedor, topographic signs in minority languages have been put in Prijedor and Gradiska, capacity building activities have been organised in Jablanica, activities according to action plan have been taking place in Prnjavor while mobile kindergarten has been set in Bosanska Krupa.

The selected local governments from Croatia have successfully implemented small grants projects according to the agreed action plans. Local authorities in Bogdanovci established a new cooperative to manage its minority language Internet radio station. Support to Roma women entrepreneurship has been organised in Cakovec. Local government in Pakrac has organised language courses in minority languages. Free legal aid for minority members in Gracac has been set up while 16 thousand books in minority languages have been identified in Knezevi Vinogradi. Minority language course for local officials Pula has been completed where local authorities have also installed bi-lingual signs and translated selected official documents to Italian language. The unresolved VAT exemption issue have finally been solved after the Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities took action to secure VAT exemption for all local governments in Croatia participating in the small grant programme.

The projects under the small grants scheme in Montenegro were mainly successful. The exception is to be found in Bijelo Polje because of delays and suspension of the project due to local political issues and bankruptcy of local authorities. The project focussed on Roma pupils in Tivat. Official documents have been translated in minority language in Plav. Kotor authorities initiated publishing magazine in

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minority language. Six municipalities participated in small grants scheme in Serbia. Subotica and Petrovac na Mlavi ran successful projects that received media attention. Bujanoviac and Pancevo municipalities implemented their projects according to the agreed action plan. There have been minor delays with projects in Bosilegrad and Novi Pazar due to the technical and organizational reasons.

In the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the project activities generally progressed according to the plan. Municipalities of Saraj Skopje and Tetovo organised meetings and round tables with members of the Commissions for inter-community relations (CICR). Municipalities of Staro Nagoricane and Krushevo focussed on minority culture preservation. Krusevo organised successfully the main event of their programme with the only delay in implementation of the plan has been noted in Tetovo.

The implementation of the small grants scheme is ongoing in all local government units. The Kosovo*¹ communities of Rahovec, Vushtri, and Kamenice organised and implemented their projects according the action plan. There have been some delays in implementation of the project in Leposavic due to issues connected to bank transactions between the municipality of Leposavic and the central government in Pristina.

Participants in the project exchanged experiences and ideas thus drawing set of advices how to succeed with small grants project. Will of participants is necessary for the initiation, establishment and success of the project. Therefore all stakeholders have to be involved. Good communication will ensure awareness of demands. This leads to support at all levels that is needed. Persistence and patience in implementing project should enable job creation as a result. Policy and strategy is not zero sum but is beneficial for all stakeholders. It is of great importance that participants learn proper budgeting and are aware of processes to amend budgets in order to utilise available funds.

There are broader implications of the project that provide no blueprints but patterns, mechanisms that can be adopted and adapted elsewhere. The important elements of the project were efforts to bring communities into decision making processes. Minorities are being made more visible. Projects and developed policies are not only granting rights to minorities but majorities are also benefiting. Services are provided to citizens. The encouragement of entrepreneurial aspects was noticed in the series of local projects that provide for sustainability of the projects. Supporting mechanisms have to secure financial capacity, outreach to and secure majority support and ultimately involve minority. These mechanisms cannot be project based but have to be in place in the community.

In order to achieve aims of their tasks activists in municipalities co-ordinated their work and activities with state agencies. This has brought together minority representatives at local level, local communities' officials and state level employees who together brought about positive results. In Vushtri they have established legal framework which was essential for the development of strategy. Pula project has built up capacity at local level thus enabling them to improve what has already been achieved in the past. The project in Tivat went beyond the framework and has responded to local

¹ "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence."

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needs in minority language education. Subotica offered example of sustainability of the project that is implemented within the existing programme. Thus they improved and provided internet connection and developed know how on e-management. Permat folklore festival has become traditional gathering. The inclusion of minority representatives in decision making process guarantees sustainability of the project. Gradiska set up the example in finding out what are needs of minorities and how small detail might achieve significant positive changes in minority and lives of the whole community. The example of Staro Nagoricane project was followed by other communities in the local region.

