



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

Address by

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to the

OSCE HCNM-UNDP Conference

**"Promoting Integration and Development in
the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia"**

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Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

Permit me to begin by thanking you all for participating in this joint OSCE HCNM-UNDP Conference. I also wish immediately to acknowledge the close working relations my Office has developed with the UNDP in Georgia, and to express publicly my support for UNDP's programme for work in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Certainly, the challenges we face in Samtskhe-Javakheti are both complex and politically sensitive. However, I am firmly convinced that today's meeting is just the kind of forum we need to start tackling these challenges, especially in terms of concrete and constructive action.

For those who may not be familiar, allow me to clarify briefly my own role. As OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I am often considered to be a national minorities' ombudsman or an investigator of individual human rights violations. But this is not correct. I am the High Commissioner *on* National Minorities and not *for* National Minorities. According to my mandate, my role is to look at inter-ethnic relations between communities and to identify – and seek resolution of – ethnic tensions that might endanger peace, stability or friendly relations within or between OSCE States. In OSCE terms, I am an instrument of the security or politico-military dimension rather than of the human dimension or of the economic and environmental dimension. Of course, we in the OSCE know that security and prosperity depend upon achieving progress in all of these dimensions – that they are inter-linked. And today's Conference is an example of this fact: the main aim of this Conference being to support a greater integration of Samtskhe-Javakheti into Georgian society, and thereby to support stability and enhance security in the country and region.

Bearing in mind the subject of our Conference, I would like to share with you today some views on integration as a tool for preventing ethnic tensions.

The conflicts that erupted after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia led some observers to believe that inter-ethnic conflicts are inevitable. I believe this conclusion is wrong. The risk of violent conflict within multi-ethnic societies is greatly reduced if all sides refrain from trying to impose their will on

others and if they respect the vital interests of the other side. Indeed, they must see and appreciate common interests.

Integration is an issue in States with historic minorities, States which have witnessed population transfers, and States with immigrant populations. In all cases there must be an appreciation of the cultural and linguistic diversity of society, a vision for how different groups can live together while safeguarding and stimulating their diversity and a strategy to pursue a common future. So, I hope it is now clear to you, that when I use the term "integration", I do not mean assimilation.

Integration also relates to the sense of security and fairness which individuals feel when they are being treated as equal members of society. Meaningful steps in this direction contribute to the building of a strong State. In particular, economic development to a large extent depends on the State ensuring security of contract and providing economy of scale to attract and retain investment. In this respect, social integration is a powerful way not only to alleviate inter-ethnic tensions, but to create an attractive climate for investment. Thus, social integration leads to social development. A society that is integrated and at peace with itself is a society that will build on common interests and resources (including its cultural and linguistic assets) and thereby become more prosperous. Moreover, as we move towards closer integration between States it is vital that we have integration within States.

This means that, on the one hand, persons belonging to minorities should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State. On the other hand, the State, and the majority within the State, must demonstrate their willingness to accept and implement the basic principles regarding the treatment of persons belonging to national minorities, such as their full equality before the law and their right to freely express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity.

Integration strategies consist of different elements and I would like to share with you today some thoughts on some of them.

Experience shows that countries implementing integrative policies can quite successfully overcome inter-ethnic tensions. A key element for integration in multi-

ethnic States is the participation of minorities in public life, particularly in the elaboration and implementation of the State's educational, linguistic, and cultural policies – matters which especially affect persons belonging to minorities.

A central component of integration strategies is to teach minorities the State language. I support projects in Estonia, Latvia, Macedonia, and Moldova to assist persons belonging to minorities to improve their knowledge of the State language. This year, in Georgia I have also taken some steps in this direction. But, in my view, much more remains to be done. Indeed, I feel we have just begun.

It needs to be recalled that in the Soviet Union the State language was Russian, which was widely spoken also in the former Republic of Georgia. However, in independent Georgia, the Georgian language as the language of this new State is less widely spoken. This is why in some regions of Georgia the shift in State language presents substantial practical and political hurdles to social integration. One important area, which has unfortunately been overlooked for some years, is the improvement of Georgian language proficiency among civil servants at the regional level. Among all of Georgia's regions, the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti seems the most acute since more than 95% of the population cannot speak Georgian. The overwhelming majority of the population therefore has difficulty communicating with and making representations to the State administration in Tbilisi. To help Georgian authorities to rectify this problem, I have initiated a project entitled "Teaching the State Language to Civil Servants" which I am implementing in partnership with the Georgian Parliament. I am delighted to say that one month ago about 140 civil servants started taking Georgian language classes in 10 different locations around the region.

