



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

address by
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* Corr.1 due to change of distribution status only, text remains unchanged

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address the Permanent Council today for the first time and present to you a summary of my activities since the start of my mandate. I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all participating States for their support for my appointment last December. I would also like to thank the Chairpersonship and Ambassador Vesa Håkkinen, the Secretariat and the Secretary General, the Director of ODIHR and the Representative on Freedom of the Media, as well as the field presences, for their support and co-operation. I furthermore wish to thank Ambassador Marek Szczygiel for his leadership as Officer-in-Charge of the office of the HCNM in the months prior to my appointment and arrival in The Hague.

For over 30 years, the institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities has been a vital instrument of conflict prevention for the OSCE. Identifying and addressing tensions involving national minority issues that have the potential to develop into a conflict within the OSCE area is as vital as ever. My engagement with participating States is grounded in OSCE principles and commitments, universal standards and norms related to the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, as well as the ten sets of thematic Guidelines and Recommendations published by my institution. Based on expertise and experience, these thematic publications provide a normative framework to promote cohesion within societies and to address minority issues in relations within and between States. I plan to contribute to this body of work established by my predecessors by exploring other thematic areas that would strengthen and inform the work of my office.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I will now proceed to summarize my activities since the beginning of my mandate, starting with my engagements with the participating States, presented in chronological order. At the outset, I would like to profoundly thank the authorities of the participating States mentioned below for facilitating these visits and for their openness to engage in constructive dialogue. I will be keen to engage further on the issues discussed with relevant stakeholders in the near future.

In February, I welcomed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Marko Đurić to my office in The Hague. I appreciated the opportunity to begin a direct dialogue with the authorities of Serbia. We discussed the Government's approach to its diverse society and, regionally, the ways that bilateral engagements can improve national minority dynamics across borders. I look forward to continuing my engagement with Serbia, and to visit the country soon to hear directly from the various institutions and representatives of national minorities. During our conversation, we also touched on the situation in Kosovo*. I have been closely following developments there related to non-majority communities and plan to visit soon, in co-ordination with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo.

At the end of February, I visited Budapest on the invitation of Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to discuss the situation of national minorities in Hungary as well as ethnic Hungarian communities in neighbouring States. I also had the opportunity to meet national minority representatives in the Hungarian National Assembly, and heard about the authorities' efforts to preserve and promote the cultures and languages of national minorities.

My first official country visit was to Moldova at the end of March. I view Moldova's diverse society as a strength, and I witnessed many positive examples of peaceful coexistence and inter-ethnic co-operation that deserve recognition and continued support. A key focus of my visit was to learn more about how multilingual education is implemented in Moldova. My office supports multilingual education in many contexts as a practical tool supporting integration. I welcome the adoption of the Concept on Multilingual Education by the Ministry of Education and Research and was encouraged by the inclusive and well-regarded process to develop its Action Plan. My office continues to assist the Ministry and is also in dialogue with the Office of the President on how best to support the further development of multilingual education in Moldova.

I observed that inclusive governance can only be sustained when decisions affecting Moldova's diverse communities are taken through broad and meaningful consultation. I therefore welcome the existing mechanisms for minority participation, including the Council of Ethno-cultural Organisations under the Agency for Inter-Ethnic Relations. I am committed to supporting the

* All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text should be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

Agency and other relevant institutions in intensifying structured dialogue with a wide range of actors – particularly in regions such as Gagauzia, where engagement across all levels of society remains essential. I believe that pragmatic, inclusive and locally grounded dialogue – among mayors, educators, civil society and other community leaders – can contribute to strengthening co-operation and mutual understanding. I remain ready to support efforts that promote such engagement and ensure that the autonomy framework is implemented both in principle and in practice.

I visited Kyiv and the Zakarpattia region in Ukraine in April. At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that it is not possible to assess developments without taking into consideration the wider context of the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, which continues to cause immense human suffering. Despite the ongoing war and challenges related to that situation, in my view, the country continues to take concrete steps towards protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, maintaining social cohesion and enhancing the inclusiveness of State policy. I observed that Ukraine has made notable progress in strengthening its legal and policy framework related to the protection of national minorities, particularly in the areas of language, education, participation and institutional support. I welcome the legislative reforms, as well as the dialogue that accompanied them – both domestically, with minority representatives, as well as bilaterally, with neighbouring States, where relevant. At the same time, specific challenges related to the ongoing war remain.

