



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**Minority Protection, Integration and Stability in  
South-Eastern Europe**

Speech by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities  
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at the Conference on  
“Democracy, Human Rights and the Protection of Persons Belonging to Ethnic and  
Religious Minorities in South-Eastern Europe”

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Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to address this conference. The issues that will be discussed here during the next few days go to the heart of the dramatic process of transition that is transforming South-Eastern Europe. Democratic change is sweeping the region. The old cliché of 'Trouble in the Balkans' is giving way to new hope of stability, integration and prosperity. The future development of South-Eastern Europe will require economic growth and regional security. But it will also have to be anchored in a bedrock of democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights including the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

Because this region's past has been scarred by conflict between different national communities, its future will be defined by its ability to cope with ethnic diversity. Based on my eight years of experience as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I would like to share with you some of my thoughts about the present and future challenges of preventing inter-ethnic conflict in South-Eastern Europe.

Human rights are an important basis of stable and prosperous multi-ethnic societies. Democracy, based on the rule of law, is the fundamental framework for protecting human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. A constitution that reflects the true character of society and includes guarantees for the rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, is a cornerstone. So too is legislation that protects the rights, interests and identities of all, not only members of the majority.

Sometimes additional legislation is necessary to protect minority concerns. For example, legislation on public administration reform has recently been introduced in Romania that will allow for the official use of minority languages in communities where minorities make up at least 20% of the population. Similar legislation has been introduced in other countries in the region, for example Slovakia. Specific minority-related legislation is also currently under discussion in Ukraine and Croatia. Furthermore, I am encouraged by the commitment of the newly elected government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to restore and enhance minority rights protection by revising existing legislation or introducing new laws. The recent revision of education laws in Romania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have opened up the possibility for increased education in the mother tongue, particularly in higher education. You may be aware that I am involved in the establishment of a private University with Albanian curriculum in Tetovo in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This is an ambitious project, but things are moving in the right direction. In a similar vein, positive developments have taken place at Babes-Bolyai University in Romania which has recently expanded the possibilities for multi-lingual education. I am now working with Constatine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia to explore ways of improving teacher training in Hungarian. These

steps do not privilege persons belonging to minorities, but act to bring all members of society to at least a minimum level of equality in the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

A number of minority-related standards have been established in the past decade, most notably the OSCE's Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. These provide a comprehensive framework for minority rights protection. In order to provide some guidelines on how to put these standards into practice, international experts, under my auspices, have devised three sets of recommendations. These are the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities and the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life.

After all, to be effective, legislation has to be applied. This should be done, not to appease the international community, but to foster long-term stability. Implementing the spirit of international standards requires leadership and education: leadership from political, religious and community leaders; education through schooling and the media. The message should not only be one of tolerance, but of appreciation for the culturally diverse world that we live in.

Evidence of a government's commitment to fostering inter-ethnic accord comes through its actions, and not merely words. This could include ensuring that local officials carry out decisions (for example on refugee return or the use of minority languages), implementing hiring policies for public officials that reflect the diversity of the state, and creating a legal system that brings to justice those who discriminate or foment national, racial or religious hatred. These types of initiatives can help level the playing field and create opportunities for members of minorities to take an active role in public life.

The point is that adoption of legislation is, in itself, insufficient. Integrating diversity also requires dialogue and participation. Through dialogue, all parties can share their concerns and interests and work towards finding common ground to reconcile possibly conflicting positions. Participation requires arrangements that enable minorities to maintain their own identity and characteristics while including them in the overall life of the State. It also means that minorities ought to participate in decisions that directly affect them. In the liberal democratic tradition, the more inclusive a political system, the more representative it is.

A number of countries in Europe have established government departments for minority issues, and have appointed Ombudsmen or Commissioners on Ethnic and Human Rights Issues. Others have ensured that minorities have representation in parliament, positions in the civil service and the local administration, and have devised electoral systems to facilitate minority representation. Several have also established minority consultative or advisory councils, either connected to legislative bodies or free-standing.

Participation has a broader connotation, namely that minorities feel that they are active and equal members of the state. If they feel that they “belong”, that the state is “theirs”, the civic identity will transcend the ethnic one.

