



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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by

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Monsieur le Président,
Excellences,
Très chers participants,
Mesdames et Messieurs,

Merci de m'offrir l'opportunité de m'adresser à vous cet après-midi.

Je n'occupe le poste de Haut Commissaire pour les Minorités Nationales à l'OSCE que depuis une semaine, c'est pourquoi je ne ferai pas un vaste tour d'horizon des activités que j'ai exercées jusqu'à présent.

Toutefois, j'aimerais vous parler un peu de mon parcours et de mes impressions concernant cette nouvelle mission.

Pour ce faire, je vais continuer en anglais. Pour celles et ceux d'entre vous que cela intéresse, le texte intégral du discours sera disponible en français.

I am not new to the OSCE. I was the head of the Swedish delegation to the (then) CSCE during the turbulent period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. I well remember those euphoric days of the Summit which took place here in Paris in November 1990. As Chairman of the principles committee that drafted the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, I recall the sense of hope and the feeling that we were witnessing a turning point in European history. As the Paris Charter declared, we were building 'a new era of Democracy, Peace and Unity'.

Things did not turn out quite as we expected. Although the threat of conventional or nuclear war decreased, Europe faced new challenges. One of the greatest was coping with inter-ethnic conflict. That is why just eighteen months later at the Helsinki Summit in July 1992 the post of High Commissioner on National Minorities was created. I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Max van der Stoep, for the outstanding way that he translated the mandate into action to address inter-ethnic tensions during his eight years as High Commissioner.

Looking back over the decade since the Paris Summit, it is safe to say that Europe is now more democratic and more unified than at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. But is it more peaceful? Inter-ethnic conflict is still a threat to the security of our continent. The crisis in Macedonia is the most salient example.

Unlike ten years ago, we have a better idea of how to spot the warning signs and we have a tool box of instruments and techniques for responding to them. Legislation to protect minorities is also more advanced, both in terms of international standards and in terms of domestic law and policy.

But we need to do more. Firstly we must persist in our efforts to build civil societies based on equality and the rule of law. If the rights of minorities are protected, if minorities are treated as equal members of society and have the possibility to fully participate in the life of the state, they will feel like they are stakeholders in that state. Secondly, any signs of tension should be addressed at an early stage. Wherever possible this should be a routine part of majority-minority dialogue. While internal

processes are crucial, the international community can be engaged in a supportive and co-operative way.

We also have to invest more in conflict prevention. This has financial implications, for example support for tension reducing projects. I encourage you to convince your colleagues in finance committees, indeed the finance ministries, to devote more resources to conflict prevention.

But money is only part of the solution. What is also required is the investment of time, energy and political will. Legislators have to make the effort to draft and enact laws that protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. In some cases this may not seem like a priority. But minority issues have a habit of quickly rising up the political agenda if they are unresolved for a long period of time. The longer minority issues are not properly addressed, the deeper the sense of minority resentment and alienation, and the harder it is to find compromise later on.

In most OSCE States minorities are able to freely express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity. But this is not a static process. One must constantly review the existing legislation, ensure harmonization of laws with international standards, and fine tune policy to ensure that the evolving interests and aspirations of minorities are taken into account. This requires that minorities have the opportunity to effectively participate in public life. Parliamentarians play a key role in this process and in setting the tone of discussions about integrating cultural and ethnic diversity, speaking out against intolerance and ethnic hatred, and combating extreme nationalism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are early days for me in this post. I know that there are issues in some of your countries that require my attention. My approach, pursuant to my mandate and the spirit of the OSCE, will be co-operative. But to be effective I will need your support, both in backing up my activities and in implementing my recommendations. Ethnic conflict remains a threat to security in Europe. We must work together to reduce that threat so that we may all live up to the expectations of ten years ago and consolidate an era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe.

Thank you for your attention.