In my dialogue with the authorities, I provided specific recommendations on how to address some of the needs and aspirations expressed by national minorities. In this context, I stressed the primacy of consultations with minority communities on policies that affect them. I also continue to underline the importance of bilateral dialogue with Ukraine's neighbours, based on concrete, fact-based assessment aimed at tangible outcomes.

My office continues to support key institutions in Ukraine, including the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights and the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience, by strengthening their capacity to implement and monitor minority rights across the country. I also noted with appreciation the Ministry of Education and Science's constructive engagement with national minority representatives, which provides a solid foundation for ensuring that Ukraine's education reforms will continue to take into account the specific needs of minority communities.

I also had the opportunity to meet representatives of minority communities displaced from the territories controlled or occupied by the Russian Federation, including ethnic Greeks and Crimean Tatars. I received reports of restrictions on education in minority languages, and limitations on both cultural expression and community life. My attention was also drawn to reported cases involving the transfer of children from their families, in ways that may undermine their cultural and linguistic identity. I intend to follow up on these developments in greater depth during a future visit and in my dialogue with relevant interlocutors.

In all my engagements, I underlined the importance of depoliticizing minority issues, and for grounding dialogue in facts and international standards. My office remains committed to strengthening Ukraine's institutional resilience by supporting balanced and inclusive policies and institutions, which is also relevant for the future of the country.

In late April, I conducted a brief introductory visit to North Macedonia. The institution of the HCNM has a long history of successful co-operation with North Macedonia. My main objectives were to discuss inter-community relations and explore possible further co-operation. In my meeting with the authorities, we explored options for our future engagement and I underlined that my office is ready to offer concrete expert support in North Macedonia, based on local needs and requests. I plan to conduct another visit soon to meet with a broader range of interlocutors, including representatives of national minorities, to get better acquainted with the situation on the ground across the country, as well as continuing my dialogue with the authorities.

A few weeks ago, during the second half of May, I was in Central Asia, visiting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. I expressed my appreciation to both countries for the landmark agreements on regulating the tristate border area of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which were signed in Khujand earlier this year. I also welcomed that the Governments of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have made public commitments to support ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity in their respective countries.

In Tajikistan, I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the authorities and civil society organizations. This will enable my office to better understand how we can most effectively help Tajikistan address the needs and challenges it faces regarding minority issues. The visit highlighted the importance of several issues and I am pleased to have identified

concrete areas for potential co-operation, particularly concerning multilingual education. I look forward to working constructively with Tajikistan's authorities on these matters going forward.

In Kyrgyzstan, I met with the authorities, civil society and representatives of minority communities in the country. Throughout my visit, I was reminded of the rich cultural and linguistic tapestry of the region, including when encountering the sheer diversity of the city of Osh, as well as the heritage of many smaller communities in Kyrgyzstan. I view Kyrgyzstan's diverse society as a strength, and I am pleased to note that Kyrgyzstan's authorities are already discussing the future of the country's integration strategy "Kyrgyz Zharany", as effective integration of diverse societies is an integral part of policy development. My visit coincided with parliamentary discussions on language rights and multilingual education, and I appreciated the opportunity to be part of these important deliberations. In Osh, I discussed ongoing developments in the region, including the effects of urban planning on minority communities. These conversations provided valuable insights into the practical implementation of policies at the local level. I was also pleased to visit the last Jewish School in Central Asia, located in Bishkek, that, I hope, will continue to be able to serve its multi-ethnic community as well in the future as it has done in the past.

Finally, I paid close attention to issues pertaining to the implementation of multilingual education and was informed of similar challenges in both countries. I note that potential solutions may offer significant opportunities for regional co-operation. As I prepare to extend my engagement to other Central Asian States in the coming months, I look forward to contributing to both the integration of Central Asia's diverse societies as well as for inter-State co-operation that can benefit regional peace and prosperity.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

My institution continued to focus on thematic and horizontal issues, based on the accumulated knowledge of the office and in response to the evolving landscape of national minority related issues.

