



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Preventing Ethnic Conflicts: Lessons and Prospects

Address to an international conference on
“Preventing Ethnic Conflict in Central-Eastern Europe”

by

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Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this conference. I would like to share with you today some of the lessons and prospects for preventing ethnic conflict, based on my eight years as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. I know that this conference is focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, but I will take the liberty of drawing on examples from wider experience in the OSCE area.

Although it is becoming increasingly trendy to talk about conflict prevention, there are very few institutions devoted solely to this task. Despite the lessons of recent years, priority is still given to managing the conflicts of the day or mopping up after the crises of yesterday. But how do we prevent the crises of tomorrow?

This question drew the close attention of (then) CSCE participating States in the early 1990s when ethnic conflicts flared or smoldered in regions of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In 1992, CSCE participating States

therefore decided to create the position of High Commissioner on National Minorities. My mandate is to provide early action and early warning on issues relating to tensions involving national minorities. In the past eight years I have been involved in a wide range of issues in over seventeen countries in the OSCE area. It is difficult to make generalizations about the nature of inter-ethnic disputes and ways of preventing them: every conflict situation is different and should be looked at in its own context. Nevertheless, I would like to point out a number of lessons that can be learned from the experience of my office.

The first point is the need for early warning and early action. The logic of preventive diplomacy is simple. Timely and effective action can help to avert a costly crisis. Instead of hindsight that says that “we should have seen it coming” and post-conflict rehabilitation that pours billions of dollars into reconstruction and rehabilitation, we should act with foresight and make the necessary investments when it comes to preventing conflicts. More often than not the warning signs are there. The problem is to act on them. . . in time.

Once we act, we should remain committed to working with the parties to bring an issue to a satisfactory resolution. Building confidence between

communities and ensuring legal and political frameworks for protecting minority rights can not be achieved overnight. It requires a steady, continuous and constructive engagement. We should not take our eye off an issue just because it is no longer in the news. Rather, we should re-enforce fragile relationships and strengthen processes precisely so that they avoid making headlines.

In order to address problems one must understand what the “root causes” are. While being sensitive to questions of culture, history and symbolism, one must carefully strip away romanticized notions to get down to the questions of substance. This is why I urge the conflicting parties to be specific. Nationalism feeds off stereotypes and vague generalizations. If one can put these aside and look at the underlying considerations, one can begin pragmatically to tackle concrete – and usually solvable - issues.

Reaching political solutions requires compromise. Parties that take a maximalist approach often meet maximum opposition. The trick is to find common ground and follow a step-by-step approach directed towards shared objectives.

However, in such discussions one can not compromise on international standards, in particular human rights. They are the bedrock of minority protection. If these rights are respected in a democratic political framework based on the rule of law, then all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, will have the opportunity and the equal right to freely express and pursue their legitimate interests and aspirations. This is true of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also more specific minority related standards like the OSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of 1994. These are minimum standards. We must stick to these standards – indeed insist on them – and not allow for obligations and commitments to be interpreted in a restrictive manner.

That being said, experience has taught me that we can not look at standards in terms of pure law. One must be sensitive to the context in which one is working in order that the parties will see the logic and possibility of applying, or one could say 'domesticating', the relevant norms and standards. The key is to move from the abstract to the concrete, to get governments to take measures – legal and political – to create the types of conditions foreseen in the standards concerning minorities. This is the message that I try to convey

through my recommendations and during my visits to OSCE participating States.

Another general observation that I would like to make is that inter-ethnic tensions often stem from a lack of communication. Open dialogue is an important requirement for dispelling misperceptions and building confidence between the parties. It is the first step in getting the parties to communicate directly, to articulate their concerns, and to seek co-operative and constructive solutions to their problems. Sometimes it takes a third party to help to initiate this process and/or move it along. I have been able to play a role in this respect in several OSCE countries.

Despite the fact that my involvement is often long-term, it is up to the parties to eventually find ways of facilitating their own means of communication. . . on a permanent basis. Dialogue between the government and the minority is seldom limited to a single issue. It is therefore important to have adequate structures of dialogue between the government and minorities for the longer term. I think that the involvement of Hungarian parties in the Governments of Slovakia and Romania and the participation of Albanian representatives in the Macedonian Government are good examples of the

possibilities and challenges for such inter-action. Furthermore, a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe have established government departments for minority issues, and have appointed Ombudsmen or Commissioners on Ethnic and Human Rights Issues. Several have also established minority consultative or advisory councils, either connected to legislative bodies or free-standing.

This relates to a further observation, namely that effective participation by national minorities in public life is an essential component of a peaceful society. Through effective participation in decision-making processes and bodies, representatives of minorities have the possibility to present their views directly to the responsible authorities. This can help the authorities to understand minorities' concerns and take these into account when developing policies. At the same time, the authorities are offered a platform to explain their policies and intentions. This can contribute to a more co-operative and less confrontational situation.

This should not be seen as tokenism. Experience has shown that integration through participation is an important element in forging links of mutual understanding and loyalty between the majority and minority

communities within the State, and in giving minorities input to processes that directly affect them. It also improves overall governance. If minorities feel that they have a stake in society, if they have input into discussion and decision-making bodies, if they have avenues of appeal, and if they feel that their identities are being protected and promoted, the chances of inter-ethnic tensions arising will be significantly reduced.

This is what I often refer to as integrating diversity. Because most modern states are multi-cultural, we all have to learn to value and accommodate pluralism. The key is to strike a balance between majority and minority interests that allow for all persons to enjoy their individual identities while realizing and valuing shared interests.

To do this, one must realize that minority and majority interests are not mutually exclusive. The protection and promotion of one identity does not have to come at the expense of another. Indeed, diversity is mutually enriching. Take the cases of language and education. International experts have concluded that “the rights of national minorities to maintain their identity can only be fully realized if they acquire a proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the educational process.” I have tried in a number of countries like Romania,

Ukraine and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to expand the possibilities for minorities to study in the mother tongue.

At the same time, persons belonging to national minorities have a responsibility and interest to integrate into the wider national society through the acquisition of proper knowledge of the State language. Therefore, on the one hand the State should accommodate cultural diversity. At the same time, it is important for all citizens of a State to know the State language. A lack of knowledge of the State language stands in the way of the process of integration. Common knowledge of the State language promotes equal opportunity for all.

Experience shows that an effective language policy is one that concentrates on protecting the State language without limiting opportunities for use of minority languages. One can strengthen the use of the State language through positive means like training rather than through negative means designed to restrict minority languages. That is why in a number of countries like Estonia, Latvia and Moldova I have supported programmes to increase minority knowledge of the State language, while, at the same time, I have insisted on the need to enact legislation that protects the use of minority languages. I have also stressed, for example in Romania and Slovakia, that in regions and localities where persons belonging to a national minority are present in significant numbers and where the desire for it has been expressed,

minorities should have adequate possibilities to use their language in official communications, public documents, public services and local government. Similar provisions should be enacted in relation to names, signs and the use of minority languages in the media.

Take another example, namely self-government. There is a vastly unexplored range of possibilities between assimilation on the one hand and secession on the other that has yet to be fully appreciated in many countries of Europe. When questions of “autonomy” and “self-determination” are raised, positions often become entrenched. Minorities often fail to clarify how they envision self-government, while governments usually suspect that requests for decentralization are the beginning of a slippery slope towards secession. Self-government does not necessarily have to have a territorial expression. And even when it does, it should not be equated with secession. More attention needs to be focused on so-called “internal” self-determination whereby self-government is arranged in such a way as to respond to the desire by a significant minority group to have a considerable amount of control over its own administration. . . . without challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the State.

I note that many countries in Central and Eastern Europe are in the process of tackling public administration reform and are introducing some form of decentralization or minority self-government. Experience has taught us that

it is essential to the success of such arrangements that government authorities and minorities recognize the need for central and uniform decisions in some areas of government, and the advantages of diversity in others. Of course, striking this balance is not easy because it relates to questions of power, control and interests. This is especially sensitive when cultural or minority issues are added to the equation. Kosovo is the obvious example. I submit that finding ways of enabling minorities to have a greater say over decisions that affect them without causing deep divisions in society will be one of the biggest challenges for this region in the years ahead.

There are no easy answers or simplistic solutions to preventing ethnic conflict. Rather, as I have explained, there are a variety of instruments and techniques that can be applied to different situations. They are not a panacea, but they can be regarded as tools which, when skillfully used, can help to fix broken trust, build confidence and construct long-term frameworks for harmonious inter-ethnic societies.

On that note, I will now turn to the prospects for the future.

