



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
November 20, 2014

High Commissioner Thors, we are pleased to see you again since your last presentation before the Permanent Council in July. Your visit is particularly appropriate given ongoing threats to security in the OSCE region. We rely heavily on your essential conflict prevention work, and we thank you for your report.

Your efforts have remained timely and targeted in the wake of ongoing Russia-backed separatist aggression in eastern Ukraine and abuses by *de facto* authorities against members of ethnic and religious groups related to the occupation and purported annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. We agree with the assessment you made of the Russia-crisis manifesting itself in Ukraine when you were in Geneva last month at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Meeting, when you said that "it threatens the foundation of Europe's public order, as confirmed by the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE commitments." The dangerous situation created by Russia in Ukraine's Donbas and Crimea regions has far-reaching implications for your mandate of ensuring the protection of the human rights of members of minority groups.

We commend you for traveling to Ukraine in recent months and reporting on the situation there. In fact, the Needs Assessment on the Integration of Formerly Deported People in Crimea, Ukraine, which was prepared by your office in 2013, served as an early warning of the sharp decline in the respect for the human rights of members of minority groups we are now witnessing in Russia-occupied Crimea. This report, and your subsequent work, noted that Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainian communities in Crimea are particularly vulnerable. Unfortunately, under Russia's occupation of Crimea, these communities are in fact under serious threat. We note a report released this week by Human Rights Watch documenting a wide range of abuses, including enforced disappearances and systemic harassment of independent civil society and media. High Commissioner Thors, we encourage you to travel more frequently to Crimea to assess the situation on the ground. We hope that you and other OSCE institutions, including the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, will be afforded unfettered access to Crimea in order to fulfill your mandates.

High Commissioner Thors, while you remain seized with the situation in Ukraine, we hope you will continue to engage actively in other countries as well. We congratulate you on your successful trip to Serbia. You noted the positive steps made by Serbian authorities to support Romanian and Vlach speakers. We also commend the Serbian government for the successful administration of National Minority Council elections last month.

We also want to recognize the first visit to Albania by a High Commissioner for National Minorities since 1994. We agree with your assessment that a climate of respect for national minorities prevails in Albania. Your visit reinforced the steps taken by Albanian authorities to improve their institutional framework to address minority rights.

Thank you for the update on your October trip to Latvia. We view positively your indication that Latvian authorities recognize the need for continued work on integration issues and to look for ways of reaching out to minority communities with locally produced content, including through an increase in Russian-language programming provided by the public broadcaster. Additionally, we commend your ongoing work with Moldovan authorities to develop a national integration strategy for national minorities. These efforts demonstrate that your office will remain pivotal in improving the situation for national minorities throughout the OSCE region.

We particularly commend the cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Education in Kyrgyzstan that you signed in October. The agreement represents a positive step toward a balanced language policy that safeguards linguistic diversity in that country. Despite this progress, we must reiterate our call for the need for a meaningful reconciliation process to overcome the ethnic divide that persists in the wake of the interethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

High Commissioner Thors, your strong contribution at the Gender Equality Review Conference demonstrated an important trajectory for OSCE work in the years to come. The participation of minority women in political and public life is vital to functioning democracies. You rightly emphasized that, "broad, inclusive participation contributes to stable, just and secure societies." We welcome your goal of launching an assessment of political participation mechanisms for members of minorities in central and southeastern Europe, and look forward to the results. Additionally, we welcome your cooperation with ODIHR to publish a handbook on national minorities' involvement in electoral processes, and your recommendations to implement important aspects of the 2012 Ljubljana Guidelines on Diverse Societies.

Thank you again, High Commissioner Thors, for your valuable work. We wish you all the best going forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.