

First Minority Forum (15-16 December 2008)

**Statement by Dr. István Lakatos, Ambassador at Large for Human Rights
Republic of Hungary**

Agenda Item II -International and Regional Human Rights Frameworks and Core Principles

Madam Chair of the Forum, Madam High Commissioner, Madam Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Distinguished Delegates, honourable colleagues, dear friends,

It is indeed an honour and privilege for me to be present at this very first session of the Minority Forum. Before turning our attention to the thematic issue of the forum, first of all I would like to congratulate the Independent Expert, Ms. Gay McDougall on the great work she had carried out. It is a great pleasure to see the fruit of a tireless work, and I firmly believe that within the framework of the Minority Forum we can make a real contribution to the evaluation of the situations of minorities but also to the raising of international standards for their protection.

It is also a pleasure for me to greet the Chair of the Forum, Ms. Viktória Mohácsi, a Hungarian compatriot. Her achievements are an excellent example that belonging to a minority group does not necessarily prejudice the destiny of a person. Her career proves what a difference access to education could mean in the life of tens of thousands of people with a minority background. On behalf of the delegation of the Republic of Hungary allow me to say that we are extremely proud that Ms. Mohácsi was chosen to chair this event.

The delegation of the Republic of Hungary is ready and willing to continue a genuine engagement with the Minority Forum in order to further the national implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. I wish to emphasize that human rights policy starts at national level. National implementation of international norms, standards and practices, enhanced cooperation with United Nations treaty bodies and the reaffirmation of values enshrined in international documents are at the forefront of our efforts.

The Government of the Republic of Hungary is strongly committed to the full implementation of all international instruments in the field of human rights. Hungary is a Party of almost all existing mechanisms, and continues to participate actively in the preparatory work aimed at the elaboration of new norms, conventions or other legally binding instruments.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Concerning the main ideas contained in the draft recommendations, allow me to briefly touch upon the relevant legal framework and the best practices of Hungary. Our Constitution enshrines the core principle that minorities living in Hungary are **constituent parts of the state** and participate in the decision-making process. The Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities enumerates thirteen minorities. The Republic of Hungary joins the Chair by recommending the formal **recognition of minorities** providing thus a key guarantee for an adequate legal framework.

Hungary as an ethnically multi-coloured country is conscious of the fact that peaceful co-existence of national and ethnic minorities with the majority population is an important element of regional and international peace and security. Consequently, the Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities declares that the Republic of Hungary **treats the right to national and ethnic identity as a universal human right**. These rights are neither a gift from the majority nor the privilege of the minority, but the **right to be different**, which is based on the respect for the freedom of the individual and is a key ingredient for social harmony.

We are firmly convinced that preserving, fostering, strengthening and passing on the minority identity is an **unalienable right of minorities both at the individual and at the community level**. The Republic of Hungary recognises the mother tongues of minorities, and reckons that education in these languages would significantly contribute **to community cohesion**. Therefore, Hungary believes that the right to maintain the minority identity can only be fully realised if persons belonging to minorities acquire a **proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the educational process**.

The Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities – by establishing a system of minority self-governments, a certain type of local cultural autonomy – introduced a fairly new institutional solution into the Hungarian legal system. According to the provisions of the Act, minority self-governments have the right to express their opinion on questions related to different aspects of minority education. Moreover, they have veto powers at local level concerning the content of minority education. The Public Education Act regulates the functioning of the **National Minority Commission**, which, besides being the professional advisory body of the Minister of Education in matters of minority education, also has veto powers in this area.

Minority self-governments are essential factors in the development of local minority policies and are able to articulate and to represent the educational interests of the given group. The **national minority self-governments** and the **National Minority Commission**, besides exercising their right to veto and expressing their opinions, have also become genuine professional factors in promoting minority education.

The Republic of Hungary is firmly convinced that the right to education must be guaranteed to everyone, regardless of his or her national or ethnic origin, religion or mother tongue. We consider the implementation of this right to be a moral obligation of governments and not just a question of budgetary resources. Being a long-term social investment, a high standard minority education serves the political, economic and security interests of both minority and majority populations.

Thank you for your attention.