



High Commissioner on National Minorities

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**OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Speech
made at the Fifth Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
Stockholm, 5 July 1996**

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the year that passed since this Assembly met in Ottawa, I have again been involved in minority questions in a great number of OSCE countries, in alphabetical order, in Croatia, Estonia, the FYR of Macedonia, Hungary, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. It would take too much of your time if I would give a detailed description of my activities in these states, though I would of course be glad to answer any questions you might wish to pose on this subject. But perhaps you will allow me to concentrate in my speech on some general aspects of my work. Sometimes I am asked: on what basis are you selecting the countries on which you concentrate your activities? Why have you selected this group of 10 and why not any of the remaining 44 states? The answer is rather simple. Though the list may, depending on the circumstances, be expanded, I am presently active in these 10 states because it is my view that they are facing especially difficult and complicated minority questions and because it is my hope that my office can be of some help in coping with them. It is my impression that the states I am involved in have understood and have accepted that this is the task I have been given in the mandate which was agreed upon by all OSCE states during the Helsinki CSCE summit of 1992. In this connection I also have to recall that my task is not to be just an advocate of minorities, but that it is my duty to be an instrument of conflict prevention, to be active in trying to remove the danger of inter-ethnic conflict and to promote inter-ethnic harmony.

I am not going to hide from you that, in trying to perform these tasks, I am making enemies. But I also have to add that these enemies are almost invariably extreme nationalists. I think this is inevitable. I would even feel that I would not perform my task properly if they would not object to my activities and views. These nationalists are not interested in promoting inter-ethnic harmony - they prefer to stir up inter-ethnic hatred.

In order to make clear the importance of policies aimed at conflict prevention, I only have to remind you of the dreadful war which was going on until recently in what formerly was Yugoslavia. Looking back at the origins of this conflict, one can only be amazed that while virtually all foreign observers had been reporting for a long time that the danger of an explosion was constantly growing, the international community only came into action after the first shots had already been fired. We have to learn from this. If the OSCE community of states wants to play a key role in conflict prevention, it has to come into action at a very early stage - as soon as there is a danger of serious tensions developing. Foreign ministers, busy as they are in coping with current crises, will also have to place the potential crises of tomorrow on their agenda. It is my firm belief that the OSCE's destiny is conflict prevention, in the broadest sense of the expression. But it can only be successful in this role, if it concentrates on the elimination of the potential causes of conflict.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The *raison d'être* of the post of High Commissioner on National Minorities is the acknowledgement by OSCE participating States that problems involving national minorities, if neglected, could develop into violent conflict. In the more that three years of my activities as High Commissioner, I have seen ample proof that this conclusion was justified. Not that the problems involving minorities indeed did cause violent conflict, but it was clear to all those directly involved that the potential for conflict was present, sometimes not even very far below the surface. At the same time, I also discovered that behind such tensions, there are often other, deeper causes of conflict. If people are unemployed, if they have little or no possibilities for education, if no decent housing is available, if the prospects for their children's future are gloomy, it is no wonder that they are dissatisfied. In many countries in the OSCE area this situation is exacerbated by the fundamental changes societies are going through. Frequently, people in these countries are faced with huge problems in their day-to-day lives, without it always being clear what the future has in store for them. Past ideologies have failed them and new ideologies with tailor-made answers are not at hand. Unfortunately, history teaches us that human nature is such that in a situation of discontent easy answers are sought and scapegoats are readily found. Nationalism then becomes the panacea for all problems. In my view, it should be the task of the OSCE to identify the root causes of conflict and to help combat these, in order to ultimately prove that nationalism, xenophobia, racism and the portrayal of "others" as the enemy, are certainly not the answers to, but indeed part of, the problem.

This brings me to the fundamental ideas behind the role of the OSCE in conflict prevention. The basis from which we operate are the values we have in common. These values apply to all those who want to be part of the OSCE community: they are indivisible, non-negotiable and universal. They comprise the rule of law, democracy, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, pluriform society and the existence of market economy. It would be wrong to perceive these values as

belonging solely to part of the OSCE area, or as religious dogmata some OSCE States want to impose on others. Rather, they are the core of the Helsinki process, which starts from a comprehensive concept of security which relates peace, security and prosperity directly to the sharing of the values. In other words, the Helsinki process has taught us that lasting peace and security are only possible in an environment where these values are shared. Thus, the observance of these values is no longer a matter of choice, but a political necessity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Even if we agree in the values that guide us, conflict prevention is not an easy task. It is a tedious process requiring considerable investment over a long period of time. Such investment will have to include significant investment of financial capital, but no less political capital. Speaking about the need to make some financial sacrifices, I hasten to add that such a financial effort will have to be seen in its proper perspective. Annually, probably less than 1% of what OSCE States spend each year for defence and security would be needed. We are used to think of security in terms of protection against aggression from outside. But a post cold war concept of European security has to take account of the fact that, as the Yugoslav drama has demonstrated, violent conflict within a state can now lead to a major threat for peace and security on this continent. Conversely, the timely provision of financial assistance can help considerably in promoting stability within a state. Let me just quote one example. As you might recall, I have developed a number of activities in Ukraine, inter alia concerning the position of the Tatar population in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The Tatars, and other smaller population groups who have returned from their deportation to Central Asia, are faced with considerable difficulties in trying to build an existence for themselves and their families. There are very few jobs, almost no housing and few opportunities for education. If these problems are not tackled, Tatar discontent might destabilize a situation in the area which in other political aspects has begun to show a remarkable improvement. But to remedy the situation, large investments are needed, for which the Ukrainian authorities lack the resources, which is understandable in the present economic situation. This means that the international community should be made aware of its responsibility and should step in with considerable financial means. So far, it has been very difficult to persuade a sufficient number of OSCE states about this necessity.

Now let me turn to the necessity of investing political capital. Here I would like to point to the important role of Parliamentarians. You, more than anybody else, will have to convince voters that quick fixes for social, economic and political problems do not exist, that extremism is never an answer and that conflict prevention is a cause worth investing in. In the end, it is obvious that preventing conflict is cheaper than enforcing or keeping peace and rebuilding societies after a violent conflict. Above all, preventing conflict means that tens of thousands of human lives will not be needlessly sacrificed and that much human suffering

can be avoided.

Political capital will also have to be invested in the OSCE and its High Commissioner on National Minorities. We can only reach results if we can count on the political support of the participating States. The High Commissioner cannot function properly without this political support. This is particularly necessary whenever he presents his reports and recommendations to the State concerned and, afterwards, to the Permanent Council. At such stages it becomes clear whether there is sufficient support for the High Commissioner's early warning information and preventive activities, and whether states are willing to give their own follow-up where needed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to say that the challenges we are facing today can only be tackled successfully if we join all our efforts. Let's not forget that we share a vision of a peaceful and prosperous OSCE community, based on the principles I mentioned earlier. Certainly, the problems sometimes seem almost impossible to overcome, especially in those parts of the OSCE that were hit by war, deep economic recession, or serious political conflict. But it is my firm conviction that if there is a basic willingness on the part of all of us to work towards the common goal, much can be achieved which might seem impossible.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen.