



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

**THE OSCE HIGH COMMISSIONER ON NATIONAL MINORITIES:  
HIS ROLE IN CONFLICT PREVENTION**

address by  
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at the  
**Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**

Washington D.C, USA – 13 April 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The human suffering caused by violent disputes and wars should be sufficient reason to dedicate ourselves to the prevention of conflict, but geographical remoteness and perhaps also other, more cynical reasons at times seem to present a barrier to such a basic human response. In addition to the human costs, the international community should be concerned that such conflicts threaten peace, stability and relations between States. A world burdened not only with widespread suffering, or even massive refugee flows, but also with disastrous regional wars could be the price we pay.

After almost half a century of relative complacency about the possibility of large-scale ethnic strife, the collapse of Yugoslavia and the break-up of the Soviet Union brought home a new awareness about how explosive disputes between nationalities could be, when the overarching logic of the Cold War no longer kept sentiments and national interests in check. The clashes and tensions between States under the Westphalian system of sovereign States appear to have been replaced by conflict generated by tension between ethnically defined groups, for example, a national majority and a national minority.

This realization led the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, now the OSCE, to search for a new instrument of preventive diplomacy, which could identify and address security risks involving national minorities in order to prevent them from becoming security threats. The idea for the institution of High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) was proposed in 1992, and the mandate is one of the few tailor-made to deal with the prevention of violent conflict.

The means through which the HCNM is to perform this function are “providing early warning, and as appropriate, early action, at the earliest possible stage, in regard to tensions involving national minority issues which have not yet developed beyond an early warning stage”.

This is easier said than done. There is no foolproof system for identifying the factors that may trigger conflict. By acting in haste to prevent conflict, a situation could be exacerbated. Conversely, too many compromises for the sake of reducing tension may turn preventive

diplomacy into appeasement. What is required is a mandate to intervene, political support, reliable information, direct contact with the parties involved and a timely response.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The HCNM mandate allows me to operate with a large degree of independence. The strength of the mandate is illustrated by the fact that, unlike the UN's Special Rapporteurs, I do not require the consent of the State in question in order to conduct a visit and meetings with all stakeholders. Consent is implicit in the mandate. However, this autonomy is not to be borne lightly: it is my duty to engage in early action to prevent escalating tensions and, when all attempts to contain and de-escalate conflict potential have failed, to issue an early warning so that other competent actors and institutions can become directly involved.

The ability to act independently is crucial not only for the impartiality and thus the credibility of my work, but also in order to act in a timely fashion. The consensus principle guiding OSCE decision-making bodies has been much debated, and acting in response to such sensitive issues as the HCNM mandate prescribes would clearly make it impossible to take any significant steps when most needed, were the HCNM to be dependent on all 56 participating States agreeing on a course of action.

Yet, whatever freedom of action is provided through this mandate, it must also be balanced with a keen sense of what is possible and realistic, combining judiciousness with diplomacy. The sensitivity of interethnic issues, especially during periods of State-building and as a consequence of a heightened sense of the need to strengthen separate identities, means that confidentiality and discretion – quiet diplomacy – is often crucial. It is equally clear that the HCNM cannot function properly without the political support of the participating States. I need the States to act on the information I provide and to be willing to proceed with their own follow-up when needed.

When the CSCE States reached the historic consensus that respect for democracy, rule of law and human rights, including rights of persons belonging to national minorities, were directly linked to sustaining peace and stability and thus the legitimate concern of all States, the HCNM was construed by many as being an unprecedentedly intrusive tool. The High Commissioner's business is getting involved in sensitive situations which States had typically

considered to be “internal matters” of no concern to outsiders. It is therefore clear that in order for involvement to be helpful rather than risk exacerbating potential conflict situations, the HCNM’s work must be based on trust and co-operation. Durable solutions are only possible if there is a sufficient measure of consent from the parties directly involved. As my tool box contains no sticks and only a few carrots, the usefulness of my action relies on ensuring impartiality and the quality of the advice I give, not to mention the need for patience and persistence as I follow up on issues with conflict potential.

Respect for human rights, and in particular compliance with international standards on minority rights, lies at the core of the HCNM approach. However, it is a tool for conflict prevention and sustainable security, rather than an end in itself. If the reason behind the HCNM institution was the recognition of the dangers of the tensions appearing in many parts of Europe in the early 1990s and if some observers are questioning the relevance of this conflict prevention instrument almost twenty years later, then recent developments throughout the world show that conflicts cannot be avoided if the root causes are not understood and addressed. Both the security dimension of human rights and the human rights dimension of security are as pertinent as ever, and ethnic, cultural and religious diversity all too often becomes the focal point for spiralling tension.

The experience of the HCNM over almost two decades illustrates why it is essential to address tensions stemming from interethnic inequalities in terms of recognition, participation in all aspects of society, including the economy and public affairs, and providing opportunities to members of society to develop their identity and language in community with others. Yet, integration of society, while respecting diversity, means focusing on the continuous process of mutual accommodation and mutual respect of all groups in society. Fostering a shared sense of belonging, recognizing rights as well as responsibilities of minorities and majorities alike, while avoiding assimilation or separation of sub-communities, is the basis for long-term stability and prevention of interethnic conflict within a State.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to use the rest of my address to provide some examples of HCNM experience from different regions of the OSCE, some focused on immediate action and others on long-

term development of preconditions for sustainable, peaceful societies, but all profoundly linked to the prevention of interethnic conflict.

