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High Commissioner on National Minorities

Address by
Astrid Thors

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

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Dear excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Since I last addressed you in November 2015, I have continued my active engagement with the participating States. I will begin by describing my country visits in a chronological order, before highlighting a number of overarching issues.

In November last year, I visited **Kyrgyzstan**, soon after the parliamentary elections. Compared with previous elections, the minority communities participated more actively in the campaign this time and there were fewer instances of nationalist rhetoric and open pressure on persons belonging to national minorities. Commendably, all of the parties complied with the requirement to have minority representatives make up 15 per cent of their party lists before the elections. However, a number of obstacles continue to block the full electoral participation of national minorities. The most pressing problem is that, similarly to parliamentary elections in 2011, the parties changed their candidate lists after the elections, thereby excluding a number of minority representatives from the final list of parliamentarians. As a result, ethnic Uzbeks – the biggest minority in the country – remain severely under-represented in the Parliament. I therefore called upon the authorities to initiate legal and policy amendments which would make the existing quota system more effective, ensuring the adequate representation of national minorities in the national parliament and local legislative bodies.

I continue to have an ongoing dialogue with the authorities and all relevant stakeholders about the implementation of the integration policy in Kyrgyzstan. The key policy framework in this realm, the State Concept on National Unity and Inter-ethnic Relations, is half-way through its implementation period. I therefore welcome the authorities' intention to conduct a mid-term evaluation of the Concept's progress. While some important and tangible results have been achieved, I encourage the authorities to step up activities aimed at increasing the participation and representation of national minorities as well as ensuring full access to justice.

Kyrgyzstan actively participates in the HCNM regional Central Asia Education Programme. With the support of UNICEF and my institution the Ministry of Education and Science in Kyrgyzstan has been piloting multilingual education models in 56 minority schools across the country. While I am glad that the Ministry supports the multilingual and multicultural

approach to education, we must recognize that this is a long-term endeavour, which should be pursued consistently and assiduously. For these policies to be successful, particularly as an instrument for integration, the authorities should strive to maintain a balance between promoting the State language and protecting mother tongue education. In this regard, the abolishment of the national school graduation test in the Uzbek language in 2015, which essentially denied many young ethnic Uzbeks the opportunity to continue their studies, represented a setback for comprehensive and balanced education policies. I continue to urge the authorities to reinstate the Uzbek language graduation test at least for a transition period, which would allow for multilingual teaching to provide some tangible results.

With reference to southern **Serbia**, I chaired the Stakeholder Committee meeting of the Bujanovac Department of the Subotica Faculty of Economics of the University of Novi Sad in the beginning of December in Belgrade. The meeting took place shortly after the inauguration of the permanent premises of the Department and the graduation of first group of students of mixed ethnic background with bachelor's degrees in economics. These are very concrete results emanating from an initiative launched by my predecessor, Ambassador Vollebaek, and implemented during the course of the last years in close cooperation with the Government of Serbia, the Municipality of Bujanovac and other key stakeholders, with financial support from the EU and Switzerland. Since its establishment in 2011, this bilingual, State-funded higher education institution has become a symbol of interaction and integration between all communities in southern Serbia. While more work remains to be done to ensure the maintenance of the high-quality education at the Department and its long-term sustainability, I commend the commitment of all stakeholders in the Department and their determination to make it a success. For those who are interested in learning more about the Bujanovac Department and its activities, further information is available on the HCNM website, including a short film on the evolution of the Department.

My institution has also continued working in the field of integration through language acquisition in Serbia by developing a Serbian-Albanian Albanian-Serbian dictionary suitable for use in primary schools. The dictionary is expected to be completed in the second half of the year. Moreover, we are supporting the Government-led work on improving of teaching of the Serbian language as non-mother tongue, which is a continuation of a multi-year effort to improve acquisition and teaching of the official language in Serbia.

The situation in **Ukraine** remains among the highest priorities of my institution. Like many, I am concerned about the continued violations of the ceasefire in the east of the country. Ongoing hostilities severely affect the civilian population in the conflict zone including by forcing many people to leave their homes and become internally displaced persons and refugees. I commend the Special Monitoring Mission for its concerted efforts in difficult circumstances to assess compliance with the Minsk agreements and promote their implementation and I appreciate the contribution of other OSCE structures towards broader stability of the country.