Promotion of good practice among peers in the region has been organised in various already described forms. The most notable promotion of the project has been organised through “Open day event” in each of the seven selected municipalities where they offered presentation of the outcomes of their small grant projects to other municipalities on national and regional level.

The findings, good practices and academic analysis of the project have resulted in the publication of "Elements of Good Practice identified during the implementation of the joint project EU/COE: Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection in South East Europe" prepared and produced by The Centre for South East European Studies of the University of Graz. The seven selected examples of good practice have been de-contextualized and analysed. Thus elements and policies that had made them successful have been taken out of local context only and thus provide published advice how to provide benefits for whole communities by the use of minority protection standards based on the local action plans, national legislation and, in particular, the recommendations of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Sustainability is of utter importance but it also presents a problem especially in communities where budgets are small. The solution might be series of cross border projects supported by funds from the European Union. This particular project has presented different picture of the region of South East Europe. By acknowledging the needs of minorities and making them more visible nation-states are becoming richer and local municipalities are becoming more attractive. The project has also helped removing the issue of securitization of minority rights. It shows that minority rights do not have to be a foreign policy tool.

During the two years project some facts and figures could show significant improvement of rights of national minorities in the participating 35 municipalities. More than 50 TV and radio shows on themes related to national minority protection have been produced and broadcast. Over 3000 pages of legal forms and documents have been translated into languages spoken by national minorities in the field. The authorities in the field designed and opened 20 web sites with online access to relevant documents and forms in local minority languages. During this process more than 300 civil servants have been trained in operating the upgraded software. The project provided for the purchase and installation of 40 computers and other office equipment in premises used by national minorities on the grassroots level.

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Some 1000 books in minority languages have been purchased. Local communities have organised 30 exhibitions and promotional events with 50 or so persons attending each event. The scheme has helped purchase of a set of traditional instruments and more than 120 traditional costumes for folk dances were sewed and made by members of national minorities during the implementation of the small grant projects.

Around 1000 leaflets and posters explaining minority rights were distributed in the field. Over 500 children participated in competitions like painting and writing skills on themes linked with national minority protection. More than 70 persons were trained and given pre-qualifications to make them more employable on the labour market.

The project has successfully achieved its overall objective of the Project to improve access to rights for minorities at various levels of government based upon Council of Europe standards in this field and in particular on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). The joint action by the Council of Europe and the European Union has provided for the project to reach to 35 municipalities in developing practical measures to remove barriers to minority rights implementation at the local level. The competitive aspect of the project also proved success because seven municipalities with the most inspirational and replicable elements of good practice during the small grant scheme were awarded additional small grants.

The participants praised policy level support throughout the project that was provided by the secretariat. The authorities were therefore able on beneficiary level to revise and draft new relevant legislation, to build the capacity of the key stakeholders and to prepare relevant documents that outline the issues to be resolved that are of the most importance to the national minorities in the field. The experiences at municipal level have been discussed and exchanged resulting in a set of recommendations to more senior authorities on how to further improve the situation in this field and improve the daily lives of national minorities.

The Project provided support in policy development and implementation. International and national experts provided guidance and support in drafting the Law on Minorities in Albania, Action Plan for Chapter 23 of the EU accession process in Serbia, printing and promotion of the Report on Status and Position of National Minorities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, opinion on the education legislation in Kosovo*² and capacity building of civil servants in charge of national minority protection in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

During the implementation of the project several concluding remarks might have been drawn. Complementary action is needed at all levels for successful protection and development of minority rights. International norms and principles, however good they might be, have to resonate in practice if any progress is to be achieved. Diversity management is important with a view to integrating societies. Investments are condition for success. They all lead to proving minority protection can be achieved and this not only proved it could be done at local level but the project showed how it could

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be done. The main aim of the project is understood to be improving lives of everyone in community which really is the core value of minority rights protection.

