



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Lamberto Zannier

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 4, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

Welcome back to the Permanent Council, High Commissioner Zannier, and thank you for your report. Given our current circumstances, it's understandable that in the last six months you were not able to travel as widely as you normally do, but even so, you have been quite busy, and we appreciate your work and the work of your staff.

The work of the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities during this health crisis is more important than ever. Your report demonstrates your understanding of this and that you and your team are thinking creatively about how best to fulfill your mandate under current conditions.

Your office has the resources and expertise to provide sound advice and analyses regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the treatment and situation of members of national minorities in participating States. Indeed, you have already begun to do so—not only privately, but also publicly, through your distribution of recommendations for governments to consider in their efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19.

In those recommendations, you stated that it is essential to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities are treated equally and enjoy human rights. Any temporary emergency measures should not fall disproportionately on any of these groups. Furthermore, you underscored the need to consult a broad range of members of society during the design and execution of governmental responses. You call on authorities to be especially vigilant in monitoring and combatting instances of intolerance and xenophobia, which often lead to scapegoating. Sadly, we have seen many instances of this last pattern, with already vulnerable populations being falsely blamed for spreading the coronavirus.

We encourage your office to continue to work with individual countries on how the pandemic and responses to it affect their minorities with a view to discerning broader trends across the OSCE region, and identifying best practices for combatting the scapegoating of minorities for the pandemic. As you stated, “policies and measures that do not equally address the needs of everyone in a society may well become a factor of instability” and so states must consider the needs of all when crafting their responses to the virus. As countries design long-term policies to

mitigate the impacts of this pandemic and prepare for future crises, we hope governments heed your counsel on the need for inclusiveness in the shaping and implementation of all policies and remedial steps.

Turning to some specific cases you raised in your report, we appreciate your work with Moldova to help build an inclusive and tolerant society there. We welcome your recent trip where you consulted with a wide range of stakeholders in Chisinau, Gagauzia, and Taraclia on education, judicial, and legislative issues. We support your work to promote the integration of Moldova's diverse society, modernize national minority legislation, and devote attention to minority language and education rights. We welcome the Moldovan government's continued steps in addressing your findings. I urge you to continue your work there as well as in Georgia.

In Kazakhstan, whose representative we just heard from, we are pleased you were able to meet with government officials following the recent violence in southern Kazakhstan.

We encourage the Kazakhstan government to act on your recommendations regarding Kazakhstan's human rights obligations and OSCE commitments.

We encourage the Presidential Administration of Turkmenistan to respond positively to your offer to support incorporation of best practices in mother tongue education for minorities and in developing and implementing policies to promote social cohesion and integration.

Mr. High Commissioner, we note with special interest your recent trip to Ukraine and we regret, through no fault of your own, you were unable to visit Crimea. We urge Russia to permit, without delay, your office, other independent international observers, and independent media unimpeded access to occupied Crimea, to investigate credible reports of ongoing abuses.

If all is well in occupied Crimea, as Russia and its government-organized NGOs consistently assert, then why does Russia prevent independent monitors from observing the situation there?

The United States has routinely condemned the systematic abuses committed by Russia's occupation forces and the repression of Ukrainians in Crimea, especially Crimean Tatars and other religious and ethnic minority groups who face the most severe abuses. The international community will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions in Crimea until it returns control of Crimea to Ukraine. We urge you to maintain a focus on the plight of the predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars, as well as congregants of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The United States applauds your work, Mr. High Commissioner, with Ukrainian officials in protecting and promoting the human rights of members of minority groups. In regard to Ukraine's language policy, as you stated in your address, I quote, "Ukraine has every right to strengthen the role of the State language to facilitate integration and enhance a shared sense of belonging."

We are pleased you were able to discuss the implementation of Ukraine's language policy at the highest levels, and we encourage Ukraine to continue its dialogue with your Office.

High Commissioner Zannier, the United States values your office's role in providing early warning and early action when you see rising tensions surrounding minority issues, and we strongly support your independence, your mandate, and your role in conflict prevention, more now than ever.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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