



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

remarks by  
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to the  
**International Conference**  
**“Towards the Concept for One Society and Interculturalism”**

**[Check against delivery]**

Skopje, North Macedonia – 3 October 2019

Dear Prime Minister,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to start by congratulating Prime Minister Zaev and his Government for the vision to embark on developing a national-level Strategy that aims to drive social cohesion forward. I see it as a sign of inspiration in today's world where we are increasingly observing singular, exclusivist and divisive discourse in the political arena.

At a time when the recognition of diversity in our societies has dramatically increased, the promotion of policies that facilitate integration, through the inclusion of all social groups with respect to their diversity, is, in my experience, one of the most effective tools to prevent conflicts. This fundamental principle is at the core of my mandate. Inclusive policies help to strengthen the cohesiveness of our diverse societies and, in turn, their resilience to conflicts and crises. Tensions prevailing in the current geo-political environment appear to further validate this principle, which we are now also promoting with the United Nations and other regional organizations in New York.

My office has followed the development of the National Strategy for Development of the concept of One Society and Inter-culturalism with great attention and has high expectations for it and its implementation. I believe that, if successfully implemented, the Strategy will be beneficial to the country and its future, strengthening cohesion and making all of its citizens feel part of the overall society, irrespective of their ethnic background.

The overall aim of the Strategy and the underlying philosophy fall squarely in line with one of the basic documents guiding the work of my office, *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. The essential premise in the Ljubljana Guidelines is that simply recognizing and accommodating the culture, identity and political interests of certain groups, and promoting the participation of all, may not be sufficient to build sustainable and lasting cohesive societies.

In fact, measures and policies aimed at promoting the integration and cohesion of diverse, multi-ethnic societies are needed to prevent different communities from growing increasingly distant, with few or no common interests, and no shared sense of belonging. Such separation into parallel and unconnected social strata can pose a considerable risk to the viability and stability of any multi-ethnic society. Diversity is a feature of all contemporary societies and of the groups that comprise them, and integration is a two-way street; enhancing the rights of a community should also not come to the detriment of the overall societal cohesion. When communities break isolationism, enjoy genuine interaction and the mutual benefits that this brings, participation by all – majority and minority groups alike – in a society is more likely to happen.

I believe that segregation of society along ethnic lines has been a challenge to the future of this country. This Strategy now recognizes the value of accommodating diversity, advancing equal opportunities and social cohesion as the cornerstone of a healthy state. Certainly, it is clear that the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) brought progress in many areas. And it is clear that it remains a cornerstone of the social contract. However, challenges persist in fostering overall social integration, leaving society divided along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines.

I thus welcome the intent of the Strategy to break from past politics and policies and to address these challenges with adequate resources, political will and inter-institutional co-operation. I believe the Strategy – through its comprehensiveness and breadth, as well as the high-level political endorsement, both domestically and, hopefully, from the entire international community – is a timely opportunity to mark a difference from past endeavours.

From reading the Strategy, it comes across that its core concept aims at including and connecting all the main elements of a sound integration policy to the potential benefit of each sector, which in turn will be beneficial for society as a whole.

However, this does not mean that the strategic vision and the connections between the different clusters should come at the expense of reduced focus on specific sectors. In this respect, I see this Strategy as providing new impetus and boosting sectoral strategies and policies. Let me briefly focus on those on which my office has traditionally been engaged.

**Education** is the essential building block for the future of any society. In the case of diverse societies, evidence from around the world points to the success of integrated education models which start from an early age. Familiarity with the unknown removes the feelings of fear, estrangement and ultimately division into “us” and “them”. In North Macedonia, segregation in schools has had the effect of rooting divisions in society deeper. This is a trend that must be reverted.

My office has had a pivotal role in supporting the development of a strategy, in 2008, on integrated education. However, progress on its implementation has been slow and often uneven. Many initiatives have been launched and pursued,

but often limited to extra-curricular activities. I saw an increasing number of grants provided by the Ministry of Education and Science to schools engaging in such activities. I also noted that recent surveys recorded a positive attitude towards integrated education among students, teachers and parents. I am hearing that the number of schools where students are separated has, however, not reduced, and barriers to integration remain formidable.

Education is one of the most important tools for furthering integration and social cohesion and should be an integral part of integration policies. I believe that efforts towards integrated education should go hand in hand with raising quality. I hope and believe that the current Strategy will allow multiplying efforts to address segregated education as a matter of priority. The Strategy's declared aims, on education, to shift gears towards systematic and sustainable solutions, including curricular and extra-curricular activities, engage central and local government, schools, students and parents, learning the language of "others", ensure early language acquisition to promote tolerance, understanding and communication, revision of text books, all resonate well with my office.

On **language**, the value of language plurality in supporting efforts to manage diversity in society is evident. I am aware that the theme of the use of language is central and critical in the context of North Macedonia. I followed with interest the adoption of new legislation regulating the use of languages. I would recommend that its implementation be pragmatic rather than dogmatic. It is important to balance the need to foster linguistic diversity, including by nurturing one's mother tongue, with promoting the use of shared, common languages, allowing effective communication among different groups in society. Such efforts should be reflected first and foremost in public life and public administration, which should cater equally to citizens from all ethnic backgrounds, and be complemented by efforts in the education sector.

This brings us to the **intersection between language and education**: Over time, I have been promoting approaches that favour multilingual education. It has been my experience that countries and regions that embrace multilingualism tend to have better learning achievements, often reflecting a more accepting attitude to other languages. At the same time, I am aware that policy solutions to the complex issue of multiple and distant languages in education must be context-specific and much will depend on their fine-tuning in practical implementation.

I was also positive about the inclusion of the cluster on **Culture** in the Strategy. I am increasingly looking at the cultural sphere as a vehicle to foster cohesion and get communities closer together. I am convinced that such a reflection may have some useful applications also in the context of North Macedonia.

In concluding, I believe this Draft Strategy lays the foundations for a shared future based on respect for diversity and inter-culturalism. I look forward to seeing the efforts in drafting this document matched with successful implementation, sustained political will and entrenching its core principles into the institutional and legal setup of the country. I also welcome the Strategy as an opportunity, in tune with the OSCE Mission to Skopje, to enhance and give new impetus to the programmatic engagement of my office in a number of key areas.

I wish you successful discussions and hope this international conference will put wind in your sails towards an inspired follow through with the Strategy.

Thank you.