

**HCNM Address to  
Russian community and NGOs in Ukraine and  
Ukrainian community and NGOs in Russia**

**October 2009**

Dear Friends,

Earlier this year, I initiated an important study on the educational situation of Russians in Ukraine and Ukrainians in Russia. My aim was to provide both States with an objective and impartial assessment and to feed it into their bilateral dialogue.

In March and April I travelled to several regions of Russia and Ukraine. I talked with many of you, schoolteachers and pupils, professors and policymakers, civil society activists and, of course, parents. I was impressed by how most of you welcomed my study and were keen to hear the results. Many of you felt that the current debate on these issues was politically charged, unprofessional and unpedagogical. Almost everyone asked me to share the results of the study with minority communities and the wider public.

In June 2009, I furnished my findings and recommendations to both Russia and Ukraine. Under my mandate, these communications are confidential. I am not in a position to make them public. Nevertheless, I owe you a debt of gratitude for sharing your insights and your feelings with me. They were instrumental in achieving a balanced report.

I have therefore decided to talk to you directly with the help of information technology. I will not violate my mandate by going into the details of my Russian or Ukrainian report. Instead, I will comment on several points relating to minority education that are relevant for the entire OSCE family, not just the two countries in question. The following relates to any OSCE participating State, not just to Russia or Ukraine.

First, a fundamental goal of any education policy is, I believe, to create a cohesive, integrated society. For this to happen, young school graduates in a given country need to have a command of the State language. A young person cannot excel in life without having fluency in the State language.

How do we achieve this? My firm conviction is that the best path to State language proficiency is bilingual or multilingual education. This type of education helps children to learn a second or third language far more quickly, by studying certain curriculum subjects in these languages. This pedagogical technique has been a resounding success in many places.

I am not saying that mother-tongue teaching should be abolished. On the contrary, the mother-tongue must remain the principal language in primary education, namely the first three to four years of schooling. However, the State language should be introduced to the children at this stage and gradually increased as they progress through the remainder of the curriculum. This approach to education allows minorities

to preserve their language and culture, while at the same time mastering the State language.

This style of education is new and innovative; it paves the way for peace and prosperity in multi-ethnic societies. It meets the demands of all sides. I am happy to see that these ideas are taking root in both Russia and Ukraine.

Bilingual or multilingual education at primary and secondary level also increases the chances of becoming a university student. Proficiency in the State language is an absolute must for becoming a university student. Nevertheless, it is wise to preserve the possibility to study certain topics in minority languages or bilingually at university level, especially in regions with a sizeable minority population, so that minority students continue to have a sense of their own identity and are able to develop to their full potential.

The school-leavers' exam in the State language recently introduced in many OSCE participating States is an equally important factor in minority access to university education. I believe that great care should be taken in the interests of minority children when carrying out such reforms. The authorities should provide adequate opportunity for these children to develop sufficient State language skills before moving towards a formal exam only available in the State language.

Second, it is essential to involve you, the minority NGOs, the activists and the parents, in any reform efforts. OSCE commitments oblige the participating States to consult minorities on the decisions that affect their lives. This particularly applies to the education authorities at central and regional level. There must always be meaningful consultation and communication before any changes are implemented. Furthermore, it is advisable to avoid shock therapy and to roll-out the reformed system gradually, with pilot schools leading the way. This will ensure a broader acceptance of the new system. Otherwise, minorities may see government proposals as an assault on mother-tongue education and assimilation through the back door.

Third, the OSCE participating States must promote minority rights. This is an obligation of all OSCE participating States. It is not enough to simply enshrine minority-language guarantees into the Education Act. Each OSCE State must proactively explain to its minority communities their right to mother-tongue education and the procedure that minority parents have to follow in order to request this type of education for their children. This information must be clearly communicated through the mass media and displayed prominently on school premises. People need to know about their rights and be able to claim them.

Finally, the content of the curriculum must be examined with the direct participation of minorities. Any negative references or stereotyping of a particular minority should be removed from the textbooks. Contentious historical issues must be explained from all perspectives, giving young minds the whole story from which to draw their own conclusions. The absence of any mention of minorities or their contribution to a particular society in the textbooks, as if they were foreigners in their own country, must also be rectified. The content of education curricula needs to reflect the culture, traditions and history of all minorities living within a particular country.

Dear Friends,

Intercultural curricula, bilingual tuition and genuine consultation with minorities all make a concrete contribution to the promotion of minority education rights.

At the same time, this needs to be supplemented, as in the case of Russia and Ukraine, by dialogue on these issues. The events of the past few months have demonstrated that the treatment of Russians in Ukraine and Ukrainians in Russia is a burning topic in both countries, from the highest level of government to the ordinary Ukrainian and Russian citizen at grass-root level. It is important to take advantage of this interest and to use it to build bridges between the two States. Dialogue between the two countries on education and other issues would calm the public debate and help avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings. It would also help both States to tackle often similar challenges in building post-Soviet education. It is also important that you, the minority communities, have a say in the discussions *between* and *in* your countries. As High Commissioner, I would warmly welcome and support such interaction.

In the months ahead, I will maintain in close contact with the Governments of Ukraine and Russia and with you, the minority communities. I think we can do a lot to enhance minority-language education by working together, overcoming differences and reaching consensus.

Thank you for your attention.