



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

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**LANGUAGES IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION:
BALANCING THE UNBALANCEABLE?**

address by
Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Language matters. After two and a half years as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities I can bear witness to this.

Robert Bunge, an American linguist and philosopher, came up with a fascinating remark on the role of language:

“Language is not just another thing we do as humans; it is *the* thing we do. It is a total environment; we live in the language as a fish lives in water.”

Language is both a vehicle for communication and an important aspect of culture and identity.

The real question, however, is “**how** does language matter?”

In the context of multi-ethnic States – which have become the norm, rather than the exception these days – it matters in two ways: as *the medium* and as *political discourse*.

In both instances good political sense requires that a balance is struck between issues that, at first sight, appear entirely unbalanceable.

For example, we say that it is both legitimate and desirable for a State to promote the official language as the common language for all its citizens. At the same time, we assert that minority communities have the right to speak, practice and study in their mother tongue. Their mother tongue may, and usually does, differ from the official language.

We say that language should not be the basis for exclusion from jobs, political life, public services and so on. Yet, we maintain that in order to hold public positions and work within official structures you should master the official language. Those who wish to spend their lives speaking a different language may do so, although they risk marginalization and alienation from the rest of society.

We believe that freedom of speech is sacrosanct and should never be restricted. At the same time, we promote political correctness, punishing inflammable rhetoric and hate speech.

How can these arguably contradictory principles and values be combined and balanced to the benefit of our shared societies?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Most of us would agree that we want to avoid conflict and tension. In order to do so, we need to reconcile the interests of the minority and the majority, on the one hand, and the interests of all individuals and the state, on the other.

To achieve the balance I just referred to, we have to find a way to ensure a degree of fairness in a society where – by a mere act of fate – some are in the position of the majority and others are not. Majority should not imply hegemony.

No State is entirely neutral in ethno-cultural terms. This is manifested in the choice of an official language. As a rule, the official language used by government and the public administration – what we often refer to as the State language – is the language of the majority community. This has unavoidable implications for those who do not speak the designated language.

Consequently, even the best intentioned governments and administrations are no longer neutral with regard to minority-language speakers. Concern for linguistic fairness, therefore, requires some response to the disadvantaged situation these groups face. Minorities should not only be able to speak their mother tongue freely in private and public; they should also have guaranteed access to **education** in their mother tongue. Such access will ensure the preservation and transmission of their culture from generation to generation.

The right to education in one's mother tongue is recognized in the OSCE and Council of Europe documents. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities requires that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to learn his or her minority language. Paragraph 34 of the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 provides that "Participating States will endeavour to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities [...] have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue [...]".

Maintaining language through education is a lifeline for minority culture and identity.

The same concern for fairness, however, requires that minorities have a proper command of the State language. This is beneficial to the State. Minority proficiency in the State language fosters social cohesion. It means that all citizens can speak one language – both literally and metaphorically. Minorities benefit too. This knowledge improves **their** economic prospects. When we mark an additional language on our CV, this immediately increases our job search chances. Proficiency in the State language allows minorities to fully participate in public life and to exercise civic and political rights.

A common knowledge of the State language helps ensure equal opportunities for all.

Minority and state interests therefore are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An effective language policy is one that strengthens the State language without limiting opportunities for the use of minority languages.

I believe in strengthening the State language through positive means. For example training and improved teaching methods, rather than negative and restrictive means.

The amended Slovak State Language Law has generated much controversy because it introduced fines for the violation of the Law. Overall, the Law itself is in conformity with accepted international norms. As I have said on previous occasions, fines are not **illegal**. They are intended to enforce the Law. The question is, however, are they effective, and do they contribute to interethnic relations? In my experience, the answer is no. They make minorities the target of penalties and do not promote a sense of fairness among all citizens of a multi-ethnic State.

You may ask: How then should a State enforce its laws if no penalties are introduced? There is no quick and easy answer. Let me make an analogy here with international institutions. International institutions, such as mine, have long grappled with the question of compliance. To paraphrase a famous quote, as High Commissioner I do not have any divisions (armoured or otherwise) to dictate my will. I have no enforcement power, no economic leverage and, lately, not even the EU membership carrot.

