



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Address by OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, Ambassador Knut Vollbaek

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 16, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We warmly welcome Ambassador Vollebaek back to the Permanent Council and we thank him for his comprehensive report.

The treatment of minorities is at the heart of many of Europe's potential, current, and continuing conflicts. As you noted, your work plays a critical role in conflict prevention, particularly in providing early warning. The persistence of tension and conflict over minority issues should compel us to do even more to address not only the causes, but also the conditions that can exacerbate conflict.

This applies most urgently in the case of Kyrgyzstan. President Otunbayeva recently spoke in the Permanent Council about the ongoing challenges her country faces, which are rooted in high levels of nationalism and intolerance. We share your concerns that persistent nationalism will undermine stability in southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly during the upcoming Presidential election.

We believe that the OSCE, together with the international community, must redouble efforts to help restore rule of law and ensure the safety of all persons. We welcome your recommendations for continued OSCE engagement on understanding the June 2010 events, policy reforms affecting minority rights, and police training. We also hope to see the important work of your office to aid in the process of mediation and reconciliation desperately needed in Kyrgyzstan.

We strongly support your continued engagement in Georgia, where your efforts to call attention to the rights and needs of ethnic minorities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are particularly important. We share your concern over the deteriorating situation in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and continue to urge full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. We continue to call for a greater international presence throughout Georgia, to include the OSCE and other international actors.

Over the years, the situation for minority populations has generally improved as democratic norms have taken hold. Unfortunately, however, the situation for some minorities – including Roma and Sinti – has deteriorated, sometimes significantly. Protecting and promoting the human rights of Roma everywhere has long been a personal commitment for Secretary Clinton and, under the Obama Administration, it is a stated priority of the United States. Like all people, ethnic Roma should have the opportunity to

live free from discrimination, enjoy equal access to education, healthcare and employment, and pursue their full potential.

We also share your concerns over persistent violations of minority rights in other OSCE states. It is clear from your report that, while definite advances have been made, there are still significant problems related to minority education in the OSCE area. The divisive education policies observed in several participating States, including restrictions on the ability of persons belonging to national minorities to have adequate opportunities to be educated in their mother tongue, are cause for concern. Such restrictions are always worrying, but particularly so when they take place in separatist areas such as Abkhazia and Transnistria, where the situation is already tense.

We agree with the High Commissioner that such restrictions have the potential to further increase tensions in the region.

Ambassador Vollebaek, your efforts play a crucial role in reducing tensions within and among states through addressing sensitive issues related to national minorities. We are encouraged by the interest expressed by the governments of a number of participating States to implement your recommendations.

We continue to support you and your team, your persistent and even-handed focus on improving education, participation by minorities in public life, the conditions of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area, and relations between states and minorities in neighboring states with whom they share affinities.

We also look forward to continuing discussion of these issues at the upcoming Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.