



Albanian Helsinki Committee

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**Some conclusions on the survey of citizens and the local administration
on the status of minorities in the city of Korça¹**
Preliminary material

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1. Briefly on the Albanian Helsinki Committee

The Albanian Helsinki Committee, the first non-governmental organization for the protection of human rights and freedoms in Albania, was founded as the Forum for the Protection of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, and was registered by means of decision no. 17/1 of the Ministry of Justice, dated 12.01.1991. On March 22, 1992, the organization joined the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and was called the Albanian Helsinki Committee. Upon approval of the law “On non-profit organizations,” AHC was registered with the Tiranë District Court in keeping with the requirements of this law.

The main mission of the AHC is to observe respect for human rights and freedoms, reinstate violated freedoms, sensitize citizens about the protection of their rights and freedoms, and improve the legislation and practice of the law through critiques and recommendations. Part of this mission is also to increase the conscientiousness of the public administration in implementing laws correctly, by enhancing the capacities of this administration.

2. Why the research was undertaken and what it seeks to produce

The ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the Republic of Albania in 2000 expresses not only Albania’s political will to be part of the Europe of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, but also a tangible reality that historically has been characterized by the spirit of coexistence and tolerance.

In the context of its activity in the area of minorities, the AHC took the initiative to implement the project “Monitoring the exercise of minority rights in the Korça municipality,” which was implemented in the Municipality of Korça. The goal of the project is to assess respect for minority rights in this city and highlight opportunities to develop them. The intention is also to increase the participation of citizens in general and of minorities in particular in local decision making, as well as to enhance their relations with the local government.

A survey of citizens in the Korça Municipality and the staff of the Municipality was part of this initiative. The survey sought to: see how citizens assess the work of the Korça Municipality; see how the Korça municipal administration assesses its own work; highlight the level of participation by minority representatives in local decision making; highlight opportunities for improving the work of the municipal administration in promoting and respecting minority rights in the Korça Municipality.

The implementation of the project was part of a regional initiative, which, besides Albania, also includes civil service society organizations in Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

3. Methodology

The basis of the methodology for the research was to prepare two types of questionnaires: one questionnaire for citizens and another one for the staff of the Korça Municipality.

In this context, we realized the survey, which took place at two levels:

First, at the level of citizens. At this level, the research sought to point out the perceptions of city inhabitants on minority issues.

Second, at the level of the local administration. At this level, the research sought to point out the perceptions of the local administration on the issue in question. Considering that this is the first research of this nature, in the sense that it addresses the local level, the research aims at describing in as detailed a fashion as possible minority issues as seen from a horizontal and a vertical perspective, that is, that of the public opinion and the institutional one. Under a phenomenological perspective, the meaning of being goes through an as detailed a meaning of actors who are the target of research as possible. Therefore, the presentation of research results has followed the above logic.

To realize the study, we interviewed citizens of Korça, minority representatives in Korça, representatives from the academia and intellectuals, the civil society in the city, minority associations, etc.

An important part of the survey was the participation of the Korça Municipality administration, without which the study would have been incomplete and deficient.

The survey was carried out in the city of Korça during the period June – August 2006. it included 480 citizens and 35 members of the Municipality administration.

This material presents some of the main conclusions emerging from the processing of surveys with citizens of the Korça Municipality and the municipal administration staff.

4. Acknowledgements

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5.1 Respect for minority rights from the citizens’ perspective

Respect for minority rights at the local level. Asked whether minority rights are respected in the Korça Municipality, 16% of the interviewed citizens responded that they are respected completely, 44% responded that they are respected partially, 36% responded that respect for minority rights depended on the community, and 1.8% said that minority rights are not respected at all. In general, the level of respect for minority rights may be considered satisfactory, but the fact that 36% responded that respect for those rights depends on the community one is part of, makes one think about differentiated and preferential treatment for a minority.

Services offered by the municipality for the protection and promotion of minority rights. With regard to the services offered by the Korça Municipality for the protection and promotion of minority rights in this Municipality, it resulted from the interviews that citizens consider the following as such: the use of minority languages in the schools without charge, financial support, employment, housing, participation in different activities, infrastructure, support for activities, ensuring equal legal rights, etc. Among these, there is a considerable percentage of citizens who did not answer the question.

