



Streamlining diversity: COVID-19 measures that support social cohesion

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In diverse societies, it is crucial that measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 take the needs of all groups into consideration, including of persons belonging to national minorities.

In the short-term, as States introduce emergency measures, it is vital that authorities are inclusive and treat all groups, including national minorities, on the basis of effective equality. This may include providing public services and communications in the languages spoken by communities, protecting the economically vulnerable, and maintaining zero tolerance for discrimination and xenophobia. To that end, in the early stages of the crisis, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) Lamberto Zannier released a statement offering recommendations on how governments could ensure that their short-term responses to COVID-19 are inclusive and sensitive to societal diversity: www.osce.org/hcnm/449170. Key principles include:

- **Uphold human rights:** It is essential to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities are treated equally and enjoy basic human rights, especially to health and to accurate, easy-to-understand and timely information, without arbitrary discrimination, at all times, including when introducing measures time-bound to the COVID-19 emergency needs.
- **Be inclusive and sensitive to language needs:** States should provide basic services in the languages used by various communities as far as possible, especially in healthcare and in communications about the health crisis and official responses. Children belonging to minority groups should be able to continue learning in the official language, along with their mother tongue. States should strive to consult with a wide range of social groups in the design and implementation of their responses. If specific groups indicate that their needs have not been met, adjust the measures to include them.
- **Maintain zero tolerance for discrimination and xenophobia:** In times of uncertainty, deeply rooted anxieties can rise to the surface. Authorities need to be especially vigilant in monitoring and combatting instances of intolerance and xenophobia and other forms of “otherization” based on identity, ethnicity, language, religion or culture.

These principles are equally relevant for the long term. States that maintain cohesive societies are more resilient to the impacts of the crisis, and will find it easier to implement effective recovery measures.

While it is difficult to predict the ramifications of COVID-19 on our diverse societies and social cohesion, experience suggests that there is a risk that minority communities could be either adversely targeted or inadvertently and disproportionately affected, which has the potential to weaken social cohesion. If certain groups in society perceive that they are being treated differently, regardless of whether this is indeed the case, this can undermine trust between the many groups that comprise our diverse societies. There is a risk that existing divisions may deepen, creating an environment in which identity-related matters can be politicized or securitized. The decisions that authorities take now may have long-term implications for the resilience and stability of diverse societies in the future.

The HCNM has a mandate to support the OSCE participating States to address both the short-term causes of interethnic tensions and to adopt long-term measures that aim to support social cohesion. Since 1992, the HCNM has worked to increase interethnic peace and reduce tensions across the OSCE region. In almost three decades, the successive High Commissioners have published nine sets of thematic Recommendations and Guidelines that address the recurrent issues that they have encountered in their work.

Based on this experience and expertise, the High Commissioner has developed a set of specific recommendations for States to take into account in their approaches to the current crisis. These recommendations encourage States to streamline diversity in measures addressing COVID-19 across several policy areas to maintain social cohesion. The High Commissioner remains available to provide the expertise of his office to the OSCE participating States in these unprecedented times.

I. Access to public administration and services

As States introduce measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, it is in their interest to ensure that information is communicated clearly and transparently so that everyone in society understands what is required. Persons belonging to national minorities, who may not have an adequate proficiency in the official language(s), could be excluded from official communications, reducing a State's ability to address the crisis. Likewise, it is in the interest of the authorities to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has equal access to public administration and services.¹

