



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

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ADDRESS

by

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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here again at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. This gathering is a distinct advantage to our Organization and should be fully utilized. There is no venue of comparable magnitude in international relations. Here, governments and civil society, including national minorities, can discuss their achievements and concerns openly and on an equal footing. I see this meeting as an invaluable opportunity to consider your views – from the capitals, from regional centres and from the field – about the challenges we face when endeavouring to build cohesive societies.

As you are aware, the idea of social integration with respect for diversity is at the heart of my mandate and activities. HCNM experience shows that education is an extremely useful tool for promoting social integration in multi-ethnic States and this is why I have chosen this topic for my appearance today. The importance of education extends beyond the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. The principal task of state schooling has been traditionally to provide everyone with a solid, basic knowledge and, perhaps more importantly from a societal point of view, a common platform and set of values within a State of divergent peoples. This also clearly implies respect for diversity, and instruction concerning, the diversity found in our societies. Only then can we create a real sense of belonging.

This sense of belonging through education means respect for children's mother tongue. Maintenance and development of minority identity is not possible without mother-tongue education. This is the principal means of preserving minority language and culture. The use of mother tongue in education correlates with one's academic achievement. The submersion approach, where the curriculum is taught to minorities solely in the State language, is a sure path to academic underachievement. The child will not have a sufficient command of either the native language or the non-native language for a future, successful professional or academic career.

Our very own OSCE commitments reinforce this view. In particular, Paragraph 34 of the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 provides that "participating States will endeavour to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities, notwithstanding the need to learn the official language or languages of the State concerned, have adequate opportunities for instruction ... in their mother tongue..."

At the same time, proficiency in the State or official language is equally vital. The State language can serve as a basis for enhancing communication between all persons, irrespective of their ethnic belonging. It is a gateway to university education, to employment and, more generally, to effective participation in public life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This makes it essential that measures to promote the State languages are balanced with providing opportunities for persons belonging to national minorities to learn and to develop their own languages. Easier said than done, you may say. Indeed, how do we navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of State language promotion and minority language preservation in multi-ethnic societies?

I do not believe, however, that there is a dichotomy between promoting the State language and preserving minority languages. Bilingual or multilingual education is a case in point. It helps us feed two birds with one scone: to preserve and develop minority identity and to achieve a proper command of the State language. The latter, in turn, is a path to full and effective participation in public life, to jobs in capitals, not just the village where a particular minority resides. Furthermore, this type of education helps us instil a set of common values in our diverse societies.

Allow me to elaborate.

Bilingual or multilingual education have been demonstrated to promote a range of enhanced skills in children, such as a richness of vocabulary, a sensitivity to multiple meanings, a better understanding of complex language structures, enhanced abilities to understand abstract concepts and, not least, an easier route to the acquisition of additional languages. But, the advantages of bilingual or multilingual education go beyond pure educational advancement.

As early as in 1937, recommendation 11 of the International Conference on Education in Geneva emphasized that knowledge of multiple languages leads to more respect for other cultures. Empirical evidence from the OSCE region confirms this. Teaching a range of subjects through the medium of a second or even third language helps learners develop a positive attitude towards different languages and cultures, an attitude which remains after they have left school.

Bilingual or multilingual education allows individuals to move beyond exclusive identifiers. Recognising that we all have multiple and shared identities serves to promote participation by all within public life.

Let me make it clear. Bilingual or multilingual education on its own does not equal integrated education. An integrated education also means that the applied standards are the same for all schools, i.e. that minority schools are subject to the same quality control mechanisms, the same number of inspections and use the same university entrance examination.

A bilingual or multilingual method of teaching must also be supported by measures to promote a broad understanding of and respect for diversity within a State. This can be achieved through developing curricula and teaching materials that reflect this diversity and which promote an inclusive understanding of the State.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In spite of the well-known benefits of integrated education, we are, regrettably, witnessing an increasing segregation along ethnic lines in education in many OSCE participating States. This trend is particularly alarming in those societies where an integrated education system previously existed.

Segregation is a strong word. It conjures up pictures of a South Africa under apartheid. When I used this term in my report to the Permanent Council in Vienna last June, some representatives reacted strongly to this term. I fully understand that. However, whether we talk about segregation, separation or division, the fact nevertheless remains that in some countries we are seeing a move away from an integrated education system and this is of great concern to me.

International law does not prohibit the establishment of separate educational systems or institutions for religious or linguistic reasons. This is in fact a right protected by minority rights law based on freedom of choice, which is crucial to the development and maintenance of minority identities. However, there are clear conditions for setting up such an establishment. According to the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, participation or attendance should be optional – in law and in practice – and the education provided must conform to the standards applied in majority education at the same level.