I have long maintained that improved policies in the field of inter-ethnic relations would help to consolidate Ukrainian society and would increase stability in the country as a whole. A key ingredient for this purpose would be a stronger institutional framework that would facilitate a dialogue between national minorities and the Ukrainian authorities on issues of common concern. It would, furthermore, help to bring Ukraine closer in compliance with European standards by equipping the State with appropriate national, regional and local arrangements to build a stable democracy.

I visited Kyiv earlier this year in order to co-host, in cooperation with the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Human Rights, National Minorities and Inter-ethnic Relations, a round table on “Strengthening the Institutional Framework Related to Inter-ethnic Relations in Ukraine in the Context of Decentralization”. I appreciated the views expressed by participants who noted that a dedicated executive body or a co-ordination mechanism, preferably one that falls directly under the Cabinet of Ministers, should be made responsible for national minority rights and the integration of society. It should also have the competencies to develop, implement and co-ordinate overall government policies. I also noted concerns expressed by attending minority representatives that they are insufficiently involved in the ongoing political and legislative reforms that affect them, including in the decentralization process.

During my visit to Kyiv, I had the opportunity to meet with several representatives of minority communities, including Russian minority organizations, in Ukraine. Some of them informed me about the difficulties they face in protecting and promoting their culture and language, particularly in the sphere of education.

In my previous statements, I drew your attention to the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which has been a priority for my institution for many years. I am concerned about the decision taken on 26 April to declare the Mejlis as an “extremist organization” and prohibit its activities. This is yet another manifestation of a worrying increase in politically motivated pressure on the representatives of the Crimean Tatar community that is having a direct impact on the community's ability to protect and promote its culture and traditions. As I have not been granted access to the peninsula, I can only refer to sources such as reports by other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Continued repression leading to social isolation could in the long run lead to radicalization and to situations where resorting to violence is not excluded. At the same time, attention should be paid to the Kherson region, with a focus on causes and possible consequences of a rising level of perceived insecurity among the population living in close proximity to the Administrative Boundary Line.

I visited **Bosnia and Herzegovina** in March, shortly after the country had submitted its EU membership application. I traveled to Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka and other localities. During the visit, I witnessed and commended increased local ownership by for example parliamentary bodies, with regard to efforts to review progress and co-ordinate further strengthening of human rights protection, including the rights of minorities. However, when I met with national minority councils at the State and entity levels, dissatisfaction with the level of attention they receive and their limited influence on political and legislative processes was expressed. I encouraged authorities to adopt the State level Strategic Platform on National Minorities as a key tool to ensure that all members of society, including national minorities, have equal rights and opportunities.

I regret that there was no progress in implementing the European Court of Human Rights rulings on Sejdić and Finci nor on Zornić, and, consequently, no advancement in addressing the discriminatory nature of the governance system derived from the Dayton Peace agreement. This is having a negative impact on the conditions of national minorities in particular and is also a source of inequality in general, thereby preventing the development of a genuine concept of citizenship.

Unfortunately, I also directly observed an increase in nationalist rhetoric, hampering reconciliation.

With regard to education, there has been no change in the ‘two schools under one roof’ approach, whereby children of different ethnicities are physically separated within one single school and learn from different curricula. However, I noted an increased awareness of the need to improve the quality of education, also by harmonizing the curricula as far as possible. In other parts of the country, there are issues with the naming of the language of instruction which have led to classes being boycotted by school children, as has also been noted by the Head of the OSCE mission in his recent report to the Permanent Council. I therefore urge the relevant authorities to engage in dialogue to find solutions to this contested issue that would be acceptable to all, and I stand ready to assist. During my visit, I also witnessed local initiatives aimed at using education to build civic values, strengthen social cohesion and bridge divides between communities. I encourage local institutions to follow this path.

I visited **Georgia** in April, shortly after military escalation took place in the region along the line of contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone. Both in Tbilisi and in Marneuli I listened to concerns as to how regional instability in and around the South Caucasus could affect Georgia. Some minority representatives noted that potential tensions between the ethnic Armenian and Azeri communities could surface if hostilities were to reignite over Nagorno-Karabakh. Concerns were also communicated about the potential threat of religious radicalization in some parts of the country and about an increase in hate crimes and hate speech targeting minorities in Georgia. I conveyed these concerns to the authorities and underlined the need for more comprehensive policies and the involvement of political leaders to address any such potential tensions. I received reassurances that steps would be taken to safeguard and further strengthen inter-ethnic relations in the country. In that regard I commended the authorities on their recent efforts to promote the integration of society. In particular, I encouraged the effective implementation of the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration for 2015-2020 and its Action Plan. In this respect, I invited the authorities to explore synergies between the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the integration strategy.

