



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Looking Back, Looking Forward:

Reflections on Preventing Inter-Ethnic Conflict

Address to an international conference on
“Facing Ethnic Conflicts”

by

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Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nationalism is alive and well. Although I hope Ted Gurr is right when he says that ethnic warfare's heyday may belong to the last century¹, we are by no means out of the woods yet. Just when we think someone like Milosevic is moving into the shadows, someone like Vadim Tudor steals the spotlight. While the media focuses on one conflict, another one brews below the surface. A century marred by inter-ethnic conflict and excessive nationalism is only just behind us: But its legacy lingers on. What lessons can we take from the past and what are the prospects for facing ethnic conflicts in the future? Based on my eight years of experience as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I would like to share with you today my reflections on preventing inter-ethnic conflict.

I

Although our world is changing rapidly, some of the fundamental issues that we are facing today are those that theorists and practitioners have been struggling with over the past one hundred and fifty years. These include protecting and promoting minority rights and identities within multi-ethnic states, and reconciling claims for self-determination with the interest in preserving the territorial integrity of States. These issues plagued the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Indeed, one could argue that the collapse of those empires was due in part to their failure to reconcile competing national and state interests. During the Inter-War period the Great Powers and later the League of Nations tried to satisfy the desire of some nations for self-determination and to protect minorities that lived in multi-ethnic states. However, there were few international standards to meet these challenges and those that existed were often undermined by power politics. Minority rights and self-determination were therefore open to abuse, as demonstrated by Hitler's justification for his expansionist plans.

Communist countries also had difficulties coping with so-called "nationalities problems". Indeed, nationalism was a contributing factor to the break up of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The immediate post-Communist period was characterized by an explosion of nationalism. While euphoria welcomed the birth or re-birth of states, the accentuation

¹ Ted Robert Gurr, "Ethnic warfare on the wane", *Foreign Affairs*, New York, May/June 2000, p. 52.

and revival of national identity was often accompanied by a complete disrespect for the rights of others. Violent conflicts raged in a number of former Communist bloc countries and inter-ethnic tensions threatened to erupt in others.

In short, one of the defining characteristics of the twentieth century was the impact of excessive nationalism and the clash between the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. Wars were fought in defense of these principles; states have been created and broken up in their name; ideologies have been driven by them; and millions of people have been expelled or killed either fighting for, or being victimized by, nationalistic or ethnically-based ideals. As a result, one legacy of the twentieth century is that we almost automatically associate the word “ethnic” with conflict.

II

What can we do to reverse this trend? How can we face, or better still prevent, violent ethnic conflict? I believe that there are three main considerations. The first is the need for a strong legal basis for minority rights protection. The second requires finding imaginative solutions for integrating multi-ethnic diversity. And the third is to improve our techniques for assisting all groups in society to work towards these ends. Related to this latter point is the need to put greater emphasis on conflict prevention.

The protection of minorities is centered on the protection and promotion of the human rights of persons belonging to minorities. If these rights are respected in a democratic political framework based on the rule of law, then all persons, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, will have the opportunity and the equal right to freely express and pursue their legitimate interests and aspirations.

In addition to established human rights standards, minority rights protection has been strengthened in recent years by the OSCE’s Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. These standards have not been developed abstractly. They reflect the common views and wisdom of experts and practitioners and above all governments who have sought reasonable and fair ways of accommodating different identities and cultures while protecting the rights of individuals.

To be effective, these standards have to be applied. I think that many OSCE States are heading in the right direction. The fact that the respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, is part of the European Union’s criteria for admission of new members has made an important impact on applicant states.

But applying these standards is not a matter of scraping over the bar for the sake of appeasing the international community. The message that I try to convey to Governments is that they should implement their commitments not because they have to, but because it makes sense. Minorities are not going to go away. Marginalizing or ignoring minorities risks isolating them from mainstream society. If minorities do not feel like active and equal members of the state, they will not act like active and equal members of the state. They might seek to create their own parallel institutions and may tend to keep to themselves. This strengthens their sense of uniqueness or separateness and, by extension, the sense of difference between themselves and the majority. There is a danger that this divisiveness can sow the seeds of distrust, suspicion and misunderstanding – the worst case outcomes of which we know all too well.

Conversely if minorities are given the opportunity to be full and equal members of society and do not feel that their identities are threatened, then the chances of inter-ethnic tension will be greatly reduced. If ethnicity is depoliticized and politics is de-ethnized, then one's ethnic identity will not be an issue. Instead, people from all communities will concentrate on common interests and common concerns. Involving minorities in society and protecting their rights and identities is therefore good governance.

