



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

**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION OF MINORITIES
IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

address by
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to the
Conference Internet 2013 - Shaping policies to advance media freedom

[Check against delivery]

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Distinguished participants,

Thank you for the invitation.

I for one am very happy that the position of minorities in the media is a part of this conference. This subject comes up regularly in my work as High Commissioner on National Minorities. In general, there is not that much difference between ensuring freedom of expression for minorities or majorities. However, some challenges to freedom of expression have a specific dimension for minorities and others are unique to them. For example, minorities may lack political or economic power or face discrimination because they speak a different language and belong to smaller groups. Specifically, I would like to address three issues related to minorities and the media that are relevant to my work in conflict prevention: minority languages in the media, the role the media can play in integrating societies and the implications of new technologies.

But first, let me underline in general terms the real risk of conflict that arises when the rights and interests of minority groups are not sufficiently taken into account. This may seem an obvious point to make, but it is crucial and often underestimated and under-researched. The exclusion of minorities from the media landscape constitutes a threat not only to the survival of the languages and cultures of minorities but also to their integration as full members of society. Equally dangerous is the promotion of negative stereotypes in the media or even the dissemination of hate speech, as this can contribute to an explosive situation that may ultimately lead to large-scale violence. I witnessed this happening in Kyrgyzstan before the conflict erupted in 2010, and I still see it happening in other contexts.

The first issue I would like to discuss with you today is the precarious position of minority languages in the media. This has been a focus of my institution since the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoep, took up office 20 years ago. In order to maintain and develop cultural and linguistic identities, access to the media in minority languages is as important as, for example, the right to minority education. Moreover, if persons belonging to national minorities do not have access to media in their own languages they may miss out on vital information that can obstruct their access to social, economic and political opportunities on an equal footing with the majority. Unfortunately, some States approach language policy as a zero-sum game in which the official language – often defined as the language spoken by the majority – is promoted at the expense of minority languages through stringent language quotas, inspections, selective budget allocations and other restrictions. Such policies infringe

on human and minority rights standards. This is made clear in the 2003 HCNM *Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media* and other international standards. I have seen that any policy that aims to strengthen an official language at the expense of minority languages will ultimately be counter-productive. This approach weakens integration and respect for diversity. In my work, I strongly advise governments to adopt policies that aim to include, rather than exclude, minority languages in the media. This means rejecting restrictive language policies that limit the ability of minorities to present and express themselves in the media. Removing restrictions also enables the rest of society to learn more about the minorities with whom they share a common country.

Second, and related to the first point, is the role the media can and should play in integrating societies. I work in many countries that are divided along ethnic, religious and/or linguistic lines, and I see that the media landscape often reflects the same divisions. Since minorities belong to smaller groups that tend to have less economic and political power, minority media outlets often fail to achieve the necessary critical mass, particularly in times of economic hardship. State policies to encourage the media to promote and reflect the diversity within society are, therefore, essential. States should also consider policies to support minority media outlets, which face higher costs and lower revenues. As my recent *Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* underline, State policies should also strive to challenge negative stereotypes and counter intolerance. In addition, when States neglect their duty to promote meaningful access to the media for all, persons belonging to minorities can be left with only one source of information: namely the media of neighbouring States. This can only widen existing divisions within society and could contribute to bilateral tensions. Yet these issues can be addressed with relatively few resources. One of my projects in the Armenian-populated region of Georgia showed that simple initiatives can have a wide impact. This can include subtitling national news programmes in minority languages, rebroadcasting programmes in relevant regions and supporting the production of local news. When minority communities are better informed about the social and political life of the country they live in, they tend to find it easier to integrate.

My third point regards the effects that new technology may have on minority media. New media are often heralded as the saviours of minority media. Some say that the internet and other technological advances have cut the costs of production and opened access to the media to all. Unfortunately, my experience is quite different. While the internet and other new media do present exciting new opportunities, new media do not necessarily ease access

for minorities, and the interests of minorities still need to be taken into account and actively protected. One example is when States switch to digital radio and television. This process is controlled at the political level and has huge economic consequences. It is important to ensure that minorities are not excluded from this process. In addition, while the internet is open to everyone, it tends to favour majority languages, cultures and preferences. Because minority languages, cultures and points of view can easily find themselves marginalized, investment in quality journalism needs to be directed to minority as well as majority media outlets. It is also important to encourage public broadcasters to consider representing minorities in their programming.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is essential that States ensure that their media landscape reflects the diversity of their societies in terms of language, culture and opinions. States need to be proactive. They have to adopt the relevant legal frameworks and policies, invest in training journalists and opening accessibility, and commit sufficient resources. The private sector can also contribute to creating a more open and representative media landscape.

Ensuring an inclusive media environment is not only a question of promoting a healthy democracy, ensuring good governance or respecting international obligations, it is crucial if we want to promote peaceful and stable societies in which all groups can play their part.

Thank you for your attention.