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**STATEMENT BY MS. MIROSLAVA BEHAM,
AMBASSADOR OF SERBIA,
IN RESPONSE TO THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER ON NATIONAL MINORITIES,
AMBASSADOR KNUT VOLLEBAEK,
AT THE 687th MEETING
OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

8 November 2007

Mr. Chairman,

Serbia very warmly welcomes Ambassador Knut Vollebaek for the first time in his capacity as HCNM to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive written and oral reports.

Mr. Chairman,

The adequate handling of minority issues is a crucial parameter of determining the level of democracy and commitments to human rights of every society. Apart from appropriate legislation, it affords a lot of sensitivity in properly addressing the needs and possible fears of the minority population in order to enable it to live a life in dignity and safety. There is a sensitive balance to be reached between the preservation of the identity of national minorities and their integration into the overall society they live in. At the same time, minority issues are by their very nature susceptible to political instrumentalisation or misuse, by both – the majority *and* the minority – and thus may turn into security issues. So, we are talking about a complex phenomenon.

As regards Serbia, the government's determination to build on already reached results and successes and to further improve the situation of national minorities in the country is undiminished. Through the Council for National Minorities the Serbian authorities have a regular and intense communication and exchange with the representatives of the respective national minorities, national minority parties are represented in the Serbian Parliament and the Roma Action Plan is being implemented. According to Council of Europe-, but also OSCE-reports and assessments, the overall situation of national minorities in Serbia is

improving steadily, in particular in Vojvodina, where the rights of the major minority – the Hungarian minority - are additionally taken into account and guaranteed in bilateral agreements with the Republic of Hungary.

The Coordinating Body for the South of Serbia, as well, is not ceasing from efforts to implement commitments and put measures into effect, which offer the Albanian population adequate conditions for integration and the necessary preservation of their national identity.

We would like to thank Ambassador Vollebaek for visiting Serbia at an early stage after his appointment as High Commissioner and for offering our authorities the assistance requested for further improving the situation of national minorities in our country.

Mr. Chairman,

Our delegation has long advocated the initiation of a reconciliation process between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, which is indispensable in any peace-building effort and is long overdue in Kosovo itself. We note with great satisfaction that Ambassador Vollebaek in this regard is committed to move the process forward, which was started by his predecessor. Let me, however, at this point reiterate our consideration that reconciliation of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo can be successfully promoted only when reconciliation between Belgrade and Pristina is advanced at the same time. Serbs in Kosovo do not consider themselves to be a minority, but part of the majority population in Serbia. By improving confidence and trust between Belgrade and Pristina, between Serbs in Serbia and Albanians in Kosovo, you will automatically enhance the relations between the respective communities living in Kosovo itself. These processes are all the more necessary since more than 200.000 IDPs from Kosovo living in Central Serbia are waiting to return to an environment which still is distinguished by “a high level of tensions between the various ethnic groups”, as Ambassador Vollebaek put in his report.

In concluding, Mr. Chairman, we would like to reiterate our readiness – the readiness of our authorities as well as of our delegation here in Vienna – to cooperate constructively with the High Commissioner and his team.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman