

National Minorities in BiH

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mission) works with relevant authorities and civil society partners to improve the political, economic and social participation of the 17 recognized national minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This work is particularly important in BiH, where minority voices remain underrepresented in public life, especially as the country's constitutional and political system is based on the three constituent peoples, which excludes national minorities from the foundational framework. The Mission is uniquely positioned to advance the national minorities inclusion given its mandate, field outreach, expertise, and long-standing partnerships across all levels of government and society.

Adopted in 2003, the Law on the Protection of Rights of Members of National Minorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ obligates BiH to respect, protect and develop the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of 17 recognized national minorities in BiH, thereby reflecting constitutional protections of equality and non-discrimination and translating them into concrete rights and obligations. This landmark legislation enshrined the rights of BiH's national

minorities to protect their cultural, religious, educational, social, economic and political freedoms, needs and identities.

The Mission has actively advocated for the development and adoption of critical legislation, including the respective laws on protection of persons belonging to national minorities, adopted in Republika Srpska in 2004, in the Federation of BiH (FBiH) in 2008, and in Brčko District of

¹ According to the BiH Law on Protection of Rights of National Minorities, a national minority is a part of the population, namely, citizens of BiH, who do not belong to any of the three constituent peoples, and is comprised of people of the same or similar ethnic origin, the same or similar traditions, customs, beliefs, language, culture and spirituality, and a common or related history and other characteristics.

BiH in 2020. Mission advocacy also contributed to BiH's 2010 ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. More recently, in November 2022, the Mission, together with the Council of Europe, initiated process of amending the FBiH Law on National Minorities. To ensure the enforcement of this legal framework, the Mission supported the establishment of national minority councils (NMCs), as advisory bodies, at the State-, entity- and Brčko District-levels.

As the NMCs' ability to engage in policymaking remains limited, the Mission has committed to enhancing their capacities through targeted training and transparent, non-discriminatory institutional processes, including amendments to the criteria for selection of NMC members. The Mission conducts joint advocacy with the NMCs to address legislative gaps and increase consideration by relevant authorities of NMC initiatives.

Building on this, and in co-operation with the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Law on National Minorities of BiH, the Mission

supports awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building activities to strengthen the engagement of BiH's national minorities in policymaking.

In its work with the national minorities and the issues impacting them, the Mission being guided by the OSCE standards and commitments and closely co-ordinates and co-operates with the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities (HCNM). For example, in March 2024, the Mission, together with the OSCE HCNM and the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, organized a regional conference to assess the situation of national minorities and identify key challenges and opportunities for their inclusion.

Roma

The Mission places a particular focus on Roma, the largest and most marginalized national minority in BiH. The OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area reaffirms the relevant OSCE commitments and calls upon participating States to enhance their efforts to ensure that Roma and Sinti are able to participate fully in society. While BiH, as a participating State, has taken on these commitments, Roma in BiH continue to face systemic

discrimination in numerous areas, including education, employment, access to social protection, health services, and housing and property rights. For example, in spite of recent improvements, housing conditions for the Roma population often remain inadequate, with many living in informal settlements lacking water or electricity.

With this in mind, the Mission advocated for the establishment of the Roma Advisory Board to the BiH Council of Ministers. Since the 2002 agreement by the BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees to establish such a board, the Mission has collaborated with the Roma Advisory Board, supporting activities aimed at improving the inclusion of Roma in society.

Having identified the issues hindering the full inclusion of Roma, the Mission works to improve Roma access to authorities and human rights institutions and advocates for implementation of the BiH's Action Plan for Social Inclusion of Roma. Not only does this aim to ensure the meaningful participation of Roma in governmental policy bodies and structures, address problems in areas such as housing, health, employment and education, and combat discrimination and prejudice against Roma, it contributes to the overall advocacy capacity of the Roma community.

In this vein, the Mission has focused on enhancing the capacities of young Roma activists, particularly young Roma women. This has included tailored training for Roma civil society organizations and co-operation with the Roma women's network "Success" on issues of concern for Roma women and girls, which more recently, in 2024 and 2025, was focused on the issue of early marriages. Together with the network "Success", the Mission also worked to raise awareness about the position of Roma women in BiH by marking the month of Roma Women Activism, which runs annually from 8 March, or International Women's Day, to 8 April, or International Roma Day.

The Mission assists the respective authorities in developing measures that target issues of specific concern to Roma community, such as preventive actions for early marriages or protocols for prevention of child begging. In doing so, the Mission also closely monitors the implementation of adopted local Roma action plans. Crucially, the Mission advocates that the perspective of Roma women and youth are reflected in these strategic documents to increase their impact and relevance.

For more information, scan the QR code.



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