



**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR MIROSLAVA BEHAM,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF SERBIA TO THE OSCE,
IN RESPONSE TO THE HIGH COMMISSIONER
ON NATIONAL MINORITIES,
AMBASSADOR KNUT VOLLEBAEK,
AT THE 815th MEETING OF
THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

17 June 2010

Mr Chairman,

The delegation of Serbia very warmly welcomes Ambassador Vollebaek to today's meeting of the Permanent Council and thanks him for his report, which, we believe, is an impressive evidence of the relevance and diversity of the High Commissioner's activities and his institution as a conflict prevention and crises management tool of the OSCE. The report also shows – implicitly and explicitly – that challenges can appear at any time all over the OSCE area and that participating States are well-advised to take advantage of the High Commissioner's experiences and expertise in time.

Let me stress in this regard, Mr. Chairman, that Serbia fully appreciates and respects the authority of the High Commissioner on minority issues. This is why the Serbian authorities invited the High Commissioner to participate in the feasibility study on the creation of a multi-ethnic higher educational institution in the south Serbian municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo in order to provide the Albanian minority access to higher education in their mother tongue. We will value the High Commissioner's continuing assistance on this issue, as we share in general his approach that education plays a key role in promoting integration. Only last week Deputy Prime Minister Djelić announced, for example, that Serbia has quintupled its expenses for the improvement of the situation of the Roma, with a specific focus on their education.

Being aware of the significance of combating discrimination against Roma, we welcome the High Commissioner's activities aimed at advancing the situation of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo, as we are in favour of other activities leading to the improvement of the situation of all non-Albanian communities in the south Serbian province, provided that they are in compliance with UNSCR 1244 and the status neutral approach of the OSCE.

Mr. Chairman,

Serbia attaches great value to a sustainable integration and inclusion of the country's national minorities, as well as their active participation in public life, while offering them all possibilities to preserve their national identities. Last year the National Assembly of Serbia adopted a Law on Election and Competencies of the National Councils of National Minorities, paving the way for national minorities to elect their own National Councils through which they would exercise their rights to self-government in the fields of education, culture, information and the official use of the minority languages. The Serbian Law on Election and Competencies of the National Councils of National Minorities is among the most advanced regulations existing in the field of minority rights protection in general, and it gives the national minorities far-reaching competencies, including the possibility to establish educational and cultural institutions as well as media outlets.

On 6 June representatives of 19 national minorities voted to elect their National Minority Councils with a turnout of 54,47 % or almost 240.000 voters. The elections were monitored by 170 foreign observers, the OSCE, the European Commission and numerous embassies, including countries who do not have a minority group in Serbia. It was assessed that the voting was conducted in a democratic atmosphere, and some of the technical problems that appeared during the voting were immediately addressed by the Central Election Commission. The deadline for forming the National Councils is 29 June.

Let me take this opportunity, Mr. Chairman, to thank the OSCE Mission in Belgrade for its very active and valuable assistance in the implementation of this unique endeavour my country is undertaking to safeguard the highest standards for the protection of our minorities.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.