



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

**IS INTEGRATION AN ANSWER  
TO ETHNIC PLURALISM?**

Address by  
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to the  
Seminar on  
**“Ethnic religious pluralism and challenges of integration”**

organized by  
the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
to the Kingdom of the Netherlands  
and  
ROI, Dutch Institute for Public Administration

The Hague, the Netherlands – 24 November 2010

Ambassador, Senators,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank the Embassy of Kazakhstan and the Dutch Institute for Public Administration (ROI) for taking the initiative to organize this important event on the challenges of integration. This topic is of greatest relevance to all of OSCE's participating States.

All of us have asked ourselves, at one point or another, how to deal with the growing diversity of our societies; how to enjoy the incredible wealth of our cultural heritage and how to avoid that our differences become a source of violence. But before we continue searching for answers, perhaps we should establish whether we are asking the right question.

Diversity, be it ethno-cultural or confessional, has characterized social relations for centuries. It is neither new nor unprecedented. The idea of a culturally homogenous national community, in contrast, is relatively recent. This idea is actually the result of the rising power of nationalism and the concomitant spread of the nation-state system, which has been developing since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The idea, however, was never fully implemented because no matter how neatly we try to draw boundaries there will always be pockets of difference; there will always be people that are not quite the same; those we have come to call minorities. So, the fundamental question facing us all is: how can various communities with different cultures, needs and aspirations live together in peace and dignity, while at the same time ensuring the freedom of individuals and the stability of multi-ethnic States. This is the question that the institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities has been trying to address since its inception.

John Stuart Mill famously remarked in his 1861 treatise *Representative Government* that “[f]ree institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities.” Today, the very notion of democracy has been redefined. A democratic government is expected to respect and accommodate cultural differences and seek social consensus that is not simply “majoritarian”. We can now assume that a minority that is fully integrated into the political community will nevertheless remain identifiable as a distinct group. Mill's fears, however, are not entirely ungrounded. If difference trumps commonness, if an individual is

defined as a Turk or a Frisian or a Muslim *before* he or she is defined as a citizen, if a particular identity is a barrier and ethnic distinction a source of strife and confrontation, the chances for successful state-building are pretty slim. This is the challenge facing many newly independent States of post-Communist Europe. This is the challenge that Gandhi's India faced eight decades ago, and this is the challenge that Western Europe faces today.

Gandhi relished the plurality of the diverse identities of Indians and yet he worried about the political consequences of what he called the "vivisection" and sectionalization of his country. He was expressing a general concern, not specific to India, when he asked, "[i]magine the whole nation vivisected and torn to pieces; how could it be made into a nation?"

Successive High Commissioners have grappled with the same questions. It would be naïve to claim that we have discovered "the answer". However, as an institution the HCNM has accumulated considerable knowledge and expertise in promoting inclusion and participation of all members of society, while recognizing and accommodating their differences and encouraging interaction between different groups. I describe this approach as "integration with respect for diversity", and since no doubt each and every one of you present here has a different understanding of what integration means, let me share with you what it means to the HCNM.

Integration is first and foremost a process rather than an end result. It is a process that involves not only minorities but also majorities and governments. It is a process which changes us all and ultimately determines how our understanding of "self" and of society we share will evolve. A British newspaper once carried an article describing what constitutes Englishness. The paper referred to a lady, saying she was "as English as daffodils and chicken tikka masala". Change, transformation and accommodation are all integral parts of the process of integration.

Questions are often raised with respect to *who* should be integrated and *how*. Currently, the prevailing discourse focuses on the integration of minorities, usually with an immigrant background, into mainstream society. Such an approach presupposes the existence of a more or less monolithic, dominant culture to which minorities have to adapt. It also places the primary responsibility for change on minorities rather than on society as a whole. Traditional national minorities I am familiar with tend to challenge the hierarchical relationship that often

develops between majority and minority communities, which is why my focus has been on the integration *of* societies rather than *into* societies. This means identifying the beneficiaries of integration policies as being multi-ethnic States and societies as a whole rather than specific groups. This also implies that integration is more of a process based on partnership rather than on an outcome. It requires all members of society, both from the majority and the minority communities, to adapt when necessary, establish effective channels of communication, and learn how to engage in social relations of benefit to all.

Recognition of and respect for diversity is another side of the integration coin. The two, I believe, are mutually reinforcing. In this context, the protection and promotion of minority rights, including identity rights, is a precondition for building peaceful and fair relations within plural societies. The guarantee and effective enjoyment of minority rights is vital for ensuring that minorities have a stake and an effective voice in the wider societies in which they live. This requires that minorities are not only given, but also fully utilize, the opportunity to learn the official or State language(s), to participate in public life, to respect the rule of law and co-operate with the authorities and to become an integral part of the shared society.

In order to set processes of integration in motion, persons belonging to national minorities should be encouraged to engage in public life at many different levels and to assume the same responsibility for building peaceful, functioning democratic societies as other members of the population. They should, however, also have an opportunity to learn and speak their mother tongue and preserve their cultural identity. Minority cultures, languages and traditions also form an integral part of the overall cultural heritage of any multi-ethnic State and should be celebrated rather than feared and suppressed.

At the same time, the provision of minority rights within the legal system and the creation of a legislative framework for the protection of national minorities, while essential, are not enough to prevent conflicts or to govern diversity in a democratic way. For minority rights to be worth the paper they are written on, they must be effectively implemented. This requires adequate resources, material and human, secured and applied by authorities with an unwavering political will. For rights to be properly implemented, they have to be underpinned by a system of good and democratic governance. In fact, integration is as much about good governance as it is about the respect for fundamental rights. Good governance, in

this context, ensures that all stakeholders, including minorities, participate and influence the decision-making process. It also encourages the development of adequate policies that promote social cohesion and integration of diverse societies, while respecting the plurality of cultures and views. This makes for better and more widely accepted decisions, and so reduces the risks and costs of conflict.

Integration is also about interaction and freedom. It is about having the freedom to make choices; to decide whether to belong to a community or not; to move across the boundaries of inherited culture and identity. It is about multiplication of identities. Just as one has the right to have one's identity protected and respected so one has the right not to be imprisoned by that identity. As Hannah Arendt noted: "Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice [...] is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course, and not belonging, no longer a matter of choice". The integration I am talking about aims to protect the identity and culture of ethnic communities, while also respecting the freedom of their individual members.

The only way to ensure that people respect each others' choices and learn to think "without horizons" is through education. This is why integration is also and perhaps most fundamentally about education. It is through education that young people learn how to question stereotypes and combat prejudice, how to deal with multiple perspectives and develop critical thinking. Schools that teach the history and culture of all members of society to their pupils, not only through books but also through socialization and the fostering of bonds of friendship, are laying a solid foundation for the future of their countries. It is for this reason that I have argued strongly against the trend towards segregated education along ethnic lines that seems to have become so prevalent in many post-conflict societies. The long-term costs of such separation are too high to be allowed to continue or to be encouraged.

A balanced education system needs to combine tuition *in* and *through* the minority language with tuition in the State language. Learning their mother tongue and, where appropriate, studying in their mother tongue is essential for national minorities in order to preserve and develop their culture and identity. At the same time, learning the official language or languages is a precondition for the full enjoyment of their rights and life opportunities. This includes the rights to participation, association and engagement in public life. It also ensures better mobility and access to employment throughout the State and beyond. In addition,

integration as a process depends largely on communication across and between groups, something that can hardly be achieved if there is no common language or languages. It is through communication and dialogue that all parties learn about each other's concerns and learn to appreciate each other's interests. Only through dialogue can they find common ground and ultimately reconcile conflicting positions.

Integration is therefore about avoiding the extremes of assimilation on the one hand and separation on the other. It sees no contradiction in maintaining a distinctive identity – be it cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic or a combination of these – and being an integral part of society at large. It assumes the complementarity of civic and ethnic elements of identity and of belonging to both a particular ethnic community and a wider community of all citizens. Integration defined in this way requires a degree of openness and flexibility as well as a desire on the part of both majority and minority communities to participate and engage. It can only be achieved through a system of democratic governance and respect for fundamental rights, including minority rights, since this is the only effective way of ensuring that identity, however defined, does not become a source of exclusion and discrimination. Without democracy and respect for human rights, the legitimacy of the State diminishes in the eyes of the minorities and the potential for confrontation grows. This is contrary to the interests of the State, because in the long run nothing can be more dangerous than a group of dissatisfied and alienated citizens united by a common kinship and a sense of not belonging to the State in which they reside. It is the perfect recipe for generating tensions that could disrupt both internal stability and international security.

So is integration the answer to our challenges today? I believe it is. We have no other alternative. I am well aware that talking about integration is much easier than doing it, but as we know “difficulty is the excuse history never accepts.”

Thank you.