

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Working Session 14: Tolerance and non-discrimination II
National Minorities

Statement of the Slovak Republic

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our delegation has joined the EU statement on the issue of national minorities, prevention of aggressive nationalism, chauvinism and ethnic cleansing presented by Poland today but we would also like to use this opportunity to add some remarks in the national capacity.

Slovakia is a multinational state. There are more than 700 000 persons, approximately 13 % of the population, who declared other than the Slovak nationality in the last census in 2001 and belong to some of 12 national minorities.

In its **Manifesto**, the new Slovak Government created after the June 2006 elections, expressed a commitment to **develop this multiethnic and multicultural character of the society** and declared unambiguously an intention **to fight against all forms of racial, ethnic, religious and political intolerance** as well as an intention **to combat discrimination, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, extreme nationalism and chauvinism.**

The protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities is essential to stability, democratic security and peace in Europe. As a pluralist and genuinely democratic society, the Slovak Republic not only respects the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each person belonging to a national minority, but also creates appropriate conditions enabling these persons to express, preserve and develop their own identity and fully participate in the life of the society. The Slovak Republic endeavours to create a climate of tolerance and dialogue between national minorities, the Government and the majority population, which is necessary to enable cultural diversity to be a source of enrichment for the society.

Since its establishment on 1 January 1993 the Slovak Republic has joined all the most important international political and legal documents related to the observance and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

In its minority policy, the Slovak Republic proceeds in line with the commitments concerning the protection of national minorities resulting from the United Nations conventions and declarations from the OSCE documents, including the Copenhagen Document of June 1990, as well as from the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Slovakia is also a party to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (since 1995) and to the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages (since 2001).

At a national level, the Slovak Constitution is the basic legal document anchoring the human rights and freedoms including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The Constitution enacts principles of equality and does not allow any form of discrimination against citizens. Citizens belonging to national minorities are above all equal citizens of the Slovak Republic. Everyone is given the right to freely choose his or her nationality, while any intervention into this decision and any forms of coercion aimed at assimilation are forbidden. The Slovak Republic's legislation guarantees citizens belonging to national minorities all rights to which the Slovak Republic has committed itself in relevant international and political documents. These rights can be applied either individually or in community with others.

There are other more than 30 legally binding documents supplementing the constitutional regulation in this field. Let me mention a few of them as an example of good practice. The **Law of 1994 on denomination of communities in language of national minorities** allows municipalities, in which citizens of a national minority form at least 20% of the population, to be denominated in the language of the national minority on separate road signs denominations. These are placed under road signs bearing the name of the municipality in the official language. The **Law on the Use of Minority Languages**, adopted in 1999, lays down *inter alia* rules for the use of minority languages in official communications in municipalities where a minority amounts to at least 20 % of the local population according to the latest census. At the present time the law applies to 656 municipalities (512 – Hungarian, 68 – Ruthenian, 57 – Roma, 18 – Ukrainian, 1- German). In 2004 the **Anti-discrimination Law** came into effect in the Slovak Republic, through which the EU antidiscrimination legislation has been transposed into the Slovak legal order.

In connection with a creation of a new Government in the Slovak Republic, concerns have been raised regarding possible negative changes in the minority policy of Slovakia. I would

like to stress that these concerns are unsubstantiated. The new Slovak Government is not going to adopt measures, which would diminish the level of minority protection reached so far in Slovakia. On the contrary, the intention of the Government to create a special **Office for Minorities** should be seen as a step forward.

This Office will complement the existing institutional structure comprising the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Knowledge Based Society, European Affairs, Human Rights and Minorities, the Council of the Government for National Minorities and Ethnic Groups and the Office of the Governmental Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities.

The Slovak Government promotes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and strongly condemns any expressions and acts of intolerance, nationalism or racism. This attitude was also confirmed in a **Join Declaration adopted by the Slovak Parliament** (National Council of the Slovak Republic) **on September 6, 2006** on the occasion of the national Memorial Day of the Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence. The Declaration was supported by a vast majority of deputies from almost all political parties represented in the Parliament, including the Party of Hungarian Coalition (opposition party) and the Slovak National Party (member of the ruling coalition).

Slovakia is situated in a region in which the various national, ethnic and religious minorities have been mixing indefinitely throughout the history. They have always been playing an important role in the country's development and are a factor of enrichment of the society.

The Slovak Government is fully aware of this fact and considers a comprehensive minority policy for a benefit of national minorities an important part of its work. It will continue to create conditions for persons belonging to national minorities to have equal opportunity to be effectively involved in the public life and economic activities and it will also take measures to protect their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity.