



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

www.osce-hcnm.org

ADDRESS

by

Knut Vollebaek,

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to

the Ninth Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security
Congress Centre Hofburg

Check Against Delivery!

Vienna, 18 February 2010

Mr. Chairman, (Mr. Consiglio Di Nino),
Distinguished members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to come back to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Twice a year, the OSCE becomes a place of debate where people do not mince their words and where they take Europe's security challenges head on. As High Commissioner, I see the Parliamentary Assembly as a constituency of support for my activities and for promoting interethnic peace within and between our States.

Ethnic and religious diversity is not news on our continent. In fact, it is the mismanagement of this diversity that has shaped much of Europe's history in the last century. To deal with this difficult legacy, OSCE participating States made a large number of commitments relating to national minorities and set up the Institution of the High Commissioner – or HCNM in OSCE jargon. Respecting these commitments and supporting international institutions will help participating States avoid ethnic strife at home and confrontation over national minority issues between each other.

Despite the devastating consequences of interethnic conflict, the memory of some politicians is short. Extreme nationalism is back on the march in the OSCE regions. In some quarters it has assumed an air of respectability. This is alarming but not surprising. Agitators of ethnic hatred play on the public's fears, fuelled by economic crisis. These people reap cheap dividends from people's anxiety about the changing ethnic make-up of our societies.

It is natural for people to adopt a waiting attitude to change. When new neighbours move in, we are curious to meet them. We are interested in finding out more about their background. Somewhere at the back of our mind, we worry about what kind of relationship we might have with them.

Responsible politicians explain change to people. They exhibit proper leadership and propose ways to deal with change together. Irresponsible politicians exploit changes and shift the blame for societal ills onto newcomers. Weak politicians follow irresponsible politicians and move to the fringes of political thought.

I believe it is high time that all of us think hard about how we can make our societies more cohesive. This applies to younger States in transition who have embarked on nation-building

and have national minorities on their territory. But it equally applies to older, established nation-States. There, immigration and the emergence of new ethnic groups generate unease and a renewed search for the so-called "old" roots, driven by a suspicion of "aliens." In this sense, all our societies are now in transition.

At its Edinburgh session in 2004, the Parliamentary Assembly asked my predecessor, Rolf Ekéus, to carry out a study of the integration policies for so-called "new minorities" in established democracies. In the light of what I have just mentioned, this request was particularly timely and the HCNM duly completed the study and presented it to the Assembly in 2006.

The study revealed striking parallels. Many of the integration challenges relating to traditional minorities are also relevant for "new" ones. The study confirmed that "West of Vienna" had some innovative ideas on how to grapple with diversity, but identified achievements and interesting experiences "East of Vienna" too.

We need to summarize this knowledge and to present, in a coherent way, a strategy, a guiding document on how to properly promote integration in our diverse societies. Such an integration strategy should involve the protection and promotion of minority rights, on the one hand, and the responsibilities of minorities to take part in the society where they live, on the other.

I have therefore decided to resume work on this issue begun by my predecessor, drawing on the extensive experience of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities on integration in multi-ethnic societies. In anticipation of possible concerns or objections on the basis of definitions, I would like to make it clear that I have no plan to extend the framework of national minority rights on so-called "new minorities". My task not to focus on the "who" but the "how" of integration. What is the best way to achieve proficiency in the official language among minority children? What kind of education do they need? How can we structure police services to respond to the needs of multi-ethnic societies? These questions are asked by policymakers in Rome and Riga, in Moscow and Madrid and in Oslo and Osh. Let us find common solutions together.

I call upon the Assembly to take part in shaping this document. I hope that you – elected representatives with direct access to your constituencies – will submit your ideas, experiences and comments in the course of this year. For the Assembly's Annual Session in Oslo this summer, I plan together with the Norwegian hosts to organize a special event on integration. I

invite all of you to bring your expertise and enthusiasm to this event.

Integration guidelines drawing on the wealth of accumulated international knowledge will help political mainstream to disarm extreme nationalists. Such guidelines will provide support for the voices speaking in favour of majority-minority accommodation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Confronting extreme nationalism at home is also important for another reason.

As I have mentioned to the Assembly on previous occasions, extreme nationalism has the tendency to spread beyond the borders of one particular State under the guise of protecting “ethnic brethren” in neighbouring States. To an increasing degree, States in the OSCE region are becoming engaged with their ethnic kin through policies to extend privileges to co-ethnics in neighbouring States. The justifications vary. Sometimes, there is a genuine concern about the situation of the ethnic minority. In other instances, governments have sought to use nationalist rhetoric on minorities to shore up their legitimacy in the face of economic difficulties, or to advance their foreign policy goals by playing the ethnic card. The last two examples of behaviour are particularly worrisome.

Whatever the motivations, unilateral steps in these areas – without consultation with the State concerned – are a recipe for trouble, and even inter-State conflict over national minority issues. Let us be clear: States can have a legitimate interest in the situation of a national minority in another country with which their population shares ethnic bonds. We must, however, adhere to the basic tenet of international law that the protection of minority rights is the obligation of the State where the minority resides. Bilateral treaties and multilateral mechanisms are by far the best tools for tackling these controversial issues. The HCNM is actively supporting this sort of dialogue.

As legislators, you are best placed to prevent laws that infuse tension into inter-State relations. Whenever you see or propose such legislation, I call upon you to refer to the HCNM's Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations.

These Recommendations spell out what assistance a neighbouring State may offer under international law to its co-ethnics in great detail and unambiguous language. I also hope that you, as Parliamentarians, will assume more responsibility in these matters and will sound the alarm bell whenever minority rights are in danger or the State is considering extending its

jurisdiction to nationals of other States.

Furthermore, I am also proposing that the OSCE participating States endorse the Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations as a commitment. I believe a decision by the States to adhere to a certain code of behaviour in these matters will be good for European security. A lot of distrust and misperception would begin to fade and the anxiety of many States would be reduced.

Mr. Chairman,

As in previous years, the High Commissioner has been a travelling commissioner. This underscores the importance of my country work. It is this work that provides the inspiration for my thematic guidelines. It is this work that is most directly linked to conflict prevention. It is this work that can make a difference to the lives of ordinary people.

My mandate requires me to work in confidence. I am not in the so-called “blame and shame” business. I am not here to point the finger. A shrewd move, I believe, on the part of the OSCE participating States back in 1992. It avoids the over-hyping of delicate minority issues. It allows me to build confidence and gain the trust of the involved parties.

For more information about my country work, I invite you to read my statements to the Permanent Council, to be found on the HCNM website.

At the same time, let me say a few words about some general experiences of my two and a half years as High Commissioner.

Recently, we have seen a tightening of the legislative framework for minorities. Perhaps some policymakers felt that minorities got too good a deal in the 1990s. Some have made an anti-minority framework their political platform.

The repercussions of this are that minority languages are being squeezed out of the public domain. In many places they cannot be used in local municipalities, hospitals and cinemas, even in places where a national minority constitutes a local majority.

All of this does little good for interethnic relations. I am a firm believer in using official languages as a means of integration. Official language is a common denominator that allows the smooth functioning of the state machinery. It is important, however, to avoid promoting it

at the expense of minority languages.

As I have stated on numerous occasions, linguistic policy can be a win-win situation for both the majority and minorities. Promotion of the official language need not necessarily translate into the decline of minority languages.

For example, bilingual or multilingual education equips children with a sound knowledge of both their mother tongue and the State language. Subtitling, rather than the dubbing of news bulletins, movies, talk shows and other broadcasts, better meets multiple linguistic needs. Ballot papers and election materials distributed in the State and the minority languages increase turnout and, ultimately, election legitimacy. Public services in minority languages, particularly at local level, or a simple bilingual road sign in a minority-populated area enhance the sense of belonging amongst minorities.

Mr. Chairman,

The linguistic and cultural diversity of our societies is an immense asset. It makes our cities and regions more interesting places in which to live and work. Policies that develop and nurture positive and respectful conditions are required, so that the appreciation of different cultures and religions, and the guarantee of equal opportunities and rights for all, become reality.

Integration respecting diversity is the answer to this challenge. It will create a society in which everyone, including members of all ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious groups, has a sense of belonging - a society in which all can build and share a common home, where all have an equal opportunity to contribute and to benefit, because the rights of all are respected and the responsibilities of all are accepted. In such a society the benefits of diversity can be enjoyed by all and any possible tensions arising from diversity, which could lead to instability or conflict, will be attenuated or eliminated.

I look forward to developing principles for such policies and count on the Parliamentary Assembly's participation in this effort.

Thank you.