I also urged the authorities to timely and fully implement the State Language Law, which entered into force in January 2016. It is important that this law contributes to achieving an adequate balance between promoting the State language and protecting the linguistic rights of persons belonging to national minorities. For this reason I also reiterated the importance of ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn I have continued to support a project to facilitate interaction between the political parties in the country and national minority representatives, including by bringing them together to discuss topical issues on televised talk shows. I trust this will contribute to focussing the attention of political parties on issues that concern national minorities, and that minority representatives will in turn have more opportunities for political participation and representation.

I deeply regret the fatal shooting incident on 19 May at the village of Kurcha near the Administrative Boundary Line. This loss of life illustrates that the situation in and around Abkhazia continues to warrant close attention. During my visit in Tbilisi, several interlocutors informed me of recent changes in the language of instruction in schools in lower Gali, as well as new documentation requirements in Abkhazia, which negatively affect the Georgian community. I hope that both the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism and the Geneva International Discussions can contribute not only to the prevention of future security incidents but also to a more comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues and I stand ready to support the Co-Chairs in this regard.

In May, I paid visits to **Croatia**, Hungary and Slovakia to discuss inter-State relations and the internal situations regarding the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. In general, the co-operation between these three countries on the bilateral level is quite constructive.

While in Zagreb, I focused on the full realization of rights of persons belonging to national minorities according to the international obligations undertaken by Croatia, the Croatian Constitution and relevant national laws. I emphasized the need to fully implement the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities, in particular the provisions regarding languages and scripts. A script should not be regarded as a threat or a provocation, but rather as an element of culture. I welcome the Ministry of Public Administration's initiative to closely monitor minority representation in public offices, and conduct a country-wide survey on the status of implementation of the above mentioned Constitutional Act. This thorough overview will enable areas of common interest and gaps to be identified and will indicate the policies and/or resources that are needed to implement the full spectrum of legislation to avoid any further division of society. I offered my institution's expertise in devising follow-up strategies on minority rights and providing guidance on aspects of public administration reform that are pertinent to minority rights.

Marginalizing or stigmatizing national minorities would pose a threat to societal cohesion and to bilateral relations. I urged systematic condemnation of discriminatory rhetoric or conduct. A renewed dialogue between all political and social actors is needed to overcome difficulties, including those related to the protection of minority rights.

Regarding national minorities abroad, I was pleased with the attention given to the existing joint bi-lateral inter-governmental commissions and with the active role played by all ministries under the auspices of the State Office of Croats Abroad. I would encourage the use of such mechanism to promote good neighbourly relations.

The ongoing reform of the curricula by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports could serve as a basis for shared practices in neighbouring countries facing similar needs in multi-lingual education. I have reiterated the support of my institution for teaching a common curriculum, regardless of the language of instruction, as an effective way to integrate diverse societies along common points of understanding.

I welcomed possible avenues for co-operation with the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and the Ministry of Public Administration. My institution will continue to engage closely with Croatian institutions and representatives of national minorities to foster societal cohesion and inclusive policies.

During my visits to Hungary and Slovakia, I took stock of developments regarding minority issues in bilateral relations, both between those participating States and with other participating States in the region. Tensions between Hungary and Slovakia involving minority issues have subsided in recent years, and the countries enjoy in general a positive relationship. I have recommended to both governments to take advantage of these positive conditions for dialogue and to use them to address any existing long-term disagreements on the issues of citizenship and “kin”-State minority support, in line with The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations. This will help to prevent policy disagreements on minority issues from resurfacing in the future. In line with this, I note with interest the possibility of resuming the work of the bilateral commission on minority issues and would encourage any concrete steps in this direction by both countries.

Hungary has developed an advanced legislative framework covering the rights of national minorities, with the latest major changes occurring in 2012 with respect to nationalities' self-governments and the participation of national minorities in political life. It is now possible to take stock of the implementation of some of these amendments. I welcomed the fact that financial support for the self-governments has doubled in the last year. In terms of political participation, I noted that the 13 nationality spokespersons have been appointed to Parliament. They have in practice used the possibility to discuss minority-related issues even though their right to address the Parliament is decided on a case by case basis. Some new challenges deriving from the practical implementation of the 2012 legal framework have emerged. These include maintaining adequate oversight of the use of public finances without overly burdensome accounting procedures that could negatively affect the autonomy of the self-government. I was informed that the 2012 Act on the Rights of Nationalities of Hungary is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Human Capacities and I would urge the government to conduct the review in consultation with national minority representatives.

