



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

**THE OSCE AND THE POLITICS OF PEACE –
THE LASTING LEGACY OF HELSINKI**

address by
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to the
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[Check against delivery]

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Madam Chairperson,
Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

After today's meetings, none of you needs to be reminded that the Helsinki +40 process is already well under way, ahead of the upcoming anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which became the starting point of the OSCE. My own Institution, the HCNM, is a child of the second Helsinki summit in 1992 and we will officially celebrate our 20th anniversary since the office opened next month. There is good reason to celebrate what was done in Helsinki in both 1975 and 1992, and what we have achieved since then. But, as we gear up for these anniversaries, we should also reflect on how the achievements of the past came about and how this can inform our work today. Why did the leaders succeed in Helsinki? How did they manage to do what now seems so hard: to reach out across the divides and find common ground?

Re-reading the Helsinki Final Act today, it is not difficult to see how far we have come. To use my own work as an example, the Helsinki Final Act's provisions on minority issues were very general. *"The participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the right of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before the law, will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms and will, in this manner, protect their legitimate interests in this sphere."* A lot has been done to turn this vision into reality, and many successes have been achieved. We have agreed norms and practices. We have codified rights and duties in the legal framework. Efforts have been made to identify and find ways to address past discrimination. The fact that we still face complex minority-related issues does not mean we have failed; it just means we have more to do.

Even though the implementation of many commitments remains imperfect, nobody today seriously questions the validity of the commitments themselves. The Helsinki Final Act has become unassailable. This, if anything, testifies to the progress we have made: what was then disputed is now agreed. The Helsinki Final Act was the outcome of a long and complex process in which positions were honed through delicate negotiations and a give-and-take

approach. It is easy to forget that at the time, some did not consider the outcome to be especially positive, since they felt that they had given too much and received too little.

The elaboration of the HCNM mandate at the second Helsinki summit in 1992 was another landmark achieved against the odds. Many States had very strong reservations. They were concerned about this proposed “High Commissioner” intruding on what they considered their internal affairs. But, as in 1975, the prevailing belief in the benefits of international co-operation helped tip the scales. The leaders also felt a strong sense of urgency. There was a real crisis unfolding before their eyes. Lives were being lost. And the tools at their disposal were insufficient to manage this crisis. They needed to act, and swiftly. So, in an inspiring example of international co-operation, they set aside their national perspectives and adopted the mandate. It is also remarkable to note that some of the States that were most sceptical at the time can today be counted among my most ardent supporters.

The Helsinki Final Act was achieved during the Cold War, a political landscape far more polarized and hostile to compromise than anything we have today. It was achieved thanks to a strong belief in the merits of multilateral co-operation. A belief that together we can achieve what we cannot achieve on our own. A belief that small individual sacrifices can help promote the greater good. A belief that international politics should have human interest at its core. This is the true spirit of Helsinki.

Mr. President,
Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would claim that my Institution, like the OSCE in general, has been successful. Over the past twenty years, the HCNM has been deeply involved with many participating States to reduce the risk of inter-ethnic conflict. Only twice – in 1999 in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan – have the situations spun so far out of control that a High Commissioner needed to issue a formal early warning. We all hope there will be no third time. But we should also make sure that we have the capacity to deal with an early warning if it does come, including adequate response capacity. Much has been said about the response capacity in our Organization, and yes, there is room for improvement. But no amount of capacity will ever make a difference without the political will to use it.

Most HCNM engagements are not dramatic early warnings requiring a decisive and rapid response. For the most part, my activities are not widely noticed. This is how I and my predecessors have been able to be effective. The HCNM has established itself as a trusted partner for Governments throughout the OSCE area. Through persistence and consistency, Governments have come to respect this Institution, expect its involvement and seek its advice. Over time, Governments have come to see that a neutral outsider can see things differently and draw parallels with comparable situations. And they are reassured that my aim is not to name and shame, but to assist.

The OSCE is built around co-operation with the participating States for the benefit of the participating States. The best way for the Organization to remain relevant is for the participating States to use its mechanisms. And they do. I am glad to note that in recent years, we have become involved in some situations on the request of the parties themselves. This is how it should be.

Despite all these positive examples, I am concerned that we risk slipping backwards. Throughout my term as High Commissioner, it has become more difficult to maintain a constructive relationship with all participating States. We must not allow ourselves to undermine what we have achieved since Helsinki. It is our responsibility to continue to make progress, however slow and difficult that may be. It seems the will to co-operate and the belief in the merits of international mechanisms is waning. Have we forgotten where we started? Do we really want to go back?

Mr. President,
Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's political discourse is becoming increasingly polarized and based on hard positions. As High Commissioner on National Minorities, I see that these trends, if unchecked, could result in our societies being less respectful of diversity. For minorities, this can only be negative.

We need to revive the spirit of Helsinki. This is about more than simply implementing commitments and recommendations. It is about how we do politics. As parliamentarians, you have a great role to play in this. How we work together is not only about the decisions we make, but also how we frame our arguments. You, parliamentarians, have the power to place this frame. You, politicians, set the tone of the debate. You can be part of the great Helsinki legacy by upholding its spirit. Sometimes this means speaking out when least expected. But maybe more often, it means exercising restraint.

Some say the OSCE has outlived its usefulness. I beg to differ. There is still plenty that this Organization is uniquely placed to achieve. The commitments we have made together in and since Helsinki remain as topical as ever. A key reason why the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act remains an inspiration for our times is because it is timeless. It is not our Organization that we need to reset; it is our commitment to it.

Mr. President,
Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have come a long way since Helsinki in 1975. But we still have a way to go. We have to remain on the path to peace. And remember, we have only managed to get this far because we have acted together. There is an African proverb that says *if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together*. Let that inspire our Organization and our politics.

Thank you.