

Speech by Mr. Zeynel Abidin Ustaibo, the President of Culture, Arts and Sport Association Gercek, Representative of the Turkish Community of Kosovo, for the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Working Session 5 on National Minorities, 1 October 2008

His Excellency the High Commissioner,
Esteemed Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin my words by expressing my great pleasure for having the opportunity to address to such a distinguished audience while thanking to the organizers.

In my brief speech, I will touch upon the issues related to the Turkish community in the Republic of Kosovo.

Turkish Community of Kosovo constitutes one of the traditional minorities in this region that has endured for decades with its own language, education and culture. Mostly an urban group, Turks make up 1 to 2 percent of the 2.3 million strong Kosovar population.

Turkish language, spoken by 300.000 Kosovars of all ethnicities, gained its official status in 1951 and, with the 1974 Constitution, the official use of the Turkish language was further broadened. However, in the first year of the UNMIK Administration this official status was not recognized. Upon the persistent protests of the Turkish Community, the official status of the Turkish language was returned but to a limited extent through the legislation adopted by the Kosova Parliament. Following the enacting of the Law on Languages, Turkish was accepted as official language in Prizren Municipality without any condition. The law also foresaw the status of "language in official use" for Turkish in municipalities where it is traditionally spoken.

Non-Serbian minorities could take part in the status process to a very limited level and mostly indirectly.

Following the declaration of independence, widely supported and cheered by the Turkish Community, the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo is adopted. To the deep frustration of the Turkish Community, the new Constitution failed to mention the equal status of Turkish language as an official language together with Albanian and Serbian. The Article 5 of the Constitution states only that Turkish language has the status of official language at the municipal level or will be in official use at all levels as provided by law.

Furthermore, according to the Law on Identity Documents, Kosovo identity documents may include Turkish language, besides other languages of official status. At the central government level, Turkish members of parliament frequently use their right to speak Turkish and submit and demand documents in Turkish. Moreover, the Official Gazette has an edition in Turkish.

Education in Turkish language also restarted in 1951. Today, there is education in Turkish from kindergarten to high school level. Besides there are two departments in the University of Prishtina in Turkish language. We can say that these issues are well regulated under the set of laws adopted by the Kosovo Parliament. But we should admit that we face some difficulties related to the lack of adequate number of teachers, dismal classroom conditions and the failure in the provision of the required text books. Most high school classes are made without books. We believe, with the traditional role it plays and the positive contribution it puts into the cultural life of Kosovo, the education in Turkish language more than deserves a special attention and support.

Turkish community has numerous associations which have an important place in the preservation of the Turkish tradition and customs. Unfortunately, enough effort is not shown to support these associations which continue their work despite scarcities.

Failure in the protection of the Ottoman Turkish cultural heritage, which we see as the common heritage of all the Kosovars is deplorable. We find the series of attacks on the Bayraktar Turbe in Prishtina, where historical tombs were destroyed as most appalling acts of vandalism, and a

direct assault on the idea of Kosovo as a tolerant and multi-ethnic society. The non-factual negative perspective about the Ottoman period presented in the history textbooks in Albanian education should also be mentioned as an offensive element for the Turkish Community.

During the 17 November 2008 general and local elections, Central Election Committee led by the OSCE Kosova Head of Mission, upon certain claims of irregularities, invalidated an important number of votes without renewal of elections. Invalidated votes included around one third of the Turkish Kosovar votes. Appeals for the renewal of elections especially at election stations with a Turkish Kosovar majority was ignored by the Central Election Commission. It was a decision that effected the representation of the Turkish Kosovar Community deeply.

Turkish Community is represented in Kosovo Parliament with two set aside seats and one seat won by votes. The joint parliamentary group we have together with the Bosniac Community is represented in the government as a coalition partner. The Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning and the Deputy Minister of Communities and Returns are from the Turkish Community.

Still the Turkish Community is quite far from what could be achieved vis-a-vis the position of its members in the Kosovar society. The asymmetrically high ratios of unemployment among Kosovar Turks is a prime indicator. If one element leading to this result is the insufficient knowledge of the Albanian language and another one is the indifference shown by the Kosovo authorities to non-Serbian minorities of Kosovo. We are willing to work together with the authorities to strengthen the capabilities of our youth including the knowledge of Albanian language, but it must be clear to all that we will never accept a trade off with the education in Turkish language.

We expect the OSCE Mission in Kosovo to continue its engagement to enhance the role minority communities play in Kosovo. Institutional endorsement for the new municipalities like “Mamuşa” will be crucial in the period ahead.

We need more support from the international community. We see the priority areas as;

- adoption of common strategies for the support of minority communities,
- positions in administration set aside for minority representation so that the public institutions become more accessible,
- material and financial support for the education in minority languages with a special emphasis on the preparation and provision of adequate books,
- support for the founding of cultural and youth centers that can also be used by the minority associations,
- founding of language centers for minority communities,
- provision of minority community rights in the Constitution of Kosovo,
- full implementation of the Constitutional and legal provisions concerning minority communities,
- support for the minority community media.

I would like to conclude my speech by stating that we as the Kosovar Turks, despite all the shortcomings, are very hopeful for the future of the Republic of Kosovo. We have the will to exert every effort to improve our social, economic and political status. And with the much needed support of the international community we believe we will be able to overcome the immense challenges we face in linguistic and educational areas, especially in the implementation of the legislation in force.

Thank you very much.