Let me start on a positive note. Frankly, in many regions of Europe the prospects for ethnic conflict seem to have receded. Several countries in Eastern

Europe are on the way to accession to the European Union, their economies are becoming more integrated into the world economy and civil society is flourishing. States are showing a greater understanding for the need to develop legislation to protect minority rights, devise mechanisms to facilitate dialogue with minorities, and build frameworks in which minorities can more fully participate in decisions and activities that directly affect them. The fact that the respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, is part of the European Union's criteria for admission of new Members has had an important impact on applicant States. So too, I believe, will the Council of Europe's Framework Convention and the monitoring of its implementation. I would like to think that the work of my Office has also played a role in this process.

But I would like to make a number of cautionary remarks.

Firstly, I want to warn against complacency. There is a growing sense that inter-ethnic conflicts are waning. The explosion of excessive nationalism is seen as a product of the collapse of Communism and now that we are moving out of the period of post-Communist transition, the worst is over. I hope this is true. But I have some concerns.

The first is that there is no guarantee that we will continue moving in the same direction. We must therefore remain committed to the strengthening of democracy and keep an eye open for any back-sliding on commitments that have already been undertaken. We must continue to assist and monitor the process of implementing legal and political reform.

The second point is that we should not see the process of protecting minority rights as an end in itself. Enacting legislation to protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities should not be regarded as some sort of short term process of scraping over the bar in order to fulfill certain minimum criteria. Rather, creating legislative and political frameworks for minority protection should be regarded as a long-term process of integration that will create harmonious, pluralistic, and stable societies.

This requires resources. Investing in preventive diplomacy and minority integration pays huge dividends. A society at peace with itself is a society that can concentrate on issues of common interest, which benefit all citizens. Conversely, a divided society will be bogged down in the politics of difference rather than integrating diversity. If those differences lead to conflict, the price is

high – economically, in terms of human lives, and in terms of long-term stability. We are quick to offer assistance to people in need, either during or after a crisis. But we have to do more to prevent crises from getting to that stage at all. That requires political will, but also investment.

Another major challenge for this region concerns its Romani communities. This is, strictly speaking, not a question of preventing inter-State conflict. But it does go to the heart of many of the issues that I have raised today, namely linguistic and education issues, overcoming exclusion, and fostering dialogue and political participation. These issues, together with a range of other concerns like Roma housing, health care, and migration may well be the most pressing minority-related concerns in Central and Eastern Europe in the years ahead.

Another concern that I have relates to the effect that minority issues could have on bilateral relations between States. Such relations are often complicated when one's neighbor is a kin-State to a sizeable minority in one's State. Bilateral treaties can sometimes play a useful confidence-building role in such situations, but we must be wary of heavy-handed external interference.

Issues may be raised, but they should not be used as a pretext for pursuing more far-reaching aims.

That is not to say that the internal affairs of a State are out of bounds. It is worth recalling that in 1991, OSCE participating States agreed in Moscow that "commitments undertaken in the human dimension of the [O]SCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned." This has allowed the OSCE, including my office, to be legitimately and constructively engaged in the internal affairs of sovereign States on the basis of our common interest in security. However, Chechnya and Kosovo have demonstrated that the normative system necessary to guide our conduct when confronting the violent repression of minorities is still in its infancy. Moreover, we have yet to develop sufficient techniques to secure routine compliance with the norms that are already in place. We must therefore clarify legitimate grounds for external involvement in the internal affairs of a state.

A final point is one that I mentioned earlier, namely the challenge of balancing self-determination with territorial integrity. This will require expanding the possibilities of territorial and non-territorial self-government. It

will also mean that ways have to be found to cope with the pride of nations at a time when sovereignty is declining. To my mind, the starting point is to acknowledge that the traditional view of the nation-State is losing its relevance. In the modern world, ethnic homogeneity seldom exists and efforts to impose it are conflict ridden and doomed to failure. Therefore, multi-ethnic States should be considered the norm. This should seem self-evident in Central and Eastern Europe, a region defined by cultural diversity. But history speaks volumes. I think that we are all poorer for the fact that the twentieth century was, to paraphrase Günther Grass, the century of expulsions. We should regard the diversity of this region as an asset, not as a potential source of conflict.

Let us not be burdened by the weight of the past, but let us not forget its lessons. The last ten years have given us considerable experience in confronting and coping with inter-ethnic issues. Based on these lessons, we must seek to build a region open to diversity, rooted in a strong foundation of democratic governance and respect for human rights, and co-operative in its neighborly relations.

Thank you for your attention.

