



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Report by High Commissioner on National Minorities Astrid Thors

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 16, 2015

High Commissioner Thors, we warmly welcome you back to the Permanent Council, and thank you for the comprehensive report on your activities during the past six months. You have been particularly busy, with multiple trips to countries throughout the OSCE region, a tempo which we hope you are able to sustain as you investigate, report on, and advocate for the human rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

High Commissioner Thors, in the six months since your last report to the Permanent Council, we have seen a steady deterioration of respect for the rights of members of national minority groups in Russia-occupied Crimea and in the separatist-controlled parts of eastern Ukraine. The abuses against Crimean Tatars, ethnic Ukrainians, and others who do not support the de facto regime in occupied Crimea require our enduring attention, and we appreciate that **Crimea** remains “an absolute priority” for you. The United States echoes your call to the Russian occupation authorities to allow you and other independent international actors access to the peninsula to monitor the situation there.

While Russia denies you access to the part of **Ukraine** it occupies, we counted nine trips by your office to different regions in the east and west of Ukraine, including Kharkiv, Lviv, and Zarkapatia since 2014. Following your visits in June and July to Uzhhorod, Mukacheve, Berehove and Lviv in western Ukraine, you reported further steps that can be taken to foster positive inter-ethnic relations. We agree that Ukraine, like many other countries, needs a stronger institutional architecture to implement its commitments on persons belonging to national minorities and to better promote the inclusion of its diverse population.

In contrast to your nine trips to various regions of Ukraine, we note with regret that you have not yet had the opportunity to visit Crimea, which remains part of Ukraine despite its occupation by Russia. We encourage the Russian government, as the entity in effective control of Crimea, to afford access to the High Commissioner in accordance with the HCNM mandate to which all participating States have agreed.

High Commissioner Thors, we expect that the visit you made in June to Central Asia will pay dividends into the future. Thank you for encouraging **Kazakhstan**'s authorities to take the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity into account in its planned reforms, known as the “100 Concrete Steps,” in areas including education, the civil service, and the promotion of national identity and unity. Your visit to **Kyrgyzstan** revealed that while some progress has been made in recent years, Kyrgyz society is still struggling to heal societal divisions, achieve

justice, and become more cohesive as a nation. We recognize your efforts in **Turkmenistan** to promote access for members of national minorities to education in their mother tongues and to allow them to exercise their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Your work in **Moldova** and **Georgia** to enhance dialogue and facilitate freedom of movement is commendable. We join you in supporting the Multi-Party Dialogue on National Minority Issues that seeks to strengthen the participation of members of national minorities in Moldova and Georgia.

As you noted, we should not permit political crises to exploit inter-ethnic tensions in **Macedonia**, and the people of Macedonia have made it clear that they agree. We appreciate your progress in **Serbia**, where you are working with the government and the OSCE Mission to find solutions to political challenges and engaging minority groups. We recognize the progress you reported that was made by the Serbian government to normalize relations with the ethnic Albanian leadership in Presevo.

Your predecessor, Knut Vollebaek, told the Permanent Council in 2012 that respect for diversity has proved to be a powerful driver of progress. Where diversity is not embraced, we have seen sobering examples of ethnic divisions that often fuel conflict. To avoid such situations, participating States must address the tensions that arise from differences between ethnic groups, and between minorities and majorities. As participating States address these challenges, we encourage them to work with the High Commissioner for National Minorities. Thank you again for your work, High Commissioner Thors, as you engage on these difficult challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.