



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

address by
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to the
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Excellencies,
Religious leaders, distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

My mandate was established by the OSCE participating States more than three decades ago to identify and de-escalate tensions involving national minorities and ethnic communities – quietly, impartially, and early – so that differences don’t get the chance to become divisions, and divisions never become conflict. That preventive spirit is also at the heart of this Congress. As His Excellency President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has underlined, the potential of religion to act as a bridge between communities and countries is indispensable when the world’s stability is tested. We gather today to make that potential a reality.

Sustainable inter-ethnic peace rests on two mutually reinforcing pillars: integration with respect for diversity and security anchored in human rights. Where different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities are able to learn, work, participate and be heard – in their own languages and together in the State language – societies grow more cohesive and resilient to radicalization and hate.

In 2022, during this Forum, my predecessor, Ambassador Kairat Abdrakhmanov, stressed three practical levers of prevention: inclusive education, responsible media and digital spaces, and meaningful participation. This year, I would like to place a special focus on youth exchange and on the participation and leadership of women and girls belonging to different communities. If we dedicate resources and succeed in advancing these two priorities, we will amplify the impact of every other investment in peace.

Young people are our partners in sustainable peace and prevention. When they meet across lines of faith, language and identity – on campus, online and in their own towns – they lower the temperature of public debate, broaden empathy and build sustainable networks. That is why, during my visit to Kazakhstan this week, like during other visits, I am engaging actively with students – I have already given a lecture at KIMEP University and I look forward to my upcoming lecture at Nazarbayev University.

Women belonging to different communities, including minorities, often face intersection of multiple barriers – linguistic, socio-economic, cultural and sometimes legal. When these women are included and participate, the benefits to their families and communities multiply – school attendance rises, local economies are strengthened and grievances are resolved earlier and more peacefully.

At the same time, women belonging to minorities should be recognized and supported as leaders and mediators within local and national governance. For this valuable potential to be realized, commitment must be matched by resources: predictable, transparent financing for women-led initiatives in mixed communities should be built into policy frameworks, so that education, mentorship and interfaith community work can strengthen social cohesion in a sustainable way.

Much has already been done by faith-based leaders to strengthen cohesion, yet further steps could bring about a lasting difference.

Religious leaders bring unique convening power and moral authority. Even small steps taken now could make a lasting difference. For example, opening pathways for youth. Building on OSCE region's wider experiences with youth dialogues and intercultural exchanges, religious leaders could intensify efforts to host regular, jointly designed youth dialogues and service projects – creating space, and responsibility, for young people to work together across lines of faith, language and identity.

A second way is modelling responsible remembrance. At a time when debates over history are intensifying, leaders can help shape inclusive commemorations that acknowledge all communities' losses and contributions. Because when memory is handled with care, it can heal.

And third, helping to de-escalate negative rhetoric. Religious leaders can set the tone by discouraging divisive language, speaking out against hate speech and promoting respectful dialogue. By leading through example—using nuanced and inclusive rhetoric themselves—they can lower the temperature of public debate, prevent tensions from escalating, and foster a climate in which all communities feel secure and valued.

What can the HCNM offer?

Drawing on the OSCE HCNM's thematic Recommendations and Guidelines – on education (The Hague), on integration of diverse societies (Ljubljana), on media in the digital age (Tallinn), on minority language rights (Oslo), as well as socio-economic inclusion – I propose a concrete step that States, religious leaders and local authorities can take together: interfaith and inter-ethnic youth exchanges. Move beyond symbolic meetings to problem-solving exchanges where mixed teams of students work jointly on shared challenges. Because when young people build something together, they also build trust among themselves.

My office is ready to share expertise on conflict prevention and fostering integration, including bilingual and mother-tongue plus State-language education models, that strengthen both learning outcomes and social cohesion. We can support the design of youth exchanges and initiatives that foster the leadership of minority women, drawing on tools and lessons learned from across the OSCE area. And where sensitive issues of language, education or participation risk escalation, I can help facilitate quiet dialogue to keep channels open and trust intact.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Every act of inclusion is an early investment in peace. Youth exchange and the participation of women belonging to minorities are not side projects; they are core infrastructure for security.

I am grateful to the President of Kazakhstan, His Excellency Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, for convening this Congress and for his consistent support to interreligious dialogue. I look forward to working with many of you in translating our shared principles into daily practice – so that the next generation inherits habits of co-operation that keep our diverse societies peaceful, resilient and whole.

Thank you.