



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Astrid Thors

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 10, 2014

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

High Commissioner, we thank you for your presence, for your report, and for your ongoing work on conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage. Your work is akin to a smoke alarm, providing us with an early warning of impending danger. Events in Ukraine have shown that we must respond to warnings with action, to prevent tensions from igniting into violence.

Your efforts have taken on an even greater significance in recent months as Europe has seen one state assert the right, and even the responsibility, to violate international law and intervene militarily in the territory of another state in the name of persons of similar ethnic background. We hope we can manage to de-escalate the ongoing situation in Ukraine peacefully, and renounce violence in similar cases in the future. The 2008 Bolzano Recommendations are valuable in this regard. We urge their use to manage relations between neighboring States when national minority issues arise.

We thank you for your joint report with ODIHR that assessed the human rights and minority rights situation in Ukraine. In your report, you noted the importance of language issues in Ukraine, as in all OSCE participating States. We would like to highlight Ukraine's positive progress on this issue, as its government moves forward implementing important constitutional reforms. The draft constitutional amendments published by the Ukrainian parliament on June 27 would grant authority to local governments to confer special status on Russian or other minority language. President Poroshenko himself has said, "the language issue won't divide the country again." We welcome these developments and encourage the Ukrainian government's ongoing inclusive dialogue process.

You also noted in your report that ethnic Ukrainians and Tatars in Crimea who espouse pro-Ukrainian views or manifest a will to uphold their identity, especially their religion, culture and language, appear increasingly vulnerable and are in urgent need of protection. You stated that addressing this is a responsibility borne first and foremost by the Russian occupation authorities exercising de facto control in Crimea. Given this urgent need, we hope you can report that you have had unfettered access to Crimea to ensure these minority rights are being respected, and that you – and other OSCE actors, including the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) – will have this access in the weeks and months ahead. The surest way to restore the rights of all in Crimea is for the Russian Federation to reverse its illegal attempted annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and to abide by its international obligations.

While the situation in Ukraine has drawn much of our attention, we continue to view your work as essential for conflict prevention throughout the OSCE area. We would like to make just a few comments in regard to specific visits you have made since you last provided a comprehensive report to the Permanent Council.

We agree that sustained commitment concerning the use of Russian and Kazakh languages is important in Kazakhstan. We are pleased to see Uzbek- and Uighur-language schools, like Russian schools, receive positive support from Kazakh government authorities.

Your ongoing work to improve inter-ethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan is also commendable. We support your work to urge the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to implement the Action Plan and to promote a balanced language policy that safeguards linguistic diversity.

We welcome Moldova's desire to pursue an integration strategy that bridges gaps with its minority populations, including those with the Russian-speaking community.

Similarly, we are pleased to see Georgia's "National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration." We encourage your efforts to enhance political participation of national minorities in Georgia. The Administrative Boundary Lines are artificial barriers that hinder both freedom of movement and inter-ethnic relations.

In Macedonia, worrisome inter-ethnic tensions continue, as demonstrated by protests and violence over the weekend. Recent announcements of verdicts from criminal cases have exacerbated ongoing inter-ethnic tensions. We urge you to remain engaged with the government and political leaders to encourage dialogue and reforms, particularly in education, to further integrate society and improve inter-ethnic relations.

Likewise, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we welcome the attention you have paid to the complex issue of the national census. We wonder whether the OSCE can play a greater role assisting national authorities with data verification and processing, given some delays in the process. We recall the positive conclusions reached at the Regional Conference on Access to Civil Registration and Documentation in South-Eastern Europe, held on 25 October 2013, in Podgorica, Montenegro, and encourage follow-up.

Your visit to southern Serbia in January also appeared to be successful. The United States supports enhanced dialogue and confidence-building measures in this region. We are encouraged to see Serbian media broadcasting in several languages of minority populations.

We note your visit to Romania and we will continue to support positive steps taken by the government and urge that the Balzano Recommendations be consulted first by affected parties should tensions arise.

Regarding your comments on recent events in Kosovo, where incidents involving barricades on the main bridge in Mitrovica led to violent protests, as a general rule we second your call for careful coordination and dialogue between relevant stakeholders at all stages, in the interests of stability and furthering the strong progress being made toward normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations under the April 2013 agreement.

Thank you again, High Commissioner, for your valuable work. We wish you all the best going forward. And thank you for the announcement of the winner of the Max van der Stoel Award, I will release a statement on that separately.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.