



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

**ADDRESS**

by  
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to the  
**the 5th World Congress of**  
**the Finno-Ugric Peoples Panel: Ethnic Policy and Law**

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Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia, 28 June 2008

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege to address a forum that brings together representatives of some 25 million people. The Finno-Ugric cultures are renowned in the world for their indivisible link with nature and their harmony with the environment. The setting of this Congress, in the beautiful and peaceful wilderness of Khanty-Mansiysk, is therefore particularly appropriate. I would like to thank the organizers of the Congress and Minister Kozak for the invitation to take part in this event, which celebrates the diversity of the Finno-Ugric family and its place in our world.

The theme of today's gathering, "Identity and the Changing World," is indeed central to many of you in this room who fight for the survival of numerically smaller ethnic communities and their distinctive characteristics. How do we save the languages that are on the brink of extinction? What measures do we take to preserve the unique traditions and, in fact, way of life of these communities? Such questions are rightly on the agenda of policy makers, minority activists and us, the international organizations.

As you know, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the position which I now hold, was established in 1992 as an instrument of conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage. My mandate is to address tensions involving national minority issues which, in the judgment of the High Commissioner, have the potential to develop into conflicts. The mandate was conceived by the participating States of the OSCE first and foremost in recognition of the fact that conflicts in today's world are often fuelled by inter-ethnic tension, in particular tensions between majority and minorities.

It would be too bold a statement to declare that the High Commissioner has developed a typology of ethnic conflict in the 15 years of its activity but I will allow myself certain generalizations.

Tensions can originate from a sense of separation and, often, exclusion from society at large. They may also be caused by the idea that one's identity, including one's culture, language, and religion, is under threat. We have seen this happen in situations where State borders are redrawn, where the natural resources are to be distributed between various ethnic groups, or where States seek to re-establish a national identity in the wake of newly achieved independence, sometimes at the cost of the identity of the minorities living within their borders. Such conflicts within a state are particularly dangerous because they also affect security in regional and international contexts, not least through their impact on neighbouring States or neighbouring communities.

Some social scientists and, more alarmingly, politicians have recently been arguing that the only viable solution to ethnic cleavage is separation. Their case rests on the premise that multi-ethnic cohabitation is, as Chekhov would put it, "a loaded gun on the wall that will inevitably fire in the final act." The scenario that this school of thought offers, is either partition or forced assimilation of minority communities into the majority culture.

In our globalized world where literally no nation State is homogenous any longer and no society is mono-ethnic, this is a debate that only feeds xenophobia and serves no constructive purpose. I firmly believe that the correct balance between the interests of majority and minority can and should be found. The need for societal cohesion and integration is not at

odds with the respect for and maintenance of national identities. Although a recipe for inter-ethnic peace does not exist, we are all well aware of the ingredients needed to bring communities together in harmony and unite them in the building of a common society.

Educational policies and practice are particularly important in multi-ethnic societies. I am glad to see that a part of our Congress will be devoted to this topic. Education provides the means by which national minorities pass on their culture to future generations and, thus, preserve, promote and develop their minority characteristics. In this way, we support the diversity of cultural and linguistic experiences that make our multi-ethnic societies rewarding places to live.

It is fair to say that the preservation and development of national identity is virtually impossible without instruction in minority languages in secondary schools or, at the very minimum, the teaching of minority languages as a subject on the curriculum. At the same time, persons belonging to national minorities have a responsibility to integrate into the wider national society by acquiring a proper knowledge of the State language. This is no doubt a challenge both for the minority and the majority in spite of the fact that both communities will benefit from the active development of such policies and practices.

In this context, bilingual or multilingual education has shown to have a number of important advantages. Firstly, this type of education promotes a range of enhanced skills in children, including the development of a rich vocabulary, increased sensitivity to multiple meanings, a better understanding of complex language structures and ability to understand abstract concepts. Bilingual or multilingual education also strengthens the ability of an individual to learn additional languages more easily. This capacity is of increasing importance in a world

faced with globalization, the expansion of the Internet and other modern communication media. Language becomes a gateway to new opportunities, to different cultures and to the wider world.

Bilingual or multilingual education also has advantages beyond pure academic attainment. This type of education helps all ethnic communities to understand and accept that they live in a multilingual and multicultural society. Experience in various countries has shown that as a result of immersion in other languages, or teaching a range of subjects through the medium of a second or even third language, students develop a positive attitude to different languages and cultures. Bilingual or multilingual education is a means of fostering increased social interaction and building friendships irrespective of ethnicity. As a result of these benefits, bilingual and/or multilingual education is increasingly used as a powerful and successful means to protect and revive languages that have experienced a particular decline or setback, since this is a tool that does not challenge the use of other established languages.

