



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO CONTESTED HISTORIES

address by

Christophe Kamp

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

Siena Symposium on Contested Histories:

Challenges and Opportunities in Building More Cohesive Societies

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Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,

It is my great pleasure and honour to speak here today at this Symposium, where we will reflect on and examine how the ways in which history is told, remembered and contested can support integration processes or contribute to tensions in diverse societies.

At the outset, I would like to thank the University of Siena and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation – EuroClio Project on Contested Histories for co-organizing this important discussion and the excellent co-operation to that end. I would also like to thank the University for hosting the Symposium. It is truly fitting and inspiring to have these conversations in a place where history is so tangible.

Excellencies,

As the past is frequently invoked in public debates and political discourse, the question of whose history is told, and how, is both urgent and complex. The terrain of history is, in many ways, contested: a site where identities are constructed, challenged and sometimes erased.

We see this struggle everywhere. In debates over educational curricula. In the renaming of streets and institutions. In monuments toppled or fiercely defended. We see it in museums, in textbooks, in silence and in speech. In the legacies of colonialism, slavery, apartheid, forced migration and genocide – histories that refuse to remain in the past because their consequences are still felt in the present. Indeed, what we remember, and what we choose to forget, shapes not only our understanding of the past, but our trajectory into the future.

Contestations around history remind us that historical memory is not merely about factual evidence; it is also about interpretation. Histories are crafted, curated, revised and sometimes manipulated. They are told from particular perspectives, under particular pressures, and often in service of particular ends.

These are not abstract concerns. They are deeply personal, and often political as well. There are no simple solutions. However, there are certain principles that we can consider when addressing sources of disagreement and controversy related to historical memory. I would like

to set out some broad considerations on how to approach these questions that may assist efforts to find suitable responses.

Excellencies,

Let me start with a brief introduction of my mandate as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. The position was established in 1992, in the aftermath of the Cold War, to prevent conflicts arising from tensions involving national minority issues. This includes providing early warning when tensions involving national minority issues risk escalating into conflict, and early action, which involves supporting States' efforts to develop policies that promote integration and strengthen the resilience of diverse societies.

I approach this work through a security lens, using quiet diplomacy to build trust and promote inclusive dialogue. Issues relating to national minorities can be addressed through engagement with the authorities of the country where they live, minority communities, and, where relevant, neighbouring States. There are three main considerations. The first is the need for a strong legal basis for minority rights protection. Second is the need to find imaginative and practical solutions for integrating diverse society in a way that supports stability. And third is the need for assistance and advice to authorities and other groups in societies on how to work towards these ends.

Many States need to find a way to balance the need to foster a shared ownership of society while also respecting linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity within that society. How this balance is struck plays a critical role in determining a society's strength and resilience to internal and external pressures. Contested histories can present a central challenge in this balancing act. In my role as High Commissioner on National Minorities, I have come to see how the ways in which communities remember and interpret their past carry not only profound emotional weight but also security implications. Whether rooted in moments of triumph or trauma, shared memories can foster a strong sense of belonging and unity. Yet, the same historical events can evoke very different emotions in different communities, as well as between members of a community. What one group celebrates as a proud chapter of its history may be remembered by another as a source of deep suffering.

Here the present remains deeply intertwined with the past. Shared historical narratives, passed down through generations, shape collective identity and influence how groups interpret current events and justify their actions. At the same time, communities remember and commemorate the past through the lens of their present-day experiences. Political struggles over which parts of history to emphasize or suppress often mirror existing divisions – ethnic, linguistic or religious.

Minorities are sometimes portrayed as security threats or instrumentalized within broader political agendas. Historical grievances may in that context be revived or distorted to sow mistrust, justify exclusion and deepen social divides – dynamics evident in political discourse and media, and reflected in conversations I have across the region. Too often, dominant narratives overshadow minority voices, and if left unchecked, these patterns risk fuelling marginalization. This instrumentalization extends beyond domestic politics: external actors, including in neighbouring States, may use minority groups' interests for their own political reasons. Competing accounts of the past – on borders, identity or past injustices – are invoked to stir nationalist sentiment or reignite old territorial claims. In a fragile security environment, such politicization of memory heightens tensions and can even lead to cross-border disputes.

Excellencies,

While I fully recognize the sensitive nature of this issue, I believe my institution is well placed to explore how we can help diverse societies manage contestations over historical narratives in a pragmatic way. In this, I am fortunate to be able to refer to over 30 years of accumulated HCNM experience on similarly sensitive issues and the input of international experts in the field. The advice of my institution has always been built on expertise and experience, and that is why we are here today, to share our experience and expertise.

I believe we should look at three areas: first, we need to set out the general principles underpinning policy- and decision-making in this area; second, we will look at how historical events and people are remembered in public spaces through statues, street names, monuments and other symbols; and third, we will consider the entire education system, which teaches a particular version of history, and has the potential to promote critical-thinking skills and multi-perspective approaches.

