



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

PREVENTION OF INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT

address by
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The collapse of the Soviet System, the break-up of the monolithic Soviet Union proper and the dissolution of its equally monolithic supporting alliance system in Eastern and Central Europe meant that millions of human beings had to search for an identity, other than being Soviet citizens or socialist communist subjects striving in vain for the realization of the Marxist vision.

To replace the disappearing patterns, the age-old idea of the nation State had to be resurrected. Belonging to one specific nationality meant an opportunity to lay claim to territory, a country or a state, provided history and the size of nation coincided to make this possible. Otherwise you had to settle as a minority within a State and adjust to the realities of a status, sometimes challenged with regard to access to your language, education, history as well as political governance and self realization.

Too frequently, the political reality of a minority status has been that fundamental rights have been questioned and discrimination a reality where non-discrimination is the law.

In the United States, Samuel Huntington – of "Clashes of Civilization" fame – is fighting a rearguard action to save the USA as an Anglo-Protestant citadel against the onslaught of the waves of Hispanic/Mexican immigration. The centuries-old policy/practice of assimilation of mass immigration appears – according to Professor Huntington – to be challenged by the unwillingness or inability of the new immigrants to assimilate. Thus the notion of the United States as a nation and a culture would be put at risk. Although Huntington's ideas about the Hispanic Challenge have met vigorous opposition among American academia, they are argued with force and cannot be ignored. They may gain wide appeal in the US and like so many other American intellectual and social innovations be transported to Europe.

In this formative period for the larger Europe characterized by the emergence of new independent States, re-definition of old States and growing patterns of migration, it is becoming a necessity to identify the means to reconcile the State and the Nation. Somewhere in this process, choices have to be made – assimilation, integration or separation. The question is: Is there an American model or a European model to be followed?

For Europe's part it could be argued that the idea of so-called "State forming nation" is losing its relevance in the face of contemporary realities and the changes currently underway in many societies. In the larger Europe, the OSCE region, emerging out of the shadows of the Soviet system, there are few "pure States" in an ethnic sense. Bearing in mind

the bitter history of the ethnic conflicts during the Twentieth Century, this can be a blessing – or a curse. Now, the reality is that Ethnic and State boundaries seldom coincide. Ethnic groups are therefore frequently divided by borders.

The costs and risks of attempts – whether peaceful or violent – to create ethnically pure States have been shown again and again to be unacceptably high. The national and logical choice by any society would therefore be to find ways to create an existence in a multi-ethnic context.

Proposition

The lessons learned are that multi-ethnic States are viable as long as they accommodate and integrate diversity. International organizations and institutions could best support the viability of such States, helping them to make multi-ethnicity work.

This also means that emphasis should be placed on preventing States from dis-integrating, from becoming "failed States". The relatively newly independent States in particular, face the complex task of building States and strengthening national identities, often in difficult political and economic situations, without excluding persons belonging to national minorities.

Security dimension

If we look at South-East and Central Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, all part of the OSCE-region, but even more apparent Africa and South East Asia, is it remarkable that since the end of the Cold War, the large majority of violent conflicts in these regions have been generated by ethnic tension and strife. Therefore it should be obvious that international efforts to prevent new conflicts need to focus on interethnic problems and majority/minority relations. To me it is striking how feeble the multilateral structures often are about responding in a preventive mood to these challenges to international peace and security. The HCNM is one of the few international institutions which is mandated to be a tool of prevention of just such conflict and to address ethnic tensions and violence. The too frequently overlooked, and even ignored, OSCE has with the creation of the institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) created a unique tool for addressing these active threats of ethnic tension and violence, with their potential of ethnic cleansing and armed conflict. You'll find in the background material to this Seminar, an excellent presentation of how Max van der Stoep the first HCNM, by making full use of the mandate of

the institution and applying its far-reaching prerogatives, has repeatedly succeeded in making a difference where ethnic tensions threatened to turn into violence.

Building on past experience and proved methods, I as incumbent HCNM am identifying majority/minority situations which have the potential to develop into serious tensions. I approach them by applying the rights, prerogatives, practices and experience designed to prevent situations from developing into conflicts.

This approach is characterized by a combination of the collection of information, and visits and direct contact with officials, representatives, civil society and individuals. Regional diplomacy which culminates in concrete and practical recommendations, frequently backed up by targeted projects in support of education, language, practical participation, democratic practices, as well as media access and development, sometimes in cooperation with the UN, UNHCR, the Council of Europe and the EU. The emphasis is always on early action and on prevention.

Since I took up the office I have been addressing situations like the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia; the inter-ethnic issues in Serbia especially in Southern Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia (in particular the Serb/Albanian tensions, consolidation within the Ohrid agreement and the remaining problem of the return of the deported Serbian minority in Croatia); the issue of tensions in Crimea between the returning formerly deported Tatars and the ethnic Russians in Ukraine; the difficult situation of Meshketians in Krasnodor Krai in Russia; the inter-ethnic diversity threatening the very existence of Georgia, specifically the matter of the breakout regime in Abkhazia on the Armenian minority in Samske Javashketi, in Southern Caucasus; the problems in Central Asia including the ethnically confusing situation in the Fergana Valley with its Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazak nationalities, the complex ethnic situations in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and, particularly, in Turkmenistan with its very own brand of nationalities and the really worrisome situation of the Uzbek and Russian minorities and, finally, matters in Central Europe relating to the States and their ethnic kin living in neighbouring countries.

The HCNM has to adjust his tools to each specific situation from legislative reform in the Baltic States, support to primary, secondary and higher education for Albanians in the Balkans, integrative actions to break the isolation of Armenians in Georgia and settlement, political and language reforms in the Central Asian States.

In regions where memories of violent conflict are fresh, like the Balkans, South Caucasus and Central Asia, the wounds are not completely healed. The urgency of dealing in

an innovative and constructive manner with the potential of renewed ethnic violence is stressed by the disturbing and growing trend of forces of gangsterism, corruption and extortion, which exploit ethnic tensions to promote their own agendas and thereby have a vested interest in a worsening and hardening of the relations between majority and minority.

This opens the trap of equating ethnicity with conflict. To avoid such a misreading, the HCNM must find ways in his work to create understanding and respect for the minority situations and isolate minorities from the forces which are trying to compromise their efforts to access education, language, media and political participation.

Just a few words about that Europe, which here is defined as the enlarged EU. An inconsistency has arisen with the accession of the ten new members who in accordance with the Copenhagen Criteria for membership in the European Union have been required to respect standards in regard to the protection of persons belonging to National Minorities, while the 15 older member States have not been subject to similar obligations. It is difficult to justify such a discrepancy in standards between new and old member States under the EU rules. A simple step which I have proposed to the EU presidency is to incorporate the legal protection of persons belonging to National Minorities into the European Constitution. To date, no decision has been taken even though the Presidency has signalled optimism in its responses to me. Such a measure would assert equal protection of the EU Law to the tens of millions who do not belong to a majority population within an EU member State.

Finally, returning to the choice I talked about initially for the High Commissioner on National Minorities – the choice between assimilation, integration or separation – the answer in simple terms is the searching of the middle ground between the two extremes, on the one side forced assimilation, on the other separation or break out, namely integration with respect to diversity. That is the best way.

The sceptic may say "Easier said than done", and I agree with such a statement. But I have not found anything better.