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Author: Jeroen Zandberg

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Us Noard East Fryslan (UsNEF)
Netherlands Chamber of Commerce registration: 84743093
E-mail: jeroenzandberg@underrepresentedstates.org
Website: www.underrepresentedstates.org

The situation of the Frisians in Germany

About USNEF

UsNEF is an association that aims to promote the interests of the population in the Frisian region.

The four autochthonous national minorities in Germany

The Frisians are officially recognized in Germany as one of the four autochthonous national minorities. The other national minorities are the Danes, the Sorbs and the Sinti and Roma. The latter live scattered throughout Germany, while the other three, the Danes, Frisians and Sorbs, inhabit a clearly defined area. This recognition gives the four communities special protection and government support. An autochthonous national minority is an ethnic, cultural and linguistic community that has lived for many generations in a territory where it is now a minority.

Germany signed and ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The reports that Germany submitted to these mechanisms can be found here: <https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/community-and-integration/national-minorities/national-minorities-node.html>

The Frisian minority in Germany is linguistically divided into East Frisian (or Sater Frisian) and North Frisian. Sater Frisian has approximately one thousand active speakers in the municipality of Saterland. However, North Frisian still has up to fifty thousand speakers and is therefore comparable in number to the Danish (50 thousand) and Sorbian (60 thousand) minorities.

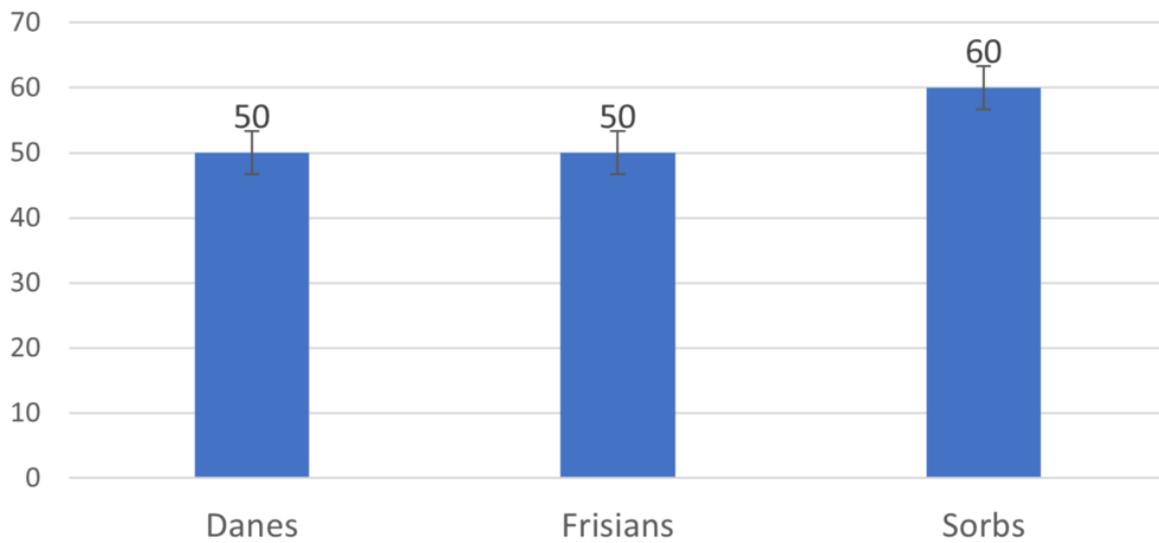
Government support for the Frisian language

The Frisians are recognized by the German government as an autochthonous, national minority. This recognition gives them access to government support, whereby the Frisian minority received 1.3 million euros from the German government in 2021 to strengthen their cultural identity. The government support ensures, among other things, that the Frisian language has a place in education. About a thousand people are currently taking voluntary language lessons at schools in the North Frisian region. In addition, some primary schools pay attention to Frisian and once a week there is a three-minute program called '*Frasch for enarken*' on the German public broadcaster NDR.

The other national minorities have similar goals, but different capabilities. For example, the Sorbs received 24 million euros and the Danish minority even received 104 million euros (from the German and Danish governments) to strengthen their cultural community. The Danish minority finances 46 secondary schools and 57 primary schools in which their own cultural identity is central. A large majority of Danish-language students who want to pursue higher education do so in Denmark. Furthermore, there is an active program to recruit teachers from Poland and the Czech Republic to become teachers in the Sorbian-language educational system, since they can quickly master the Sorbian language.

