



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

ADDRESS

by

Knut Vollebaek,

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to

the Seventh Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security
Congress Centre Hofburg

Check Against Delivery!

Vienna, 21 February 2008

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly again. Someone once said that there is nothing quite as pretentious as quoting oneself, but in this case I ask for your indulgence. Talking about the Assembly's role in Saint Petersburg in July 1999, I made a statement I think is worth repeating: "Nobody is better equipped to develop modern political parties and political institutions than politicians from democratic countries... We need a political environment based on power sharing and not on power monopoly. You form part of such structures. You work in such an environment. Now we need your knowledge, your inspiration and your solidarity..."

In 1999, I was speaking about the particular case of Kosovo, but I strongly believe that this also applies to the entire spectrum of the Assembly's involvement in the OSCE. I believe parliaments and inter-parliamentary bodies need to be involved in our work rather than being mere spectators with no say. I believe that democratic accountability and parliamentary oversight ought to become a norm in international organizations, to the same extent as they are the norm in most of our own countries. As OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I will seek and listen to your advice and continue to draw upon your expertise.

Since becoming the High Commissioner six months ago, I have visited 14 participating States, a quarter of the OSCE family members. A number of themes emerged during my talks with government officials, legislators and national minority communities. Today, I would like to share my initial impressions from these visits and see whether they correlate with what you hear from your constituents, the men and women of your countries.

We live in a time when we are witnessing the renaissance of disturbing nationalism. It is proudly marching across the OSCE region, infiltrating the mainstream of public life from the fringes of society. Ethnic entrepreneurs reap cheap dividends from the anxiety people often have about the changing cultural palette of our societies. Voices speaking in favour of inter-ethnic harmony and majority-minority accommodation are becoming unfashionable and are brushed aside as an unpopular remnant of the past. National minorities are distressed about these developments. They feel more pressure to give up their identity in order to hold onto their jobs in the public sector. They see ever more emphasis put on the majority language and culture, a shrinking representation at the local and national level, socio-economic exclusion and fewer opportunities for their children to attend university. Unfortunately, national

minorities are expecting more bad news.

Nationalism in the OSCE region has been thought to be closely linked to the challenge of nation-building in post-totalitarian, transitional societies. Societies, where there has been a vacuum generated by the abandonment of the old ideology, often put the issue of national identity high on the agenda. It is indeed the case that as ideologically imposed identities crumbled in such societies, they engaged themselves in the quest for their new national identity and its components. Today, however, we are also observing a parallel tendency in old, established nation-states as immigration and the emergence of new ethnic groups generate unease and a renewed search for the "old" roots spiced with suspicion of "aliens." In this sense, all our societies are now in transition.

Speaking of the scourge of extreme nationalism, another manifestation of this phenomenon is its tendency to expand beyond the borders of one particular State to ostensibly protect "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 outside the kin-state. Various justifications are presented. Sometimes, there is a genuine concern about the situation of the kin-minority. In other instances, governments have sought to use nationalist rhetoric on kin-minorities to shore up their legitimacy in the face of economic difficulties or to advance their foreign policy goals by playing the kin-card.

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 with whom their population shares ethnic bonds in other countries. We must, however, adhere to the basic tenant 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, for example the talks between Romania and Ukraine and the discourse on national minority education in Central Asia.

The kin-state issue has long been the bread and butter of the HCNM, and I unfortunately expect it to crop up time and time again. What assistance a kin-state is allowed to offer, under international law, to its kin-minority needs to be spelled out in greater and more unambiguous detail. In order to clarify international standards and to offer advice to policy makers in OSCE participating States, the HCNM is preparing guidelines on this topic and intend to launch them in June 2008. I also call upon you, as parliamentarians, to assume more responsibility in

these matters by sounding the alarm bell whenever minority rights are in danger or the State extends its jurisdiction to nationals of other States.