Opportunities for minorities to use services offered by the Municipality: The processed data indicates that there is a difference between the perception of services and the opportunities for realizing them. In this context, 50% of those polled said they are not aware of services offered by the Municipality and that the services are insufficiently used by minorities. In these circumstances, the issue of the effectiveness of services for minorities arises.

However, citizens responded positively on the change of the situation of respect for minority rights in recent years. 65% of them said the situation of minorities in Korça has changed positively, whereas 25% of them responded that the situation has remained the same in recent years. However, in contravention of the latter, to the question whether there had been cases of violations of minority rights, 40% of citizens responded there had been cases of minority rights violations, whereas 41% of them denied the existence of violations of minority rights.

On the question: what minority-related issues would you seek help for, citizens mentioned employment as a very helpful tool for minorities, then legal assistance, the issuance/obtaining of documentation, access to information, etc. Considering the fact that of 480 citizens polled, 350 mentioned employment and then legal assistance, we draw the conclusion that minorities encounter social problems that characterize the transitional situation in Korça as well as throughout the country. Nevertheless, this situation may be felt more among minorities and it is appropriate that, in the context of social policies to alleviate these effects, special attention be devoted to minorities.

The role of the public administration. With regard to the assessment by citizens of the role of the public administration, the processing of data indicated that a considerable number of them consider it not very helpful (31%), 38% consider it sometimes helpful, 5% do not know, and only 22% of the citizens polled consider the role of the public administration very helpful.

Citizens' recommendations for the Korça Municipality administration: Regarding the question of whether those polled had recommendations for the municipal administration in relation to minority rights, citizens made different suggestions for the Korça municipal administration. Among those stand out the need to take measures on employment, housing, learning minority language, and respect for minority rights, ensuring social and economic support, etc. The fact that 140 interviewees, out of 480, respond that they do not know what to suggest the Municipality, may be has to do with the degree of knowledge about minority rights and how they should protect them.

Citizens and cases of minority rights violations. The majority of citizens responded that in the case of obtaining information that the rights of a person belonging to a minority are being violated, they would turn to the police. The reaction to minority rights violations is an indicator of civic reaction in a democratic system. It is also a positive fact that citizens trust the police. In the list, police is followed by international organizations, local ones, and municipal bodies. Meanwhile, the phenomenon that needs to be tackled, both by local structures and non-governmental organizations, is that of citizens' indifference, considering that a considerable number of those polled responded that they would not do anything in the case of minority rights violations.

With regard to cases of citizens turning to the Korça Municipality bodies for the protection of their rights, in 79% of the cases citizens did not address municipal bodies, in 19% of the cases they did turn to municipal bodies, and 2% do not know.

The reasons why they did not turn to the Municipality were lack of trust (38%), lack of efficiency (35%), lack of competences to act (12%), and absence of a reason to turn to it (15%). In this context, it is necessary that the Municipality find tools and ways to earn the citizens' trust.

Phenomenon of discrimination: Prevention of discrimination is one of the leading directions of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and it should be a priority in the work of local government bodies and other political and civil society actors. With regard to the phenomenon of discrimination and the treatment of minorities by municipal bodies, based on the citizens' perceptions, it results that minorities are treated in a differentiated manner. In this context, those polled said belonging to a given minority is related to discrimination in employment (56%), education (39%), and discrimination by municipal bodies. While 29% of those polled admitted the existence of discrimination in employment toward minorities, 25% admitted it in education, and 19% admitted the existence of discrimination by municipal bodies.

With regard to equal treatment of minority and non-minority citizens, it results that 43% of citizens thought treatment is not equal, 46% of them think treatment is equal, whereas 11% do not know.

Integration of minorities One of the important indicators of the situation of minorities is the degree of their integration into the society. The surveys showed that out of 480

interviewees, over 200 of them responded that measures have been taken to integrate minorities and 60 said no. The fact that about 170 interviewees responded that they do not know, indicates that more public policies need to be implemented.

Media: Media plays a big role in the integration of minorities. Its role in promoting tolerance and cultural pluralism is an important factor for creating a climate of harmony and interethnic tolerance. To the question whether the local media promotes tolerance and cultural pluralism, 55% of those polled responded positively and 23% negatively. Considering that 22% responded that they do not know represents a problem for the local media, which needs to organize better the aspect of its contents.