Because few modern States are ethnically homogeneous, legal and political frameworks should be devised to reflect the multi-ethnic reality rather than the nation-state myth. This is especially the case where there are sizeable and concentrated minority populations. For example, legislation, including the Constitution, should be inclusive and stress civic rather than ethnic attributes. States should ensure that opportunities exist for minorities to have an effective voice in government. Minorities should have opportunities to give input to decisions that affect them. There should be mechanisms through which they can discuss their points of view and opportunities for dialogue with government representatives. Because dialogue between the government and minorities is seldom limited to a single issue, it is important that these channels are established for the long term. A number of countries in the OSCE area have created government departments for minority issues, and have appointed Ombudsmen or Commissioners on Ethnic and Human Rights Issues. Several have also established minority consultative or advisory councils, either connected to legislative bodies or free-standing. Still, more needs to be done to have minorities adequately represented in the civil service, for example police and local officials.

These ideas should not be seen as a means of pandering to minority interests. Nor should they be implemented in a superficial way that amounts to little more than tokenism. Rather, the key is to strike a balance between minority and majority interests that allows for all sides to enjoy their individual identities while realizing and valuing shared interests.

For example, an effective language policy is one that concentrates on protecting the State language without limiting opportunities for use of minority languages. This is especially the case in education. On the one hand, the right of persons belonging to national minorities to maintain their identity can only be fully realized if they acquire a proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the educational process. At the same time, persons belonging to national minorities have a responsibility to integrate into the wider national society through the acquisition of a proper knowledge of the State language. This knowledge improves their economic prospects and their possibilities to exercise civic and political rights. Minority and majority interests can therefore be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

The same goes for culture. Persons belonging to national minorities have the right to express, preserve and develop their cultural identity free of any attempts at assimilation against their will. Of course, with equal rights come equal obligations. Minorities must be good citizens and not pursue their interests to the detriment of the human and civic rights of others.

Integrating diversity may, in some cases, be well served by allowing for a certain amount of self-government. There is a vastly unexplored range of possibilities between assimilation on one hand and secession on the other that has yet to be fully appreciated. More attention needs to be focused on so-called “internal” self-determination whereby self-government is arranged in such a way as to respond to the desire by a significant minority group to have a considerable amount of control over its own administration. . . without challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the state. I am glad to see that there are two panels during this conference which will look at federalism and power-sharing arrangements. I have brought with me copies of the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of Minorities in Public Life which have been prepared by international experts. I hope that may provide useful food for thought.

Accepting that integrating diversity is both desirable and possible, what can be done to assist this process?

III

The onus is on governments. They have the main responsibility to devise legislation and political frameworks to protect and integrate minorities. An overall integration strategy can be helpful in this respect. In this process, it is important for the government to send the right political signals and to involve minorities in decisions that affect them. Furthermore, promises that are given should be kept. Statements of good intention which are not fulfilled will erode the minority's confidence in the government. This can lead to disillusionment and an unwillingness to compromise in the future. Of course, this works both ways. Minorities must make full use of the opportunities available to them and demonstrate that they are responsible partners.

The international community can also play a role. Multilateral monitoring of the compliance of States to their international commitments increases transparency. Support for specific projects can help to reduce tensions and build long-term stability. I think we sometimes underestimate the impact that targeted resources can have on preventing conflict. Resources are often dedicated to people in need, either during or after a crisis. But we have to do more to prevent crises from getting to that stage at all. That requires political will, but also investment. It is hard to quantify successful preventive diplomacy because if it works nothing happens. But it is certainly easy to spot failure. Therefore although investment in conflict prevention may not be glamorous and may take years to pay dividends, it is money very well spent.

Of course, integration is a long-term process and there may be setbacks along the way. We must therefore be vigilant and committed to preventing any tensions involving national minority issues which have the potential to develop into conflict situations. My philosophy over the past eight years has been that the sooner we head off smoldering disputes, the better the chance that we will prevent them from igniting into full-scale conflicts later on. The longer the fuse burns, the more entrenched positions become and the harder it is to undo the damage.

Early information and careful analysis provide the background for early warning. Depending on the level of threat to security, early warning should be followed by early action. This action does not have to be dramatic. But it has to be timely and it should get to the heart of the issues. My experience is that this is best done quietly and co-operatively. Furthermore, one should take a step by step approach that creates a momentum for change.

