



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities**

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STATEMENT

by

Mr Knut Vollebaek,

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities,

to the

**2nd session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues:
Effective Political Participation of Minorities**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to the second UN Forum on Minority Issues. This gathering provides an invaluable opportunity to discuss the situation and concerns of minorities around the globe and should be fully utilized. Here, governments and civil society – and first and foremost minorities – can discuss their achievements and concerns openly and on an equal footing. I see this meeting as a rare opportunity to review the challenges we face when endeavouring to build cohesive societies.

The central theme of this year's Forum, Effective Political Participation of Minorities, is crucial in building and preserving cohesive and stable societies. The essence of participation, of democracy in fact, is involvement, both in terms of having the opportunity to make a substantive contribution to decision-making processes and in terms of the impact of those contributions. The more inclusive a system is, the more representative it is. The closer we bring the decision-making to those affected by involving them, the better the policies and laws we make and the more likely they are to be accepted. This is not only a question of implementing international standards, but also of good governance.

Since the establishment of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (or HCNM for short), my predecessors and I have witnessed, on a daily basis and in a wide range of geographic, cultural, linguistic and political constellations, what are the challenges we are faced with when trying to achieve effective political participation of minorities. Minorities are often excluded from decision-making processes, even in matters that directly affect them such as the allocation of budgets, the structure and language of the education system or measures to support their identity. Even in cases where they are allowed to speak out, their concerns may be ignored and their legitimate demands cast aside. Minorities are very often underrepresented, not only at different levels of government, but also in essential public services such as the police, the judiciary and the civil service. This is an acute problem particularly in States in which a particular ethnic, linguistic or religious group dominates the State organs and deliberately excludes other groups through various means. In other cases, the exclusion of minorities from political participation may not be deliberate, but rather the result of more practical obstacles such as a lack of knowledge of the State language, geographic isolation or imbalances in the education system.

Whatever the causes of exclusion, if left unaddressed they can pose a real risk to the stability of societies. If minorities do not feel that their voices are being heard through the democratic process, they will be more likely to resort to less acceptable means for promoting their interests. Nothing is more dangerous in the long term than a cohesive group of disgruntled citizens who sees no point in showing loyalty to a State because it feels “foreign” to them. If however, they feel that they “belong”, that the State is also “theirs”, then civic identity is more likely to transcend that of ethnicity, linguistics or religion.

Given the complexity of the problems faced by minorities, as well as the limits of most majority decision-making processes, special arrangements are often needed to ensure that the voices of minorities are heard and their interests considered. This is why the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1999 invited recognized international experts to draw up a set of thematic guidelines, namely The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, also known simply as the Lund Recommendations after the Swedish city in which they were first presented. These Recommendations aim to facilitate the inclusion of minorities within the State, while at the same time enabling minorities to maintain their own identity.

Rather than pointing to one single model, the Lund Recommendations are extremely rich in offering different choices and models regarding all relevant aspects of political participation of minorities. These include advisory and consultative bodies, electoral-system design, decentralization and territorial and non-territorial models of minority self-government. All these options are often largely unknown to politicians, minority leaders and other members of civil society. The suitability of a certain mechanism or model will depend on the historic, geographic, political and economic circumstances of each individual case. Certain models work better in certain circumstances.

Whatever the concrete design or mechanism finally chosen, experience across the OSCE area has shown that the best way to preserve interethnic peace and stability is to allow minorities to participate. This is a delicate process demanding sensitivity from the minority as well as the majority. On the one hand, one has to bear in mind that having a “voice” does not necessarily equate to being “heard”. Our emphasis must be on both words when discussing “effective participation”. Token minority participation is dangerous as it only breeds cynicism and in the end encourages these groups to pursue their goals outside the democratic framework. On the other hand, it is important to remind ourselves that minority rights do not give minorities the final say in all decisions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my work as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I constantly advocate solutions that promote the integration of minority groups into the wider society, while at the same time respecting the minority's right to a separate linguistic, ethnic or religious identity. In all cases this requires very practical measures. Many of the causes of interethnic tensions are deep-rooted and require not just political or legislative action but also the sustained deployment of significant resources, for example, in the fields of education, political participation or the media. Providing support through programmes and projects has therefore become an important part of my office's activities. The emphasis of these projects is always on early action and prevention of conflict, and they aim to close gaps that otherwise would not necessarily be filled.

Given the multidimensional nature of the challenge to promote the effective political participation of minorities, the HCNM projects are necessarily wide-ranging. Let me give you a few examples. It is my experience that adequate and regular access to the media and national news constitutes an important means through which minority communities can participate in the public life of their country. Yet, minority-language media broadcasting is often limited to small outlets in minority populated regions that focus on local events, but offer little in terms of national or international news. The sometimes limited command of the State language in minority populated regions in itself limits access to nationally produced news coverage. Minorities then turn mainly to the media outlets of their "kin-State", which precludes them from regular and accurate information about on-going developments in their country.

In one such region of an OSCE participating State, I have therefore helped to set up and equip two local TV stations. The project involves the training of local journalists and technical personnel in reporting techniques and using modern equipment, and managers in the running of the TV companies as effective businesses. Both TV companies started producing their own weekly news bulletins in January 2005. Local news in minority languages is now broadcast almost every day. At the same time these stations rebroadcast State-language national news programmes with minority language subtitling. When asked about the importance of these programmes, 71.9 per cent of the people polled responded: "very important" and pointed out that they would lose a unique source of information should

the broadcasting stop. We are implementing a similar project in another minority populated region, which is showing similar results.

In other OSCE participating States my office has facilitated the translation of campaign materials, party manifestos and party political broadcasts during election campaigns into minority languages so that minority members can make a more informed choice in these elections.

HCNM projects also focus on promoting relations between the different parts of the executive and persons belonging to minorities. In several OSCE participating States, my office has provided training to civil servants on the management of interethnic relations. Other training courses focused on removing certain barriers to integration by providing State-language classes to civil servants in minority-populated areas. Dominance of the minority language and the lack of knowledge of the State language in certain regions form an obstacle to the active participation of minorities in political, economic and social life.

Yet another area where project work has been particularly influential, is the improvement of relations between national minorities and the police, who often represent the sole agency of the criminal justice system that minority communities come into contact with. This means the police have a strong influence on the attitudes and perceptions of national minorities about the rule of law and the state's capacity to act in a just, legitimate and accountable way. One of the important outcomes of our work has been the publication of the Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies, drawn up by a group of international experts at the request of the HCNM in 2005.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ultimately, my mission as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities is to prevent interethnic conflict, whether through quiet diplomacy, projects, thematic recommendations or any other means I see fit. Whatever form this takes, it is meant to address the root causes of conflict often linked to minority grievances about insufficient participation in public life, including and intrinsically related to economic, social and cultural life. It is my experience – time and time again – that integration through participation is crucial in forging links of mutual understanding and loyalty between majority and minority communities within the State. If minorities feel they have a stake in society, if they have input in discussions and are consulted by decision-making bodies, and if they feel that their identities are being

protected, the chances of interethnic tensions arising or solutions being derailed are significantly reduced.

I look forward to the ensuing discussion and wish you every success in your important work.

Thank you for your attention.