



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

Building a multi-ethnic State: a post-Ohrid challenge

Address by
by
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at the
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[Check Against Delivery]

Tetovo – 21 October 2011

Dear Pro-Rector,

Dear Faculty and students,

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a real pleasure for me to be back at the South East European University. Almost 10 years have passed since the University opened its doors in a pioneering and innovative venture to provide high academic standards to all students of this country. The “Stoel University”, as it is fondly referred to, has become a symbol of minority rights and conflict prevention. We are all indebted to its main architect, the late Max van der Stoel, who sadly passed away earlier this year. He not only laid the foundations of a respected academic institution, but also indicated a way forward for the country’s educational policy.

Integration of multiethnic societies is a broad challenge that confronts us all. Today’s Europe has a growing ethnic and cultural diversity, and integration has become one of its most debated, controversial and, also misunderstood words. The word “integration” may have an even stronger resonance in a country like yours, which in recent history has seen violence erupting as a result of interethnic tensions.

Certainly, major developments have been achieved since the country gained independence in 1991. Key milestones are being celebrated this year: 20 years of independence and the tenth anniversary of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Discussions have been organized to mark these anniversaries and to debate the achievements made over the past decade. The questions we ought to be asking are how has the country been transformed after Ohrid and what kind of State is being built?

I am particularly glad that we are able to consider some of the questions pertaining to the future of a young democracy here at the South East European University – an institution that is dedicated to building the future. More than 6000 students have been trained at this university over the last ten years. Many of you, who are students here today, will become part of this country's elite. As well-educated citizens, you will to no small extent be assigned the task of shaping the country's future and ensuring the stability of its democracy. I believe promotion of tolerance and the fight against prejudice and stereotypes will be crucial in your efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear students,

As High Commissioner on National Minorities, my role is to provide “early warning” on developments that have the potential to cause interethnic tension or political violence and suggest “early action”. This is part of my mandate as an instrument of conflict prevention. I have worked with the authorities in many countries to address the root causes of tension. This has led me to pay particular attention to the field of education, which has been a long-standing source of grievance in this country. Ten years after the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, we are still witnessing interethnic clashes in schools where students from different ethnic backgrounds study in shifts. As a result, I have held discussions on how such tensions can be prevented and how this trend towards increased separation of students based on ethnicity can be halted and reversed. This has also been part of my present visit and I must say that I am more optimistic after my recent talks in Skopje than before. Let me first of all underline that I am not questioning or challenging the relevance of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This Agreement sets out important provisions regarding the rights of communities to receive education in their own language, in line with international law. At the

same time, we cannot and should not stop at that. We cannot just look at one side of the issue: i.e., safeguarding one's identity, without considering the other side. It is equally important to create a sphere of interaction and understanding between diverse identities. This means that a balance must be struck between preservation of identity on the one side and the creation of a common feeling of belonging to the State on the other. This is the essence of what I would call a process of integration of society, which is rather about multiplication than suppression of identities. It is a commonly held misconception that we, as humans, can only belong to one community and not to others, that our identities are singular and exclusive. The reality, fortunately, is different. One may be a Swede in Finland and yet feel strongly about one's affiliation with the Finnish State and have a strong sense of belonging to Finland in a civic and political sense. Similarly, citizens of this country may have different ethnic backgrounds and, follow different religions, yet be united in one political community as citizens of the common State. The challenge is to build a civic identity, complementing our ethno-cultural affiliations, so that all citizens have a stake in and ownership of the State they share.