During my visit, I also discussed promoting the integration of the Hungarian society. I acknowledged that efforts have been made with regard to improving the conditions of the Roma. Patterns of segregation of Roma continue to be an issue of concern however, with disproportionate over-representation of Roma in special schools for mentally disabled people and segregated classes or school buildings within mainstream schools. I am convinced that efforts are needed to create a climate of mutual understanding between the Roma and non-Roma to prevent tensions. In this context, a firm commitment to tackle hate speech and hate crime would be essential.

My visit to **Slovakia** followed soon after the general election and the formation of a new coalition government. I was happy to note the inclusion of national minority issues in the government's manifesto, such as a commitment to prevent the closure of small schools, including minority schools, and the provision of cultural support for minorities. I understand that the fragmented institutional structure dealing with national minorities is to remain, which is a source of disappointment for minorities. Despite the absence of a dedicated body for national minority issues with executive functions, I hope that adequate measures can be taken to develop a national minority policy and I look forward to the adoption, in consultation with minorities, of an Action Plan on National Minorities, as was originally foreseen in the Governmental Human Rights Strategy.

I also discussed the situation of the Roma, including anti-Roma rhetoric, and I hope that the new Plenipotentiary on Roma advising the Ministry of the Interior will receive support for his proposals. These include increasing pre-school opportunities and ensuring a more inclusive education system, notably by reviewing the evaluation procedure applied for placing Roma pupils in special schools. I noted with interest the planned initiative of the Plenipotentiary to facilitate access to property by Roma in non-segregated areas and hope that the local authorities in question will actively support the proposed action.

I welcome the work of the Public Defender of Rights and encourage the Government to pay adequate attention to her recommendations and provide her office with the necessary support. In particular, I encouraged greater receptiveness to the Public Defender's proposal of an independent mechanism to investigate police misconduct. Such a mechanism would be tasked to look *inter alia* into allegations of excessive use of police force towards Roma communities and could help in restoring trust in the police among the Roma community.

In May I also visited **Moldova**, where I was pleased to note some positive developments since my previous visit, despite the political and economic turbulence last year. In line with my recommendations and those of other international institutions, in November 2015 the parliament adopted a decision establishing a permanent joint working group with members of parliament and the People's Assembly of Gagauzia. I applaud this important step toward improving the functioning of the Gagauz autonomy and relations between Chisinau and Comrat. To keep this platform viable, all stakeholders must make full use of it and avoid politicizing issues under discussion. The process is still in the early stages and will require sustained commitment, patience and flexibility. I am ready to assist the working group in ways that can help it to achieve informed and balanced discussions and decisions.

Another welcome development was the adoption in December last year of a new programme to improve teaching of the State language in schools teaching in minority languages. As knowledge of the State language remains an obstacle to the participation of national minorities in public life in Moldova, efforts to address this challenge should start in the educational system and should be allowed sufficient funding. At the same time such efforts must respect the right of minorities to obtain instruction of and in minority languages. Minority representatives shared their concerns with me about the ongoing implementation of relevant provisions of the 2014 Education Code and other processes such as the optimization

of the school network and new procedures for the selection of school directors. I was glad to hear that the Ministry of Education may establish a special unit as well as a consultative council on minority education. These structures can help to improve communication and transparency on potentially sensitive education issues.

I had hoped that my visit would be an occasion to congratulate the government on the adoption of the integration strategy which my institution helped the Bureau of Interethnic Relations to develop in recent years. While recognizing that last year's political instability made the strategy's adoption difficult, I see no reason for further delay, as the document has undergone extensive consultations and has benefitted from international expertise. The Prime Minister assured me that the approval process will begin very soon and I count on his commitment in this regard.

During my visit to Moldova I also visited Transdnistria. The prospect of restarting the discussions in the 5+2 format is a promising step toward a peaceful settlement. Meanwhile, the situation of the Moldovan-administered schools teaching in the Latin script continues to warrant attention. Even if overt pressure on the schools has eased, more subtle forms of pressure are taking their toll and resulting in lower enrolments, among other consequences. I urge both sides to undertake a comprehensive agreement on these schools. I continue to work closely with the OSCE Mission to Moldova also on this issue to identify practical solutions.