The promotion of positive values and language skills is a crucial element in integrated education, but intercultural education should not be confined to these areas. Experience suggests that it is also important to give careful consideration in the education curriculum to the place of the history and culture of all ethnic communities within a State, not only that of the national majority. This inclusive approach has proved to be a powerful means to promote integration. It can be further enhanced when the subjects in the curriculum related to minorities are developed with the active participation of bodies representing the same minorities.

Mr. Chairman,

Another prerequisite for a successful multi-ethnic state is to identify practical ways in which the language rights and needs of different communities, both majority and minority, can be satisfied in a harmonious way. It has been my experience that these rights and requirements can be most effectively ensured when language is viewed as a means of enhancing communication between different communities rather than as a way of identifying divisions. This is also the best way to prevent the emergence of frictions and even tensions in respect to the issue of language. The practical approach that the High Commissioner has developed to achieve this end is one of integration with respect for diversity.

The State language has a vital role to play in promoting integration. It provides a means for all citizens, whatever their ethnic background, to communicate with each other and with the authorities. I therefore welcome steps to ensure that citizens have the opportunity to learn and to use the State language. However, in accordance with international standards, measures to enhance the State language should not be undertaken at the expense of other languages spoken in the country or the rights of individuals to use and develop those languages.

Mr. Chairman,

In communities that are characterised by ethnic pluralism, the role of the public media is especially important. Through programming that reflects the diverse linguistic and ethnic character of a society, public television and radio can offer a wide and balanced range of programmes to meet the needs and rights of the whole population, including persons belonging to national minorities. Furthermore, public service broadcasting in the languages

of the various ethnic communities resident within a country, can promote loyalty to the State by ensuring that all citizens enjoy the services provided by the national media.

At the same time, wide access to the public media in minority languages can also ensure that all ethnic communities have the opportunity to receive domestically produced information and news and, thereby, prevent a situation arising in which some ethnic groups have no alternative but to resort to external media sources. Technological advances – such as the use of translation, post-synchronization and subtitling – can be used to facilitate the use of multiple languages in the field of media at little extra cost.

My remarks today would be incomplete without addressing the issue of minority participation in public life or, to put it simply, the right to have a voice in decisions that have direct impact on one's life.. Good governance entails the responsibility of administering to the whole population and at the same time taking into account, in a meaningful way, the specific concerns and interests of minorities.

Arguably, the greatest challenge is in giving national minorities a meaningful role in political decision-making or, again to put it simply, actually participating in governing the country. Whatever the form – be it territorial autonomy, non-territorial arrangements, specific provisions in the election law, advisory or consultative bodies – the fundamental feature of all these models is their departure from simple majority rule and their taking on board the concept of reaching out to national minorities in order to take their needs and aspirations into account. Having a say in government is the key to overcoming internal divisions and reconciling competing interests. As Oxford Professor, Vernon Bogdanor, noted: "European experience tends to confirm that the best protection for minority groups lies not so much in

statutory provisions as in institutional arrangements that assist in allowing all to participate in government."

I have recently learned that the Khanty-Mansiysk region has instituted an assembly that represents the indigenous peoples and has the power to review and veto any bills impacting on indigenous populations before they reach the regional legislature. This is a good practical example of how numerically smaller communities could be encouraged to become engaged into the governing process and to take on the responsibility for the advancement of the common good.

The title of the panel on today's agenda is "Ethnic Policy and Law." Striking a delicate balance in order to meet the rights and needs of all sections of society is difficult for lawmakers. International law often also contains vague and general provisions creating a puzzle for legislators and jurists that is difficult to unravel.

Over the years, the HCNM has supported the production of a series of recommendations by groups of independent experts in the fields of education, language, broadcasting, participation and policing. These documents are designed to provide OSCE participating States with practical guidance in the development of policies and law, which can balance and meet the needs and interests of all sections of the population in our multi-ethnic societies. The recommendations and guidelines could be of considerable interest to today's audience and my staff will leave copies of them in the conference secretariat. Electronic versions in a variety of languages can also be downloaded from the HCNM's website at [www.osce-hcnm.org](http://www.osce-hcnm.org)

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,



European history has been witness to many clashes between States, either military or diplomatic, over national minority issues. Various motivations lie behind these actions. In the past few months, I have been developing another thematic document designed to assist the participating States in peacefully managing national minority issues in inter-State relations. One of the solutions that the document promotes is transfrontier co-operation among States within the framework of friendly bilateral and multilateral relations. I believe the World Congress of the Finno-Ugric Peoples is a prime example of an institution in line with the recommendations. The constructive and practical discussion of challenges in minority protection by Estonia, Finland, Hungary and Russia could serve as an inspiration to other States.

I have been told that Khanty-Mansiysk stands on seven hills that bring luck to the city and its residents and its guests. I certainly wish all of you every success in your deliberations in the next couple of days and in your noble efforts to preserve the unique Finno-Ugric civilization.

Thank you for your attention.