



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

**Address**

to the opening session of the

**OSCE Tolerance Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-  
Ethnic Understanding**

by

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(Check against delivery)

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honor for me to have the opportunity to address you today on the opening of the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding. I thank the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting this conference and together with the Chairmanship-in-Office and ODIHR organizing the meeting, as a concrete step in the continuous work of the OSCE to promote tolerance, non-discrimination and dialogue. From my perspective as High Commissioner on National Minorities, these are means of preventing conflict and tensions and building societal harmony. Building on what was inscribed in the Declaration on Principles in the Helsinki Final Act regarding respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, it is logical that the OSCE should address matters which have direct relevance for building cohesive societies and realizing the deeper meaning of democracy and the respect for human rights. It is also topical. We have all witnessed how tensions caused by ethnic, cultural and religious differences and misconceptions can be a source of societal unrest and in some instances violent conflict.

I hope and believe that this meeting will give us a chance not only to talk about the matter at hand, but rather to identify ways and means by which to achieve what has already been decided and declared.

As HCNM, my work consists of addressing situations where tensions between majority and minorities, between different ethnic groups, risk causing graver consequences. Promoting inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious tolerance and understanding thus constitute a central element of my daily operations. Nevertheless, I do not believe that promoting understanding is enough. Tolerance, and even more so, understanding goes a long way. It establishes the foundation on which something stronger and more sustainable can be built.

Stating the obvious, it is clear that understanding does not necessarily mean agreeing. We do not all have to agree on everything. We do not all have to be alike. How empty, bland and poor life would be if that were the case. In an open and democratic society, differences of views, beliefs and ideas coexist and sometimes confront each other. We can and should not avoid all arguments and differences. An open discussion and vivid exchange of ideas and viewpoints is important to protect and is something to be valued.

Understanding can, moreover, not come at any cost. There are universal principles and rights that must be respected. The basic human rights standards enshrined in international law cannot be compromised. Within the realm of these overarching principles there must be understanding and respect for differences and diversity.

We should not seek to hide our differences. We should seek to establish a situation where diversity is seen as enriching rather than threatening. Diversity should be reflected in mainstream society – in the political, economic and social life of states, including in the media – to enable all to identify with the society in which they live.

We should actively counter a situation where a person's ethnicity, religion and cultural belonging are used as a pretext for exclusion and discrimination. Alienation and the perceived threat to one's identity are all factors that risk causing discord and tensions.

It comes as no surprise to anyone when I say that our societies have grown increasingly diverse in the last decades – increasingly diverse in culture, ethnicity, religion and language. Inter-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue has developed into a matter of relevance within states as well as between states. The HCNM was set up as an institution to address such tensions relating to national minorities which risk going so far as even to affect relations between participating States.

Where diversity causes tension, one has to reflect upon ways to address this. Diversity is both a blessing – enriching our societies – and a challenge – if perceived as threatening the fabric of a homogeneous society.

The OSCE is well placed to address this challenge of today. The OSCE was established as a forum for political dialogue and negotiations. It still is. Such a forum – based on a core set of common values: the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, while encompassing different ethnicities, religions and cultures – is suitable for an exchange of experiences and information on good practices. The OSCE participating States have a solid opportunity to learn from each other and assist each other by actively discussing how to secure cohesive societies which at the same time value diversity.

Within our societies, I do believe that ensuring tolerance and non-discrimination constitute the very base on which to found a society at peace with itself. In my view, this alone is not enough, however. This should also be followed by active measures to promote sustainable societal harmony by giving every member of society equal opportunities to participate in the public, social and economic life of the state. It means protection of minorities and of their religious, educational and linguistic rights.

Feelings of alienation and exclusion as well as perceptions of a threat to one's identity are fertile grounds for discord and unrest. We must recognize that the tensions which threaten the stability and security of our societies have complex causes and need a multi-faceted response. The unrest that we have seen in recent years in the OSCE area have their origins not only in religious or ethnic or cultural differences, but also in a sense of exclusion and alienation resulting from economic and social discrimination and a lack of opportunity for political or cultural participation. Conflict prevention requires that we address all these causes. This means not just tolerance, but active policies aimed at enforcing non-discrimination and promoting equality, inclusiveness and respect for diversity.

The ideal of equality and equal opportunities is one which should be defended and promoted. It is a corner stone in building harmonious societies. But an ideal must be visible in real life. An ideal that fails to concretize in practice is of course still a highly worthy ideal and goal, but risk leading to frustration.

I am hopeful that our discussion during this meeting will highlight many aspects of importance in promoting inter-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony and would encourage participating States to take the discussion one step further. We should continue to reflect upon how to sustain societal harmony by ensuring non-discrimination and promoting equality, social, political and economic inclusiveness and participation while protecting the right to diversity. It is this balance – between integration and diversity which is at the core of my work as HCNM. The participating States of the OSCE are well placed to share experience on this matter, and this conference provides a valuable opportunity for such an exchange of ideas.

Thank you for your attention.