After having discussed country visits undertaken since I last addressed you, let me state that in line with my conflict prevention mandate I have continued to follow the developments in **Skopje** with the utmost attention and in close coordination with the OSCE Mission and other OSCE bodies. I have observed with concern the depth of the political crisis and the difficulties in finding a consensual way out of it. So far, the crisis has not assumed an inter-ethnic dimension. I encourage the authorities, the political parties, and all the relevant stakeholders to act responsibly and address the core of the current political crisis, as well as its root causes. Rule of law, balanced and professional media, and free and fair elections are crucial for the welfare of the whole society as well as the reassurance of national minorities. Any future government should place on the top of its agenda further promoting integration and enhanced social cohesion. Re-launching and effectively implementing an integrated education strategy should also be a central element in this respect. My institution stands ready to support the country in such efforts.

As you will have noticed, I have observed increased **hate speech targeting national minorities** in several of the countries I have visited. Similar observations of increased hate speech have been noted, among others, by the Director of ODIHR and by the Council of Europe including the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) which in December last year issued a policy recommendation on combating hate speech. I have been pleased to note that tolerance and non-discrimination is high on the agenda of the Chairmanship and that the first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) as well as the Human Dimension Committee also have addressed this issue.

The question of decreased tolerance and increase in hate speech is of utmost relevance for a High Commissioner on National Minorities. If left unaddressed, hate speech can lead to acts of violence and contribute to conflict of a wider scale. Preventing hate speech is conflict prevention.

A sign of weakness of our responses is the trend observed by many that hate speech is something used not only by the political extremes, but also the mainstream politicians seem to increasingly resort to it. Divisive rhetoric and the stigmatization of one ethnic community has become even more evident with the migration and refugee crisis. Some forms of hate speech also put different minority groups against each other or migrants against national minorities. Blaming minorities cannot replace addressing structural inequalities and racism and promoting integration with respect for diversity.

A new challenge for the work to combat hate speech and promote tolerance is the perception that the understanding of human rights and the concept of the rule of law have eroded. Even the independence of Parliamentary Ombudsmen or Public Defenders are put into question.

My sincere plea is that all of us make renewed efforts: a refocus on education of the basic concepts of human rights and democratic values, a strong commitment by political leaders, elected and State officials to denounce public manifestations of intolerance and discrimination unequivocally and in a timely manner. The support for civil society working to combat hate speech must be strengthened and public campaigns for human rights and tolerance must be given space in public broadcasting. A better coordination between the structures of OSCE is also needed.

Since the outset, **education** has played a key role in the conflict prevention work of the HCNM. The conference to mark the 20th anniversary of *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* organized by my institution in The Hague in April was a valuable opportunity to reflect upon the relevance of these Recommendations in preventing conflict as well as to examine contemporary challenges in addressing ethnic diversity in and through education. I was pleased to note the widespread interest in these issues, as demonstrated by the attendance of 180 conference participants from numerous participating States.

In this endeavour, my institution was greatly helped by an inspiring community of education and minority rights specialists and practitioners. Together with the representatives of the OSCE participating States and civil society, leading experts debated the politicization of education, discussed education decision-making processes and the importance of involving parents and empowering teachers, and explored levels of awareness regarding education options for minority children as well as the enforcement mechanisms for minority rights in education.

Language has often been a source of tension in education and the issue of multilingual education has been one of the areas of intervention by the High Commissioner. At the same time, preventing conflict through education may demand a more comprehensive approach, encompassing other areas such as history education, where the State has a role in creating enabling conditions to teach history in a way that leads to mutual understanding and allows multiple perspectives. It also demands steps to avoid treating the issue of minority education in isolation but as part of overall education reforms where minority concerns are also taken into account.

It is fair to say that we have come a long way in highlighting minority rights in education since the 1996 Hague Recommendations. As we know, implementation of human rights standards is not set once for all, it needs to continually adapt and adjust to new circumstances. In many ways, *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* of 2012 started to embrace some of these new circumstances by addressing dilemmas around integration, including those that occur in the field of education. I am convinced that there is room for yet another courageous attempt to respond to the contemporary challenges of ethnic diversity in and through education. That attempt should offer a shared and long-term vision

of how education could embrace the increasingly complex realities of multiple identities at a time when rising nationalism in the OSCE area tends to dismiss this rich complexity and reduce it to an “us versus them” paradigm.

