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Threatened Sorbian schools in Saxony could spell disaster for the language

The Government of the Land of Saxony reached the decision last month not to allow the creation of 5th classes, the youngest class in several secondary schools age 10 ? 16, in Upper Lusatia as of the coming school year.

Four secondary schools in three districts in Upper Lusatia are affected; two of them are Sorbian-medium schools, one in Radibor in the district of Bautzen/ Budyšin, the other in Panschwitz-Kuckau in the district of Kamenz.

In reaction to what is seen as an alarming development for Sorbian schools and bilingual education in Saxony, the federal board of the Domowina, the Union of Lusatian Sorbs, argued for the preservation of the Sorbian and bilingual schools at a meeting in Bautzen last week. ?Schools as public speech areas are the pillars of maintenance and revitalization of the Sorbian language?, it said in the resolution.

Domowina demands the maintenance of the Sorbian secondary school in Radibor, and the bilingual schools Schleife and Wittichenau and all Sorbian schools in the district of Kamenz.

On the basis of certain legal provisions and constitutional guarantees concerning minorities, the federal board expects the net of schools to be widened and not to be reduced.

Reactions also came at the EU level. Two members of the European Parliament, Mr. Sylwester Chruszcz from Poland and Mr. Jaromir Kohlicek

from the Czech Republic, took action and tabled a parliamentary question to the European Commission on May 8th. The two MEPs expressed their concern that the Sorbian medium schools will be doomed to closure once the fifth class is closed. Eurolang readers will remember that this happened in 2001 with the Sorbian secondary school in Crostwitz, despite strong protests from parents, pupils as well as internationally.

According to Saxon legislation, there is a minimum of pupils required to maintain a school just as there is a minimum of pupils required to create a class. The consequence would be that the omission of a class in secondary school might lead to the closure of the entire school because there are not enough pupils to maintain a school. Then the Sorbian minority would be left with only half the Sorbian schools that existed four years ago.

The MEPs, who also each run a European Bureau in Bautzen/ Budyšin to ensure the interests of the Sorbian people on a European level, asked the Commission whether it finds the actions of the Saxon Government compatible with European standards for ethnic and national minorities as well as European values of linguistic and cultural diversity.

They also asked whether the Commission sees a danger for the Sorbian people because of the actions of the Saxon Government.

Recent efforts to establish a Sorbian secondary school in Hoyerswerda have also stalled, apparently due to insufficient demand. The idea was to ensure a seamless transition from the nearby Sorbian primary school to a Sorbian secondary school.

In its first evaluation report of the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Germany, the Committee of Experts strongly criticized the requirement for a minimum of 20 pupils in order to open a Sorbian class, claiming that it was much too high considering the number of speakers and pointing to much more flexible arrangements in other countries.