



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

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## **OPENING STATEMENT**

by

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at the

**Conference on Integration of National Minorities in European Societies:  
with Special Focus on their Participation in the Decision-Making Process  
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Minister Milošoski,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very outset, I would like to congratulate you Minister Milošoski and your country on your chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. Navigating a ship with an international crew on board is not an easy task, but it is certain to be a rewarding and useful experience. As you know, Kazakhstan is chairing the OSCE this year. I see both chairmanships as an encouraging sign that newly independent countries are taking on leading roles in international organizations, bringing forward new ideas and reinvigorating our work. Thank you for taking up the issue of participation and linking it to the cohesion of European societies. Thank you also for inviting the OSCE to the Conference. This is yet another example of how close the CoE and the OSCE work together.

Minority rights are important. I do not have to convince the audience in this country of that. Indeed, it holds true for the entire OSCE region. Minority rights are a prerequisite for peace, justice and stability.

The effective participation of minority communities in public life is an essential element in the catalogue of minority rights.

As parents, we want to have a stake in the education of our children. As voters, we want our opinion to be heard by the politicians. As TV viewers, we want our public broadcasters to reflect the diversity of our societies.

Being listened to and taking part is the essence of participatory democracy.

It was this reasoning that prompted the OSCE leaders in Paris in 1990 to undertake “to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations,” as the Charter of Paris for a New Europe starts. The pledge was not just for any kind of “democracy”, but one of a “representative and pluralist character”.

The Helsinki Process pioneered another important principle, namely “equal security for all our countries.” This sovereign equality of States means that countries as diverse as Spain and San Marino, and Latvia and Lichtenstein now have the right to an equal say on the world stage.

Diversity between our countries is generally accepted. When it comes to handling differences within our societies, however, there is still a long way to go.

Mr. Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Effective participation by minority communities in public life is a precondition for a peaceful and democratic society. Involvement is the essence of this participation. Involvement develops a sense of belonging. Involvement brings the decision-making closer to those most affected. Ultimately, minority participation makes for better policies and better laws.

Political tensions are a normal part of any democracy. No State in the Council of Europe or the OSCE should aspire to build an Orwellian society where everyone agrees on everything.

Disagreements and public debate are healthy signs. Nonetheless in order to avoid disagreements escalating out of control, it is essential that the concerns and interests of all members of society, including persons belonging to national minorities, are taken on board, their rights respected and their needs accommodated.

How do we achieve this?

A practical tool, which guides my own work as well as assisting governments and representatives of minorities, is the set of recommendations developed by the High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1999 to help States give their minorities an effective voice, namely the “Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life” or the Lund Recommendations as they are colloquially known. They offer ways to address deficits in participation in public life that cause tension within or between OSCE participating States.

Mr. Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The real added value of the Lund Recommendations is that they offer practical ideas and options that governments and minorities may simply not have been aware of before. They help expand and make available the range of successful and already existing arrangements for the effective participation of all sectors of the population in public life.

Another very important document in this context is the Council of Europe’s Advisory Committee’s commentary on effective participation, adopted on 27 February 2008. This

document complements the Lund Recommendations in further promoting public participation of persons belonging to national minorities. It shows how enhanced co-operation among international organizations can raise awareness of the benefits of sharing experiences and facilitating activities.

Mr. Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have stated on numerous occasions, participation of minorities in national Parliaments through any number of tools – including, but not exclusively the reservation of a number of seats in Parliament or in parliamentary committees – is certainly important. Equally important, however, is the participation of minorities at local and regional level. This is especially critical at certain stages of democratic development within society when the functioning of minority representation – both at local and at regional level – is often considered to be as important as national level representation for minorities.

I have also suggested and encouraged – in line with the Lund Recommendations – special arrangements for minority representation on executive, judicial and administrative bodies as well as in the civil service. Advisory or consultative bodies within an appropriate institutional framework can serve as a forum for minorities to provide input into the policy-making process. They also act as a dialogue mechanism between government and minorities. It should be remembered, however, that these forums should only complement, rather than substitute, direct political representation. They must be legitimate, and properly funded. In this respect, I have encouraged and welcomed the establishment of National Minority Councils in many OSCE participating States as a means of institutionalizing dialogue

between the governments and the minorities. The Councils ensure that the particular concerns of persons belonging to national minorities are taken into account. In addition, I have been advocating the establishment of a variety of advisory and consultative bodies not only on general minority issues but also in such specific areas as education, use of languages, access to media and policing among others.

Mr. Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As High Commissioner, I have often experienced how language issues generate interethnic tension. This particularly applies to the use of minority languages in addition to the State language in contacts with public authorities, or the use of minority languages by elected representatives in the national Parliament. Linguistic rights are particularly significant for minorities. They guarantee that minorities are able to understand the policies that affect them. They help minorities become involved in civil life. It is a fallacy that the use of one language in addition to any other necessarily has a diminishing effect. This is not a zero-sum game.

The administrative division of a country and the redrawing of constituency boundaries is another source of contention. This issue is especially thorny where the enjoyment of minority rights in a designated area depends on a threshold minority population. Decentralization can be particularly helpful when minorities are territorially concentrated. It allows minorities to exercise better authority over their own affairs. At the same time, efforts to support minority participation should not be at the expense of democracy. A State majority may find itself in a minority position in a particular region, like ethnic Ukrainians in Crimea. In such cases the

linguistic rights of the numerically inferior groups must be safeguarded, also in a minority area.

Mr. Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whatever the arrangement finally chosen, experience across the OSCE area presents us with clear evidence that the best way to preserve interethnic peace is to allow minorities to participate on a continuing basis and to recognize the importance of their involvement in decision-making processes. Especially, when it comes to matters that have a direct impact on the language and culture of their communities.

Much remains to be done, notably in improving the representation of minority groups in Parliaments and at regional and local levels. Representation of minority communities in executive and judicial bodies needs to be increased. Advisory, consultative and decision-making bodies and mechanisms are needed where they do not exist. Above all, one should avoid the practice of selecting rather than electing minority representatives to elective bodies, since they can never claim to be truly representative of their constituents.

Let us reflect today on how our societies can facilitate the participation of minority communities in the decision-making process. Let us come up with creative ideas and solutions on how we can give them a voice on issues that have a direct impact on them. Let us make our societies more inclusive and truly representative of their diversity.

I wish your conference every success and thank you for your attention.