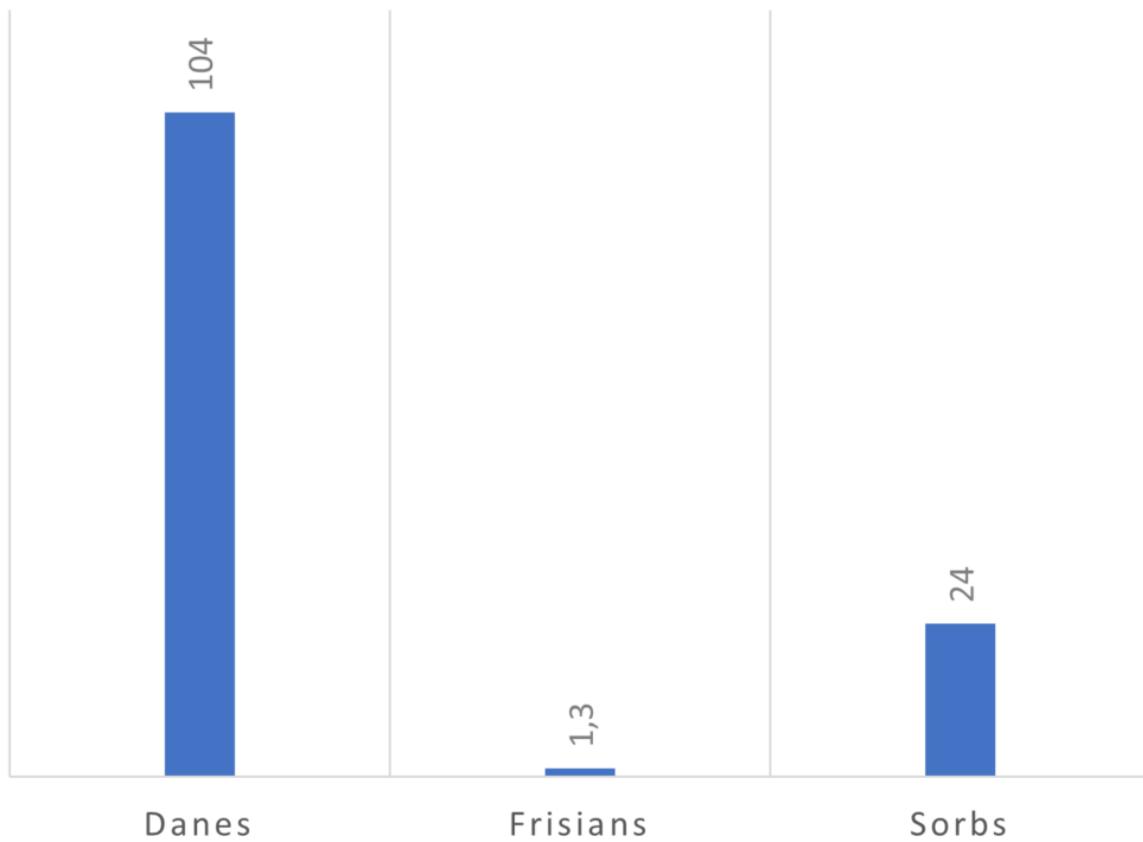
POPULATION

(in thousands)

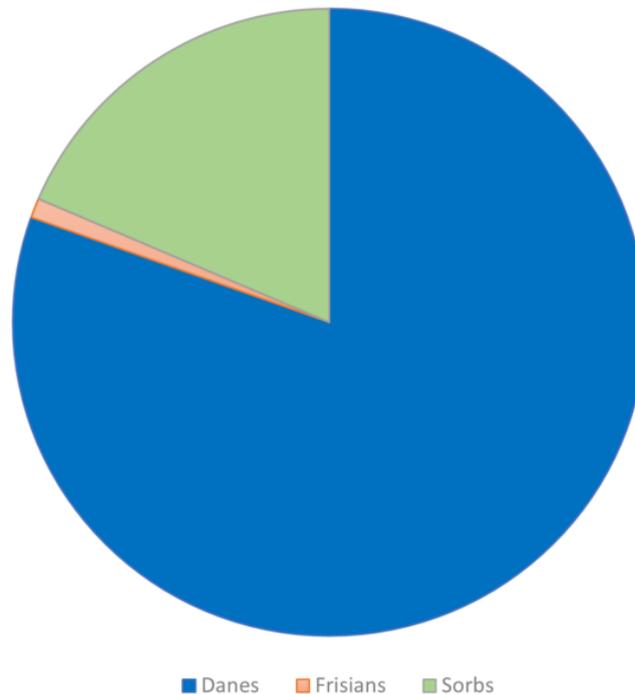


GOVERNMENT SUPPORT 2021

(in million euro)



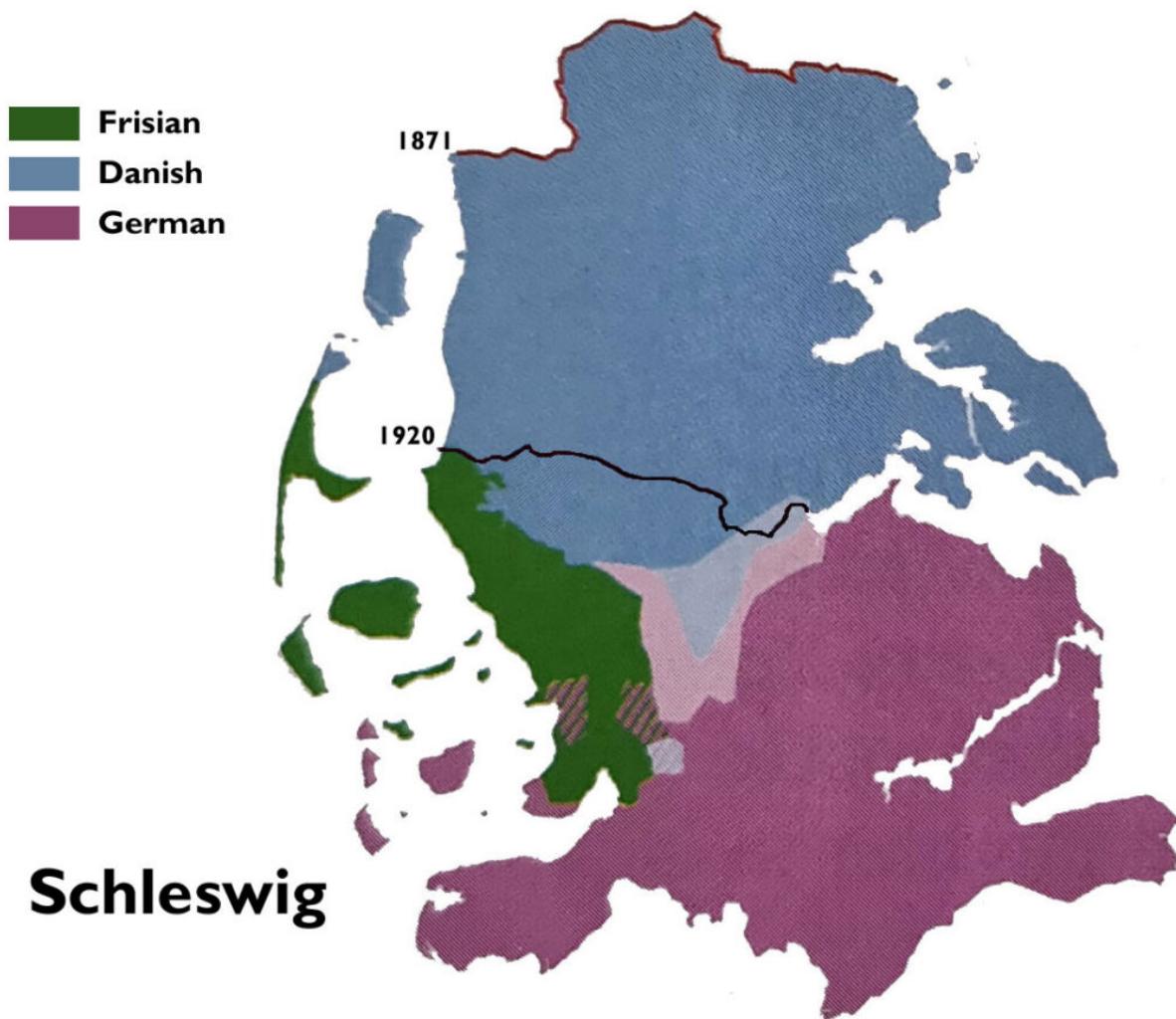
GOVERNMENT SUPPORT 2021



The imbalance in support for the various national minorities is not the result of the number of people belonging to the community; after all, the three communities have a comparable population size. The government support mainly reflects the geopolitical balance of power. This is particularly visible in Schleswig-Holstein. The Danish and (North) Frisian minorities are located in this northern German state. However, the latter are much less visible. The Danish minority has schools, while the Frisian minority has (voluntary) language lessons. Furthermore, on prestigious and political occasions, when national and international representatives meet in the state, support for the Danish minority is widely reported, while the existence of the Frisians is largely ignored.