Thus, the legacy of the Ohrid Framework Agreement should by no means be underestimated. This historic agreement secured peace. It also helped preserve and develop the identities of various communities, addressed past discrimination and allowed for greater participation of ethnic minorities, in particular the Albanian community, in the public administration. But the Agreement remains a legal and technical document. It cannot be considered an all-encompassing solution to addressing all issues of interethnic relations. In fact, the current interethnic situation shows that one cannot expect that the agreement provides all the necessary tools to address tendencies of ethnic separation. This is hardly surprising. We know that interethnic tensions cannot be solved once and for all. This does not mean that the agreement should be renegotiated. Such a move could open a Pandora's Box of divisive political bargaining, which would obstruct the political agenda. However, ten years after

Ohrid may be a good moment to develop complementary policies to address the gaps in approaches to interethnic accommodation left open in the Agreement. In other words, the time has come to go beyond Ohrid.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear students

This country has made progress in the area of education over the last decade by providing a well-developed system of mother-tongue teaching. However, the lack of interaction between pupils of different ethnic backgrounds and too little knowledge about each other, have increasingly become a cause for concern. Such a situation prompted the elaboration of a comprehensive Government policy to reduce ethnic distance in and through education. My office assisted in this process by providing advice and expertise. As you may know, this policy is based on a document with the long name: Steps towards an integrated education and was endorsed by the Government in October last year, and should progressively be implemented by the authorities, hopefully with active support from those in the education system, from school directors to teachers, to parents and local authorities. This is a major undertaking. I believe success will depend on building trust and co-operation, and that hasty decisions must be avoided, even when it comes to increasing the Macedonian language proficiency. Learning languages is a crucial element of education, as it enhances not only interaction, but also economic opportunities, growth and social cohesiveness. Yet, integrated education is not confined to this issue. Curriculum and textbook development, teacher training, joint curriculums and extra-curricula activities, which are all covered in this plan, should not be neglected pending resolution of linguistic disagreements.

While education plays a pivotal role in ensuring stability and internal cohesion, reform in this area alone is not enough. Education is not a straightforward solution to ethnic separation. Rather, well adapted education policies need to be part of a wider strategy for integration of society aimed at building a well-functioning multi-ethnic State. Indeed, efforts to change approaches to education may well prove futile if the whole political and social spectrum is otherwise divided. Further, commitment to integrated education may be eroded if the country's public space becomes increasingly mono-ethnic and excludes the multi-ethnic heritage. A divided public space is not conducive to interaction, and opens up for a zero sum approach to community rights, where one ethnic community's gain is another's loss.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear students,

It has often been said that the "Ohrid spirit" should be revived, that we need a renewal of the spirit of interethnic co-operation and compromise in this country. Agreements like the OFA are not static, and they are not an end in themselves. Rather, the Agreement is a foundation on which to build. To build interethnic trust and leave behind the politics of fear and distrust there is a need for additional tools. For example, in the context of the discussion on Integrated Education, language issues still generate tremendous debates. This is an unresolved issue that could create new tensions in the future. Another example is the now postponed population census, which has been marred by controversies emanating from different interpretations of community rights and demography. Inevitably, this has made the census a highly politicized exercise.

How to tackle some of these issues is one of the biggest challenges for the country on its way towards European integration, and requires a move away from excessive politicization and

towards genuine dialogue. The Ohrid Framework Agreement secured peace and stability, but it did not solve all issues at the time, nor has it prevented new tensions from arising. There is no single best model to go about addressing this. It is rather a matter of striking the right balance between respecting community rights and adhering to common values independent of one's ethnic background, based on a shared vision of the State.

Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher at the University of Chicago, said in a recent interview: "What democracy needs is listening and respect". Listening also means that an engaged and critical media plays its part in debating ideas and reporting on issues in an unbiased fashion. It requires that individuals take the points made by others seriously and are willing to change their mind if the argument so merits.

The challenge for you who are students today is to engage in discussions that go beyond a merely antagonistic discourse based on ethnic affiliation. Universities like yours, which have embraced ethnic diversity, are no doubt well placed for such debates. You can set higher standards for your political leaders. As High Commissioner on National Minorities, I will continue to call on your Government to find the relevant path to integrate its multi-ethnic society and, in the long run, ensure the stability of its democracy. But it is up to you, the youth of this country, and its future political leadership, to take up the challenge of defining the country's future.

Thank you for your attention and good luck.