Since 2003, when HCNM issued *The Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*, we have seen extensive and momentous changes in our social, political, economic and personal communications, with the line between the traditional **media** and other communications platforms becoming less clear-cut. These changes directly affect communication between majorities and minorities in our diverse societies. As I have remarked earlier, there is a need for an updated set of HCNM guidelines to provide practical advice to participating States seeking to ensure proper access and opportunities for minorities in the rapidly changing landscape of the media. From the conflict prevention perspective, it remains essential to ensure that the new communications landscape will not lead to marginalization of minority voices – whether politically or commercially – but instead provides a means to develop their culture.

The updated guidelines will encompass a wider scope than solely the use of minority languages in the broadcast media. In addition to the linguistic dimension, the recommendations will tackle issues such as the access of minorities to the digital media, the role of the media in promoting the participation of minorities, and the potential of the media to contribute to the integration of diverse societies, and thereby to conflict prevention. This work will further develop respective elements of *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* and other relevant HCNM Recommendations.

The recommendations will take stock of technical advances in the media sector from a national minority perspective. On one hand, new technology can make communication easier for minorities. For example, entry costs to the communications and media sectors are lower than ever. On the other hand, the digital switchover in broadcast media has not always positively affected the minority media. Alongside technical developments, it is also important to continue focusing on the policy level. In this regard, I would like to mention that more participating States have not only sought to apply language quotas in the last 10-15 years, but also effectively introduced indirect quotas to digital broadcasting, including for the private media, thereby making it difficult for minorities to be heard in the mainstream media environment. Finally, the recommendations will provide further advice on some trans-border

and international broadcasting issues that impact minorities, building on *The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*. As the Representative on Freedom of the Media has often noted, national security concerns have been evoked in some participating States to ban or suspend broadcasting from other States. These developments should be carefully assessed not only in view of the freedom of expression, but also in relation to the linguistic rights of national minorities.

In preparing the updated guidelines, we are in touch with other OSCE structures, in particular the Representative on Freedom of the Media, as well as with relevant international organizations. Our aim is to ensure that the updated guidelines benefit from the entire range of intergovernmental work on defining standards and practices in this area.

Alongside education and media, my institution has identified ensuring national minorities' **access to justice** as another area where further thematic work would be beneficial with a view to preventing ethnic tensions. Thus also access to justice is planned to be a theme for a new set of guidelines. We are examining various lessons learnt in terms of legislative frameworks and policy solutions. For example, I recently had an opportunity to hear in Washington about the United States' approach to these issues.

Thematic work is a prime example of a field where my institution has benefited from continuous co-operation with various international and regional partners. Since I last addressed you, I have further intensified exchanges with the Council of Europe, including by addressing the Committee of Ministers' Deputies and the Venice Commission in December. Furthermore, I will be pleased to speak at the upcoming high level seminar on the protection and promotion of human rights in culturally diverse societies, in particular from the perspective of *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. I have also continued to strengthen partnerships with various UN bodies with regard to conflict prevention and the promotion of the integration of diverse societies, where the Sustainable Development Goals can provide an important point of reference.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to convey my thanks for the good co-operation I have continued to enjoy with other OSCE structures. The valuable support by field presences in the context of my country visits as well as the engagement with ODIHR on election missions represent prime examples of such co-operation. Moreover, I have been happy to

further strengthen my co-operation with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in particular in terms of enhancing conflict prevention efforts.

I have been pleased to note the emphasis the German Chairmanship has placed on national minority issues. At the initiative of the Chairmanship, my institution is examining bridge building opportunities emerging from the variety of connections built upon diverse societies, with a view to identifying policies and mechanisms which can transform these opportunities into reality. A team of researchers at the European Centre for Minority Issues, the European Academy of Bolzano/Bozen and an independent researcher based in Bishkek have been asked to analyse structural factors such as existing legal frameworks, policies and practices as well as experiences and perspectives on the bridge building role and potential of national minority issues at the level of international relations, national and local politics, and at grassroots level. I trust this work will help identifying good practices and thereby contribute to our common deliberations on the bridge building potential of national minority issues.

I would like to conclude by expressing my gratitude to the German Chairmanship for all the support and co-operation. I look forward to continuing our common efforts.