The issue that often came up at the final conference in Tirana, 16-17 November 2016, was "how to ensure that results of the project are sustained". Therefore conference provided opportunities for networking and exchange of ideas. What was of great significance was "peer to peer" exchange of ideas and experiences.

The College of Europe, at the request of the Project secretariat, conducted a baseline study that was designed as a regional participatory action research in 35 selected municipalities in the Project's Beneficiaries. This study before the beginning of the operational phase of the project was followed by the research at the end of the project. Thus it is possible to measure the level of awareness and information concerning international obligations (FCNM, ECRML) and national legislation related to the protection of national minorities in the 35 selected municipalities. The areas for improvement have been notified, strategies for intervention through the project have been recommended and the impact of the project has been measured.

The project had three specific objectives that contributed in a complementary manner and have helped achieving the overall objective of the joint European Union / Council of Europe project. These were:

- 1) To support local governments to enhance policies and capacity for implementing recommendations on minority rights in practice in selected local governments in the region;
- 2) To identify and share good practices among the participating local governments and develop adaptable models for use in other local governments in the region;
- 3) Based on evidence from the local level coupled with recommendations from CoE monitoring reports, to provide support on legislative and policy changes at the central government level.

They have all been successfully achieved and therefore it helped success of the overall aim of the project.

The participants appreciation of the role played by Secretariat during the project was noticed as the Secretariat's role and activity was praised during and at the end of the final regional conference. This draws attention to the importance of organisational structure of the project and its execution by the secretariat as all local participants rely heavily on support and advice coming from experienced members of the secretariat. This is most obvious in contacts with less experienced local municipalities and minorities leaders who participated in internationally led projects for the first time.

The concluding elements of the report could be summarised as follows:



- International and national levels have proven their own importance but it is the local level where individual members of numerically inferior minority communities feel and enjoy protection of their rights.
- The project has recognised the importance of baseline funding that provided investment in minority rights, used local knowledge and expertise and was co-operated locally. These elements provided for a success of the project overall.
- The main aim of the project is understood to be improving lives of everyone in community which really is the core value of minority rights protection.
- Will of participants is necessary for the initiation, establishment and success of the project. Therefore all stakeholders have to be involved. Good communication will ensure awareness of demands.
- Issue of great importance is proper budgeting and implementation of small grant project in transparent and agreed timeframe.
- The encouragement of entrepreneurial aspects was noticed in the series of local projects that provide for sustainability of the projects. Supporting mechanisms have to secure financial capacity, outreach to and secure majority support and ultimately involve minority. These mechanisms cannot be project based but have to be in place in the community.
- By focussing and working at local level special feeling of ownership of the project has been created which is of great importance. However, working at local level can also create some additional problems. The communities are small and ties between members of communities are stronger. Personal grievances, therefore, are also stronger and can be an obstacle to development of the project.
- Exchange of experiences and ideas was of great benefits for communities as all the countries are in the process of developing capacities to join the European Union while municipalities from Croatia are already part of it. Thus one learning process has been helped and lessons learned approach is especially beneficial for the communities outside of the European Union.
- Legislation is in place to prevent discrimination of minorities and to achieve equality. When general principles and grassroots initiatives are put together in practice the best results are being achieved.
- Promotion of good practice among peers in the region has been organised in various already described forms. The most notable promotion of the project has been organised through “Open day event” in each of the seven selected municipalities where they offered presentation of the outcomes of their small grant projects to other municipalities on national and regional level.
- The participants praised policy level support throughout the project that was provided by the secretariat. The authorities were therefore able on beneficiary level to revise and draft new relevant legislation, to build the capacity of the key stakeholders and to prepare relevant documents that outline the issues to be resolved that are of the most importance to the national minorities in the field. The experiences at municipal level have been discussed and exchanged resulting in a set of recommendations to more senior authorities on how to further improve the situation in this field and improve the daily lives of national minorities.

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