



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

STATEMENT

by
Rolf Ekéus

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
383rd Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council

Vienna, 7 March 2002

Regarding **Latvia**, the immediate question of interest is the matter of the abolishment of the language requirement in the Election Law. I however wish to clarify that my engagement in Latvia, acting on the basis of my mandate, regards a broad range of issues. The Latvian Foreign Minister in a letter to me has also confirmed this in December last year.

During contacts with the President, Prime Minister and leading representatives of political fractions in the Parliament I have been given to understand that there is a good prospect that the Election Law can be amended. However, to make this possible, a number of changes to the Constitution are necessary. These concern inter alia the strengthening of the Latvian language, both on a national and a local level. I have been fully informed about the present situation regarding these amendments and will during deliberations in the Parliament, take on the responsibility to continue to evaluate the compatibility of them with international norms as well as their impact on the relations between the majority and minority in Latvia. Regarding the timetable, some politicians caution that the amendment of the Election Law could be delayed awaiting the outcome of the process of changing the Constitution.

I emphasized to the Latvian Government that the process of naturalization is of high importance and that the momentum should be maintained and if possible further accelerated.

I conducted detailed discussions on the planned education reform making the Latvian language compulsory as the only language of tuition on the secondary level, beginning in 2004. There is some skepticism about the practical feasibility of this target date. However, the authorities make great efforts to implement this reform to the extent possible. I expressed my expectation that the minority concerns will be taken fully into account.

I also visited the newly established Society Integration Foundation. Its opening is an important step. I intend to engage myself further on related issues and my Office is therefore now elaborating a project on social integration in Latvia.

Regarding projects, I have also decided to take on board the project of a manual for language inspectors, initially drafted by the now closed OSCE mission to Latvia. My Office has reworked this blueprint and I have, during my visit, reached a preliminary understanding with the Head of the State Language Center on its application.

I am returning to Latvia on the 20th of March and plan to visit **Estonia** on the 28th of March.

On 28 February, I wrote a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the **Federal Republic of Yugoslavia** commending the adoption by the Parliament of the Law of Protection of National Minorities. The law is designed to provide a stronger legislative framework for comprehensive protection of persons belonging to national minorities. Over the past year, I have been closely engaged in assisting the ministry for national and ethnic communities with the preparation of the draft law. I have also offered my assistance in the process of implementing the law.

Last week I visited **Croatia**. I had extensive discussions with the President and high-ranking officials as well as with representatives of the Serbian and other minorities. I also visited the town of Vukovar.

Some progress has been achieved in the areas covered by my mandate. However, there are still concerns regarding the return of refugees, repossession of property and other housing issues as well as the implementation of the Amnesty Law. My visit coincided with the decision of the Croatian Government to withdraw the Constitutional law on National Minorities from further procedures. This gives me reasons for concern. I was, however, assured that renewed efforts would be made to develop a new draft. I underlined the importance of such a law and offered to assist in this drafting process.

In **the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**, I have recently joined the Board of the SEE University. I felt that this was a natural step as the project was launched by the High Commissioner. I have also been engaged in the issue of preparing the census and the international monitoring of the census through participation in the Steering Committee, which should give political guidance to the process. It is however likely that the census will be postponed for the third time.

Directly after my last Report to the PC, I visited the **Slovak Republic** and met with Foreign Minister Kukan, representatives of the Hungarian minority and senior officials. I was particularly interested in minority-related legislation and how the Act on Hungarians Living in Neighboring Countries, the so-called Status Law, is affecting domestic politics and Slovakia's bilateral relations with Hungary. I also visited Constantine the Philosopher

University in Nitra to see what steps are being taken to improve pedagogical training in minority languages.

I am impressed by the steps that the Slovak Government has taken in the past three years to protect and promote the rights of persons belonging to national minorities in the Slovak Republic. I hope that the Government will continue in such a positive vein over the next few years.

Regarding the matter of the Status Law I have communicated my views on the basis of my statement of principle on 26 October 2001 calling for continued bilateral consultations between the two Governments.

In early February, I visited **Ukraine** and conducted meetings with the President, high officials and with national minorities, including representatives of the formerly deported people of Crimea (Crimean Tartars). I welcomed that Ukraine has recently adopted a Law on Citizenship which has opened good opportunities for the returning formerly deported people to quickly become citizens. There is a concern about inter-ethnic relations in Crimea, especially on the matter of political representation. As I did not have the opportunity to visit Crimea on this visit I will return to Ukraine after the elections of 31 March.

I visited **Georgia** from 6 to 9 February and met a number of senior officials including President Eduard Shevardnadze as well as a number of representatives of national minorities.

During the last months I have been engaged in Georgia as my Office has provided advice and assistance in the process of developing a law on the State Language.

I also paid a visit to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia. This region is mainly populated by Armenians and is isolated from the rest of the country in terms of economy, information and politics. For the local population the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki and the Armenian press are the main sources of information regarding Georgian affairs. The economy is mainly directed towards Russia and Armenia and the Russian rubel is the main currency. The possible return of the Meskhetians, who were deported from Georgia in 1944, increases the potential for tension. The social-economic situation in the region makes me concerned as it increases tensions between the majority and the minority. I therefore feel that

I have to remain involved in this region, especially as the OSCE mission mainly focuses on South Ossetia and the UN on Abkhazia .

I have, since my last Report, closely monitored political developments in **Moldova** where there is an ongoing tension regarding language issues. I am also closely following the situation concerning the difficult situation in the schools in Transdnistria where the Romanian (Moldavian) language is taught in the Latin script.