



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

Address to a regional Ministerial Conference on National and Ethnic  
Communities and Minorities in South Eastern Europe  
- Domestic and Regional Confidence Building

by

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Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to address this conference. I think that it is appropriate that my first speech as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities is made here in Belgrade. This city and this country have witnessed so much turmoil in recent years as a result of national and ethnic issues. It seems beyond doubt that Yugoslavia's future will be defined in part by its ability to protect minority rights at home and develop good relations in the region. In the same way that countries of Western Europe overcame their differences and prospered after the Second World War, I am hopeful that South Eastern Europe now stands at the threshold of a period of regional reconciliation and development leading to stability and prosperity for all. Just as extreme nationalism has impoverished this region, the protection of minority rights and the pursuit of good neighborly relations can enrich it. Therefore, as I take up my mandate as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities I look forward to visiting this region in order to assist Governments and minorities to get on with the future rather than mulling over the past.

Under my predecessor, Max van der Stoep, the office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was very active in South Eastern Europe. It is my intention to maintain and build upon this engagement while following all developments in the Balkans that relate to possible tensions involving national minorities.

Our goal, in the first place, should be to prevent tensions from developing in the first place. That is why the pursuit of appropriate policy and law protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities is important. In a number of countries in the region, my office will continue to work with Governments on minority-related legislation, including framework laws on minority rights. A number of states in the region are also currently drafting anti-discrimination legislation, which are vital for curbing intolerance and ethnic hatred. In addition, effective policies and laws facilitating the right of return have a special significance in the Balkans after so many years of population dislocation. We must ensure that steps are taken to allow people to return to their homes voluntarily and in conditions of safety.

The international standards to cope with these issues already exist. They are the baseline on which Governments should build their domestic legislation. We must stick to these standards – indeed insist on them – and not allow obligations and commitments to be interpreted in a restrictive manner. We must also work hard to ensure that the good intentions stated at the highest level are translated into action for the people most affected.

Two sessions of this conference will look at bilateral agreements and trans-frontier co-operation. These topics are well chosen because whereas the recent history

of this region was marked by animosity and suspicion between neighbors, the future must be characterized by openness and co-operation. The worlds of business, finance, media and communication are changing the way that we look at, and relate to, each other. Barriers are coming down, transactions are speeding up, and distances are getting shorter. South Eastern Europe has a regional identity and comparative advantages which must be fully developed. The keys for future stability and growth must come through co-operation and closer integration.

That is not to say that sovereignty no longer matters. States must respect the laws of their neighbors. Bilateral consultations are essential when it comes to discussing issues that have a bearing on the sovereignty of another state. This is, after all, a condition of mutual respect, and encourages trust and co-operation. That is the spirit in which bilateral treaties are concluded. It is also a cornerstone of international law.

Many bilateral treaties contain clauses concerning the protection of persons belonging to national minorities. These are designed to put to rest any concerns that neighbors may have about the treatment of a kin-minority. They may also ease suspicions about the use of minority issues as a pretext for external interference. Accordingly, bilateral treaties may create mechanisms both to facilitate cultural exchanges of mutual interest and benefit, and also respond to points of dispute which may arise.

I know this subject will be treated in detail later on, but permit just to emphasize that bilateral treaties should be based on established international standards and must certainly not go below or compromise existing obligations or commitments. To this end, they should contain a clause to the effect that the contents should not be construed in ways that conflict with international law. In addition, bilateral treaties should avoid preferential treatment for certain minorities over other groups or individuals in society. They should also not necessarily be viewed as static. Because new issues arise and relationships change, treaties should provide mechanisms for political consultations and/or joint commissions to facilitate the implementation of treaties and to ensure that their spirit is being lived up to.

Of course, bilateral treaties are no substitute for good domestic policy and law, nor do they supersede other international standards. One must also be wary that provisions of such treaties are not used as tools to meddle in the internal politics of contracting States. In this respect, bilateral treaties can not replace multilateral mechanisms that have the essential attributes of independence and impartiality.

Mr. Chairman,

I am proud to represent one such mechanism.

To conclude, while good inter-ethnic relations depend on responsible behavior on the part of all parties, the onus for the protection of minorities rests with Governments. Recent history has shown us the cost of exclusion, intolerance and

violence. All of us must work to learn from the past and to engage in co-operative security directed towards good governance. We must adapt our thinking and our societal structures to deal with contemporary realities and the challenges of building a better future. This is in the interests of all members of society as well as regional security.

I look forward to working with you to achieve this end.