While noting that we will explore some of the challenges of effective decision-making around historical memory in more depth later today, let me start by sharing a few reflections on general principles. International legal norms do not circumscribe how States should interpret, present and validate facts and events related to their historical narratives, and we see that some States wish to define a single version of history. However, restricting the perspectives of minority communities by imposing one narrative while silencing others often deepens divisions between and among communities and can strain relations between States.

By contrast, policies related to history that embrace multiple perspectives can promote inclusion and mutual understanding, including acknowledging the trauma that some groups may have experienced. Consensus cannot always be achieved and should not be the only objective. Involving different communities in shaping multi-perspective narratives of history strengthens democratic processes, builds trust and contributes to long-term cohesion and conflict prevention. Such inclusive dialogue about history requires sensitivity, openness and participation. A mutual accommodation needs to be sought between conflicting interpretations, requiring consultations and a willingness by all parties to consider differing viewpoints in good faith. It also requires taking into account the potential effects of policy decisions on different communities.

Freedom of expression and academic freedom are essential here. Historians, researchers, activists and the wider public must be able to explore and debate the past openly, without censorship or political interference. At the same time, historical accuracy should be safeguarded, based on factual, corroborated evidence and rigorous historical research.

Crucially, how history is remembered can affect not only internal dynamics but also relations between countries. Decision makers should therefore assess the potential effects of their decisions not only on persons belonging to different communities but on inter-State relations as well. In some cases, bilateral historical commissions have successfully helped manage these sensitivities and prevent escalation – something we will discuss further later today.

While inclusiveness is a fundamental principle, it will not work if only applied to how historical memory is represented and regulated. As conflict over historical narratives can be a rallying cry to disaffected communities, States should take into consideration the root causes of disputes over historical memory and address the underlying grievances. Thus, as the experience of my office has shown, efforts in the field of historical memory should be accompanied by policies

that foster inclusiveness, participation and integration in society, including education, language, the economy, justice, public life, the police and the media. A holistic approach is what really makes a society cohesive and resilient to crisis and conflict. My office engages with States on how to achieve that, based on a series of Recommendations and Guidelines that we have published over the last three decades.

A more specific area I would like to address is representations of history in public spaces. Through monuments, statues, street names and other symbols, States send messages about who and what should be remembered. These choices matter. They shape identity, belonging and how communities relate to one another. It is also important to be sensitive to the changes in values and interpretations of history within a society, and to reflect this change in public space.

That is why it is essential that public symbols reflect the diversity of society, including the voices of national minorities. In my work across the OSCE area, I have seen how contested symbols can divide communities. I have also seen how inclusive approaches can foster dialogue, help find common narratives and ensure that the debate remains respectful to the identities and perceptions of all members of society.

There are some approaches that have been helpful in this area. When contestations arise, States should act to calm tensions and initiate inclusive, consultative and participatory processes. When names of public places and objects, such as streets, cities, landmarks or squares reflect local historical, cultural and linguistic diversity, the potential for tensions to emerge or be exacerbated is lessened. We also know that as remembrance activities are important expressions of cultural identity, the rights of all members of the population to organize and participate in such activities in public spaces should be respected and protected, even though they may be subject to lawful and proportionate security-related limitations. Because museums and memory sites play a similarly significant role in how a society preserves its history, curating collections and public spaces with sensitivity to how different groups might interpret artefacts and accompanying narratives is essential.

We should also remember that memory plays many different roles. Erasing memory by, for example, removing statues, may come with the loss of historical or artistic value, and carries the risk of forgetting difficult pages of our past and the lessons learned since. There is rarely a simple choice between keeping or removing a monument. In some cases, symbols have been

contextualized, relocated, or repurposed to acknowledge their historical or artistic value while addressing the concerns of different groups. These creative solutions allow space for multiple narratives and shared ownership and help prevent further polarization, and I am looking forward to learning about some concrete case studies today and tomorrow.

I would also like to highlight the role of education, especially history education, which shapes how future generations understand their past and their present and future place in society. What and how we teach should reflect the diversity of society and it should include multiple, even conflicting, perspectives, obtained through inclusive processes and meaningful engagement with minority communities. My predecessors and I have observed that education systems that acknowledge and integrate both majority and minority contributions, including in curriculum, textbooks and other classroom materials, can help build integration and intercultural understanding.

Education policy, especially with respect to history teaching, should aim to build critical thinking, enable open dialogue, challenge stereotypes and move away from “us versus them” narratives. Students should learn that history evolves – not just through the uncovering of new evidence, but as values and perspectives shift. For the younger generation, especially those from national minority communities, it is important to learn about the changing and varied perspectives related to the history of the society in which they live and their own connection to that history.

Excellencies,

This Symposium is an invitation to interrogate the frameworks we use to understand the past, to confront uncomfortable truths and to consider the ethical responsibilities of policymakers, scholars, educators and citizens alike.

Over the course of today and tomorrow, we will hear from a remarkable group of contributors, each of whom brings a unique lens to the discussion and challenges us to think critically. I look forward to considering how history, even when contested, can be a space for dialogue rather than division.

Thank you for your attention.