While being sensitive to questions of culture, history and symbolism, I try to get the parties to concentrate on questions of substance. Nationalism feeds off stereotypes and vague generalizations. If one can put these aside and look at the specific underlying considerations, one can begin to pragmatically tackle concrete issues in dispute. In the process, the parties might even discover that their respective positions are not as far removed from each other as they may have thought. And if they are, they often welcome outside assistance in finding common ground and building consensus.

This is not the case when parties or individuals have no interest in compromise. Extreme nationalists often stick to their guns (sometimes literally) because compromise would undermine vested interests which often have nothing to do with ethnicity. National or ethnic arguments often mask interests of power, prestige and resources. In such cases, we have to be careful to make a distinction between populists, demagogues, extremists and their followers on one hand and the silent majority on the other. Efforts to condemn all members of an ethnic or religious group because of the actions of a few may not only infringe on their rights, but may create the very conditions that extremists thrive on.

Bearing that in mind, my goal has been to find common ground among the parties. I try to get Governments to stretch the bounds of the politically possible while reminding minorities to keep their demands within the realm of the probable. During my visits and in my recommendations I try to indicate possible compromise formula and explain that protecting the interests of one group does not have to come at the expense of another.

Looking back, I hope that it can be said that my office has been able to play a useful role in taking early action on issues that could have exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. Of course, the successful outcome of my intervention depends on the willingness of the parties to take to heart and implement the advice that I give. I see my role as that of a conciliator and catalyst. I think that the flexibility of my mandate has allowed me to be inventive in my approach. The intrusiveness of my mandate has allowed me to play an active and legitimate role in the internal affairs of states. Constructive, long-term engagement has helped to ensure that States stick to and implement their commitments.

But I must admit that it is a bit discouraging to think that my workload has not decreased in the last few years. That is why I would caution against any complacency about the reduced threat of ethnic conflict. There is a certain wishful linear logic that we are all progressing in the same direction according to the good intentions of high-

level international documents. That certainly is the goal, but reality sometimes has a nasty way of interfering. There is no guarantee that we will continue moving in the right direction. We must therefore keep an eye on any back-sliding on minority rights protection and continue to assist and monitor the process of implementing legal and political reform. We must also follow-up early warning with early action. We can not simply hope that when there are clouds on the horizon they will disperse. I do not want to sound like a Cassandra, but I want to warn against the view that excessive nationalism is a by-product of post-Communist transition and as we move out of that phase, nationalism will fade away. If that is true, how does one explain recent election results in Bosnia and Romania? Or the evident rise of xenophobia and racism in many European countries? Or persistent separatist movements in some countries? Or the assertive tendency of some countries to defend the interests of their kin abroad while neglecting the role that international organizations can play in this regard? Or the continued suspicion among certain ethnic communities that their neighbors can not be trusted? There is no end of Nationalism as there is no end of History. We will be facing ethnic conflict for some time to come.

My intention is not to prophesize doom and gloom. Rather, it is to underline the importance of the issues that will be discussed during these three days. I applaud the Center for Development Research of the University of Bonn for its initiative and the Federal Foreign Office of Germany for supporting this venture.

To conclude, I am looking ahead to six more months as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. My agenda for the next half year is filling up quickly. There are many issues across the OSCE area that concern national minorities. I can not deal with them all, nor does my mandate oblige me too. I must concentrate on those that have the most direct bearing on security. Among the issues of highest priority at the moment are the comprehensive reform of legislation concerning minorities in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the establishment of an Albanian Institution of Higher Education in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the educational rights of minorities in Ukraine and the Russian Federation, implementation of language legislation in Latvia and Estonia, integration issues in Moldova, and security issues in Central Asia. I have also learned to expect the unexpected.

Over the past few years, thanks in large part to many of the experts in this room, we have learned a great deal about the symptoms of crisis situations, the characteristics of nationalism, techniques for conflict management, and priorities for post-conflict rehabilitation. I'm sure further ideas will develop out of this conference. My hope is that in the years ahead, issues of ethnicity and nationalism will not only be

better understood, but more effectively addressed. They will become part of the normal discourse rather than sources of conflict. This will not only require a greater emphasis on conflict prevention, but also a change in thinking about the traditional paradigm of the nation-state and the meaning of sovereignty.

I urge you, leading scholars and policy makers, to continue your work in this important field that requires our combined efforts.

Thank you for your attention.