



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

**SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF INTEGRATION:  
THE ROLE OF THE OSCE HIGH COMMISSIONER  
ON NATIONAL MINORITIES**

address by  
**Rolf Ekéus**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the  
**University of Ottawa Conference**  
**“Debating Language Policies in Canada and Europe”**

Ottawa, Canada – 31 March 2005

Mr. Chairman,  
Distinguished Conference Participants,

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the conference organizers and to the University of Ottawa for the invitation to address you today. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate the University on the occasion of the establishment of a number of new professorial positions for research into language questions. As Canadians are well aware, language plays a fundamental role in human society. Indeed, it has been my experience as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities that language can be one of the most contentious issues in multi-ethnic societies. This is because of both its functional and its symbolic significance. Language is simultaneously a marker of ethnic identity, a vehicle for expressing distinct cultures, a source of national cohesion, the basis for public administration and an instrument for building political communities. Thus, language is at the core of our individual and collective identities.

With the creation of states and nations language has become essential for political and administrative functions. In the nineteenth century, at least in Europe, language was considered to be the defining characteristic of a nation, and it was almost axiomatic that a linguistic community deserved to have its own state. It was in large part this thinking that prompted the efforts to bring about Italian and German unification. In the global era, language has become even more important. While some languages provide the medium for worldwide communication, at the same time we have witnessed the extinction of languages and many hundreds more face an uncertain future.

In Europe today, we are seeking to build a Union in which language is not a barrier for citizens and where different language communities are able to protect and develop their languages. This endeavour is not without its difficulties and it is certainly not cheap: the annual costs for translation within the various organs of the EU are set to exceed one billion US dollars following the recent enlargement of the Union. The fact that Europe is prepared to commit such resources to promoting communication is testimony to the continuing salience of language to its citizens and of the need to find creative ways to accommodate the diverse language needs in our societies.

While language issues are the source of considerable tensions in a number of the regions of the OSCE where I operate, I believe that the challenges of promoting harmonious social integration within multilingual societies are not insurmountable. I agree with the opinion of the noted political scientist Ted Gurr when he observes that, "... language

differences, unlike racial and religious ones, are subject to individual and collective compromises. Individuals in heterogeneous societies can and ordinarily do speak several languages, but they cannot be both black and white or both Hindu and Muslim”.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, social scientists have sometimes downplayed the role of language, seeing it as being malleable for reasons of economic interest. However it has been my experience that people wish to retain their languages for a variety of reasons and that they should be entitled to this. If economic questions were the only factor determining the role of language then a number of minorities – for example the Bretons, the Welsh, and the Tatars – would not be working so actively to preserve and to develop their languages.

As High Commissioner, I believe that my role is to help to find practical ways whereby language can be used as a means of integration and social cohesion rather than as an instrument of exclusion, repression or even assimilation. This is important because there is too often a tendency to approach language issues in 'zero sum' terms whereby the promotion of one language is undertaken at the expense of others. Such thinking is harmful not just for minorities but also for majorities. It is rarely the case that ethnic communities live in entirely homogenous and separate communities, and this means that even linguistic majorities can find themselves living as minorities within minorities in particular territories of a State. Furthermore, in a number of the participating States of the OSCE ethnic majorities actually constitute linguistic minorities because their language has been repressed or lost as a result of the influence of more powerful languages.

It was against the background of the volatile and sometimes violent nature of inter-ethnic relations, including disputes about language, that the OSCE decided to establish the post of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1993. This decision was a reflection of the growing understanding in the international community that contemporary conflicts are often the product of tensions and frictions *within* States, between different groups – based on ethnicity, religion, and language – and frequently in the context of majority-minority relations.

The HCNM was established in a time of considerable optimism about the potential for international organizations to play a leading role in promoting peace and stability. The philosophy behind the creation of the HCNM was to establish an instrument of conflict prevention. In the fulfilment of this role, the High Commissioner is expected to engage

---

<sup>1</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, *Peoples vs. States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute for Peace, 2000) p. 67.

himself for the precise purpose of addressing situations where he considers that there are tensions involving national minority issues which have the potential to develop into conflict within, and perhaps between States. To that end, the HCNM mandate has been tailor-made to enable him to take action to prevent inter-ethnic tensions from developing into confrontation and even full-scale violence, which could spill over into international conflagration.

I am often thought to be a national minorities' ombudsman or an investigator of individual human-rights violations. But as I hope is clear from my earlier comments, this is not correct. In fact, my obligation is to intervene in order to prevent majority-minority tensions from developing into conflict, which means that I do not automatically take the side of the minorities. My mandate is derived from what is known as the political and security dimension of the OSCE's activities rather than its human dimension. At the same time, the OSCE has adopted a comprehensive concept of security, according to which there is no security without human rights, including minority rights. For this reason, my work does often draw upon tools derived from other dimensions such as the human dimension of the OSCE culture. Therefore, it is particularly important in my work to promote the integration of national minorities into the societies where they live.

My task is not the promotion of the assimilation of minorities, nor is it their separation from the societies in which they are living. I strive to identify the middle ground of integration which respects diversity. As High Commissioner, I seek to find the best ways to accommodate the legitimate concerns both of majorities and minorities. That is to say, where those in the minority as well as those in the majority can preserve their identity as members of ethnic, linguistic or religious groups and yet also share with other groups the identity of the national society as a whole. In my experience, the best means to achieve this end is within the context of a set of integration policies.

As you will immediately understand, language has a critical role to play in this undertaking. While language can, on the one hand, be a major source of division within diverse societies, on the other hand, with the right kind of policies, it can also be used a tool for integration. For this to function properly both the majority and the minority must be willing to accept compromise. Integration, therefore, involves responsibilities and rights on both sides. The minority should be prepared to learn and to use the language or languages endorsed by the State, normally the language of the majority. At the same time, the majority must accept the linguistic rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

In practice, this may not be an easy balance to establish or to maintain. For this reason, I have supported the development of a set of recommendations by international experts designed to assist States, ethnic majorities and minorities. The *Oslo Recommendations* regarding the linguistic rights of national minorities offer practical guidelines on how the linguistic needs and rights of different ethnic groups can be accommodated. These recommendations are supplemented by *The Hague Recommendations* on the education rights of national minorities and *The Lund Recommendations* on the effective participation of national minorities in public life, both of which contain sections dealing with language. Reflecting the key role that the various mediums of mass communication play in modern society, I have recently supported the development of *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*.

If language is to be a basis for integration then there must also be practical measures to encourage integration. Over the years, the HCNM has developed considerable experience in this area. A key challenge has been to find ways to promote knowledge of the State language while ensuring the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to protect and develop their languages. One example of my work in this area is in the predominately ethnic Armenian region of Samtskhe-Javakheti in Georgia. Language is a central element of my work to integrate the region more closely into Georgian society. I have, for example, introduced a project to promote knowledge of the State language amongst local officials and the general population of the region. Another project is designed to ensure that the Armenian population has access to local and national media in their own language. This initiative means that the ethnic Armenians no longer have to rely exclusively on the news broadcasts from neighbouring Armenia for information. I am also directly involved in language issues in the Transdnister region of Moldova, where the Romanian language faces discrimination in the regional educational system.

Another vital part of integration strategies concerning language issues can be accomplished by education. I believe that education should promote values of tolerance and mutual understanding, and ought to provide children with the necessary skills to live and thrive in multi-ethnic and multilingual societies. In this way, education is not only a key to cultural development and the perpetuation of diverse identities, but it is also central to the larger social integration necessary in any State. In multilingual societies, the right kind of educational policies on language can play a fundamental role in achieving these aims.

In Kyrgyzstan, I have supported the establishment and subsequent activities of the *Working Group on Integration through Education*, which is composed of local officials, educational experts and representatives of national minorities. One of the principal recommendations of the Group is that more opportunities for multilingual and mother-tongue education, notably at the primary level, should be made available in the country. The teaching not just *of* but also *in* different languages, both for minorities and for majorities, can, in my view, help to overcome the widespread idea that the existence of different languages establishes barriers between communities. Indeed, it has been my experience that as a result of the introduction of multilingual and mother-tongue education, language can become a medium for communication rather than a basis for exclusion. At the same time, the introduction of such measures must be undertaken with careful consideration of the impact that reform can have on children and their communities. For this reason, I am assisting with measures to maintain educational standards in the context of a far-reaching reform of the way in which language is employed in the school curriculum. The recent introduction of the State language as a means of education in Russian-speaking secondary schools in Latvia and shortly, in Estonia has motivated my involvement in this field.

Another issue that I frequently encounter is the question of language requirements preventing representatives of different communities from being able to enjoy their right to equal opportunity. A key area is higher education. In the south of Kazakhstan, I am working with Uzbek-language schools to offer supplementary tuition for final-year students in the State language, Kazakh, or the official language, Russian. This project is designed to enable the Uzbek-speaking students to take the State Examination for entry into higher-education institutions in Kazakhstan, which is currently only offered in the Kazakh and the Russian language. During the Soviet era, most ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan went to Uzbekistan to study and obviously did this in the Uzbek language, which afforded them limited job or academic opportunities when or if returning to Kazakhstan. This is no longer possible. Furthermore, from the point of view of integration, it is desirable that significant numbers of Kazakhstani Uzbeks study in their own country. This project has been remarkably successful, with over 90% of the students receiving the additional tuition gaining entry to institutes of higher education in Kazakhstan. As a follow up, I am now in a dialogue with the Kazakhstani authorities with the view to assisting them in providing future examinations in the Uzbek language and training multilingual teachers to work in the Uzbek-language schools.

In a similar vein, I am working with Albanian-speaking students in South Serbia to help them to acquire skills in the Serbian language in order to encourage them to continue their university studies in Belgrade rather than moving to Kosovo and the Pristina University, thus furthering their integration in Serbia.

Mr. Chairman,  
Distinguished Conference Participants,

The cases that I have highlighted today are just a few examples of the sort of practical approaches that can be employed to counter the emergence of frictions around language issues and to promote integration. Of course, each country is a specific case and we should be careful to develop policies that fit the diversity of our societies. There is no simple universal model to solve these questions. At the same time, it is my experience that distinctions between unilingual and multilingual countries are breaking down as a result of immigration and the recognition in many societies that ethnic and linguistic diversity is to be valued.

The new and old challenges associated with accommodating different languages in our societies are certainly considerable. Nevertheless, it is my firm conviction that the type of approaches that I have outlined today can make a substantial contribution to meeting and overcoming these challenges. A key task, I believe, is to create the conditions whereby individuals living in multilingual environments have the opportunity to become skilled in a variety of languages. In this way, languages can become transethnic in character. This is important not only because an ability to speak languages is an advantage but also because such a development would do much to challenge the idea that particular languages are automatically identified with the ethnic majority or the ethnic minorities.

It goes without saying that establishing the conditions whereby language can serve as a means of integration is not an easy task. Nevertheless, with creativity and further research, as well as through discussion such as that which will be taking place at this conference, it is my firm conviction that this task can be achieved. With this in mind, I would like to wish you every success with the remainder of the conference and I look forward to following the work undertaken by scholars and practitioners in this vital area in the years ahead.

Thank you for your attention.