

UN Forum on Minority Issues
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V. National practices and real experiences: existing mechanisms providing for the political participation of minorities

Thank you, Madam President,

I would like to start with an example:

Austria's largest national minority group - the Burgenland Croats - has not had its own political minority party for 90 years. The Burgenland Croats, today a totally integrated part of civil society, have always preferred to integrate into the existing political parties. As all political parties need voters, the consequence was and is a positive competition between all political parties to have minority issues on their agenda.

The effect could make this minority proud:

In the federal government, two ministers and one state secretary are declared members of the mentioned national minority. Also some parliament members are Burgenland Croats. At the provincial level, some important positions are also held by declared members of the national minority, inter alia the current president of the provincial parliament, and the current head of the office of the governor of the federal province Burgenland. Indeed, although the Burgenland Croats do not have their own political party and guaranteed seats in the legislative bodies, this minority is, in comparison to its size, quite overrepresented.

This example demonstrates two challenges for political parties:

On the one hand, national minority issues are covered most effectively, if they are on the agenda of all political parties. On the other hand, a national minority political party might easily come into an opposition situation, which makes it much more difficult to find a political majority for minority issues.

Austria has chosen to establish the instrument of advisory bodies for each of her national minority groups. These national minority advisory councils are within the framework of the Federal Chancellery and have advisory competences.

The number of members and the procedures for the composition of these advisory councils are strictly regulated by law. This guarantees that the majority of the members of the advisory councils, including the chair and vice-chair of the councils, are proposed by representative minority associations. Churches and political parties will propose the other members of the advisory councils. This procedure ensures that all political and ideological tendencies within the national minority groups are adequately reflected by the advisory councils. The federal government decides the concrete composition of an advisory council, but each representative minority association has access to the administrative court, which can review, whether the composition of an advisory council corresponds with the relevant legal provisions.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that Austria's experience with the instrument of the advisory councils has been truly positive.

Thank you.