



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on National Minorities

As prepared for delivery by Felice Gaer,
Commissioner, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 28, 2005

Since 1975, the Helsinki process has focused on the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and on continued discrimination against them in the OSCE region.

The mandate of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities deals with many issues relevant to national minorities, from early warning to conflict mediation to education, labor, and social integration issues. The United States appreciates Ambassador Ekeus' activities, and his recent increased emphasis on educational opportunities for minority youth in Central Asia, the Caucasus and southeastern Europe. Yet despite these and other efforts, members of ethnic, religious and other minorities still face discrimination and even acts of violence in many parts of the OSCE region. As High Commissioner Ekeus stated on September 19, "most contemporary conflicts, which have tended to become more frequent in the OSCE region in recent years, have been driven by interethnic or religious friction."

The United States also gives credit to the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina for focusing on education in multi-ethnic regions. Education, coupled with safeguards for minorities' rights, will help promote tolerance and respect.

Despite many positive developments in Kosovo over the past year, the situation of Kosovo's minority communities remains precarious. Ethnic Serbs, Roma, Ashkalis and Egyptians face major obstacles, including discrimination, restricted freedom of movement, inadequate access to public services, and harassment. The good work of individual government agencies to recover from the March 2004 violence must now be reinforced by political will to achieve lasting reconciliation. Leaders must make extra efforts to facilitate returns. We urge Kosovo's minorities to participate in the provisional institutions of self-government but the majority ethnic group must also facilitate such participation. Recent efforts to achieve a consensus on decentralization are an important first step. Belgrade should not act to impede local agreements when they can be reached. The same standards must apply both north of the Ibar River and throughout the rest of Kosovo.

In Moldova, the United States welcomes the July 1st decision to grant permanent registration to four Moldovan-language schools in Transdnistria. These and other steps can lay the groundwork for a lasting settlement to the conflict in the region.

Members of Russia's Jewish minority in the past year have been subjected to libelous attacks by public figures, including parliamentarians. Despite appeals for tolerance by President Putin and other senior officials, violent gang attacks against members of ethnic, religious and other minorities continue. In Voronezh, local authorities appear unable or unwilling to address the problem, while in Krasnodar, they seem to be encouraging it. Reportedly, fabricated criminal cases against members of Russia's Muslim minorities are increasing, partly due to their perceived connection to the decade-long war in Chechnya.

In Macedonia, despite destabilizing efforts by some militants within its Albanian population, efforts have gone forward toward full implementation of the Ohrid peace accord of 2001. We welcome the recent passage of a law on national symbols, which allows minorities to display their own flag alongside the Macedonian flag in areas where they constitute a majority of the population.

In Turkmenistan, the obligatory use of Turkmen as the state language still limits Russian, Uzbek and other minorities' access to education. We remind the Turkmen authorities of their commitments under the 1990 Copenhagen Document. Turkmen citizens still are officially denied access to minority-language media. We also are concerned about reports that Uzbeks living in border areas are still being forcibly relocated to desert areas in the interior.

The United States condemns the recent crackdown on the Polish minority in Belarus, including harassment, intimidation and arrests of members of the Union of Poles in Belarus. Authorities have also taken over the Union's newspaper.

Greece's poor treatment of its ethnic Turkish, Albanian and Macedonian minorities is still a concern of the United States. Greece continues to displace some Romani communities in a manner inconsistent with Greek law.

We remain concerned about the situation of the Kurds of Turkey. Despite laws to the contrary, Kurds face obstacles in broadcasting or publishing in their own language. Those who advocate Kurdish cultural and language rights may be branded in public opinion as members of the terrorist PKK.

We are concerned about increased popular support for nationalist movements in Bulgaria, as seen in the strong support for the "Ataka" political party in this June's elections. While we commend the larger political parties for speaking out against "Ataka's" hateful agenda, we urge Bulgarian authorities to prosecute party leader Siderov's direct incitements to violence against ethnic minorities. Moreover, we encourage Bulgaria to seek the assistance of the three Personal Representatives on tolerance.

Finally, the United States notes the continued efforts to improve the situation for minorities in Croatia, in accordance with the 2002 Constitutional Law on National Minorities. Unfortunately, some returnees to Croatia continue to face impediments,

including difficulties in regaining property, unequal access to reconstruction assistance and unresolved occupancy or tenancy rights.

Mr. Moderator, we welcome the intensive efforts by OSCE institutions, particularly those of Ambassador Ekeus, and of OSCE missions to improve the lives and prospects of national minorities. Ultimately, however, it is up to participating States to find the political will to move from words on paper to improve realities on the ground.