



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**High Commissioner on National Minorities**

**A D D R E S S**

by

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to the

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Check Against Delivery

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Mr Chairman, Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to address you today. It is highly appropriate that my first speech as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) is made during the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting here in Warsaw. I wish to thank Ambassador Christian Strohal and his team for organizing this annual meeting which has become the most important European forum for the regular review of human dimension commitments. As I take up my mandate as High Commissioner I look forward to working with you in order to improve the implementation of human dimension commitments.

As former Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, this Organization is not a *terra incognita* for me. However, a lot has happened since 1999. My mandate brings important new challenges with it, challenges facing the whole OSCE and its participating States.

The OSCE's *raison d'être* is, first and foremost, its efforts to **prevent conflicts** between and within its 56 participating States. If we do not succeed in conflict prevention, the damage that conflicts cause to people, the economies and the environment can last for decades and create a huge need for post-conflict rehabilitation.

Thus, the OSCE's mission to prevent conflicts is as important today as it was at the time of the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The creation of the institution of the HCNM in 1992 demonstrated the OSCE's ability to address also the situation after the Cold War when most conflicts are fought over ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural issues. Many of these conflicts concern minority groups that may have been marginalised politically, excluded economically, oppressed culturally and isolated socially. Existing tensions are exacerbated when persons belonging to minorities are discriminated against or put under pressure to give up certain aspects of their identity, such as their culture, religion or language. As the first High Commissioner Mr. Max van der Stoel so rightly said, "where there is injustice, there is insecurity and this in time gives rise to instability and ultimately threats to peace". Thus we should continuously remind ourselves of the need to address tension before it becomes a conflict. Inter-ethnic conflicts are not natural disasters. They are not inevitable.

In the past 15 years of implementing the HCNM mandate, the work of my two distinguished predecessors has clearly demonstrated this. They were successful when they were able to detect the problem at an early stage and then address the situation together with all parties concerned. In the words of the HCNM mandate this means: "providing *early warning* and, as appropriate, *early action* in regard to tensions involving national minority issues which have

not yet developed beyond an early warning stage, but, in the judgement of the High Commissioner, have the potential to develop into a conflict within the OSCE area".

The mandate of the HCNM seems clear enough. The task of fulfilling the mandate is a challenge. Still today there are many difficult issues confronting the States of the OSCE region and it often proves difficult to draw attention of the international community to tensions between different national, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups until violence actually erupts. While respecting and using the confidentiality requirements and all other elements of my mandate, I will make continuous and determined efforts to start, maintain and enhance whatever processes that are deemed necessary to de-escalate tensions. In the medium and long term perspectives, this should always be followed up by efforts to resolve the underlying issues and the more deep-rooted causes of conflict. To this end I will continue, like my predecessors, to make concrete and practical recommendations to States and national minorities alike. These may include changes in legislation, institutions or policies towards minorities. I will aim at continuing to back up such recommendations and guidelines by targeted programmes and projects to help ensuring the implementation of policies to reduce tensions.

This is a task of enormous proportions and one in which the HCNM can only assist the parties by applying his approach of "quiet diplomacy". After all, it is the parties themselves who will need to adopt and implement solutions which more often than now will have to reflect a compromise reached or brokered between them. We can help the parties concerned by providing assistance in the form of diplomatic engagement, expertise and standard-setting, but it is ultimately up to the States themselves and the minorities involved to develop positive attitudes, a necessary precondition to avoiding conflict. In this context I would like to stress three aspects:

First, I still see the **participating States** of the OSCE as the most important guarantors for ensuring the respect for and full implementation of minority rights. Without well-functioning, democratic and accountable States, based on the rule of law, the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language are likely to be violated. Furthermore, without the protection of their rights by the State, the minorities become vulnerable and will increase the potential for conflicts. It is for this reason that I dare to say that good governance and well-functioning institutions are the first and best instruments to prevent conflicts. The more democratic a system of governance is, the greater the opportunity for a peaceful and stable situation.

Second, States as well as the international community should consider and treat **national minorities** as full partners who need to be included in the process of devising and implementing all policies which affect them, whether these policies are economic, social or cultural in character. My door will always be open to them. My services will always be available. At the same time, I need to repeat that I am the High Commissioner *on* rather than *for* National Minorities. I am not an Ombudsman for National Minorities. Minorities may sometimes need to be cautioned on the need to move away from “maximalist” positions.

Third, the **international community** has a particular responsibility in the prevention of conflicts and in assisting States in implementing the commitments they have undertaken concerning the protection and promotion of the rights of persons belonging to minorities. I therefore intend to pursue close co-operation with the participating States as well as with international organizations. Only a combined approach by all the relevant institutions can lead to effective results. As the OSCE focal point on national minorities I would like to co-operate closely within the Organization, in particular with the ODIHR. Like my predecessors, I will continue to expand the co-operation which is already in place particularly with the European Union, the Council of Europe (CoE) and the United Nations as well as its respective specialized institutions. I will continue to develop close contacts with the various bodies of the CoE. In this context, allow me to inform you about a modest but significant success story. This summer the first-ever joint OSCE-CoE publication was issued: "National Minority Standards. A Compilation of OSCE and Council of Europe Texts".

Mr Chairman,

Let me finally underline that the international minority standards are not only binding for the OSCE and its participating States, but also for the national minorities and should be respected by all other actors. In my opinion, the international community in general, and the OSCE in particular, have been quite successful in developing **adequate international standards** on human and minority rights, establishing fora for dialogue, methods of international co-operation and follow-up instruments. I would like to stress that these are the minimum standards to which all participating States have freely committed themselves. Sometimes however more detailed rules, recommendations or guidelines are indispensable in helping public authorities and minorities in addressing, designing and pursuing well-targeted policies implementing national minority commitments. This is why my predecessors endorsed five sets of recommendations in the field of education, languages, participation, broadcast media and policing in multi-ethnic societies. Furthermore together with a group of experts I continue the examination of possible recommendations on the transfrontier co-operation of

states for the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

As was underlined by the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons in 2005, "OSCE values and commitments are the bedrock on which the Organization stands." What is required, therefore, is the consistent and effective implementation of these standards throughout the OSCE area. All participating States have declared that the commitments undertaken within the human dimension of the OSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all of them and no longer belong exclusively to the sphere of internal affairs of the State concerned. It is anything but easy to always be consistent in such a commitment, but today's increasingly interconnected world makes this not only an opportunity for modern governance, but also a requirement for guaranteeing security.

In addressing these issues, a "one-size-fits-all" solution is out of the question. What is certain, however, is that a long-term commitment throughout the OSCE area is needed in order to gradually dispense with simplistic approaches. A rhetoric of "us" and "them" is detrimental with respect to the accommodation of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. Separation is not the solution; only reasonable integration can help solve the problems.

Thank you.