Mr. Chairman,

We know from experience that the damage inflicted upon the fabric of societies by inter-ethnic conflict will haunt us for generations. Dealing with the consequences of these conflicts usually requires tremendous reconciliation efforts. I therefore promote the antithesis of nationalism in my conflict prevention work, that is, integration with respect for diversity within the State. As High Commissioner, I strive to identify the best ways to accommodate the legitimate concerns of majorities and minorities. I seek the means by which they can build a national society together in such a way that the State is the common home for all of them, where no one is treated as a second class citizen.

The exact nature of the measures that constitute integration will vary from society to society and a different balance will be appropriate in each case. Nonetheless, some form of integration, avoiding the extremes of forced assimilation on the one hand and separatism on the other, is likely to be the best way to promote social cohesion and reduce the risk of conflict. Directing words of hatred at strangers is much easier than designing innovative integration policies. The wrong choice could be costly. I hope that as politicians you will also raise your voice in favour of the right decision.

The HCNM is facilitating the integration of national minorities across the OSCE region in a number of practical ways. One of the key tools is, of course, language. While I insist that minorities have the right to maintain their national identity through mother-tongue teaching at primary and secondary school level, I also stress the role of the State language as a means of social integration. The proper acquisition of the State language by national minorities in the process of education is a prerequisite for career development and, more generally, success in life. In Georgia, for instance, the HCNM supports the activities of Language Houses that provide free State language lessons for national minority communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti. These Houses are open to people of all ages and professional backgrounds. Their financing has recently been taken over by the Georgian state, which is a good example of statesmanship and commitment. One cannot demand knowledge of the State language without investing in it.

Minority participation in public life is the bedrock of integration. Integration cannot succeed without the involvement of national minority communities. Governments have to ensure the

maximum opportunities to enable those affected by public decision-making to make their contribution. I cannot think of a better place to give minorities a genuine voice than a national legislature. During my visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, I welcomed their governments' encouraging steps to broaden minority representation in the parliament and suggested ways to improve their newly instituted systems. In the near future, I also intend to complete, together with ODIHR, the process of updating the "Guidelines to Assist National Minority Participation in the Electoral Processes," a booklet to assist governments in enhancing minority representation in decision-making. Given the Assembly's interest in the observation of elections, I believe the issue of minority participation in legislatures across the OSCE region may warrant your examination.

Access to public sector jobs is another aspect of minority participation. Any public service, be it the police or municipal authorities, has to reflect the ethnic make-up of the society in order to command the trust of all ethnic communities. I continue to monitor closely the issue of equitable representation of all communities in public services in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and proportional representation of national minorities in the state administration and in the judiciary in Croatia. In Ukraine's Crimea, I have sponsored a series of meetings between national minority communities and the authorities to discuss burning problems in inter-ethnic relations. Dialogue, consultation and involvement are vital for building a successful multi-ethnic state.

Education, along with language and public participation, is a key area where the integration of diverse ethnic communities can be promoted. Education is a vital element in the preservation and development of the identity of persons belonging to ethnic communities, both majorities and minorities. It is a core way of forming and transmitting identity within a cultural group, particularly in regard to language, history and culture. To this end, my office supports a range of projects in a number of participating States. They aim to introduce innovative teaching methods in schools and allow various languages to thrive side by side in the teaching process, rather than restricting them. I also believe that there should be places in the education system, at both secondary and higher level, to bring children from different backgrounds together to learn from each other, rather than separating them on the basis of one particular ethnic or linguistic identity. I have recently visited two universities that serve as meeting places for the students of various ethnic backgrounds, the South East European University in Tetovo and the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. We need more schools and universities of this kind.

Availability of minority-language broadcasts and audio-visual production is becoming a hot

topic too. Restrictions have been placed on the use of minority languages in a number of States, including in the private sphere where the regulators have limited scope for intervention. Public service and private broadcasting in the languages of the ethnic communities within a country can, in fact, promote loyalty to the state by enabling all citizens to enjoy the services provided by the national media. Thus, wide access to information can ensure that all ethnic communities have the opportunity to receive domestically produced information and news and, thereby, prevent a situation from developing in which some ethnic groups have no alternative but to resort to external media sources.

This year we are marking the fifth anniversary of the 2003 OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area. Our colleagues at the ODIHR's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues are preparing a review of the plan's implementation. As High Commissioner I will use my post to draw attention to the plight of Roma, and I appeal to you to adopt appropriate measures in your national legislations addressing the situation of Roma.

Mr. Chairman,

I mentioned Kosovo at the start of my speech. Last Sunday, the authorities in Kosovo declared independence. I will remind all of you here what I remind my interlocutors when visiting Pristina and Belgrade: I am status neutral. The work I have done, and will continue to do, relates to the well-being of Kosovo's communities and the needs to be undertaken regardless of status. Nonetheless, it is my hope that the atmosphere in Kosovo will stay calm. Violence, provocations and efforts to make any of Kosovo's communities feel unwelcome have no place.

Last month, I visited Kosovo for five days, spending most of my time with the non-Albanian communities. I discussed with Kosovo Serbs and Roma their concerns for the present situation and their hopes for the future. Trust in the institutions of Kosovo by Kosovo Serbs and Roma is low. I believe it is correct to say that their fear of the unknown is palpable. Regardless, many of them told me that despite the anxiety, they are committed to staying in Kosovo. There is a small, but growing sense of willingness amongst some Kosovo Serbs to engage Kosovo's institutions. Many, however, told me that if the international presence in their enclaves and local communities was abolished,, their communities would have to consider leaving their homes. This would be a terrible loss, not only for the individuals concerned, but for Kosovo's multi-ethnic fabric and for the credibility of the international community.

There are two key actors in Kosovo who can affect whether Kosovo remains a multi-ethnic society or not: the local authorities and the international community. I cannot speak on behalf of the local authorities, though the Prime Minister and President assured me that they are committed to making sure that the lives, livelihoods and homes of Kosovo Serbs and others are protected. They were resolute in their arguing that Kosovo must remain a place for all communities. I appreciate their statements to this regard. It will be essential that they follow this up with concrete action. In order to assist in securing that this happens, it is of fundamental importance that the international community remain fully engaged.

I believe that it is essential that the OSCE continues to play a role in monitoring the situation in Kosovo, as well as helping communities build relations, especially at the local level, so that they can promote dialogue in order to improve their overall situation.

In this sense, consideration must be given to how a lack of continuity of the OSCE can undermine the trust that many Kosovo Serbs in local communities have built with the local OSCE presence. A premature departure or downsizing of the OSCE presence, coupled with an inadequate build-up of a newly mandated international presence could contribute to a void of monitoring the situation. This could have a detrimental impact on whether people would stay or go. If Kosovo's Serb and smaller communities leave Kosovo in the coming period it will be a tragedy. If they leave, partially as a result of the international community's and the OSCE's failure to fully take account of the implications of failing to act or not acting in a timely fashion, it would be even more tragic. That is why it is essential that we find a way to prevent a void. It is not a question of politics, but a matter of whether people will stay in their homes or leave, or, more seriously, whether we are heading for a potential conflict or can strengthen our efforts of promoting peace.

Mr. Chairman,

Europe's complex ethnic heritage has left us with an immense wealth of linguistic and cultural diversity. It makes our cities and regions such rewarding places in which to live and work. Although ethnic diversity is a source of strength and an asset, it requires policies and tools that develop and nurture positive and respectful human environments, where different cultures and religions are appreciated and equal opportunities and rights are guaranteed for all.

Integration with respect for diversity is the answer to this challenge. It will create a society in which all, including members of all ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious groups, have a sense of belonging and sharing and of building a common identity in a common home. A 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 a mutually rewarding relationship with the Parliamentary Assembly in the years to come. I feel we have a lot to do together to ensure that tolerance and a real respect for being different – for being a minority – become deeply rooted across the OSCE. I count on your help and assure you that you can count on the HCNM.

Thank you.