The level of information from the media on local administration attitudes toward minorities is an important indicator of its impact on promoting values of democracy and, in a narrower context, the treatment of minorities. The majority of those polled responded that the media rarely reported cases of the municipal administration committing actions to support minority rights or to highlight violations of their right. While 24% of them responded that they do not know, 13% of them responded that this happens often, and 10% responded that this never happens.

The problem is disturbing when concerning the way the local media reports the situation of minority rights. About 240 interviewees responded that the media covers in a non-objective way the situation of minority rights, whereas about 130 interviewees said the media gives an objective coverage of the situation of minority rights. On the other hand, in following up, interviewees considered television the most important medium for the protection of minority rights (49%), followed by newspapers, radio, and lastly the internet.

Representation of minorities: Minority rights are closely linked with the level of representation. This conclusion derives also from the analysis of figures emerging from the survey, with 88% thinking that minority rights would be enforced better if the representation of minorities were better.

Some of the recommendations that interviewees have addressed to the Korça Municipality administration are:

- Employment (85)
- Give more schooling opportunities in their language (65)
- Ensure economic, social, and health assistance (50)
- Ensure housing (45)
- Show greater interest toward minorities (39)
- There should be equal implementation of the laws (39)
- There should be no discrimination (20)
- There should be wider representation of minorities in the public administration
- Work better on integration of minorities (18)
- Respect minority rights (18)

- Improve infrastructure (15)
- Increase investments and funds (12)
- Be unbiased (8)
- Do not know (150)

Interviewees assessed that employment, housing, schooling and education in the mother tongue, participation in the administration, would all help improve the human rights situation.

5.2 Perception of the situation of minorities by the Korça Municipality administration

Minorities as a community with special rights: The answer to the question whether minorities should have/need special rights for their protection testifies to an important aspect of the perception of minority rights by the Korça Municipality administration vis-à-vis the majority of the population. In the European concept, minorities, just because they are minorities, should enjoy some special rights in comparison to the rest of the population. It should be emphasized that this is an important indicator of the level of democracy existing in a country. The fact that 57% of interviewees think that minorities should not have special rights for their protection indicates a narrow concept on the issue. Meanwhile, 25% of those polled responded that minorities should need special rights for their protection and 18% responded that such protection should only exist in some areas.

Services offered by the Municipality for the protection and promotion of minority rights. In response to this question, interviewees from the public administration said that the most frequent services offered are housing, employment, schooling, social economic assistance, public services, etc. It is worth mentioning that a high percentage of interviewees are not aware of these services.

One of the posed questions is about the level of use of these opportunities by minorities. The level of use of such opportunities is what would evaluate the role of the administration. Translated into figures, this situation appears as follows: 48% of those polled responded that these opportunities are not used very often, 25% said often, 8,5% said insufficiently, and 18.5% do not know. This picture shows that the situation could be described in a hypothetical manner. The fact that 48% of those polled respond that these opportunities are not used often indicates that minorities are not interested or lack information about such opportunities. Nevertheless there is a progressive improvement of the situation reflected in the fact that 66% of those polled said the situation of the use of these opportunities has improved during recent years, whereas 23% of them said the situation remained the same.

Cases of minority members request help from the Municipality on their rights. Those polled indicated that the most frequent cases of minority members turning to the Korça Municipality have been those of discrimination at work, access to information, legal assistance, and the need to obtain documents. In this context, we are of the opinion

that employment and the right to information should represent two important priorities for the work of the Korça Municipality.

Perception of opportunities for integration. Perception by Korça Municipality staff of minority opportunities for integration focuses on two issues: facultative multi-cultural education in schools (62%) and the organization of joint cultural activities (35%). We are of the opinion that problems of integration are much broader. Education and culture are two important components not only of cultural identity, but also of communication and mutual respect. However, there needs to be a wider vision that should include other aspects such as economic circulation, the arts, religion, etc.

The situation appears problematic when talking about municipality-offered services beyond legal obligations. In this context, in response to the question, “What services, beyond existing legal obligations, does the municipality, your section/directory offer?”, a large number of employees responded that they do not know what services, beyond existing legal obligations, the municipality or respective section/directory offer. Although there is a mixture of functional duties with external ones, the variety of responses indicates an effort for a more social function of employees.

