

## **MINORITY PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

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At the opening session on Monday, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ambassador Vollebaek, said that “good governance and well-functioning institutions are the first and best instrument to prevent conflicts. The more democratic a system of governance is, the greater the opportunity for a peaceful and stable situation.”

Election process is a conflict resolution mechanism, whereby conflicts are solved peacefully in the political arena and not violently, on the street. It is, therefore, very important that elections are held in line with OSCE Commitments and that the election process is inclusive toward all elements of a society, including minorities and other groupings. Participation of minorities in election legislative reform process is a key instrument in peace building and in future conflict prevention. Similarly, constitutional framework and election legislation should allow for minority participation in political life and governmental affairs.

Given the importance of minority participation in the electoral process, the OSCE/ODIHR has dedicated significant attention to these issues. An example – the well know Guidelines on National Minority Participation describes a variety of electoral mechanisms that can be used to achieve a meaningful political representation for national minorities. This handbook is being currently revised in cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minority and the ODIHR Contact Point on

Roma and Sinti Issues. The OSCE/ODIHR has been using the relevant Lund Recommendations as reference in its work.

### **OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions**

The standard OSCE/ODIHR election observation methodology includes analysis of the participation of national minorities in elections since 2000. Among other issues, observation missions analyze minority participation as voters, candidates and elected representatives, their participation in leadership positions within state institutions, electoral commissions and political parties. It also considers the legislative framework and its impact on minorities.

Thanks to the fruitful cooperation with the CPRSI and High Commissioner's Office, a number of experts have participated in the EOMs to assess national minority participation, including Roma, in the electoral process.

**Please allow me now to summarize the main findings on national minority participation included in ODIHR reports.**

Since 2000, a number of shortcomings have been identified. These are, however, not limited to minority participation.

The main findings could be grouped in eight clusters.

1. While some participating States deploy significant efforts to increase national minority representation, the absence of formal and comprehensive mechanisms for ensuring inclusion of national minorities

remains relatively common. Certain elements of some electoral systems, such as threshold requirements for parliamentary representation or burdensome financial or signature registration requirements for party lists and candidates, are perceived to be disadvantageous for national minority representation. Some countries have adopted special provisions that give preferential treatment to minorities, such as for example threshold waiver for parliamentary representation in Serbia, lowered signature requirements for registration of minority party lists in Montenegro or special districting requirements in USA.

In countries like Serbia, Montenegro and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia the formation of political parties on the basis of national or ethnic identity is permitted and such parties actively participate in elections representing minority interests. By contrast, in Bulgaria, Georgia, and Kazakhstan for instance, minority parties are explicitly prohibited. Minority candidates should be mainstreamed in other registered party lists.

Observers deployed to recent elections in Estonia, Netherlands, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, reported inclusion of national minorities' representatives as candidates on lists of mainstream parties.

2. Small number of minority representatives nominated as candidates and election officials. In many countries observed, the number of minority representatives running as candidates or appointed as members of election commissions does not reflect their share of the population. Although national minorities appear to be represented to varying degrees in election commissions of some countries, as reported in Serbia, Tajikistan and Georgia, the legislative requirement introduced in the Former Yugoslav

Republic of Macedonia for equitable national minority representation in areas where they constitute more than 20 per cent of the population remains a rather exceptional practice. At the same time, observers in a number of countries continue to point out to the low level of self-organization among minority groups, passiveness and frequent absence of strategies for the protection of their interests. Civil society representing minority interests appears to be somewhat more active and better organized only in countries with traditionally heterogeneous makeup such as in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

3. Little attention is given to minority issues in the campaign. Although the situation is improving with the development of political parties and their campaign strategies, mainstream political parties mostly do little to attract minority voters and to develop targeted campaign mechanisms. This factor is interlinked with:

4. Overall, low turnout of voters from minorities, combined with a lower interest in the elections and a certain apathy, are not conducive to attract the attention of mainstream parties, which do not see the political value to include minority candidates on their lists and to address minority issues in the campaign. The lack of minority candidates and campaign issues leads to low participation of and interest in minority voters. In turn, low participation of minority voters leads to limited campaigning in the minority areas and small number of minority candidates on mainstream party lists. Lower voter turnout among national minorities was noted by electoral authorities of Netherlands, Bosnia, Ireland and Canada.

5. Registration of minorities as voters. This is particularly applicable to Roma communities which are affected by problems related to civil and

voter registration, difficult access to identification documents, costs, etc. In Albania, Bulgaria, Belarus and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Roma are often not registered as residents in the communities where they live. However, this does not necessarily happen as a result of discrimination, but rather Roma themselves frequently fail or refuse to undergo necessary civil and voter registration.

6. Availability of election material, including ballots and voter information in minority languages. While observers in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine reported that important election related documents were only available in state language, other States are consistently translating voter education materials in minority languages. This is the case in Moldova, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to cite only two.

In Georgia, a multilingual voter information hotline operated in the run-up to recent local elections and election officials in minority areas were trained in preferred languages. In countries, such the Netherlands and Canada, targeted awareness and information campaigns were carried out. Spots and publications in minority languages in the mass media were noted in Estonia and Albania. Civil society has a significant and complementary role to play in providing voter education to minorities.

7. Frequent reports regarding election irregularities in the areas populated by minority groupings, usually at a higher rate than in other areas. This includes allegations of vote buying among Roma communities (e.g. in Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania). In addition, minority voters are also generally socially and economically excluded and therefore vulnerable to threats of losing employment, social benefits; they are at times pressured to vote for particular parties/candidates.

8. Lack of systematic monitoring mechanisms and reliable data. Analysis on minority participation and integration in some countries is impaired by the lack of mechanisms for systematic monitoring and data collection, as noted in Albania and Moldova.

More detailed findings could be found in the observation reports available at the ODIHR website. Thank you for your attention.