My **first example** is one that remains high on the agenda also today: Kyrgyzstan. The systemic issues concerning democratic development and rule of law provided the backdrop for tensions relating to majority-minority relations which last year, as you know, erupted into violence. Since I have taken up my position, I have closely monitored the developments in Kyrgyzstan. The interethnic situation further deteriorated last spring. As you may also be aware, I took the ultimate step of early warning by actually issuing a formal “early warning” to the Chairperson-in-Office in June, following my addresses throughout spring to the Permanent Council in Vienna on the deteriorating interethnic situation in Kyrgyzstan. Under my mandate, it is my responsibility to bring a situation to the attention of the OSCE Permanent Council, through the Chairperson-in-Office, if I deem it particularly serious, in order to mobilize a decision by more potent international actors to intervene with other means.

Nevertheless, tragic loss of life was not prevented and we can rightfully ask what could have been done by all actors in order to avoid this. It is with unease that I have to admit that the situation in Kyrgyzstan remains volatile; the fledgling parliamentary democracy weak; unresolved resentment over last year’s events could turn into open hostility; while reconciliation initiatives seem to take place on paper rather than in real life. The Uzbek and other minorities continue to experience discrimination in employment and other spheres of life, especially in the south of the country. In such a situation, I closely monitor any short-term signs of conflict potential and am supporting the development of policies by the authorities to address more fundamental issues of sustainable and peaceful interethnic relations. The recent initiative that President Otunbaeva has taken, on my advice, to elaborate a Concept of [inter-]Ethnic Policy and Consolidation of the Kyrgyzstani Society is a positive step. However, it requires further dialogue and international expert input, and at the same time local ownership and political commitment, without which implementation is not conceivable.

**Second**, I would like briefly to outline the background of HCNM involvement in Georgia. As in many of the States that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, the ethnic groups not belonging to the “titular nation” became national minorities – sometimes having to readjust

their self-recognition as members of a Soviet, Russian-speaking majority. In Georgia, as in some other States in the region, the members of minority communities did not know the language of the majority, which for understandable and legitimate reasons became strengthened as the official language. This is a complex issue and one which could become fractious if not carefully handled. The political health and stability of Georgia is more than a national interest, it is an international interest of great relevance for peace and security in the sensitive region of the Caucasus.

Effective participation of all members of society in all aspects of daily life is a fundamental pre-condition for democratic, stable and well-governed States. The lack of proficiency in the State language is an obvious barrier to such participation, including in employment. Countering the risk of spiralling tensions emanating from exclusion and marginalization experienced by minorities can only be done by fostering inclusion and active participation in the economy and in social and public life. Representation in public administration is one key aspect of effective participation in the development of the common good. This can only be achieved if there is a common language of communication.

In the Armenian-populated area of Samtskhe-Javakheti, a rather remote and little-known region of Georgia where few people speak Georgian and there are few contacts with the central authorities, hundreds of ethnic-Armenians have participated in language training for civil servants. The project, established by the HCNM in co-operation with the Government, makes it possible for the participants to perform their functions as civil servants and advance their careers. Continued involvement at project level enables my office to assess the functioning and impact of this programme, and is an example of the added value of sustained engagement over time, which also requires contributions from international donors.

The **third** example from my work comes from the Balkans, one of the areas where the complexity of interaction and diverse perceptions of history and causes of interethnic violence, have created what may appear to be daunting challenges. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia faces cleavages along linguistic and ethnic lines, which are unfortunately also reflected in the increased separation in education, rather than improvement in trends of interaction. The co-existence of ethnic-Albanians and ethnic-Macedonians in the same schools has even sometimes led to violent incidents. This situation is cause for serious concern and could also be a destabilizing factor in the long term.

At the same time, education is the field where fundamental and sustainable change can take place over time, if addressed in a systematic fashion. I have therefore assisted the authorities in the development of a comprehensive strategy on integrated education. This strategy promotes integration by introducing joint activities for pupils of different ethnic backgrounds, the adaptation of curricula and textbooks to reflect the diversity of society and avoiding negative stereotypes. Teacher training and enhancing the capacity of school management to act professionally without undue politicization is also part of the strategy. An important element of the strategy – but a very sensitive one as we know from past experience, when inadequate consultations and dialogue with the target audience of such reforms led to their failure and to tensions – is the introduction of the Macedonian language during the first stage of primary education. This comprehensive strategy was endorsed by the authorities in October last year. Although presently political developments and the forthcoming elections may have temporarily eclipsed this policy's priority, it is my conviction that such a comprehensive commitment is necessary to address the foundations for an integrated society in a systematic way, starting with education.

HCNM involvement therefore spans quiet diplomacy, provision of expertise and advice on legislation and policies, and the support of targeted projects, many of which are small-scale and all of which are dependent on the specific context, but all of which aim at establishing a firm foundation for structural changes in society. As High Commissioner, I am in the privileged position, stemming from my mandate, of involvement both in the immediate concerns of short-term tensions and in more fundamental problems and potential solutions where I can work gradually but persistently towards sustainable, long-term peace and stability. I hope that my brief presentation and examples have provided a flavour of my work and role in conflict prevention.

Thank you for your attention.