Successive High Commissioners have observed how issues related to differing interpretations of history can lead to tensions within diverse societies and between States. My office has been

studying the issue for several years, and started developing policy guidance for authorities and practitioners on how to deal with disputes over historical memory in public spaces and in the legal sphere, as well as how to approach questions related to history education. In November last year, my office convened an expert meeting in The Hague to further build the institution's knowledge and understanding of these issues. I plan to continue to follow developments related to confrontational historical narratives in the OSCE area, and to consult with experts and practitioners so that I can offer concrete advice to participating States on how to deal with issues related to historical memory in a manner that reduces tensions, and allows for a critical discussion of the past.

On 15 May, my office collaborated with the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department/Strategic Police Matters Unit to organize a roundtable in The Hague to address the evolving challenges that new technologies pose to law enforcement in diverse societies. Participants included representatives from law-enforcement agencies, academia, civil society, international organizations and the OSCE, who discussed the impact of new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, on policing in multi-ethnic societies. Building on the *Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies* from 2006, we are actively seeking to help authorities modernize their approaches, which entails looking for ways to support them to adapt to today's technological reality and to utilize new technological tools in their work.

One of the thematic areas that my office has been exploring with increasing attention is the conflict-sensitive collection, analysis and use of data on ethnicity, language and religion. Over the last three years, numerous population censuses were conducted in different OSCE participating States. The experience of these processes underscores that the manner in which data on diversity markers is handled can significantly impact social cohesion, inter-community relations and even identity formation itself. I would like to highlight three key trends relevant to my mandate:

First, many participating States are re-evaluating how to accurately reflect ethnic, religious or linguistic diversity in statistical terms. Statistical representation of diversity can generate an artificially simplistic view of society when it forces individuals into single, exclusive identity categories. We have seen that when census methodologies allow respondents to express their identities without constraints and acknowledge multiple affiliations, they can foster a greater sense of social cohesion rather than reinforcing divisions. Many of the participating States

around this table recognize this issue and I would like to highlight Moldova's recent commendable approach, as they joined other OSCE participating States in allowing multiple responses on ethnic belonging, recognizing the complex, overlapping nature of identity.

Second, linguistic inclusivity in the census process itself has proven crucial. Successful approaches have included recruiting enumerators who speak minority languages, publishing questionnaires in minority languages and ensuring that software systems accommodate all official languages. When minority communities can participate fully in their preferred language, both participation rates and data accuracy improve significantly.

Third, I have observed attempts to politically instrumentalize census processes. This has manifested in numerous ways, including through instrumentalizing minority participation in the census itself. It is crucial that statistical offices are given a high degree of independence from political influence, particularly when handling sensitive identity data that can be exploited to exacerbate tensions within or between States.

These trends demonstrate some of the many issues on how data collection, analysis and usage can either promote social cohesion or contribute to conflict potential. When designed thoughtfully, census processes can acknowledge complexity, foster inclusion and provide valuable data for evidence-based policymaking. My office is developing specific guidance for participating States on conflict-sensitive approaches to collecting and using identity-related data. I invite all participating States to engage with us on this important work.

I recognize that issues related to the environment – including climate change, environmental degradation, access to land and natural resources, as well as transboundary co-operation – are increasingly shaping the security landscape, with implications for all communities. These are shared challenges and potential threats to peace and security; however, they are also opportunities – opportunities to build trust, foster dialogue and promote collective action between different communities across ethnic and societal lines. Building on the work of my predecessors and our *Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Social and Economic Life*, my institution will continue to explore how issues related to the environment can be addressed in ways that bring diverse communities together around common goals to promote peace and stability. We will seek avenues for co-operation with international organizations working in this space, and count on the support of OSCE

participating States and field presences as we further examine the link between environment, social cohesion and conflict prevention.

My office continues to pay attention to the situation of women and girls from national minority communities as they intersect with issues across our thematic portfolio with the understanding that greater gender equality in societies contributes to greater comprehensive security. As I mentioned in my address at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Winter Meeting this year, my office has been examining the intersectionality of gender and national minorities, and the situation of minority women within the context of conflict prevention, for several years. Our development of practical policy guidance for participating States is well underway. The drafting process is drawing on our previous and planned research projects and consultations, notably including a substantive in-person meeting of experts held in December last year, and a roundtable discussion that my office is hosting next week on the challenges faced by national minority women at the local level, with participation from human rights and policy professionals from across the OSCE area. I was furthermore pleased to participate in the Gender Equality Conference organized by the Chairpersonship of Finland last month and to support the launch of their OSCE-wide Roadmap on Women, Peace and Security.