The referendum without a Frisian choice

This situation is easy to understand from the perspective of the history of the area. After all, Schleswig was a border area where Denmark and Germany battled for regional supremacy for centuries. After World War I, following the Treaty of Versailles, a referendum was held that divided the area between Denmark and Germany. The results of the two referendums, in February and March 1920, determined the current borders between Germany and Denmark. The areas with a large majority of German or Danish speakers were added to the respective country. The new borders have also created the existence of small minorities on both sides of the border. The German minority in Denmark currently numbers around 15,000 people.



Schleswig

In the distant past, state borders ran along the lines of power, while in the twentieth century they ran on the basis of identity. Participation in the leading identity gives an individual access to all positions of power in society. The boundaries in the twenty-first century have become blurred and responsibilities, risks and the exercise of power have been dispersed. It seems that the Frisian-speaking community has mainly been given the risks.

The Frisians were ignored in this geopolitical game. Although the area was trilingual, the referendums in 1920 were solely about the future of the Danish and German communities and the control of the territory by Denmark or Germany. Although the Frisians formed a majority of the population in the North Sea area, they were forced to choose between two nationalistic options that did not do justice to the interests of the Frisian community.

Ultimately, in 1920, the Frisian community chose to stay with Germany. The fact that a large state usually shows more tolerance for diverse identities may have played a role in this choice. After all, a vast country almost always has more diversity within its borders and lacks the capacity to impose an identity on every single citizen. In the twenty-first century, state structures have become even larger. It may therefore be in the interest of the Frisian communities to focus now primarily on participation in the supranational structures of the European Union and the United Nations, rather than just that of a national state.

Now, more than a hundred years later, the friendships between Germany and Denmark are close and the German and Danish minorities in the border region are thriving like never before. The Frisian community, however, seems less vital. Frisian culture is limited to voluntary work, folklore and primary education. Frisian has in some respect not transcended its infancy, while the other national minorities have matured and participate at every level of society.

Discrimination and the Frisian language in the public sphere

The Frisian language and culture are objectively allocated far fewer resources than comparable others. The freedom to protect and promote the Frisian language and culture is without the necessary resources only the freedom-of-nothing-to-lose, because you are unable to do anything. The result is that people leave the language community and Frisian dies out. This has been a process that has been going on for centuries, where various Frisian languages and dialects along the North Sea coast were marginalized and eventually replaced by German. Currently two Frisian languages exist, but both of them are in serious danger of disappearing. There are currently numerous organizations which work in support of the Frisian languages. However, these organizations are voluntary based and focus on cultural activities that attract few people. Furthermore, these organizations are mainly run by pensioners and their activities are also geared at retirees. This is due to the fact that the language community lacks the means for a competitive sector in which people can earn a living. An aspect of the marginalization of the language community is the degradation of the region's competitiveness, which causes people to emigrate to other areas. The East- and North Frisian regions have one of the lowest competitiveness scores of any German region.

In Saterland, as well as in Northern Frisia, geographic name-plates are bi-lingual; German and Frisian. This is however the only visible public sign and use of Frisian in the East- and North Frisian regions. Regional public administration, for example, is exclusively in German. The exclusion of Frisian in public administration downgrades the language to a second-tier, folkloristic curiosity that is merely useful for attracting tourism. Since the Frisian language is not used in public administration, private companies also do not feel the necessity to operate and communicate in Frisian. By excluding the Frisian language from public administration, you exclude it from public life and thereby from people's everyday life.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Frisian languages are deliberately neglected and marginalized by the German government, which causes them to rapidly disappear. The German government recognizes the Frisians as a national minority, which is similar in definition to an indigenous people. The German government should therefore take its responsibility and guarantee the continued survival of these language communities.

The German government should:

- Support the Frisian languages to promote them educationally from elective courses to full schools
- Implement the Frisian languages in the local and regional public administration
- Support Frisian media
- Require the government to use Frisian in the communication and cooperation with the private sector
- Provide the Frisians all the recognition that indigenous peoples have.