This requires a type of social contract. On the one hand, governments should create the conditions where minorities have an opportunity to be full and active members of society. They should also encourage a political culture that allows persons belonging to national minorities to freely express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity. For their part, persons belonging to minorities should take advantage of these opportunities in a way that allows them to fully enjoy their rights while honoring their obligations as members of the state. In this way, people will be able to enjoy their individual interests while contributing to the common good.

Good governance in multi-ethnic states may require a certain amount of self-administration or self-governance. When many people think of self-governance, they immediately think of forms of self-determination that lead to secession. This is misleading. Indeed, increased self-government can often diminish the desire for secession. By decentralizing certain responsibilities and powers, and sharing others between the central and local governments, local or regional officials can deal with issues that directly affect them. This allows them to better control political, material and symbolic resources while enjoying the benefits of being part of a wider administrative unit, namely the state.

This type of arrangement may seem radical in societies with a long tradition of centralized government. But experience has shown that decentralization can overcome the polarization of the all-or-nothing logic of assimilation on one hand or separation on the other. At the same time, it is crucial that the central government ensure institutional guarantees for basic rights, common security and equal opportunities within the state. There is thus a delicate balance to be struck. I am encouraged by the Yugoslav Government’s recent decision to try to calm tensions in the Presevo valley by allowing for a greater amount of self-administration. This sets a good precedent for dealing with other complex local government issues in other areas of the country.

Self-government can be flexible in terms of the division of responsibilities between the centre and the regions. Functions may be allocated asymmetrically to respond to different minority situations within the same State. This seems particularly applicable to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the moment as it seeks to come to terms with its multi-ethnic character in a new, democratic environment.

There are also non-territorial ways in which specific interests of national minorities may be assured. For example, individuals and groups have the right to choose their names in the minority languages and obtain official recognition of their names. Minority education institutions should play a role in determining the curricula for the teaching of their minority languages and cultures. Minorities should be able to determine and enjoy their own symbols and other forms of cultural expression. The

point is to give minorities, especially those that are dispersed throughout a State, ways of maintaining and developing their identities and cultures. Of course, the bottom line is protecting their human rights. Ideas on types of 'internal self-determination' can be found in the Lund Recommendations which I have brought with me.

A note of caution on cultural autonomy, namely that vertical divisions of authority on an ethnic basis may cause friction with horizontal levels of local, regional or central government. Where cultural issues become politicized, nationalism is never very far away. That is why I stress that wherever possible, the concerns of minorities should be addressed in civic rather than cultural structures.

Another word of caution, and that concerns the tendency to make generalizations about people on the basis of their religion or ethnicity. We often talk about minorities as if they were a collective group – 'the Hungarians', 'the Albanians', 'the Croats', 'the Roma' and so on. The same is true in terms of religious categorizations, for example 'the Muslims'. Although it may be convenient or politically expedient to make such general classifications, we must remember that these groups are made up of individuals and that no group is truly homogenous.

This has two ramifications in terms of addressing inter-ethnic conflict. The first is that when looking at issues in dispute, one must strip away the stereotypes and the nationalist rhetoric and look at the underlying issues. What often emerges is that the points of contention have very little to do with ethnicity, but are blown up by one side or the other into "national" issues. The second consideration is that one should seek a middle ground by marginalizing or neutralizing extremists, particularly those who resort to violence. It is often these ethnic entrepreneurs who claim to speak on behalf of the entire nation – and will use any means to reach their aims. Achieving understanding among people of different faiths or nationalities is very difficult if the process of confidence-building is disrupted by those who have no interest in peace, or refuse to compromise. It is usually only a small group of people who resort to extremism, but they poison relations to the point that fear and suspicion grip all sides. This is fertile ground for the growth of extreme nationalist or sectarian violence.

To conclude, there is a sense in South-Eastern Europe that the time has come to put ethnic differences behind us and look to the future. The main focus is now on economic growth, closer European integration, and so on. But in looking to the future we should try to avoid the ruptures of the past. This can be achieved by following a concerted policy of protecting minority rights, integrating diversity and considering ways of balancing local, regional and state interests. Only through addressing these fundamental questions can one build the type of harmonious societies that will enjoy long-term stability and prosperity.

Thank you for your attention.