Because language is an important tool of social integration and because my Office is providing legal advice and technical assistance to the Georgian Parliament in connection with the Draft Law on the State Language, I would like to take this opportunity to express my views on this important law. I feel this particularly necessary since the media has published inaccurate reports about my cooperation with Georgian authorities in this respect.

I consider the adoption of a Law on the State Language to be not only a sovereign right of Georgia, but also a necessary step in developing a strong, united Georgian State that contributes to stability and security in the region. In my opinion, the adoption of a good Law on the State Language would provide a comprehensive framework for language use and promotion in Georgia, and thereby constitute a key element for overall social integration in Georgia. Specifically, I believe it is important for Georgia to restore and strengthen the status of the State language in Georgia and to create conditions for its use across its entire territory. From this perspective, the adoption of a good Law should be viewed as the first step in a larger social process.

Once a clear and practical legal regime is established, even more important will be its vigorous implementation. If well implemented, it will ensure that the Georgian language can truly be used in the normal affairs of the whole State and in the daily life of the population. Indeed, in the absence of a fully elaborated and multi-dimensional programme of implementation, there is the risk that the Law will have little real impact. This is why I believe it is necessary for the Parliament and Government of Georgia to move immediately to elaborate a comprehensive programme to promote the knowledge and use of the State language throughout the country, including a programme of wide-spread language instruction in schools and the public service, especially at local level. Clearly, an endeavour of this magnitude will require the positive engagement of the Georgian authorities and population along with the support of the international community which will only follow if international standards are respected.

Another important pillar of any successful integration strategy, I believe, is a certain degree of decentralization. Public administration reform that devolves particular responsibilities to regional and local authorities is often the most effective way to allow cultural and regional identities to flourish. Decentralization can also be particularly useful in promoting the local use of minority languages. Georgia is clearly already a decentralized State with considerable self-government for Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia.

While decentralisation is an important tool, one must be careful that national standards, such as the rule of law and other essential tenets of democracy, are not eroded in the process. One example of this that greatly concerns me is the ban of Georgian language at schools in the Gali region of Abkhazia. It is important to point out that international norms and standards require that any authorities controlling territory and people, even if not recognized by other governments, must respect the human rights of everyone, including persons belonging to national minorities or, in this case, persons in a similar position. Moreover, the failure to respect human rights anywhere is the legitimate focus of international attention. According to the Final Document of the 1991 Moscow Meeting on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, “issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law are of international concern, as respect for these rights and freedoms constitutes one of the foundations of the international order”.

Mr. Chairman,

Regarding Samtskhe-Javakheti, which we are specifically discussing today, I would like to stress that the main reason for my interest and involvement in this region is because I believe it is essential to support its deeper integration into Georgian society. As you know this region is populated mostly by ethnic Armenians and relatively isolated from the rest of the country economically, politically and linguistically. For the local population, the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki and the Armenian press are the main sources of information regarding Georgian affairs. The economy is mainly directed towards Russia and Armenia and the Russian Ruble is the main currency. Complicating the existing situation is the prospective return of the Metskhetians who were deported from the region in 1944. The difficult economic situation in the region is another issue that makes me concerned. All of these factors argue in favour of a comprehensive policy and programme with special attention to development and integration.

To conclude, as experience in other parts of the OSCE shows, the failure to integrate a region into the rest of the country, if not addressed properly, has the capacity to generate disaffection among the population giving rise to extremism and even to conflict. In Georgia, to avoid such a situation a policy to support stronger integration

of Samtskhe-Javakheti into Georgian society is needed. This requires a policy to overcome the isolation of the region, in particular the improvement of the information flows between Tbilisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti, more extensive language training, and opportunities for economic development. Such actions, of course, require adequate resources. I hope you will share my view after having familiarised yourself with the programmes presented here by the Georgian Government, the UNDP, and my Office, and will support some of these important initiatives.

Thank you for your attention.