



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

**Minority protection and the Framework Convention for the Protection of
National Minorities in the work of the OSCE High Commissioner on
National Minorities**

Address by
by
Astrid Thors

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

**Roundtable event to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Council of Europe
Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities**

[Check against delivery]

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Stability, democratic security and peace in this continent: these are our common goals. We have gathered here in Strasbourg today on the 15th anniversary of the entry into force of the Framework Convention because we are all determined to ensure that our European system to protect minority rights and prevent ethnic conflicts works. We want to ensure that it will continue working as well as possible. We already heard many good ideas here by the previous speakers, the three wise men, who have such long experience in working in the field of minority rights.

The Framework Convention is our primary legal standard. Let me also say that the comprehensive Opinions of the Advisory Committee, backed by the Committee of Ministers Resolutions, are a key resource for my Institution. They provide an excellent overview of minority rights implementation in State Parties, including by identifying gaps in implementation.

Consolidation of democracies is a fragile process which can easily be derailed. Respect for human, including minority, rights is often challenged. The ground gained by nationalist forces in many places in Europe today is worrying. We are witnessing a re-emergence of a form of nationalism that sees ethnic differences as a threat, the so-called “other” as an enemy. The growth of intolerance and hate speech threatens our democracies and puts peace in our countries and in our continent at risk. We must resist this trend.

That minority issues have been the subject of disputes in bilateral relations is perhaps nothing new: modern European history has many examples where concerns for ethnic “kin” have shaped inter-State relations and turned minority issues into security issues. The Framework Convention promotes a multilateral approach to minority issues. Should we be concerned about the return of a bilateral approach to minority issues?

The Framework Convention acknowledges the contribution kin-States can make to minority protection and the role bilateral treaties can play. Yet, as the Advisory Committee has reminded State Parties in some of its Opinions, we should not

over-rely on kin-State support: minority protection is the responsibility of the State where the minority resides.

This principle is one of the foundations of the *Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on Minorities in Inter-State Relations*. Elaborating on Article 18 of the Framework Convention, the Bolzano Recommendations emphasize the importance of promoting bilateral relations but also warn against the “bilateralization” of minority issues, which might lead to even bigger difference between the level of protection for minorities who have a kin-state and those who do not have such a state.

The most marginalized and vulnerable minority in Europe without a kin-state are without any doubt the Roma and Sinti. I recently spoke at an OSCE meeting in Vienna, which reviewed the progress made in the last 10 years in implementing the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area. Regrettably, despite increased funding and many actors working in this field, very little has been achieved in terms of concrete results and outcomes for the Roma and Sinti. Thus, the situation of Roma and Sinti remains one of the biggest challenges for us today in Europe.

Dear friends,

It is clear that both the HCNM and FCNM have common challenges to tackle. I believe that the cooperation that my Institution has developed over years with the Advisory Committee has been and continues to be key in order to ensure that we safeguard consistency in the constantly evolving field of minority rights. To put it in a more straight forward manner, without our cooperation, our common efforts to address these common challenges would be seriously undermined. This, we cannot afford.

The most recent Commentary on language rights by the Advisory Committee offers some valuable paths States can follow to address difficult questions, such as how to strike an appropriate balance between promoting official languages while protecting the linguistic rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

During my first field visits and contacts with participating states after having taken up my mandate, I have already seen how relevant the Advisory Committee's most recent commentary is. Let me for example take the question how to strike a balance between majority and minority languages in education. You rightly refer to the risks when minority language teachers are called upon to teach in the official language without proper support and preparation. I share your view that multilingual education can be beneficial for the pupils, but we must continue to ensure that it does not lead to de facto discrimination.

Dear friends,

We must remain vigilant and we must always strive to be relevant. These are the key challenges we will face in the future as we work to identify imperfections while striving to overcome them. We need to work with all parts of the society and include women and youth in the dialogue with minority representatives.

Yet our efforts may prove futile if we cannot count on the full co-operation of States in engaging in constructive dialogue. Allow me to conclude with a brief comment on responsibilities and the transformation of society.

The Advisory Committee issues opinions and recommendations for States and my Institution can facilitate processes and provide expertise on policies and measures that can reduce tensions between minorities and majorities. Together, we can help shape attitudes, identify shortcomings and support efforts to find solutions. What we cannot do, however, is replace State responsibility or substitute State action. We can play our part in influencing the future but ultimately, only political leaders can deliver a vision of inter-ethnic relations that secures peace.