



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

**Combatting Extremism:
Preventing and Fighting Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination**

Speech by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities
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at the Conference on
Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

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Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome the opportunity to address this conference. In my capacity as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I have a special concern for the scourge of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. These forces constitute a threat to social cohesion and security especially within multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. They attack the very pluralism and diversity that enrich our cities, communities and states. We must therefore work to prevent their spread and be vigilant in stamping out this evil wherever it appears.

I am particularly concerned about extreme nationalism. In my experience, extreme nationalism arises when the fetish of the “nation” overtakes all other considerations. When we concentrate too much on what makes us unique as a national group, we lose sight of what we have in common with fellow human beings. This nationalist narcissism too often spawns chauvinistic policies that provoke fear and hatred in others. This creates a malign spiral of distrust and reaction that can trigger violence.

Where the rights of persons belonging to national minorities are oppressed or restricted, it is common – and frankly understandable – that individuals and communities will seek to defend their identities. After all, one’s identity, national or otherwise, is an important part of how one understands oneself and is intrinsic to human dignity. We must therefore reject chauvinist or assimilationist policies. More generally, we must work against the likelihood of ethnic, cultural or religious differences being seen as threats. Furthermore, states should be obliged to create the space, opportunities and the legal framework for minorities to exercise their rights and to maintain and develop their identities.

Extreme nationalism and xenophobia also arise in reaction to global forces – globalization – that are perceived as threatening a group’s traditional values and identity. Bearing that in mind, we must be careful to ensure that trans-national projects do not undermine national or cultural identities. The logic of integrating diversity applies at the inter-State as well as the sub-State level.

Racism and xenophobia also stem from ignorance. When people are unfamiliar with other cultures, they often perceive them as threatening. “Otherness” is considered strange. People who speak a different language, practice a different faith, eat different food, or look or dress differently are not like “us” – they are “outsiders”. This strangeness is not appreciated by those with bigoted or intolerant views.

To my office, education plays an important – indeed essential - role in breaking down stereotypes, explaining the richness of diversity, and broadening understanding of universal human rights. Governments should create special educational programmes – for adults and children – in multi-ethnic societies, either with historic or more recent immigrant populations, which increase mutual understanding.

Extreme nationalism, racism, and xenophobia thrive on a sense of grievance. Over centuries of human history, many events have taken place that have created a perception of inequality and unfairness. Historical grievances should to be laid to rest. This may take any number of

forms – a truth and reconciliation commission, an historical review, compensation, an apology or simply the choice to move on. On the other side, some crimes – like the Holocaust – are so heinous that instead of forgetting, we must ensure remembrance of the horrors so that such grievous acts will never be repeated.

Inequality and/or unfairness may be real or imagined. If it is real, it may be due to discrimination in which case one needs anti-discrimination legislation and effective mechanisms to implement it. It is worth recalling paragraph 5.9 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document that states: “all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law will prohibit any discrimination and guarantee all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground”.

Guaranteeing anti-discrimination may be done on a law-by-law basis or through a comprehensive law against discrimination. In either case, to be effective, such legislation should include creation of an independent and impartial domestic institution for the supervision and implementation of the law, for example by means of a specialised Ombudsman or “equality commission”. The effectiveness of such institutions will be measured by their ability to be proactive, publicly known, and accessible.

Anti-discrimination legislation should be in line with Protocol 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights along with EU Directive 43 of 2000 (the so-called Race Directive) which are of special relevance to the member States of the Council of Europe and the European Union. In this regard, I encourage all Council of Europe Members States to ratify Protocol 12, and EU member and candidate States also to comply fully with the Race Directive.

Inequality or unfairness may relate to real or perceived socio-economic disparity. This is a double-edged sword. Populists often try to rouse passions by saying that “outsiders” (whether minorities or foreigners) are not only intruding on traditional values, they are stealing jobs and taking away opportunities. Majority intolerance plays on fears of being “swamped” by foreigners. For their part, minorities may feel that they are being denied access to particular types of jobs or promotions because of their skin colour, language skills, or ethnicity. They may feel discriminated against and denied equal access to public resources.

Here again anti-discrimination legislation (in line with international law) concerning social and economic rights can be helpful. So too can regulated and transparent immigration policies, State support for language training, and greater awareness about the benefits (rather than costs) that immigrants who integrate into society can bring to their new communities. I believe that the socio-economic aspects of inter-ethnic relations deserve closer attention and I intend to explore this issue within the context of my mandate.

After all, the costs of failing to integrate minorities (whether indigenous or migrant) can be high. Lack of integration can lead to ghettoization, mutual suspicion, and condemning a group to being an underclass. This can have a number of consequences, including domestic and international security, especially in states with sizeable minority populations. This can be exacerbated by potential interference of a kin-State, or elements thereof.

Since multi-culturalism is the norm across the OSCE area, the challenge of integrating diversity is common – to varying degrees – for all OSCE states.

As High Commissioner, I am considering ways how I can take a more active role in addressing these issues. My mandate refers to the fact that my office is an instrument of conflict prevention which should become engaged in national minority issues that could jeopardize stability and relations between States. So it is an inter-State, security-related instrument.

Building on this, at the Rome Ministerial meeting in 1993 OSCE Foreign Ministers issued a Declaration on Aggressive Nationalism, Racism, Chauvinism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism. They agreed that the OSCE should do more to combat these threats stating “the clear standards of behaviour reflected in [O]SCE commitments include active support for the equal rights of all individuals in accordance with international law and for the protection of national minorities”. The Rome Declaration invited the High Commissioner, in light of his mandate, to pay particular attention to these forces.

In the decade since that Declaration was made, specialized institutions have been created within the Council of Europe and the European Union to look exclusively at the problem of racism and xenophobia. Chief among them are the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. OSCE activities combatting racism and xenophobia should add value to existing bodies and instruments, both in approach and geographic reach. The OSCE, including the HCNM, should take on the responsibility to ensure implementation of minority-related commitments, particularly in the context of conflict prevention.

Despite efforts that have been made, there are still those who seek to gain power and influence by playing the nationalist or xenophobic card. Therefore we – as individual Governments, NGOs, and in the OSCE as a whole – must explain why respect for diversity, inclusion, mutual understanding, and integration are in all of our interests. Perhaps it is self-evident to most of us here. But there are still those who need to be convinced. We need to act together in order to dry up the environments where hatred can fester and extremism can provoke violence that undermines stability and security across the OSCE in order to bring peace and dignity to each and everyone in this vast area of the globe.