

Macedonia: National Conference Rights of the ethnic communities in Republic of Macedonia

Over one hundred representatives of local self-governance, international and domestic foundations, nongovernmental organizations active in the sphere of minority rights participated in the conference. All of ombudsman's regional offices as well as media confirm their interest about the topic with their participation at the conference. The aim of the conference was to present the results of the two-year implementation of the program Minority Rights in Practice in RM. In addition, the conference provided space for sharing experiences and practices from applied local policies for sustainable development of the communities.

Common Values organized one-day conference "Rights of the ethnic communities in Republic of Macedonia" in Holiday Inn hotel in Skopje on February 26, 2007.

The conference was organized within the "Minority Rights in Practice in Southeast Europe" project financed by King Baudouin Foundation and Foundation Open Society Institute - Macedonia.

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The conference was organized in three working sessions. Representatives of both foundations addressed the participants at the opening session stressing the importance of supporting civil initiatives that treat minority rights. "Minorities are still facing various forms of discrimination and they do not participate in important state institutions," said Mr. Fabrice De Kerchove, Program manager at King Baudouin Foundation. He noted that the problem lays in insufficient implementation of determined mechanisms and laws on realization of minority rights. Civil society should play great role in improving this situation by pressing institutions, added Mr. De Kerchove.

"Considering ethnic, lingual and cultural diversity Macedonia is small Europe and we should nourish such diversity," thinks Mr. Vladimir Milchin, executive director of the Foundation Open Society Institute - Macedonia. Ms. Hajrie Ahmed, president of Common Values in her speech presented the results achieved during two-year implementation of the program.

Results of the mini survey that Common Values team conducted in five municipalities in Macedonia were also presented at the conference. The survey was conducted in the following municipalities with mixed ethnic structure: Chair, Butel, Shuto Orizari, Kumanovo and Struga.

"Communication between citizens belonging to different ethnic communities is inevitable, but generally it is very formal and dishonest," noted Kliment Gligorov, program coordinator at Common Values who presented in details the results gathered from the survey.

In the second session Experiences and practices of civil society organizations in realization of the rights of ethnic communities in Republic of Macedonia were presented.

Mr. Alexandro Tedesco, Program coordinator at the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje talked about cooperation with ZELS (Association of local self-government units) regarding the establishment of Commissions for minority relations. The Law on local self-governance enacted in 2002 predicts establishing Commissions for minority relations in municipalities where 20% of the population belongs to other ethnic community. These commissions are in-charge of resolving issues and problems of the representatives of the ethnic communities.

Mr. Sreten Koceski of the Institute for development of communities from Tetovo elaborated on institutional support provided by this organization to the Commissions for minority relations towards enhancement of their functionality. Mr. Senat Bekjiri representative of Millennium NGO from Vrapchishte also presented a positive example of a civil initiative. As an organization that deals with advocacy and lobbying for the rights of Turkish community in Republic of Macedonia, he informed about formation of a lobby group for information, mediation, lobbying and participation of the Turkish community in municipalities Vrapchishte and Gostivar.

Representatives of the local self-governance, in whose jurisdiction are most of the rights of the ethnic communities, spoke in the third session of the National conference. They addressed the challenges that local self-governance is facing in realization of the rights of the ethnic communities.

Mr. Andrej Petrov, president of ZELS said living in peace and tolerance is the main priority. The aim of the local self-governance with decentralization process is to enable citizens to realize their rights in municipalities, including the realization of the rights of the ethnic communities. The Government should act towards prevention in resolving the needs of the citizens on dialogue principle.

Representative of municipality of Struga stressed that Commission for minority relations has full support by the municipality for its functioning in order to achieve good interethnic relations between ethnic communities that live in Struga. "Our challenge is to learn how to build mutual trust and to nourish consensual spirit," said Mr. Bajraktari, advisor of mayor of municipality of Struga.

Mr. Ljupcho Kec Mickosovski, mayor of municipality of Sopsishte presented the positive example of celebrating Christmas and Bajram together in his municipality. Sopsishte has 13 settlements, and Macedonians are majority in 7 while Albanians are majority in 5. At these meetings people have the opportunity to get together and to discuss about all the issues from their everyday living, as well as to get familiar with the customs of the other community. These joint celebrations will become tradition because we must nourish living together. We have mutual responsibility to nourish common values and together to walk the path to the European Union.

Municipality of Chair is open to every one, we nourish multiethnic atmosphere, said Mr. Musa Zuka, president of the Council of municipality of Chair. Our challenge is to create atmosphere of trust and tolerance in which citizens can realize all their rights regardless their ethnic belonging.

The conference was covered by lot of electronic and printed media which provided affirmation of the issues related to minority rights to wider public. In their presentations and discussion participants noted the positive role of the civil society organization Common Values in nourishing positive values and affirmation of the rights of the ethnic communities living in Republic of Macedonia.

After the conflict in 2001 the contacts are reduced, the tension between different ethnic communities is significantly increased, the relations are deteriorated. Ethnically mixed marriages are perceived with highest level of aversion, while barrier is smallest in business communication. Macedonians consider their physical safety and obtaining diplomas and job positions without appropriate competences. Albanians generally think that Macedonians are continuously hindering their advancement, while Roma perceive Albanians as brutal, and Macedonians full of prejudices about them.

These are the main impressions of the survey called Close and Still Distant. More information about the survey and the results can be found at [this link](#).