1. States should take every effort to ensure that communications issued by public administrations, including printed materials for distribution, as well as essential public signs and announcements, are available in multiple languages, including the languages spoken by minority communities. Communications, including visual materials, should be representative of the whole of society, including national minorities and gender.
2. States should enable the use of minority languages for essential public administration and services if this is not envisaged in legislation, especially in healthcare, where possible, according to the needs of communities concerned.
3. States may consider bringing in additional resources to enhance the operational effectiveness and capacity of public administration and the civil service to provide communications and public services, such as healthcare, in a timely and accurate fashion in multiple minority languages.
4. While States have a right to promote official language(s) to advance the integration of society, the HCNM recommends that States use incentives rather than punitive measures to encourage use of the State and official language(s). If punitive measures are, nevertheless, in place, States are encouraged to take a flexible and pragmatic approach by easing fines and punitive measures for non-compliance with language regulations. This may facilitate and expedite smooth interaction and information exchange for all groups, regardless of their linguistic background.
5. Law enforcement agencies in many States are being given additional powers related to the extraordinary measures. States must ensure that enforcement is conducted in an impartial and non-discriminatory manner, which does not single out any particular group and excludes ethnic profiling. In multi-ethnic areas, police should consider deploying ethnically mixed teams, where possible, to build public confidence and increase their operational effectiveness. If States consider temporarily using surveillance technologies to track the spread of the virus, this should not target any groups disproportionately.
6. As public administration and services adjust to respond to the crisis, States should include national minority representatives in the decision-making processes related to measures that will affect them, including the drafting of ethical medical frameworks. National minority representatives should be included in discussions necessary to resolving problems, as their role can help ensure, to the extent possible, a balanced community response to difficult ethical dilemmas such as triage, when relevant.
7. States could create conditions for national minorities to initiate and participate in initiatives that may complement State interventions, as well as to act as multipliers and linguistic and cultural interpreters in their respective communities, as a way to build solidarity.

II. Access to media

When States issue special measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, it is essential that everyone in society can comprehend what is expected of them in a language that they understand. In addition, there is the risk that information spaces could be misused to spread rumours and misinformation or incite ethnically based hatred.²

8. States are encouraged to provide access to media and to official communications in relevant minority languages, which plays a key role in timely and effective outreach to all groups in a diverse society. It also supports efforts to build a common framework so that all members of society, including national minorities, understand what measures they need to take to contribute to addressing the spread or the consequences of COVID-19 in their communities.
9. States may consider adopting technical and other measures to ensure easy access to information for persons belonging to national minorities in their own languages if there is a likelihood that the State language is not mastered by all. This is particularly important for prompt dissemination of critical announcements targeting all members of society with regard to new or urgent measures.
10. In the context where minority media could help multiply official messages related to addressing the crisis and its impacts, States should not discourage national minorities from creating their own media channels to increase access to and redistribution of official information in their own language(s) and, if possible, they could provide support in this regard. If there are regulations in place limiting the share of minority languages in media, those could be liberalized or suspended as temporary measure.
11. States should pay special attention to the needs of smaller minorities or other vulnerable linguistic groups that usually have limited access to media in their own languages. An increase in content related to COVID-19 in the official language(s) should be balanced by a fair and proportionate content in the languages of minorities.
12. Rumours and misinformation can spread rapidly in times of uncertainty. It is in the interest of authorities to invest in shared media spaces for minorities and majorities to provide trustworthy sources of information. This builds cohesiveness in society and is a key method to address the proliferation of echo chambers, filter bubbles, and other forms of insular discursive and information spaces, including on social media.

III. Access to education

The temporary closure of educational institutions in many States has forced a move towards distance-learning models, including online or televised teaching methods. There is the risk that members of national minorities may be disproportionately affected due to a possible reduction of opportunities for education in and of minority languages. It is important to provide continuity for children, including national minorities, to help them cope with the extraordinary circumstances.³

13. States should ensure that the education system continues to balance learning in and of the State or official language(s) with adequate opportunities for pupils to learn their minority language or receive instruction in this language.
14. States may need to tailor home learning to the needs of various communities. For instance, they may need to provide additional resources to certain minority communities that are vulnerable due to their socio-economic situation to ensure that they have the necessary technical infrastructure and means to access education.
15. States should consider providing additional assistance for teaching staff, including those of minority background and those involved in multilingual education, who are providing teaching through alternative means, including online and via public television.

16. If States need to introduce budget restrictions due to the economic consequences of COVID-19, they need to ensure that any cuts within the education system do not disproportionately affect schools with teaching in and of minority languages.

IV. Access to opportunities for socio-economic inclusion and participation

The crisis will likely result in negative socio-economic consequences, particularly for vulnerable communities, including national minorities. National minorities are in some cases disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled labour and the informal economy, or located in cross-border areas with related economic activities. Moreover, some minority communities and, in particular, women belonging to national minorities, may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of the resultant economic crisis due to pre-existing structural inequalities and socially conditioned attitudes.⁴

17. States are encouraged to take steps to mitigate the potential for the socio-economic consequences of the crisis to have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable communities, including national minorities. States may need to pay particular attention to low-wage workers, informal labourers, and persons without access to identity documents or formal bank accounts. As national minorities are, in some cases, disproportionately concentrated in such categories, there is a risk that they may fall into poverty and social exclusion.
18. Many persons belonging to national minorities are self-employed or have small businesses, including many operating in border regions or across borders. States are encouraged to ensure that such businesses are not disproportionately harmed by the consequences of the crisis. In particular, States are encouraged to take positive actions to counter minorities' economic marginalization and exclusion, including by identifying and implementing supportive measures.
19. Women, including women belonging to national minorities, who often bear additional responsibilities in their households, might be disproportionately affected by the social and economic consequences of the crisis. They might face additional barriers in accessing the labour market for numerous reasons, including due to the shut down or lack of public infrastructure or due to difficulties accessing childcare. States are encouraged to consider facilitating, including through social campaigns and other incentives, minority women's participation in the labour market.
20. States are encouraged to co-operate with the private business sector to overcome the consequences of the crisis, including supporting corporate social responsibility initiatives that safeguard the equal protection of everyone, including members of national minorities.
21. Any fiscal and budgetary policies aimed at cushioning the social and economic effects of the crisis should apply equally to the needs of persons belonging to national minorities, especially those living in border, rural and remote areas, to ensure that they can equally benefit from financial support. This also presupposes that States follow a transparent process and communicate in all relevant languages, including in the languages of minorities.

V. Cross-border co-operation and inter-State relations

Cross-border activities have been negatively affected by responses to the crisis. This may have long-term consequences for the way States operate, and may have a disproportionate effect on national minorities living in border areas and who are often involved in cross-border trade. There is a risk that unresolved cross-border issues – including disputes over natural resources such as water, land, pastures, and non-demarcated or delimited parts of the border – could become acute. These issues often have an interethnic dimension.⁵

22. Authorities of States with shared borders are encouraged to actively collaborate with each other and with local cross-border communities, including national minorities, to be aware of and be able to respond to early warning signs of any possible tensions.

23. States increase their capacities to respond to the crisis and its longer-term consequences if they collaborate and co-ordinate their efforts with each other across borders. National minorities could be consulted on various initiatives that support these efforts, thus enabling minorities to act as bridge-builders.
24. In many States, different ethnic communities consult different media sources. In some cases, minorities predominantly consume foreign media. In the interest of good neighbourly relations, States providing media that is followed in neighbouring States should refrain from disseminating, encouraging or endorsing propaganda or inflammatory discourse that aims to, or is likely to, obstruct or undermine integration in other States. Equally, States should refrain from disseminating messages that could lead to hostility towards particular groups, including national minorities. States should avoid undermining friendly relations within and among States and/or the sovereignty of other States.
25. Where appropriate, “kin”-States may offer assistance to support education abroad with regard to textbooks, language training, teacher training or school facilities. Such support should be non-discriminatory and have the consent of the State where the minorities reside and be in line with applicable domestic and international educational standards. Likewise, if States provide support to cultural, infrastructural or other projects, this should respect the laws and be done with the consent of the country in which they are implemented, and should be done preferably on a territorial rather than an ethnic basis.

¹ *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/oslo-recommendations>; *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/hague-recommendations>; *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/ljubljana-guidelines>; and *The Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/policing-recommendations>.

² *The Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/tallinn-guidelines>; *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/oslo-recommendations>; and *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/ljubljana-guidelines>.

³ *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/hague-recommendations>.

⁴ *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/ljubljana-guidelines>.

⁵ *The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/bolzano-bozen-recommendations>.