

**Opening Statement by Ms. Viktória Mohácsi at the First Forum on
Minority Issues
15 December, 2008. Geneva**

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 the very first session of the Minority Forum. On behalf of my country, I would like to express my deep gratitude for having this unique opportunity to chair this Forum. I would not have been able to do all this work without the enormous help provided by Ms. Gay McDougall, the Independent Expert. Thank you very much for all your work!

In our globalized world we could hardly find a country where everyone speaks the same language, shares the same culture, beliefs and traditions. The international community should realize that the presence of different national, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups within one country is not simply an asset, but also a source of social and cultural enrichment. History has clearly shown that the acceptance of the legitimate aspirations of the minorities to preserve their identity through their culture, language and religion has not undermined, but strengthened the stability of the states concerned. Just think of our host country Switzerland as a good example.

Most major crises of the past decades have been triggered by conflicts in which ethnic identity was a prominent source of divide. Protection and promotion of the identity of national and ethnic minorities ensuring their institutional participation in public affairs are not only requirements evolving from human rights. They also form the basic premises of the non-discriminatory functioning of a democratic state.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

More than one year has passed since the adoption of the resolution on the creation of the Minority Forum, and now we can finally launch the work of this important body. At the same time, I cannot deny that our task will be challenging, since minority issues have never belonged to the simple and easily-to-solve areas. Therefore in 2008, I would say that our work is more needed than it has been any time before. I believe that through this Forum, our aim can be, and I hope will be, realized, and that this Forum will ensure that minority issues will be dealt with at the highest possible level. In this regard, it is very important that not only representatives of minorities, governments, and international actors can participate at the Forum, but also **non-governmental organizations**, which is very important and we must highlight it.

It is my firm belief that the work of this Forum will successfully complement the mandate of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues by providing a useful and unique forum for expert discussion for governments, NGOs and minority representatives on sensitive and topical questions with regard to minorities.

Dear Participants,

The thematic focus of the First Forum on Minority Issues is on education, which is of highest importance. **Education** is a key issue and a definitive point in the life of minorities. Nowadays, being a member of a minority group is still rather a disadvantage. The only way to fight against this situation is to provide the access to education. However, education *per se* is not enough. States should implement the core principles of human rights such as the principle of equality and non-discrimination. We must promote quality educational services for minorities and ensure equal access of minority students to schools. To ensure minority-language educational systems, training of teachers from minority communities is of great importance.

Access to education should be guaranteed to everyone, regardless of his or her national or ethnic origin, religion or mother tongue. My personal experience in this matter shows that due to the fact that I did not have the possibility to use my mother tongue in school makes it difficult for me to express myself fluently in the Romani language. **Minority-language education** could have a key role in passing minority languages from generation to generation. The importance to learn at least partly in the mother tongue is inevitable for the preservation of the language, and even for the preservation of minority identity and culture. Without adequate minority-language education, minority pupils – as we have seen it many times – could easily have to face identity problems without a real possibility to find a solution further on. I admit that knowing the official language of the given country, the language of the majority is not only an obligation, but also a tool for being able to achieve professional goals in that country, still, promoting minority-language education is indispensable for the above-mentioned reasons.

And last, but not least, as the Chair of the Forum, I would like to draw your kind attention to the fact, that as human rights start at national level, it would be advisable to legally recognize the existence of minorities in all countries. According to the provisions of the **Hungarian Constitution**, minorities living in Hungary are recognized as **constituent components of the state**, and **Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities** lists all the thirteen Hungarian minorities.

Distinguished delegates of the Forum, honourable colleagues, dear friends!

Today and tomorrow our task will be to find the best solutions, best recommendations and best practices with a special regard to the diversity of the different minorities. I wish that our work be carried out in a good and cooperative atmosphere, trying to find common grounds in the interest of advancing the cause of minorities.

Thank you for your attention.