



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

OPENING ADDRESS

address by
Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
Opening Session
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, Poland – 24 September

Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be back in Warsaw for the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. Let me thank both the Polish MFA and the ODIHR for hosting us. This is the sixth and last time that I will attend this gathering in my capacity as High Commissioner on National Minorities, and it is all the more befitting that I will return next week for a whole day devoted to the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The two major topics will be linguistic and educational rights of national minorities, issues that have recurred frequently during the almost 20 years of my Institution's history, and to which both I and my predecessors have devoted significant efforts over the years.

Before I move on to introduce the topics of the upcoming sessions next week, I would like to remind everyone briefly about the background to my work and my presence here today. My Institution was set up in Helsinki in 1992 at the summit of the then CSCE and placed within the political-military dimension of the OSCE. My mandate therefore obliges me not to be an ombudsman for minorities or a human rights watchdog, but to provide early warning and, as appropriate, early action in regards to tensions involving national minorities, which in my judgement have the potential to develop into conflicts, which could threaten stability or security within or between participating States. This mandate was drawn up as a response to the inter-ethnic conflicts that occurred in the wake of the end of the Cold War, as European leaders at the time saw that new instruments were needed to avert further violence from occurring. Working in confidence and consulting with participating States and minorities alike, I am tasked with advising States on how to address both the imminent and the root causes of tensions so that all groups in society can build a common future, despite old grievances and divides that often remain below the surface.

Times have definitely changed since the Helsinki Document of 1992. And so has the work of the High Commissioner. Nonetheless, I am struck by how some issues seem to be of lasting relevance to us. As the OSCE has been at the forefront in setting standards for minority rights ever since its inception, I would like to use this occasion to reiterate that past

commitments remain in force, and that many of them remain as topical today as they were when first adopted.

Enormous progress has been made throughout much of the OSCE area since our work started. These achievements should not be eroded. We must not allow ourselves to be led astray. The experience accumulated by the High Commissioner confirms that ethnic diversity in and of itself is not causally linked to conflict. The conflict that has marred Europe was first and foremost the result of political choices and actions. These could have been different. We cannot change the past, but we can avoid repeating our mistakes. And when speaking here at the Human Dimension Implementation meeting, we should remind ourselves that the implementation phase is what matters the most. A lot of work remains to be done in this field.

In the work of the HCNM, the link between human rights – including minority rights – and conflict prevention has been firmly established. Although my Institution is part of the political-military dimension, it is a cross-dimensional institution par excellence. I spend far more time visiting schools than I do parade grounds, talking to teachers rather than military officers. Although the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of security forms the essence of the OSCE, I believe that we still do not fully appreciate that so-called soft issues often have hard security implications. This is why the focus of a lot of my work is on the rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I look forward to introducing the working sessions on the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, which will be held on 2 October. As I said earlier, I have chosen this year to focus in particular on the linguistic and educational rights of minorities. These are two of the areas that have proved to be of lasting importance throughout the history of the HCNM. In my experience, issues pertaining to these rights are often the root causes for tensions involving national minorities in the OSCE area. Language and education are very important aspects in everyone's life. For persons belonging to national minorities, they are also essential to their identity, and perceived infringement of these rights often results in resentment against the majority or the state, leading to tension.

The linguistic and educational rights of persons belonging to national minorities are well established, and are elaborated in some of the early recommendations published by the HCNM, the Oslo and Lund Recommendations respectively. Respect for and promotion of these minority rights by the participating States has in general improved. However, the participating States are treading a fine line between legitimate as well as often much needed promotion of the State language and upholding the rights of national minorities in these areas. I hope our sessions next week can contribute to furthering the understanding among representatives of states and civil society alike of the challenges that exist and how they can best be handled in a way that promotes cohesive and strong societies for the benefit of all.

Thank you for your attention.