



OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF MISSION

Press and Public Information Unit

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**Interview with Ambassador Hans Ola Ursatad, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia
(translation)**

- 1. Council of Europe (CoE) Parliamentary Assembly Resolution assessed current inter-ethnic situation in Vojvodina as satisfactory, with a note that there are still occasional ethnically motivated incidents, but that they are now much less frequent and of weaker intensity. How would you assess the current moment?**

I agree that there are reasons to be optimistic. Vojvodina has been traditionally a region of multi-ethnicity, multi-culturalism and tolerance, and it should remain as such. Central and Vojvodina authorities as well as local community leaders and civil society activists have undertaken many initiatives aimed at improving inter-ethnic dialogue and trust by strengthening capacity of different bodies that are dealing with protection and promotion of minority rights (Provincial Ombudsman, financial support to National Minority Councils, civil society organizations) as well as numerous initiatives in support of respect for diversity. What is positive is the sense that these initiatives are being embraced by the Vojvodinian community as a whole, and that young people are full participants. One good example is a project “Cup of Tolerance”, an initiative the Vojvodina Provincial Secretary for National Minorities established in 2005. This project is aimed at encouraging young people of different ethnic backgrounds to get to know each other better and understand each others history and traditions. The OSCE Mission has been

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pleased to support this initiative. The Alphabet of Tolerance, a project that has encouraged primary school students to better understand the multi-ethnic history of Serbia is another initiative that has been implemented in the Province and supported by the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

But more can and should be done, because tolerance and multi-culturalism, like everything else, should be nourished. That said, I would agree with the Council of Europe's assessment in that the ethnically related incidents appear to be less frequent but would emphasize that what remains extremely important is how the authorities and the general public respond to such incidents. The causes of ethnically motivated incidents remain complex and in addition to immediate condemnation of the incidents, we encourage long-lasting and continuous measures toward a full respect for diversity. It is this multi-faceted approach that will continue to provide the basis for strengthening the society that benefits from and embraces its rich diversity.

2. Provincial secretary for national minorities Tamas Korhec has recently praised Serbian authorities for progress achieved with regards to multilingualism, so that national minorities now exercise their rights to bilingual application forms when requesting personal documents...

I am pleased to note that on several issues pertaining to the rights of national minorities Serbia has not only met, but has exceeded international standards.

When considering the official use of language provisions which have recently been incorporated in, for example, the Law on Identity Cards, I believe this is one such positive example. I hope that this law is being properly implemented in all parts of Serbia. This is a complicated process – there remains work to be done and I am pleased to note that in Vojvodina the authorities have been responsive to the requests from minority communities to have bi-lingual documentation.

- 3. On the other hand, the adoption of the Law on National Councils, which should finally regulate in details competences, financing and elections of these bodies of minority self-administration, is being postponed for almost four years now...**

The Constitution prescribes the right to cultural self government for national minorities in the Republic of Serbia. There is a progressive framework law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. But the issue is that there is no law that regulates in details competences, financing and elections of the National Minority Councils. We have been following these issues closely and have expressed its concerns over the lack of the Law on a number of occasions, including at my yearly report to the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna. Adoption of this Law is crucial for continued institutionalization of the National Minority Councils. Experts from the OSCE Mission have been conducting an assessment of the National Minority Councils and the adoption of this Law repeatedly comes up as a top priority for the councils. Some council members have been elected and working for more than seven years (which is beyond their mandate), so it is clear that a law that outlines how those elections should take place is essential. We are pleased to know that this issue is also priority for the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights. We are ready to support the drafting processes through expertise either from the Mission or from the other OSCE institutions such as the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

- 4. In line with the idea of direct elections of national councils, Vojvodina Hungarians parties have prepared a proposal on creating a separate minority voters' list. Although participation in this list is on voluntary basis, a discrimination question is posed somewhat righteous, in light of the fact that citizens are guaranteed by the Constitution of Serbia right not to declare themselves about their national belonging. What is the European experience in this issue?**

I would emphasize that that there are no OSCE standards on the separate minority voters list. Although such lists may be somewhat complex and the whole issue is quite sensitive. Our standpoint is that the new Law on National Minority Councils must precisely regulate the organizational and functional concept of national councils in Serbia providing basis for effective exercise of the right to cultural self governance.

5. The said CoE report expresses concern over differences existing among regions in Serbia with regards to the respect of minority rights, and it is estimated that minorities in Eastern Serbia are in a worse position than the minorities in Vojvodina. What is the road to making minority rights equal in the entire country?

The Council of Europe report lists several recommendations aimed at improvement of the situation of national minorities and I believe that some of them are already implemented. The re-establishment of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and the appointment of the deputy Ombudsperson for national minorities are two very important actions taken by Serbia. Also I am sure that completion and proper implementation of a legal framework, for example, Laws on the National Minority Councils and on Anti-discrimination will have positive effect. Also, continued economic growth, decentralization, and foreign investment will have an impact on people's lives throughout Serbia, including those areas of Serbia, which have significant minority populations and face economic challenges.

6. Serb minority in Kosovo is in an unprecedented discriminated position. Not only that this position hasn't improved, but it got aggravated with the unilateral declaration of Kosovo independence. Official Belgrade still considers Kosovo its territory, but international community has, for years now, been responsible for the position of human and minority rights in the region.

Ensuring adequate protection of the minorities is a guiding principle for OSCE, which all of our participating States endorse. The OSCE Mission in Kosovo has been deployed there with a mandate to among other things, monitor human rights situation and help develop local democratic institutions. As for the specifics, I would defer you to the Head of Mission in Kosovo, Ambassador Werner Almhofer who is better positioned to answer your question.

7. During your visit to Subotica and Novi Sad, you will meet with representatives of local and provincial authorities, as well as with Heads of National Minority Councils. What do you expect from these meetings and what is the message you are bringing to them?

I would like to highlight that this visit is one of many of my regular trips to Vojvodina. Both my predecessors and I have understood the importance of regular communication with the National Minority Councils, local and provincial authorities and have sought to meet with them on a regular basis. Also, my colleagues from the Mission Democratization Department work on issues related to minorities and have frequent contacts with the Councils and authorities in Vojvodina. I am very much looking forward to this visit and hope to learn more what the Councils and authorities view as priorities for the coming year. On behalf of the Mission, I will try to assure the Councils that we are monitoring very closely the process of developing and adoption of the Law on National Minority Councils, and that we are ready to help them in doing their work. I also look forward to discussing with local officials and Council representatives our common interests regarding the promotion and protection of minority rights as well as joint initiatives (eg. Serbian classes for Hungarian youth). Supporting minorities' rights in Serbia is an important part of the OSCE Mission's mandate and we will continue to support the country's efforts aimed at strengthening the dialogue between different ethnicities contributing to a sustainable and stable society for all citizens of Serbia.