



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

OPENING REMARKS

by
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at the
OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on
Education of Persons Belonging to National Minorities: Integration and Equality

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Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on “Education of Persons Belonging to National Minorities: Integration and Equal Opportunities”.

I would first like to thank the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship for having proposed today’s topic, which is a logical follow-up to the session on “Integrated Education” at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in October of last year. This is the first time that a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting has been devoted entirely to an issue that is of such vital importance to persons belonging to national minorities.

My thanks also go to our colleagues at the ODIHR who have taken care of the logistical arrangements for this meeting and to the OSCE field missions, not only for their participation today and tomorrow, but also and most importantly for their contribution to promoting integrated education in their respective countries.

I also welcome the participation of international organizations and representatives of civil society from across the entire OSCE region. The issues to be discussed here can only be successfully addressed with input from a wide range of participants.

And finally, I want to thank our keynote speaker, Mr. Alan Phillips, and the introducers and moderators who have accepted my invitation to guide the discussions over the next two days.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Education has been and continues to be central to the work of successive OSCE High Commissioners on National Minorities. It is crucial in all societies as it provides individuals with the means to realize their potential and ambitions. In a multi-ethnic society, however, it is even more crucial because it also promotes cohesion and integration between different ethnic groups. It plays an essential role in breaking down stereotypes, explaining the richness of diversity and broadening understanding of universal human rights.

I anticipate that two issues will be the main running themes throughout this meeting. The first is language education. In almost all countries with national minorities, the mother tongue of the minority is almost invariably different from the State or official language of that country. If people from such minorities are to integrate successfully and achieve equality, they need to acquire fluency in the State language. At the same time, however, people from national minorities have the right to study and be educated in their mother tongue so as to protect their identity and cultural heritage. Indeed, if they are prevented from doing so, tensions or even conflict may be the result. A balanced education system needs to combine tuition in and through the minority language with tuition in the State language.

How to reconcile these two aspects of language education is the challenge facing many States with significant national minorities and especially those where the minority is geographically concentrated. “The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities”, published 14 years ago by the HCNM, suggest practical ways of addressing this dilemma at all levels of education. Language classes, special regulations for entry examinations, extra-curricular activities and alike are just some examples of how this could be done, depending on the varying circumstances. It will be interesting to learn both from those who are implementing education policy and those educationists and teachers who are at the coalface so to speak, to what extent the guidance offered in these Recommendations is relevant and actually applied in practice.

The second issue, and one that gives me particular concern, is the increasing trend towards segregated education in many OSCE States. I have referred to this in my statements to the Permanent Council and again at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting last year. Regrettably, the situation is not improving.

As I have noted on previous occasions, international law does not prohibit the establishment of separate educational systems or institutions for religious or linguistic reasons. This is in fact a right protected by law based on freedom of choice, which is crucial to the development and maintenance of minority identities. It is the negative aspects of parallel school systems that concern me. Dividing students in schools along ethnic lines only reaffirms stereotypes and undermines the social cohesion that is essential in a multi-ethnic society. It is imperative that this downside be countered by ensuring that students can meet across the ethnic divide both in the classroom and during extra-curricular activities. Greater efforts must also be made to promote the State language and its learning, to develop textbooks that take account of the multi-ethnic nature of the country and to provide better training for teachers. All these

measures can certainly have a positive impact on how students perceive one another and their own place in a given society.

As things stand now, such schools frequently lose out to majority schools in the competition for funding. The actual conditions in such schools are often bad – with overcrowded classrooms, poor sanitation, inferior textbooks and high dropout rates. Academic standards inevitably suffer as a result. In addition, the State language is often inadequately taught by teachers for whom that language is either not their mother tongue or who have little experience of teaching pupils whose mother tongue is different from that of the teacher.

As a consequence, young people from minority communities are disadvantaged in the labour market as in almost all cases the pursuit of higher education remains beyond their reach. Equality is impossible to achieve in such circumstances. Rather, it results in fragmented societies where resentment against real or even perceived discrimination creates a climate of tension where just one tiny spark can generate conflict.

This is why I am so concerned about the proliferation of parallel education structures, where children of different ethnicity do not interact and grow up in parallel worlds. It is the task of governments, civil society activists and us as international organizations to stress the importance of integrated education at every opportunity. It is fundamental to building cohesive, integrated societies.

These and other issues will be addressed in the course of the three working sessions that will follow this opening ceremony. In the first session, the focus will be on education for national minorities at the primary and secondary school level. In the second session, we will concentrate on the question of access to tertiary education for national minorities. This is an area that is of increasing concern to me and one that is of increasing importance for young people from national minorities for whom tertiary education is the key to full integration and equality in their societies. And finally, the third session will look at the issue of education for adults from minority communities. The suggested parameters for the discussions are set out in the comprehensive, annotated agenda prepared for this meeting so I will not go into them here.

A series of questions have been posed in the annotated agenda, which I hope we will be able to address during this afternoon and tomorrow. I have no doubt that the contributions from our distinguished keynote speaker and the various introducers and moderators will provoke additional questions. The answers to all the questions will certainly be important for my work

on integrated education, but they will be of even greater importance to the many OSCE participating States dealing with these issues on a day-to-day basis and frequently in situations where financial or human resources available to their governments are severely stretched. I look forward to hearing how different countries are tackling the issue. What has worked and what has not worked for them. What good practices have been developed to enable persons belonging to national minorities to participate fully in all levels of education and become fully integrated into the society in which they live. What problems may have been encountered along the way.

I am confident our discussion will be both fruitful and enlightening and thank you for your attention.

I would now like to introduce the keynote speaker for this meeting, Mr. Alan Phillips. He is the outgoing President of the Advisory Committee on the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM) and has written and spoken extensively on minority issues and, in a very practical sense, has provided his expertise in this field to many countries both within and outside the OSCE area.