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Panel 2: Public policy objectives and practices for education in minority languages

Ms. Sofia Melikova, Former OHCHR Fellow, Founding Member of the Tsakhur National and Cultural Autonomy, Civil Activist, Documentary Photographer

My name is Sofia Melikova, I am former OHCHR Minority fellow and the representative of the Tsakhur ethnic, linguistic and religious community. According to the official data, the total number of the Tsakhur population reaches 30000. Tsakhurs mainly reside in the border area between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus region. In Azerbaijan only, approximately 12 300 Tsakhurs live nowadays.

From the beginning on, I would like to note that the Azerbaijanian society is characterized by relatively high spirit of intercultural and interreligious tolerance. In case of the Tsakhurs, the Azerbaijanian authorities provide support for the latter to express their cultural identity and organize folklore activities.

However, there are certain gaps in terms of legislation related to minority rights. Absence of comprehensive legislation and affirmative actions directed at the promotion of minority rights, preservation of minority language and provision of native language classes put under threat the survival of the Tsakhur language. To note, the Tsakhur language was included into the UNESCO Atlas of endangered languages.

Currently, in the Azerbaijanian schools the Tsakhur language classes are provided in two villages only: Suvagil and Dagli. Starting from the last year, the Tsakhur language is being taught just 1 hour a week until the 5th grade. To note, other villages in Zaqatala and Qakh regions, where Tsakhurs reside are not covered. Additionally, there is lack of qualified native language teachers in the region.

In cities and even rural areas many Tsakhurs, especially younger generation, identify themselves as Azeris and do not speak Tsakhur language anymore. This has also a negative impact on the historical and cultural connection between the Tsakhurs living in Azerbaijan, on the one hand, and the Tsakhurs, residing in the Russian Federation, on the other.

Considering all the said above, we urge the international community, namely the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, as well as the government of Azerbaijan to take measures to:

1. Develop adequate national legal framework for the protection of national minorities in Azerbaijan;
2. Support university level programmes for the preparation of native language teachers and promote these programmes in minority communities;
3. Prolong native language classes for secondary school children.

Lastly, using this opportunity I would like to recommend the CoE Member states, the EU, and the UN to support the establishment of the UN Voluntary Fund for Minorities.