



## High Commissioner on National Minorities

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to attend the opening session of the human dimension implementation meeting here in Warsaw. Time seems to have past quickly, since we last met, in these very rooms a little over two years ago. Yet, since then much has happened in the OSCE community: we have seen both very promising and, unfortunately very disturbing events and developments. At any rate, there is much to be discussed in the OSCE's human dimension, and I wish all of us very thorough and fruitful deliberations.

Since I have very limited time to talk to you today, I can now only touch upon a few issues to which I would like to draw your attention. For a more comprehensive overview of my activities and some conclusions I have drawn after almost five years as High Commissioner, I would kindly refer to the written report I have submitted and which will be distributed to you.

The activities of my office have increased considerably over the last two years. The cooperation with many countries where we are active has intensified and we have had to add a number of new issues to the ones we had already been looking at two years ago. At present the High Commissioner is involved in minority situations in Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. I am active in these countries because I believe that they face especially complicated issues in the field of national minorities. Issues the resolution of which could be helped with some assistance on the part of the international community. The nature of the High Commissioner's involvement is such that he offers his advice and assistance. In this process he might express criticism, to States and minorities alike, but he certainly is not out to condemn parties to a conflict. The involvement of the High Commissioner should therefore never be seen as stigmatizing, but rather as a sign of solidarity, by the OSCE community, to its members who are facing certain difficulties.

Let me emphasize from the outset that I am extremely grateful for the fruitful cooperation with all participating States concerned. Durable solutions to minority problems are only possible if there is a sufficient measure of good will and consent on the part of all parties involved. As an impartial third party, it is my aim to propose such solutions and to bring parties to a consensus, on the basis of convincing arguments. Coercion would certainly never have a lasting positive effect. In other words: if solutions are found, it is essentially because parties themselves want a solution, but require some advice or assistance in getting there.

Also, through you, I would like to express my gratitude to all OSCE participating States for the support my reports and recommendations have received, when I presented them to the Permanent Council in Vienna. It is thanks to the repeated expression of this support, showing the OSCE's commitment to conflict prevention in minority issues, that I am able to continue the performance of my duties.

Perhaps you will allow me to high-light a number of conclusions I have drawn from situations or subjects which have warranted the High Commissioner's attention in recent times. But before doing so, I would like to stress the fundamental importance of the human dimension in general for the position of minorities. Full respect for human rights, a working democracy and the existence of the rule of law, are the best guarantees for a positive situation for national minorities. It is my experience that problems in the inter-ethnic relations very often go hand in hand with problems in

the human dimension in general.

In its history, Europe has seen many examples of persecution of minorities, of forced assimilation by States, of all sorts of discrimination. Although most of this is a thing of the past, we have to keep in mind that still today there are examples of excessive nationalism, xenophobia and racism within the OSCE community. Indeed, in my view these phenomena remain the most serious threat to European security. Under these conditions, a generous attitude of authorities towards aspirations of minorities becomes extremely important. It is in the interest of stability, and thus of the population at large, to have harmonious inter-ethnic relations. In other words: a State which helps to protect and even to promote the preservation and the deepening of the identity of the minorities living within its borders, is essentially acting in self-interest. On the other hand, it is also essential that the minorities should show commitment to the State in which they live and with which they share a common destiny. If minorities show loyalty to the country in which they live, they will stimulate the authorities to take a generous attitude towards their hopes and aspirations.

At this stage it is perhaps good to recall that all OSCE participating States have subscribed to the norms and values common to us all, as laid down in the Helsinki Final Act and later elaborated in, among other things, the Copenhagen Document. Norms and principles are fundamental to the concept of the OSCE human dimension: without them the OSCE would no longer be a community of values. If we would no longer be a community of values, we would be unable to develop the concept of comprehensive security. The protection and promotion of human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, is one of the most important elements of the human dimension and therefore also of comprehensive security. In the OSCE, there can be no zones of lesser humanity: it is the duty of all participating States to live up to the obligations they have undertaken in this field. Not only in the interest of the minorities themselves, but in the interest of the whole population, even of the whole OSCE community.

Since the position of national minorities is of concern to us all, we are in my view under the obligation to cooperate with those participating States who have to face minority related problems, in order to assist them in finding lasting solutions. Criticism might be justified and should be brought forward in a direct and open way - also on the occasion of an implementation meeting, but criticism can never be an end in itself and should always be accompanied by an offer to help, in line with the OSCE's cooperative and inclusive nature. In this context, I would like to mention that in recent years my office has received an increasing number of requests for advice and assistance in concrete inter-ethnic

situations, covering a very wide range of subjects. Just to mention a number of them, in random order: minority education, the use of minority languages, citizenship legislation, language training, official and minority language legislation, election legislation. All these subjects have direct impact on the position of national minorities, even though this might not be clear at first sight. In fact, in addressing these issues, we are tackling some of the root-causes of inter-ethnic strife.

The approach we have taken, in answer to the calls for action, varies according to the specific situation. I would like to briefly mention one instrument which has been particularly useful of late. On a number of occasions, we have organized round-tables, bringing together experts and representatives of authorities and minorities. These round-tables can be of a general nature, looking at the overall situation in a specific State, or more specific, concentrating on a topic of special concern to the parties in a conflict.

Disputes involving minorities frequently arise because of insufficient mechanisms for dialogue at the national level. I have tried to promote the development of structures for dialogue and the establishment of other instruments of democratic discussion and decision-making. This can take the form of (Consultative) Councils, Round Tables or Assemblies. The important thing is that representatives of minorities get the possibility to present their views to the authorities, which can help the authorities to understand minorities' concerns and take these into account when developing policies. At the same time, the authorities are offered a platform to explain their policies and intentions. Hopefully this will lead to a more cooperative and less confrontational situation.

These efforts have yielded some results, but much still remains to be done. It is of essential importance that, once structures for dialogue are put into place, both the authorities and the minorities remain committed to making dialogue a success. Without constant proof of this commitment, the structures will not play a helpful role and will get the odium of window-dressing. This will make minorities even more suspicious about the authorities' intentions.

The increasing attention my office has to devote to these issues, has led us to develop a project-oriented approach, in parallel of existing approaches and activities. Very often, projects are developed in close cooperation with the Hague-based *Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations*, an NGO which receives financial contributions from a number of participating States, international organizations and other, non-governmental donors. This has also resulted in intensified cooperation between my office and a number of international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the European Commission and several organizations and agencies in the UN-family.

That the High Commissioner is often asked to look into these and other issues, confirms the cooperative nature of OSCE activities. It also illustrates that the OSCE is involved in addressing matters at the very heart of its participating States' political and legal systems. This testifies to the fact that issues of the human dimension are not the exclusive domain of national jurisdiction. Of course this has been laid down in a number of OSCE documents, including the Copenhagen Document. Still, it is good to see that these commitments do not remain mere principles, but are now indeed put into practice.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me stress once again that effective conflict prevention is not possible if insufficient attention is given to minority issues. To resolve these problems, continuous attention is required over a long period of time. But in order to be fully effective, a policy of conflict prevention cannot restrict itself to efforts to stop disputes from developing into conflicts; it also has to try to remove the causes of dangerous frictions. It is your and my task, indeed it is the OSCE's task to do everything possible to make conflict prevention a success and thus create the necessary conditions for lasting peace and stability in Europe.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen.