



**PERMANENT DELEGATION  
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

**RESPONSE TO THE HIGH COMMISSIONER ON  
NATIONAL MINORITIES,  
AMBASSADOR KNUT VOLLEBÆK,**

**As delivered by Ambassador Guttorm Vik  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
27 November 2008**

Mr. Chairman,

I am pleased to join previous speakers in welcoming the High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebæk back to the Permanent Council, and thanking him for a most interesting and thought-provoking report.

I would also like to congratulate the Commissioner and his institution on the recently celebrated 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary where OSCE ambassadors received a very informative presentation of the institution's important tasks two weeks ago. I fully share the assessment of my Serbian colleague that the presentations contributed a lot to enhancing the level of understanding and strengthening further the already strong support that the HCNM enjoys among OSCE delegations and Participating States.

We have earlier commended the HCNM for the very useful and timely initiative to launch a set of recommendations on how to deal with minority issues in inter-state relations. The conflict in Georgia demonstrated how terribly wrong things can go when such basic rules and principles are not respected.

The HCNM, together with a number of other OSCE and non-OSCE institutions, now faces the task of providing the facts on the situation for minorities in the whole of Georgia, and in particular South Ossetia, and make recommendations on how to alleviate the situation of minorities. The Displaced Persons present a particular challenge in this regard. It is imperative that they be guaranteed a safe return to their home towns and villages as soon as possible. We have repeatedly expressed concern over the refusal to grant the HCNM free and unhindered access to all areas of conflict. The HCNM clearly needs this access in order to fulfil his mandate. It is therefore encouraging that representatives of the HCNM, together with ODIHR, have now been able to visit South Ossetia, and we look forward to ODIHR's report from the visit.

Mr. Chairman,

While the tragic conflict in Georgia for obvious reasons has been the main focus over the last few months, I would also like to echo the remarks of the EU welcoming the continued very valuable work of the HCNM in other regions, not least Western Balkans and Ukraine. In particular, we have taken positive note of the HCNM's active engagement with regard to minority rights in Kosovo, notably mother tongue education for the non-Albanian population and the lack of official registration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. I would also like to second the EU's support to the plea to the Georgian authorities to extend the deadline for the application of Meshketians wishing to return before the end of the year. And at the same time, the Russian authorities could give stateless Meshketians on their territory the option of integration and naturalisation.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me also pick up an important point made by ambassador Vollebæk during the anniversary presentations in the Hague and reiterated here today, a point which was also made by the Special Representative on Anti-Semitism Gert Weisskirchen during his presentation to the Council last week. I am referring to the obvious risk that the general deterioration of the economic situation resulting from the international financial crisis may hit minorities and other vulnerable groups particularly hard. Regrettably, experience from similar situations in the past shows that such groups are often the first to lose their jobs, and they may also sometimes be made scapegoats for problems which are not of their making. We would therefore encourage the HCNM to be vigilant in monitoring any such tendencies, and to issue warnings and recommendations whenever necessary.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, let me again congratulate the institution of the HCNM for what it has achieved during the first 15 years of its existence, noting that the success of this office often lies in the absence of bad news which would have come to our and the world's attention had the institution not succeeded in its efforts to detect and prevent brewing tensions on minority issues from escalating into open conflicts.

We wish you and your institution every success for the next 15 years. You have a lot of important and demanding tasks to tend to, and you can count on our full support.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman