



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

Address by  
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to the  
**1199<sup>th</sup> Plenary meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council**

**[Check against delivery]**

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Mr. Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address the Permanent Council today, exactly one year since my first appearance at this forum in my current capacity. In about a week, my institution will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). I see this as an opportunity to review some of the past achievements and – more importantly – to reassess the role and the tools of the High Commissioner in a changing geopolitical landscape. While most of the challenges that prompted participating States to establish my function 25 years ago still persist, the world has evolved since then. As I highlighted in my last address to this very Council, societies are becoming both increasingly diverse and less welcoming towards diversity. The new migration trends that the OSCE region has witnessed in the past years have underlined the need for sound policies aimed at the integration of what we sometimes refer to as “new minorities”. Regrettably, however, identity politics and socio-political polarization are growing, resulting in the marginalization of some of these groups – a dynamic which carries crisis and conflict potential. For this reason, on the one hand it is important to scale up conflict prevention efforts. On the other hand, while the principles and values enshrined in the role and mandate of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities remain as valid as ever, my working methods require constant updating, adjustment and further development to ensure I can continue to meet today’s challenges.

In this context, I am particularly proud of the efforts that my office has invested in ensuring the continued relevance of our thematic work – the so-called “Guidelines” and “Recommendations” – and in promoting their implementation to a wider audience, including, for this reporting period, at the United Nations in New York. So let me start the overview of my work in the past months, as well as a projection of future plans, from there.

In July 2018, in co-ordination with and with the generous support of the Italian Chairmanship-in-Office, I hosted a conference on the 10th Anniversary of the *Bolzano/Bozen*

*Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*, in Udine, Italy. This topic remains all the more relevant in the OSCE area, where the legitimate interest of States to support their ethnic “kin” communities in neighbouring countries sometimes collides with the jurisdiction of the latter, interfering in integration processes. In light of the absence of international instruments regulating support by States to national minorities abroad, the Recommendations are an essential practical reference, as they describe the limits of the intervention of “kin-States”. As such, they ultimately contribute to ensuring good neighbourly relations and reduce tensions involving national minorities within and across national boundaries. Participating States, academic experts, institutional representatives, civil society and others discussed the relevance of the Recommendations and challenges in the field that they cover, including the rise of nationalism, erosion in the faith of multilateral institutions, the potential bi-lateralization of national minorities in inter-State relations and a failure to ensure the integration of national minorities in their home State. I would like to thank those participating States who ensured the active participation of their representatives in the conference, which saw a very interesting balance between diplomacy and academia, and I encourage all of you to continue using the Recommendations as a frame of reference when engaging in national minorities’ matters across borders.

Continuing on our thematic work, our office is currently finalising a new set of *Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age*, complementing earlier thematic work on the topic. The importance of these Guidelines stems from the fact that the media and information technologies are crucial in creating spaces for inclusive and pluralistic public debate. Inclusive media spaces allow different groups, including minorities, to interact with each other, share information, explore and develop identities, and articulate diverse perspectives without fear. While often abused to stoke tension, if used correctly, the media and other communication platforms can help enhance understanding and reduce intolerance and mutual suspicion in diverse societies, thereby strengthening societal integration, cohesion and stability – a central goal of the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

Since 2003, when the HCNM launched the *Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*, there have been extensive developments in the media and information technology, with the line between traditional media and other communication platforms becoming increasingly blurred. This ever-changing communication landscape also affects how minorities and majorities talk with and about each other, and themselves. I therefore found it helpful to provide participating States with up-to-date guidance on how to

operationalize the right to freedom of expression in the digital age. Apart from the topic of discussion, the format of the launching event that we are planning to organize will also be very interesting as it will include an interactive panel and will make use of the latest information technologies. I hope to see many of you at the launch of this new set of Guidelines.

I have also begun to raise more awareness of the recently launched *Graz Recommendations on Access to Justice and National Minorities*. During my visit to Tbilisi, I conducted a successful roundtable discussion on the Recommendations, facilitating an exchange on how best practices in the OSCE area can inspire decision-makers in the judiciary and civil society in Georgia to identify the key challenges and better address them. My office also convened a similar roundtable in the Republic of Moldova in October, where we brought together authorities and ombudspersons from a number of OSCE participating States in the region to discuss the application of the Graz Recommendations to their respective countries. I intend to continue promoting the Recommendations in specific countries through targeted events.

I would also like to mention another set of Guidelines that are currently being revitalized, in view of the marking of their twentieth anniversary next year: the *Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life*. The anniversary event will provide an opportunity to re-examine the relevance and status of implementation of these Recommendations and to discuss ways to promote and enhance the participation of national minorities in public life, including in some new key thematic areas, such as the economic sector. We plan to gather a number of prominent experts in Lund to carry out this review, and I also look forward to your engagement in this event.

In addition, my institution participated in the Human Dimension Implementation meeting held in Warsaw in September, as part of the session on “Tolerance and non-discrimination, including rights of persons belonging to national minorities, and preventing aggressive nationalism, racism and chauvinism”. I focused my contribution on integration strategies for diverse societies.

I have recently returned from New York, where I convened a meeting together with the Italian Permanent Representation of the United Nations to strengthen the contribution of regional organizations under Chapter 8 of the UN Charter to conflict prevention. The event brought together high-level representatives from a number of regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, the League of Arab States, the Shanghai Co-operation

Organization and the European Union. I hope that we will be able to also involve the African Union, with which we have started a dialogue on this topic, in future engagements. Participants agreed on the importance of a continued exchange of expertise in order to support the conflict prevention agenda of the UN Secretary-General, who was represented at the event by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and the Director of the Policy and Mediation Division. I am grateful for the participation of a number of your representatives to the United Nations. The event was followed by a bilateral meeting with UN Secretary-General Guterres, who expressed strong support for this initiative and encouraged me to continue my engagement with regional organizations. Given the positive feedback and level of interest, I am considering capitalizing on this effort with additional engagements in the coming year.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is only when engaging with participating States that the norms and commitments promoted by my institution's thematic work are translated into practice. As such, I can only fulfil my mandate by meeting and addressing policymakers and the people affected by their policies. The last months have taken me to several countries of the OSCE region, where I met with representatives of minorities, government officials and a variety of other interlocutors. At the same time, in line with my conflict prevention mandate, my office continues following up on developments pertaining to minorities with a potential to develop crises or ignite conflict. Allow me to give you a brief overview of my visits in chronological order.

In June, I visited **Bucharest** to gauge the current status of inter-ethnic relations between majority and minority communities within Romania, as well as to discuss the situation with respect to neighbouring countries. In the course of the visit, I met with governmental, non-governmental and independent interlocutors.

Romania has solid legislation relating to national minorities, however there were indications of challenges to implementation, where the willingness of political authorities, including by allocating appropriate funding, is a factor. I encouraged all interlocutors to maintain their commitment towards inclusive dialogue as the best conduit for addressing tensions between communities. I also shared my views with both government interlocutors and national

minority representatives on the opportunities for an inclusive narrative and, conversely, the risks of enhancing divisions which exist in relation to the centennial events marking the modernization of the Romanian State. With regard to assistance provided by the Romanian Government to minorities in neighbouring States, I reiterated the importance of consultations and the use of bilateral commissions, as foreseen in the *Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*.

In September, I visited **Croatia and Serbia** in succession, in order to understand better the situation of persons belonging to national minorities in both countries. I appreciated the welcoming attitude of both governments towards the work of the High Commissioner, and the willingness to share information with me openly. In both Croatia and Serbia I found solid legal frameworks concerning national minorities and institutions which provide an adequate level of support. Nevertheless, there are points of concern which hamper the full implementation of relevant legislation.

Croatia has well-developed institutions which meet the needs of national minorities. The latter enjoy guaranteed representation within the political system, and indeed form part of the current coalition government. I however expressed some concerns in relation to inter-ethnic relations in Vukovar-Srijem County. Despite the passage of time, deep-running resentments in relation to the conflict of the 1990s continue to negatively impact relations between the majority Croat and minority Serb communities. Although the Croatian Government has made efforts at the central level, local authorities resist implementation of provisions designed to support national minorities. Sustained attention is required, particularly in the area of use of language and script. I am also concerned about the high number of ethnic Serb families opting for the model of education whereby their children are effectively not participating in joint schooling with the children of their ethnic Croat neighbours. I will continue to work with relevant authorities to ensure that this situation is addressed.

Despite the negative rhetoric sometimes reflected by the media, I have noted the existence of regular contacts at the government level between Croatia and Serbia, which include both high-level political exchanges and regular meetings of the intergovernmental Joint Commission on National Minorities, which both Croatia and Serbia have reported being satisfied with. The Commission continues to meet, and to discuss issues such as resources for cultural activities and effective political participation.

Following my visit to Zagreb and Vukovar, I travelled on to Subotica and Belgrade in Serbia. Serbia has recently undertaken an extensive public consultation process resulting in an updated legal framework covering the rights and freedoms of national minorities, as well as the operations of the Councils of National Minorities. Overall, this consultation process was deemed positive by both the Government and, to a certain extent, by national minority representatives. Minorities' representatives, however, continue to be concerned over undue political interference in the elections of their National Councils. In light of this, I will follow with great interest the upcoming elections for these bodies.

In Serbia, the media privatization process, completed two years ago, continues to impact negatively on the financial viability of media run by national minorities in their mother tongues. I am encouraged, however, by reports from government representatives that this issue will be addressed through a media strategy which is currently being developed.

As part of this trip, I chaired the tenth meeting of the Stakeholders Committee of the Bujanovac Department of the Subotica Faculty of Economics of the Novi Sad University. The multi-ethnic and bilingual Bujanovac Department is part of my focus on education. I found a strong spirit of co-operation amongst the stakeholders, who have started discussing how to transfer the chairing of the committee to Serbian institutions.

As we have discussed on previous occasions, minority-related issues in **Ukraine** have been high on my agenda since I took up my mandate in 2017. Since then, I visited Ukraine three times paying attention to how minority issues manifest themselves not only internally, but also in the bilateral relations between Ukraine and its neighbours.

In September, as a follow-up to my previous visits to Kyiv in December 2017 and to the Zakarpattia region in February 2018, I visited Kyiv and the Kherson region. Discussing several legislative developments in the sphere of education, language, citizenship and broader issues of integration with authorities in Kyiv, I reiterated the need for prior inclusive consultations on legislative developments in order to increase ownership and to reach a broad consensus. This is important in order to avoid the politicization of minority issues, especially in the context of the upcoming elections in Ukraine.

Since my previous visit in February, some positive steps have been taken. For example, the Ministry of Culture, in line with my past advice, is enhancing the institutional framework to deal with minority issues. With regard to the legislation related to education, I noted the

intensified consultations between the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the representatives of national minorities. While I welcome the efforts of the Ministry to ensure an extension of the time-frame for the implementation of Article 7 of the Education law, I share the concerns expressed by minority interlocutors regarding the pace of the reforms at the regional level. I also welcome a pattern of bilateral consultations, which have taken place between the relevant ministries of Ukraine and some of their counterparts across the border. At the same time, the matter of differentiated treatment between EU and non-EU languages remains unresolved, both in the law on Education and in the draft law on Secondary Education. I encouraged the Government and the Verkhovna Rada to address this concern in line with the opinion of the Venice Commission.

In the meantime, I took note that the Verkhovna Rada adopted in the first reading the draft law “On ensuring the functioning of Ukrainian as a State language”. I have been in dialogue with the Government and the Verkhovna Rada on this legislation, advising to proceed in a way that is inclusive in substance and in process and that preferably relies on positive rather than punitive measures to strengthen the State language. As in other countries, I believe the key challenge for the Ukrainian authorities is to find an appropriate balance in promoting the role of the Ukrainian language as a tool for integration, while at the same time protecting and promoting minority languages. In that regard, during my last visit I also encouraged the authorities to develop both the language and national minority-related legislation in parallel, to ensure consistency and to reassure minority representatives that their rights will continue to be respected.

In September, I travelled to the Kherson region where I assessed the situation of inter-ethnic relations. I also visited the Chonhar entry-exit checkpoint and discussed the situation of national minorities with interlocutors representing Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians currently residing on the Crimean peninsula.

In general, co-operation with Ukraine’s authorities on strengthening the integration of the country’s diverse society is a key priority and I stand ready to offer my support on legislative initiatives, as well as on minority issues in bilateral relations. In that regard, I have paid particular attention to the deterioration in bilateral relations between Ukraine and Hungary over a range of issues, including education, language, citizenship and effective participation in public life. My institution has issued thematic recommendations on all these topics, which – I believe – offer a technical and depoliticized way of approaching and discussing these

sensitive matters. I have therefore offered my assistance and good offices to both Governments in Budapest and Kyiv.

In September, I also visited **Georgia**, for the first time in my capacity as High Commissioner, where I continued the sustained engagement between my institution and key interlocutors in Tbilisi.

I commended the authorities for the recent steps taken for the integration of Georgia's diverse society, in the framework of the implementation of the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration, and other relevant policies and legislation, such as the new rules on dual citizenship. I welcomed recent initiatives, such as an internship programme for national minority youth graduates in public institutions, the "1+4 programme" – an idea my office has been promoting. I hope that this opens the door to increased participation of minority youth in the public and economic sector. I also continue to support the authorities in the field of multilingual and tolerance education and on language policies, including by helping to build the capacity of the recently established State Language Department.