The use of documents about minority rights in the administration’s daily work. The survey with the public administration indicated that the overwhelming majority of those polled said they use documents about minority rights only in given cases (42%), whereas 20% of them said they never use these documents.

Although not specified, we are of the opinion that the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities should take up an important place in the concrete activity of municipal employees. If we were to add the group of responses “very rarely,” “never,” and “I do not know,” which make up for 49% of the total, we think that the European and regional context should represent an important aspect in the training of local employees, as a function of improving horizontal relations (among minorities), as well as vertical relations (between communities and local representatives).

This training need is enhanced by responses to the question about the usefulness of training on minority rights, with 89% of those polled considering such training useful.

Relations between the central and local governments with regard to minority rights. On the issue of interventions or problems with the central government with regard to minority rights, attitudes varied, with 32% of those polled saying that there were never problems/interventions by the central government, 29% saying sometimes, 23% saying rarely, and 16% saying they do not know.

Phenomenon of discrimination. With regard to discrimination of persons belonging to minorities by municipal employees, responses indicate a positive situation (80% of those polled said there were no such cases), but if compared with responses to the question about cases of violations and, in which fields, one notices that a high percentage of them

admit discrimination at work and in education, less in language and housing, and a small percentage said there were no discrimination cases.

From an overall interpretation of survey data, we think that impunity of some public administration employee is not only the result of good relations between the public administration and minorities, but also of the fact that minority representatives are not informed about violations against them and the tools that may be used to reinstate violated rights.

Education. One of the rights that the Framework Convention recognizes to minorities is the right to education in the language of the minority they belong to. Based on the responses by interviewees, one notices some kind of ambiguity about this problem. The fact that 22.5% respond negatively to the question of “whether minority rights have the right to use the language of the minority they belong to at school” and 17.5% respond they do not know indicates that there is a need for the right understanding of the requirements of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. This ambiguity is also proven by results on the exercise of this right, with 40% of interviewees saying only some minorities exercise this right, 32% of them saying this right is exercised by ethnic minority members, 11% of them responding negatively (no), whereas 17% do not know.

The problem of minority education and school abandonment should disturb local minorities, whereby school abandonment in particular represents a disturbing problem. On this issue, it is necessary that there be a greater engagement by the local administration to find the ways and tools to alleviate the problem. Results, according to which 56% of those polled say the municipality has taken complementary measures to prevent school abandonment by community members, speak to the need for greater engagement.

Integration of minorities. The problem of minority integration should be one of the fundamental directions of the local administration. As may be seen from the responses, the opportunities for the integration of minorities are seen in numerous fields, but education and economic and social assistance are seen as priorities; in fact, it is in these two areas that the Municipality has concentrated its work toward integration of minorities, and less on cultures, sports, employment, etc. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the problem of integration should necessitate a wider vision.

With regard to the exercise of opportunities for integration by minority members, interviewees said this right is exercised (58%), 38% of them said this right is exercised sometimes, and 7% said this right is not exercised.

Information. With regard to the informing of citizens, to the question of what are the mechanisms to provide information to citizens in the Korça Municipality, interviewees defined as leading mechanisms the municipal gazette, directories and information offices, newspapers, and television. Daily meetings, announcements of decisions, the internet, leaflets, etc., take up less space. When talking about cases of obstacles in obtaining

information, 68% of interviewees said there are no cases of obstacles, whereas 37% of them said there are very few cases. Furthermore, interviewees from the municipal administration said that minority members exercise the right to obtain information (79%), 7% responded negatively, and 14% do not know.

Representation of minorities. The problem of minority representation in local representative structures is an important indicator of the level of democracy. In the survey, almost all agree that representation of minorities in the municipal council would have a good impact on a better implementation of their rights. 70% of those polled admitted this, whereas 12% said if minority representation at the municipal council would be wider, it would not lead to better respect for minority rights.

Regarding existing mechanisms on minority representation, there is great ambiguity on the practical meaning of representation mechanisms. Like in many other cases, the number of employees responding they do not know is high. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed considered free participation in municipal council meetings a mechanism for minority representation.

