



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the High Commissioner on National Minorities Ambassador Knut Vollebaek

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 17, 2011

The United States warmly welcomes Ambassador Vollebaek back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

We applaud your organization of a conference in Zagreb last month to address issues related to the ongoing problem of statelessness. The Zagreb Declaration which came out of the conference seeks to improve regional cooperation and foresees the development of a number of welcome benchmarks that help us assess our progress in combating statelessness.

We share your concern about the discrimination that some minorities confront throughout the OSCE region. In particular, we note that Roma and Sinti populations often face official and informal obstacles that prevent social integration and result in living conditions unacceptable in modern societies. We urge participating States to seek new and meaningful ways to fulfill our commitments in connection with the 2003 Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area.

We note your praise for Serbia's efforts to create a multi-ethnic, multilingual department of economics in Subotica, and we encourage the Government of Serbia to build on these steps and to take further actions to establish itself as a regional leader in the protection of minority rights. Serbia has an obligation to use its influence to ease inter-ethnic tensions in the region, particularly in northern Kosovo, where parallel institutions that answer to Belgrade have engaged in activities that have limited the freedom of movement for all peoples in the region. The parallel institutions' irresponsible embrace of the politics of division have isolated Kosovo Serbs and manufactured tensions between Serbs and Albanians that pose a real threat to regional stability.

As you note in your report, the politics of ethnicity is present throughout the Balkans, where issues related to education and language continue to pose challenges. We applaud your encouragement of governments in the region to take affirmative action to promote inclusive policies that bring communities together, and we encourage the Government of Macedonia to work with the OSCE Mission in Skopje to develop a more integrated education system that opens opportunities for all the peoples of Macedonia.

Ambassador Vollebaek, you and your staff play a crucial role in reducing tensions within and among states, and we commend your readiness to address sensitive issues related to national minorities. Certainly, there are numerous and thorny challenges that stand before you, but we are encouraged that the governments of a number of participating States have expressed interest in implementing your recommendations. You are making a real difference, and we

continue to support you and your team for your persistent and even-handed focus on improving social integration for the OSCE region's diverse constellation of peoples. Your efforts improve relations between states and among groups whose populations straddle state borders.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.