I also conveyed concerns of national minorities that there remain challenges to integration, including opportunities and incentives to learn the State language, and a more adequate representation and participation in all facets of public life. I shared my observations with the authorities that national minority representatives want to feel like fully-fledged citizens, that their concerns should be addressed directly and not via their "kin-States", and that challenges in national minority populated regions should be addressed constructively, not only through a security prism that may fuel tensions.

In Abkhazia, I met with the de-facto authorities and with representatives of civil society and ethnic communities, in order to get acquainted with inter-ethnic relations and diversity issues and to explore opportunities for further engagement, following conversations my predecessor had in 2012. Among others, I addressed complex topics such as ways to safeguard linguistic diversity in education, including the preservation and development of the Abkhaz language, and the issues faced by ethnic Georgians in the Gali district.

In early October, following my visit to the United Nations in New York, I visited the **United States**. In Washington D.C. I met with representatives of the U.S. Government, including the Department of Justice and the State Department, as well as with representatives from civil society and the Helsinki Commission. In the course of these meetings, I inquired into the

impact of the increased political polarization on American society and on measures taken by the authorities to promote social cohesion and to reduce the distance between communities. I intend to follow up this visit next year, to include a more active engagement with civil society actors. I also visited four universities, including Columbia University in New York, Johns Hopkins University in Washington and Tufts and Harvard University in Boston, in order to promote awareness of the thematic work of my institution and to strengthen co-operation with the academic community. At the Center for European Studies of Harvard University, I convened a panel of renowned experts in the field of memory politics to inform and advise my work in this sensitive field that continues to impact relations both within and between States. I am planning to expand this interesting work stream next year, and I am looking forward to discussing this further with you in an informal brainstorming session at an opportune moment.

I have just returned from a visit to **Moscow**, where I addressed the Second International Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism, Racism and Xenophobia. This visit, the first by an OSCE High Commissioner since 2009, allowed me to rekindle the direct engagement of my institution with the Russian authorities on a number of issues falling under my mandate.

The visit was a good opportunity to focus on issues related to national minorities in Russia. In this connection, I met with the Head of the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, created in 2015, with whom I discussed the state of implementation of the Strategy on State Nationalities Policy and explored avenues for future cooperation. The visit also included meetings with representatives of national minorities in the Russian Federation, for an exchange of information on issues related to their participation in public life, and opportunities to preserve and develop their ethnic, linguistic and religious identity. I then discussed with the Ministry of Education the impact of recent changes in the education law, with a particular focus on the modalities of teaching in and of minority languages in schools.

With regard to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside Russia, I took note of the concerns expressed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other state institutions. I intend to continue paying close attention to these matters, engaging with all relevant stakeholders and suggesting possible solutions based on best practices.

You may have noticed that in both my thematic work and country visits I have invested considerable efforts to raise the profile of my institution, including through social media. While the principle of quiet diplomacy in bilateral engagements with participating States

needs to be safeguarded, making my work visible to an increasingly wider public will ultimately enhance the likelihood that my tools will be used, and the principles enshrined in them respected.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude my statement today on a celebratory note. I am glad to inform you that the international jury of the Max van der Stoel award, assigned every two years to a person, group or institution for extraordinary and outstanding achievements in improving the position of national minorities, has decided to present the 2018 award to high school students of Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for their inspiring and courageous opposition to further ethnic segregation in schools in their town. They rose jointly, without any resources or experience, against a decision to form a new school along ethnic lines that would separate them from their peers. In doing so, they faced opposition not only from institutions behind this decision but also from their own communities and their own homes. Invitations to this event, which will also mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, have been extended to your delegations, therefore I hope at least some of you will join me in The Hague to congratulate these young people on this important and highly symbolic achievement.

Such stories are heart-warming. Despite the challenges to integration and peaceful coexistence that we witness in many diverse societies of the OSCE region, there is a wealth of committed and inspiring individuals, both in minority and majority communities and especially among the youth, whose voices need to be echoed louder and whose role needs to be capitalized on to create peaceful societies. I am committed to continuing supporting their efforts.

Diversity is a reality across the OSCE region. Portraying it as a threat, in order to promote short-term political agendas, is a way to make societies more fragile, and more conflict prone, as well as raising tensions with neighbours. Policies accommodating and managing diversity are instead the best recipe for sustainable peace, both within and between participating States.

As this is my last appearance at the Permanent Council this year, I would like to conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Italian Chairmanship for their support and co-operation in a number of joint initiatives. I equally look forward to working with the Slovakian Chairmanship in the coming year.

Thank you.