Communication with the administration. The communication of minority members with the administration in their own language is a right recognized by the Convention to minorities. Of course, this is relevant to those local communities where there is a high percentage of minorities. According to the results, 70% of those interviewed respond negatively to the question of whether minorities have the right to address the administration in their own language. This is an indicator of the low level of knowledge about the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Ambiguity may also be seen in what areas they think this right should be exercised, with a high number of those responding they do not know.

This ambiguity may also be seen in a series of issues, starting from knowledge about legislation on topographic signs at the local level, the division of competences between local, regional, and national levels, as well as areas in which it has not been implemented sufficiently. Again, one notices a high number of those responding they do not know.

The situation appears the same also with regard to suggestions about the problem of defining competences between the local, regional, and national levels.

The situation is different when concerning suggestions made by interviewees for the improvement of the situation of minority rights. With regard to the right to information, based on interviewees' suggestions, one sees the indispensability of a bulletin on minority issues, better contacts with citizens, policies for an open municipality, and normative measures. Regarding concrete measures to improve the use of minority members' language, it is impressive to note the request for better implementation of laws.

Also with regard to steps proposed to improve minority rights at the local level, one notices the request for rigorous implementation of laws as well as the need for training for both actors – minorities and the local administration.

Also regarding concrete opportunities for the further integration of minorities, facultative multi-cultural education and the organization of joint cultural activities are mentioned.

For the prevention of discrimination of minority members, the training of the public administration and amendments to the penal legislation are mentioned, to include the commitment of penal acts because of ethnic background as aggravating circumstances.

Among suggestions for the improvement of the situation of minorities in the area of education, one notices the creation of equal opportunities for all groups of minorities, the compilation of projects on education issues, and a comprehensive assessment of the education situation of minorities.

Among concrete measures for the integration of minorities, cooperation with groups of relevant minorities, the organization of public events to promote culture and other values of minorities, and the official language are emphasized. In terms of the official language, a need is seen to strengthen knowledge of the official language as a function of better integration of minorities, because by emphasizing learning of the minority language, the learning of the official language is often neglected, although it is just as indispensable for the integration of minorities with the rest of the population.

Also of interest are the suggestions to improve the representation of ethnic minorities, whereby there is an emphasis on: the establishment of special sectors on minority issues, a counseling committee consisting of minority members, and reserved seats at the municipal council.

6. Conclusions and suggestions

1. The activity of political actors at the local level should devote greater attention to acquaintance with minority problems as a function of recognizing their rights in keeping with requirements of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the establishment of conditions for their implementation. From this perspective, it is important to implement the principle of equality in treating minorities. This is enhanced by responses about the above problems, with concerns about treatment according to minority background being predominant.
2. The fact of citizens' distrust in the local administration bodies to address them in cases of minority rights violations is disturbing. In this context, it is necessary that the Korça Municipality work more and be closer to citizens in order to earn their credibility.
3. Based on the citizens' responses, employment, housing, education, etc., were mentioned as the leading social problems. In this context, it is necessary that they become the target of careful work as a function of establishing social harmony and peace.

4. The right to information should be seen in two aspects: first, as a function of citizens belonging to minorities and, second, as a function of presenting positive results of the local administration's work.
5. Special attention should be given to programs and strategies of all political and social actors in the fight against the phenomenon of discrimination, as a dangerous premise for harming social peace.
6. Local authorities should devote special attention to educational and cultural policies, as may be seen in many recommendations by citizens and administration employees, as a function of mutual recognition and the integration of minorities.
7. It is important to highlight and familiarize with documentation addressing minority issues. In this perspective, it is indispensable to clarify the duties and competences between the central and local governments in addressing minority issues. This would enhance effectiveness.
8. As may be seen in suggestions by the public administration, it is indispensable to train this administration on minority issues. In this respect, familiarization with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and its mechanisms would help clarify numerous problems related to education, participation, the use of language, etc.
9. It is indispensable to draft a joint strategy of all actors interested in the fight against stereotypes concerning minorities. This is important because that is where the seeds of hatred, intolerance, and discrimination lie.
10. Special attention should be devoted to the issue of the Roma and the Egyptians as communities most affected by the transition (period) and prejudice.