Often freedom of choice is undermined. Segregated education suits many political entrepreneurs, both on the majority and minority side. For some minority leaders, separation in education makes it easier to control their communities. For some majority politicians, segregated education is a way of keeping minorities from their share of power and influence in the society.

Parents are confronted by the absence or limited availability of alternative schooling, by official or unofficial policy of the authorities or educational establishments, by pressures from majority or minority communities, by the expense, by inadequate housing or by other considerations. In theory, segregated education establishments claim to follow official national curricula and apply official national standards of academic achievement. In practice, segregated schools and classes usually offer education of a decidedly inferior standard.

The negative aspects of segregation manifest themselves in many ways. Schools established for minorities are often underfunded when compared with those frequented by the majority. Material conditions are often much worse in minority schools: heating, electricity and sanitation are deficient, classrooms are overcrowded and teaching materials are lacking. Drop-out rates are dramatically higher. Teachers' expectations are lower because of the perceived lack of minority interest in education. As a result, what teachers are able to offer to their minority pupils is much less in quality and quantity compared to that received by students from non-minority backgrounds. This significantly lowers academic achievement in segregated schools as compared with majority schools. Additionally, the State language is often insufficiently taught, leading to weaker knowledge among minority graduates. As a consequence, minority graduates are at a disproportionate competitive disadvantage in the labour market and, in almost all cases, the pursuit of higher education is virtually out of reach.

Segregated education ultimately weakens minority rights and hampers integration with respect for diversity. Chronic underachievement and inferior conditions in minority schools may push parents to place their children in majority schools. This may have a detrimental effect on the future of the minority as a group and its position in society.

Segregated education is particularly detrimental in border areas where a kin-State of the minority in question is next door. In such situations, this minority concerned may begin to associate itself more with the foreign country than with the State where it resides. It is in the interests of the country of residence to make sure that minorities from border areas are fully involved in the life of the country. Integrated education is a prerequisite for this.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a long list of wrongs of segregated education. For all these reasons, it constitutes discrimination and therefore violates international law. To be clear, I am not in favour of closing down minority-language schools per se. Many of these establishments provide quality education and help minorities preserve their language and culture. At the same time, many more fail to do so. A slide in the overall quality of education, a lack of oversight, different quality control standards are all typical situations I encounter during my field visits. This is the crux of the problem.

I recognize that fully integrated education may not always be feasible, particularly in minority dominated regions or in post-conflict areas. Minorities may also, for religious or cultural reasons, be strongly attached to separate education. Forcing them to give up their schools may actually generate conflict. Full consultation with the affected communities, raising awareness amongst parents, pilot multilingual schools, strict quality controls in the education reform

process, and special measures to promote minority access to university education will all help multilingual education to gradually take root.

It is in this context that I must recall, in particular, the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, endorsed by the HCNM in 1996. Recommendations 5 to 7 require States to create conditions enabling members of minority communities to participate, in a meaningful way, in the development and implementation of policies and programmes related to minority education at central, regional and local levels. Furthermore, they advocate that States should adopt measures to encourage and facilitate parental involvement and choice in the educational system. As High Commissioner, I would like to underline the importance notably of school councils, which can offer an important contribution to interethnic harmony between schoolchildren. It is my experience from visiting schools and talking to pupils, teachers and parents that such councils must not be used as mere window dressing; they must be heard by headmasters, have a genuine influence on decisions and meet regularly – not only on ceremonial occasions.

In the same vein, States should make deliberate efforts to promote contact between minority and majority pupils. This could be done through extra-curricular activities and exchanges between schools to foster understanding and respect for others.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Segregated education leads to fragmented societies. It creates societies where everyone lives in his or her own partitioned space and rarely has a chance or, for that matter, the desire to interact with other cultures. In these societies, it takes just one tiny spark to generate conflict. This is why I am so concerned about the proliferation of segregated education, with its much wider ramifications for the unity of the State.

It is the task of governments, civil society activists and us as international organizations to stress at every given opportunity the importance of integrated education. It is fundamental to building cohesive, integrated societies.

Bilingual or multilingual education, intercultural curricula, textbooks and after-class activities, common standards and common control mechanisms for all schools are just some of the building blocks for creating an integrated education system. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that educational policies should reflect the linguistic and cultural needs and aspirations of national minorities. Education systems, or any changes to them, should be designed in full and genuine consultation with them.

It is hard to accept as true today that in some places bars, buses and beaches were segregated not so long ago. One of today's moral blind spots is, in my view, not facing the fact that many of our schools are still divided along ethnic lines. We need to make our schools meeting places for persons of all ethnic backgrounds. This will allow us to build a common society; based on equality, non-discrimination and opportunity for all.

Thank you for your attention.