Similarly, I recognize the critical importance of engaging youth belonging to national minorities in conflict prevention efforts. By prioritizing minority youth participation, OSCE societies can transform demographic diversity into a strategic strength that promotes stability and comprehensive social development. The engagement of young people from national minority communities is essential for reinforcing inclusive democracy, strengthening social cohesion, preventing marginalization and unlocking innovative potential for socio-economic development. The *Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Social and Economic Life* place particular emphasis on the inclusion of minority youth and women, and we regularly organize capacity-building roundtables across the OSCE area to share good practices. My office also supports the work of the Chairpersonship in developing an OSCE-wide Youth, Peace and Security roadmap, creating a link with the UN Security Council resolution on Youth, Peace and Security.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Co-operation with international organizations and multilateral structures has been very important for my mandate. I am keen on building on the good work of my predecessors to expand the wide net of strong international partnerships of my institution. I strongly believe that co-operation between multilateral structures is important to ensuring sustainable peace, security and stability in the OSCE region.

I am encouraged by the tangible progress achieved in recent years through my institution's close co-operation with UNHCR in addressing and preventing statelessness in the OSCE area. From the perspective of my mandate, leaving vulnerable people, including national minorities, in a legal limbo without full access to their rights is not only a human rights concern but also a threat to long-term stability and peaceful development of societies. Therefore, I intend to build on the positive momentum, working in partnership with UNHCR, ODIHR and the OSCE participating States to prevent and address statelessness. I am pleased to announce that my office is a member of the Advisory Committee of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness – an inclusive, multistakeholder initiative led by UNHCR. In this role, we will contribute strategic guidance to help shape the Alliance's priorities and direction, while also sharing the OSCE's experience in addressing statelessness and learning from approaches and practices beyond the OSCE. We are also launching a joint publication with UNHCR and ODIHR in the coming period on "Good Practices to Prevent Childhood Statelessness in the OSCE Area".

In April, I participated in the 40th meeting of the Co-ordination Group between the Council of Europe and the OSCE, which was a useful opportunity to take stock of our co-operation on the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. While in Strasbourg, I also met the CoE leadership to explore avenues for continued co-operation. I was also pleased to participate last month in a joint hearing of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly and the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance, on the topic of discrimination against women and girls belonging to national minorities. The European Union also continues to be an important interlocutor for my office. As in previous years, upon the request of the European Commission, I provided inputs for the yearly Enlargement package on issues pertaining to national minorities.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is important to remind ourselves that in the Paris Charter we agreed “to reaffirm our deep conviction that friendly relations among our peoples, as well as peace, justice, stability and democracy, require that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities be protected and conditions for the promotion of that identity be created.” This also underlines the dual responsibility of States, which is to both protect and promote the rights of persons belonging to national minorities under their jurisdiction and to act as responsible members of the international community with respect to minorities under the jurisdiction of another State.

In my work, I take a multifaced, fact-based and pragmatic approach. When we have an understanding of the practical issues at hand, we can then propose practical solutions. This is particularly important in a highly securitized international context in which national minority issues risk being securitized as well. I believe that if there is political will to find solutions, then solutions will be found.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have highlighted some of the activities and projects undertaken by my office in the past five months. I would like to thank all participating States for their financial support for the activities of my office. Considering the lack of an adopted budget and ongoing challenges related to that situation, the financial and human capital commitments of the participating States have been instrumental to realizing many of the initiatives that I have presented today. I also thank all staff of my institution for their high professionalism and dedication to the mandate.

As an institution, the HCNM has over 30 years of history, knowledge and experience in preventing conflicts. This year, as we are marking the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, it is an opportunity to recommit to our respect for the OSCE principles and commitments and respond to challenges to ensure a peaceful and sustainable security for everyone. In order for our work to be impactful, effective and sustainable, we need good co-operation and a firm commitment to uphold the same shared values and principles that have been guiding the work

of the OSCE for the past five decades. To this end, I stand ready to offer my engagement and support to all participating States on issues that fall within my mandate.

I thank you for your attention.