



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

ADDRESS

by

Knut Vollebaek,

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

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Check Against Delivery!

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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure both to be back before the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and to return to Astana. As speakers before me have referred to, the parliamentary arm of our Organization bears witness to the truth in our words about the OSCE's geographic span from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

Today's meeting will no doubt benefit from its location. Nowhere else are the three dimensions of the OSCE family more intertwined than they are in Central Asia. Here we find a patchwork of ethnic groups. We face the challenge of preventing trafficking in drugs and human beings. Management of borders and water is high on the agenda. I am sure that at the end of this session you will have plenty to reflect and act on, as you return to your constituencies and the parliamentary routine in your respective capitals.

The focus of this year's annual session on transparency and the expansion of the Assembly's role in OSCE decision-making is particularly timely. Looking at all the political talent, experience and insight gathered in this room today, it is my hope that the Parliamentary Assembly will play an even more crucial role in OSCE affairs.

From the perspective of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly made important contributions in the 1990s to what some call the "minority rights revolution." The 1993 and 1995 Declarations of the Assembly in Helsinki and Ottawa, respectively, pushed minority rights issues high up the list of governments' priorities in many participating States. We were resolute in our determination to overcome the ethnic conflicts of the early 1990s and steadfast in our belief that successful multi-ethnic societies could be built where majority and minorities alike would have their interests accommodated.

Today, these beliefs are contested in policy-making, in the academic debate and, unfortunately, in lawmaking. The very premise of various ethnic communities living in harmony within a State, is cast in doubt. Proponents of these views claim that majority-minority relations must by their very nature be strained, and they present minority issues as

inherently conflict laden. Not so surprising then that the rhetoric of assimilation or separation is gaining momentum and claims to represent the only viable outcome.

We must fight these arguments, and we must provide substantive evidence to counter these claims in the public debate.

Allow me at this point to refer to His Excellency President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who is a strong advocate of inter-ethnic peace in his country and beyond. My predecessors and I have enjoyed his support and co-operation during the 15 years of my Institution's existence, and I look forward to cementing this relationship in the years to come and particularly during Kazakhstan's Chairmanship in 2010.

Mr. President,

After almost a year in my position as High Commissioner, I am ever more convinced that the best "societal glue" is education. It is in school that children from different ethnic backgrounds meet and learn that being different does not mean being an enemy. In fact, many friendships that last a lifetime are born while at school, second and third languages are mastered here and foreign cultures become appreciated. While the value of integrated schooling is widely accepted, separation along ethnic lines in education is growing in many OSCE participating States. This trend is particularly worrisome in those States where an integrated system has been prevalent up till now. Governments, legislators, educationalists and minority leaders need to reverse this trend because it undermines the very foundation on which our children will build their common future.

Another lesson that we must remember is the key role that mother-tongue education plays in the maintenance and development of minority identity. During my field visits I often hear how majority representatives take pride in the ever-increasing number of minority children being sent to majority-language schools. This is presented as a success story in bringing the society together.

These trends may of course signal the wish of minority communities to voluntarily assimilate.

This is not forbidden under international law. But more often than not, they signify some form of discrimination.

I would like to remind you that Paragraph 34 of the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 clearly states that "[...] participating States will endeavour to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities, notwithstanding the need to learn the official language or languages of the State concerned, have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue [...]".

My viewpoint is supported by international research, which suggests that submersion programmes in which the child is placed in a school environment where a language different to the mother tongue of the child prevails, can impair intellectual and psychological development by creating a sense of inferiority and detrimentally affecting academic achievements. As a result, the child often lacks a command of both the native language and the State language to a degree that hampers a future successful profession or academic career. Our aspiration of education for all is therefore dealt a severe blow under this sort of schooling regime.

Moreover, the training of teachers for minority-language schools is an area neglected in some participating States. Meanwhile, the teachers in minority-language schools are aging. Within 10 to 15 years minority-language instruction may simply cease to exist because of the lack of teachers. I am frequently presented with boastful statistics about how scores of minority students are given the opportunity to study their native language and literature with state support. My immediate response is to inquire about other subjects like mathematics, biology, chemistry or geography. In my view, the question of training teachers from minority-language schools in these subjects has been grossly overlooked and has to be addressed.

Mr. President,

Equally disturbing are the moves by some participating States to restrict the use of minority-language in the public domain. Access to public services in one's own native language is particularly important because this affects the quality of peoples' lives in an immediate and

fundamental way. Everyone is keen to emphasize the expense involved. These people, however, fail to estimate the costs of ethnic conflict that linguistic mismanagement may entail.

Restrictive policies manifest themselves particularly strongly in broadcasting. States may legitimately promote one or more languages in the media. At the same time, however, it is my conviction that measures to enhance the State or official language should not be undertaken at the expense of other languages spoken in the country and the right of individuals to develop and use those languages, including in the area of broadcasting.

Five years ago, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the OSCE endorsed the "Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media" prepared by a group of independent experts. I encourage you to make use of them in your legislative endeavours. They provide practical guidance in the development of balanced media policies and in the adoption of laws that can meet the needs and interests of all sections of the population in multi-ethnic societies. The Guidelines offer, in particular, valuable advice on how technological advances – such as the use of translation, post-synchronization and subtitling – can be used to facilitate the use of multiple languages in the field of media at little extra cost.

Mr. President,

In the mid-nineteenth century, the influential political thinker John Stuart Mill presented a powerful case for giving minorities a voice in governing the state. He warned us that the majority "may desire to oppress a part of their number" and called for precautions against this. The "tyranny of the majority," when the majority oppresses the minority by their decisions, could be harmful and wrong, he argued. A talented and efficient government, in his view, was one which included the representatives of both the majority and the minority.

Some 150 years after his ideas first emerged, a government position or a parliamentary seat is still out of reach of national minorities in many OSCE participating States. Cases of overt discrimination are becoming rarer, but they are nevertheless still out there. Minority

representatives may be handpicked rather than elected. These "selections" rarely meet the requirements for electing legitimate representatives of the minority. As well intended as they may be, such moves further alienate minority groups, making them either cynical and politically passive or sometimes even more confrontational. The purpose of attaining harmonious inter-ethnic relations is therefore not achieved at all.

Given the long-standing interest of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in the observation of elections and electoral issues in general, I am happy to report that the ODIHR and HCNM will soon finalize their work on an updated version of the Warsaw Guidelines to assist national minority participation in the electoral process. This document, based on experience in the field and examples of good practice, will assist participating States in ensuring that minority participation in elections becomes a meaningful exercise. I call upon you to use this document in your domestic lawmaking and in election monitoring abroad.

Mr. President, Distinguished Parliamentarians,

Earlier in this speech I mentioned the “minority rights revolution” of the 1990s. Although I would not go so far as to declare today that a counter-revolution is taking place in my area of responsibility, there are tendencies in all our societies that give cause for concern. I do, therefore, urge you, Parliamentarians, to be alert to and to resist the drift towards separation or forced assimilation of minorities in our countries. Integration with respect for diversity and prevention of ethnic strife go hand in hand and should not be allowed to quietly slip off our agenda. We all know how devastating the effects can be on the fabric of our societies if such conflicts are not avoided. The fact that you represent your countries’ constitutions and your closeness to the ordinary people give you the capacity to play an even more important and decisive role than many government representatives are able to do. That is why I count on your continued support of the efforts of the High Commissioner in the important work of conflict prevention.

Thank you for your attention.