So how do I encourage States to take my advice? Sticks and carrots work, but arguably there are also other, less crude mechanisms. These include the socialization of certain norms. States may accept and recognize international norms and principles. They may domesticate them and nurture consensus on how these norms are to the benefit, rather than to the detriment of their societies. In other words, creating positive incentives for compliance and appealing to people's better interests also works, without the risk of conflict and alienation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

States may take steps to protect an official State language, while at the same time respecting the linguistic rights of minorities. Linguistic policy in regions and areas where minorities live in significant numbers is a particularly challenging undertaking. In such areas minorities usually have the desire to speak and maintain their own language.

I have consistently recommended that States create adequate opportunities to use minority language in minority populated areas in official communication, public documents, public services and local government.

In these mixed areas, bilingualism can hold the key to peaceful and respectful relations between different ethnic groups. Bilingualism means that both State and minority languages are widely used and spoken.

Linguistic policy is a two-way street. It is essential that minorities also have a proficiency in the State language. At the same time it is important that members of the majority residing in ethnically mixed areas are encouraged to learn the language of their neighbours. It is through such bilingualism that once hotly contested regions of Europe have achieved considerable stability and prosperity.

In practice, this is not an easy balance to establish or to maintain. For this reason, the HCNM supported the development of a set of recommendations by international experts designed to assist States, ethnic majorities and minorities. *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* offer practical guidelines on how the linguistic needs and rights of different ethnic groups can be accommodated. These recommendations are supplemented by *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* and *The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life*, both of which contain sections dealing with language. Reflecting the key role that the various mediums of mass communication play in modern society, we also developed the *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Languages can be effective tools of social integration. However, there is one condition, namely that all parties exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities. The State has to realize that its interests are better served by following a generous policy towards minorities rather than doggedly pursuing a minimalist approach. Societies profit as a whole when special attention is given to the position of minorities.

At the same time, minorities have to choose to be part of the societies in which they live. They have to make an effort to integrate by, among other things, learning the official language, taking responsibilities for public affairs and participating with other communities for the advancement of their shared society.

In this context, the use of language not only as *the medium* but also as *political discourse* is extremely important. We have witnessed how radical nationalism, transmitted over the airwaves and Internet, has contributed to the breakdown of once normal interethnic relations. It has arguably become one of the hair triggers of conflict and violence, as seen for example in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. Radical nationalism is an age-old phenomenon. Its manifestations, including through the spread of hateful, polarizing discourse, tend to increase exponentially in times of crisis. This is when minorities and other vulnerable groups become targets of violence. This is what we have to guard against.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Twenty-first-century Europe cannot afford to turn a blind eye to nationalist excesses. If those who take advantage of our commitment to freedom of speech choose to use inflammatory language, we must challenge them. Not speaking out against aggressive nationalism, xenophobia and racism is tantamount to complicity.

Politicians, those with access to power, have a particular responsibility in this respect. They should steer clear of simplistic generalizations, which only reinforce stereotypes and do not promote respect and understanding in diverse societies. We often talk about minorities as if they were a collective with one face – “the Hungarians”, “the Croats”, “the Roma”, “the Muslims”. We forget that no group is truly homogenous; each group is made up of individuals with complex characters and different, often overlapping identities. As the Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen noted, the existence of a singular identity is an illusion, and a dangerous one for that matter.

We must be aware of the dangers of simplistic classifications and generalizations, especially when they become the lingual ammunition of some irresponsible political leaders. Instead, responsible politicians should be explaining the dangers of extreme nationalism to the electorate. At the same time, they have to address the anxieties of the people. They need to speak openly about integration. They should not shy away from the issues that are of concern to the “silent majority”.

Luckily, extreme nationalists tend to be in the political minority. But we must all act if we want to make sure they do not become a dominant political force. We have to make sure their language does not become the mainstream.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Balanced linguistic policy is not a myth. However, it requires generosity, restraint and understanding on the majority side. It pleads for commitment, responsibility and willingness to take part in society as a whole from the minority side. It succeeds when both sides are ready to compromise, to use their imagination and to seek mutually acceptable solutions.

Despite differences in temperature, salinity and depth, our sea waters accommodate and feed an amazing diversity of marine life. Our States can and should turn the tide of history by accommodating their linguistic diversity too. Such an approach will create an environment where each and every individual feels at home and is in his or her element.

I am absolutely convinced that majority and minority languages can thrive side by side. If all sides combine their efforts, I believe, integration will bring benefits for all, making the balancing of the unbalanceable possible.

Thank you for your attention.