



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

**Rapid Pro-action:
Identifying and Addressing Sources of Conflict**

Address to a Wilton Park Conference on
“Creating Conditions for Peace”

by

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Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My obligation as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, is, according to my mandate, to deal with issues of minorities and majorities in the OSCE area, with the ultimate purpose to prevent violent conflicts. My task is not primarily the protection of minorities. It is notable that my title is High Commissioner *on* National Minorities, not *for* – as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The focus of my attention thus is questions relating to the interface between ethnic groups, whether they are minorities or majorities.

The heritage of the Europe of the OSCE, which also covers the Central Asian states, has left to us a complex mosaic of majorities and minorities. This richness of cultures, languages and traditions makes Europe what it is today. It is a source of strength for us in our common striving for democracy and pluralism. However, implicit in this ethnic diversity is, as we have seen this past decade, the potential for tension and even for frictions which ultimately can lead to violent conflicts both within and between states.

The roots of the present situation has to be searched for in the past century and the break-up of three empires. The Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian/Soviet empires were, as Lenin described them, “prisons of nations” and their collapse ushered forth a period of nation-building, national self-determination. With this development came also – in some cases – inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. The American President Woodrow Wilson’s vision of a Europe of nation-states, was out of step with the multi-ethnic reality of Europe’s cultural heterogeneity. Attempts to carve out nation-states under the leadership of a titular majority ignored the reality of the existence of the many different national and ethnic groups and their wish to assert their cultural identity in the newly independent states. The domination of the titular majority led to cases of minority rights abuses and deportations and contributed to the twisted logic of ethnic cleansing, fascism and genocide.

After the fall of the Soviet Union – and the break-up of Yugoslavia - we now see that the classic intra-state conflict about things such as territory and wealth tend to be substituted in Europe by a new type of conflict, intra state conflicts generated out of tensions and frictions between the majority and minorities or between national groups.

The international community was however in a better position to cope with these threats at the end of the twentieth century than it had been at the beginning. The emergence of the universal human rights norms which became recognized after the second world war with the creation of the United Nations and Council of Europe and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, later the OSCE, as laid down in the Helsinki Final Act created a new dimension in the shaping of international relations. These norms aiming at protecting the rights of all individuals in order to avoid the horrible abuses – including the consequences of extreme nationalism – also became the touch-stone in the development of modern democracy.

But, as became evident in the beginning of the 1990, the international human right norm system in itself was not sufficient to prevent atrocities. The norms needed effective systems for their implementation.

This was the background for the decision by the CSCE in 1992 to create the position of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. The fundamental thinking behind my mandate is to make the High Commissioner a central element in the OSCE's overall mission to prevent violent conflicts. As conflicts in Europe are perceived to emerge from inter-ethnic tensions, the High Commissioner has

been tasked to focus on such situations. Being a part of the security dimension of the OSCE my mandate thus is to provide early warning on issues relating to tensions involving national minorities.

The starting point for the High Commissioner is that the majority-minority relation must be dealt with within the state. It is the responsibility of each Government to provide for the security and protection of everyone inside its jurisdiction, including for the minorities. In this context, I believe that it is important to avoid two extreme approaches, both which could bring hardship and suffering to the different affected groups as well as creating potential for serious political tensions and conflict. First, the minority questions thus should not be solved through forced assimilation of minorities. It must be an all European responsibility to preserve the cultural richness and diversity of our nations. The second extreme would be to try to solve minority problems through separation, exclusion or apartheid, policies which may aggravate or add new difficulties to the situation. Therefore, it is my conviction that the minority issues should be approached with the ambition to integrate all groups into society in harmony and on the basis of full respect for their cultural identity.

In the experience of the High Commissioner there are several key components for an integrative minority policy. One is the necessity of creating opportunities for minority participation in the political life, at the national and local level and in both executive and legislative bodies, especially as regards questions which directly affect their daily existence. Other important elements are the questions of language and education. In order for national minorities to maintain their identity they need to acquire a proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the education process. At the same time, they have a responsibility – and an interest - to integrate into the wider society through the acquisition of proper knowledge of the state language. Minorities should also have the opportunity to study their own culture and enjoy cultural expression and reproduction. This enables them to have a degree of cultural autonomy within the framework of the society.

These issues – participation, language and education – are the core concern of minorities when it comes to the protection and promotion of their national interests. That is why we must dedicate attention and resources to ensuring that these interests are properly addressed, both for the sake of the community concerned and for the broader polity. This, I believe, is the essence of conflict

prevention both in the short term and for the sake of long-term stability and social cohesion.

Many of the issues that I deal with are, as you understand, concrete and tangible. It is conflict prevention in practice. In a practical and pragmatic way, I start from the norms and try adapt them in specific political and social situations. It is a matter of translating the principal norms into concrete reality.

Even if the issues that I deal with in many countries are the quite similar, every situation is different and thus need an individual approach. While one must not go below minimum international standards, it is important to apply these standards in the specific context of the states concerned. Practical and enduring solutions require approaches that are tailor made to the specific situation. One must be sensitive to the local conditions in order to best explain to the parties the reasons and possibilities for applying the relevant norms and standards. The aim is to move from the abstract to the concrete, to get governments to take measures – legal and political – to create the types of conditions foreseen in the standards concerning minorities. Compliance is not only for the sake of respecting international standards: It is an integral part of good governance and a condition for peace, security and prosperity. This is the message that I try to convey

through my recommendations and during my visits to OSCE participating States. That is why one scholar has referred to the High Commissioner as a “normative intermediary”.

One crucial element for achieving success in these responsibilities is first hand knowledge about the situation at hand. Thus, one essential part of my work is the unique possibility to act within states, a mandate which has been given to me by the participating States of the OSCE. This allows me to go where I want and see whomever I wish. These first-hand contacts with government and minority representatives, leaders of ethnic groups and non-governmental organizations working in the different countries where I am active, enable me to assess the need for action at the earliest possible stage - as required of me by my mandate. However, these extraordinary rights of involvement in internal affairs of the participating States, are preconditioned by the absolute requirement of confidentiality in all my ongoing issues under the mandate. My experience is that confidentiality allows more frankness in discussions, it is an important element for long-term confidence building and it reduces the possibility of stigmatization or misrepresentation of positions. I also stress to my interlocutors that such an approach can be fruitful in their own discussions, both domestically and bilaterally. I sometimes find that a further involvement of the media could be a

support and strengthen the High Commissioner's position but in balance the confidentiality requirement serves the office well. Without breaking the confidentiality code I am however obliged to create a broad understanding of and insight in the principles and issues I have under active consideration.

In conclusion, there are no easy answers or simplistic solutions to preventing conflict. As I have explained, there are a variety of instruments and techniques that can be applied to different situations. The tool box is now well stocked, blueprints have been devised, and valuable lessons have been learned. We must, however, remain vigilant to potential signs of conflict and follow up early warning with early action. That action must be focused, it must pool available capabilities, and must tackle both short term tensions and have an eye on longer term sustainable development. We will never eliminate conflicts, but there are certainly steps that we can take to reduce the likelihood that disagreements will erupt into violent conflicts.

Thank you for your attention.

