



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

Speech by

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Mr. Chairman,

I would like to make a brief review of some of the most salient themes and activities that I have addressed during the past year. I will conclude with a brief commentary on some of the issues on which I think that we should be vigilant in the year ahead.

During this past year I have devoted a considerable amount of attention to the question of higher education in the mother tongue. I am happy to say that there are positive developments in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Romania on this issue. A new Law on Higher Education was approved by the Macedonian Parliament which provides the legal basis for setting up an Albanian language institute of higher education. I have commissioned international experts to prepare a business plan regarding the creation of this institution. I am also working to secure financial assistance for the project. I see the development of this institution as a “good news” story for South Eastern Europe, although I should caution that we are still in the early stages of realizing this project.

Higher education in minority languages has also been a contentious inter-ethnic issue in Romania. There, I have worked with Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca to build on its existing foundations of multi-lingual

education. In July the University Senate amended the University Charter to expand the possibilities for students interested in taking courses in Hungarian and German and to create new mechanisms that will allow the various linguistic “lines” of study to have a greater say over the administration of decisions that directly affect their courses of study.

The goal in both the Romanian and Macedonian cases has been to create and entrench opportunities where students from minority communities can receive a quality tertiary education in the mother tongue. At the same time, I have tried to de-politicize these education issues so that they do not inflame inter-ethnic relations. As with so many other situations I deal with, I have tried to explain to the Government the need for protecting and promoting minority rights while cautioning minorities on the need to move away from maximalist positions. Only time will tell whether or not I have been successful, but I am cautiously optimistic that we are making progress.

Education has also been an issue that I have been looking at when examining the situation of Russian minorities in Ukraine and Ukrainian minorities in Russia. Through a number of visits and the engagement of educational experts, I have gathered information on the situation of education rights for the respective minorities in both countries. I intend to make some recommendations on these subjects before the end of this year.

As in past years, I have paid close attention to linguistic issues that effect inter-ethnic relations. In December 1999 the Latvian Parliament adopted a State Language Law. In June of this year amendments were made to the Estonian Law on Language. I am satisfied that in both cases the legislation is largely in conformity with international standards. I welcome the willingness of the Latvian authorities to make substantial changes in the original decrees on implementing the Language Law. I am continuing discussions on a number of issues relating to these decrees.

In Moldova I am looking at ways of ensuring that the strengthening of the state language does not come at the expense of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Furthermore, I am looking at language as a tool of social integration and supporting a project designed to promote knowledge and use of the State language, particularly among children from minority communities. I believe that this work can play a positive role in promoting inter-ethnic integration in Moldova.

Integration is not a challenge unique to Moldova. Accommodating inter-ethnic diversity is an issue in many OSCE States. That is why I have paid particular attention to the effective participation of minorities in public life. The Lund Recommendations, issued last year, aim to facilitate the inclusion of minorities within the State and enable minorities to maintain their own identity and characteristics, thereby promoting the good governance and integrity of the

State. As I have repeatedly noted during the past year, I believe that these Recommendations can open up new horizons for looking at ways of allowing minorities to have a greater say over decisions that affect them, without breaking up States. In this vein, I organized, in May of this year, a seminar on possible applications of the Recommendations. The Lund Recommendations were also the main topic of a seminar held in Almaty in October 1999.

Speaking of Central Asia, my office continues to monitor inter-ethnic relations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. We are paying particular attention to religious extremism which seems to be a growing threat to the stability of the region and a source of tension between ethnic groups.

Throughout my period in office, I have tried to stress to a number of governments the importance of protecting and promoting minority rights. Experience has taught us that the blatant and persistent disregard of the rights of people who are of a different ethnicity is an almost inevitable precursor to inter-ethnic tension and, all too often, violent conflict. I know you have heard me warn before about the threat of excessive nationalism and the dangers of the human rights abuses that come with it. But I need to constantly reiterate this point because the threat has not subsided. Nationalism is a card which irresponsible people within some majority groups and minority communities in the OSCE area are still willing to play. We must not be complacent. There are still a number of inter-ethnic tensions which, in my judgement, have the

potential of developing into conflicts that could affect peace, stability and relations between OSCE participating States. Bearing that in mind, it is vital to the integrity of my office and, indeed the OSCE, that the High Commissioner's mandate (including unrestricted travel), should be respected in order that I be able to effectively carry out my activities.

One way of combating human rights abuses associated with extreme nationalism is to enact comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. This was one of the central recommendations of a report that I issued in March of this year on The Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area. I am glad to see that the recommendations made in the report concerning issues like education, living conditions and political participation are receiving considerable attention. To this end, in June of this year I organized a seminar on Roma and Sinti, hosted by the Government of Slovakia, in Bratislava. We in the OSCE community need to put more attention and resources into Roma issues. I therefore take this opportunity to reiterate my call for enhancement of the Mandate of the OSCE Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues.

Discrimination is not only faced by Europe's Roma populations. It is evident in many minority-related situations. In June of this year I organized a seminar in Budva, Montenegro to hear from representatives of various national minorities in Serbia and Montenegro about the protection and promotion of their rights. It is obvious to me that minorities in the Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia faced problems of discrimination and assimilation under the Milosevic regime. There are reasons to hope that under President Kostunica, a different policy will be followed. In light of recent developments, I welcome and look forward to an opportunity to enter into a dialogue with Belgrade on minority issues.

There have been more positive developments in Croatia since the change in leadership. However, it is unacceptable that the policy of the Government to facilitate the return of Serbs to their places of origin is frequently being sabotaged at the local level. In Croatia, I am also paying attention to the Constitutional law on minorities.

I want to conclude with two cautionary observations. The first relates to the theme of this meeting, namely implementation. Unlike seven years ago when the institution of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was created, there are now a number of instruments, standards and recommendations devoted to the prevention of inter-ethnic conflict. But more needs to be done to assist States in implementing the commitments that they have undertaken concerning the protection of persons belonging to national minorities.

The second and final point that I want to make concerns vigilance. I caution those who believe that nationalism is a by-product of post-Communist

transition and that it will fade away as we move towards closer European and indeed global integration. This may well be true in the longer term, but we are not there yet. In a similar vein, I want to caution against those who think that we are now more prepared to combat signs of potential conflict because of the vast amounts of information at our disposal. I do not deny that the Internet, wire services, the work of NGOs and investigative reporting all make us better informed. But lack of information is seldom the problem; what is needed is early action. I am not referring to large-scale humanitarian intervention, but to timely commitments at an early stage to head off potential tensions. This would pre-empt the need for costly crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. More must be done. I hope that the efforts of my office will continue to have the indispensable support of OSCE participating States and the NGO community.