

**UN Forum on Minority Issues**  
**Geneva, 12 – 13 November 2009**

**Statement by Amb. Strohal, Permanent Representative of Austria**

**VII. Concrete steps to advance minority political participation and to build capacity of minorities to participate effectively**

Thank you, Mme President,

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to Ms. Gay McDougall, the Independent Expert, for organising this impressive gathering of minority experts and politicians from around the world.

We are confident that the ideas and recommendations voiced at this forum will form a solid basis for further progress: on the legal conceptions as well as the practical implementation of minority rights, in particular with regard to their political participation. It will now be for the Independent Expert, the Human Rights Council and the OHCHR, as well as for national Governments and civil society actors to take these ideas further.

I would like to highlight one aspect in particular that is a central element in virtually all aspects of minority participation: the knowledge of language. The challenge for minorities as well as states is to promote the use of the education in the minority languages and to provide the resources necessary for this. Illiteracy and language barriers are considered one of the main impediments to integration and effective participation. One focus should therefore be laid on specific educational programs to promote the minority languages as well as the knowledge of the national language to facilitate the integration process for national minorities and their political participation.

In certain parts of Austria, for example, bi-lingual schools for Croatian, Slovenian and Hungarian, as well as language education for Roma, play a very positive role in helping

minorities to both preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage and to equip them with the adequate education that allows them to participate actively in all aspects of life, be it the cultural, economic or political sphere. The success of these schools can, and should, also be measured by the fact that they attract substantial numbers of children from the majority population.

There are many different forms and concepts of how states can facilitate political participation of minorities. In Austria, no quotas or reserved parliamentary seats for minority representatives exist. Nevertheless there are currently three members of the Austrian Government that are members of the comparatively small Croatian-speaking minority, one of them being the minister of defence. Similarly, in the federal province of Burgenland, where most persons belonging to the Croatian-speaking minority traditionally live, their political representation far exceeds their numbers.

It is with these examples in mind that we would like to particularly welcome the recommendations addressed to political parties. Their readiness to be open towards minority members and minority issues undoubtedly plays an important role.

There may be many different models for political participation but there is also a common goal: the promotion and protection of persons belonging to minorities and their integration into society. Social and political inclusion is essential to ensure peace, stability and prosperity for all. Integration cannot be a one-way process. Intercultural dialogue and learning, in particular of majority, regional and minority languages, as well as awareness-raising on both sides are the necessary link towards mutual understanding in an integrated society. It is an ongoing interactive process in which we all are involved.

My delegation has been benefitting enormously from the discussions at this Forum and is looking forward to help take your recommendations further, together with the independent Expert and the OHCHR, at the next session of the Human Rights Council.

Thank you.