



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

Address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
Parliamentary Committee on Inter-Community Relations

Skopje, 9 February 2012

Madam Chairperson,
Members of the Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking you, Madam Chairperson, for the invitation to address the Parliamentary Committee on Inter-Community Relations. I am particularly pleased to be with you here in the *Sobranie*, where effective and engaged political dialogue is essential for shaping the future of the country.

Madam Chairperson,
Members of the Committee,

Preserving good interethnic relations is the cornerstone of your work, as foreseen by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (or OFA). I cannot but highlight the importance of the role given to you by the Constitution. Your country has moved a long way since the OFA was signed back in 2001. Peace has been lastingly restored, past discrimination practices are being addressed and the participation of ethnic communities, in particular the Albanian community, has improved.

Yet, as we know, many challenges remain. These have to do with the consolidation of a young democracy that should fully embrace the country's multi-ethnic character. As the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I have a mandate to address developments that have the potential to cause interethnic tensions or political violence. In the same way that I have praised the achievements of the OFA, I have also warned against cementing the ethnic divide in numerous areas of life, not least in the field of education, which risks entrenching the existence of parallel societies. I shall come back to this.

In the last weeks, we have been reminded that interethnic and inter-religious tensions do not belong to the past. A series of incidents in the Struga area involving scenes that are offensive to all of us, and particularly targeting the Muslim community, set off attacks on religious monuments. Such incidents are prone to have destabilizing effects if they are not contained and handled with resolve by all. This should start with central and local authorities, who also have the responsibility to find effective policies to ensure mutual respect and cohesion of

society. A lot of media attention has been given to these incidents, sometimes even surprising the local population by the importance given to them. In a context of exacerbated sensitivities, exaggerated or selective media reports cannot but feed tensions.

One week ago, your Committee called an extraordinary session to discuss the effects of the latest incidents on interethnic and inter-religious relations in the country. Your prompt reaction and constructive discussions have signalled to all in the country and to the international community that this Committee is ready to embrace its role to preserve and consolidate mutual understanding. I commend you all for taking on the mission that you have been assigned by the Constitution. Your conclusions testify to your engagement. I understand them – and I encourage you all to consider them – as the beginning of a long-term and structural effort by your Committee to address the underlying causes of these tensions. If these underlying causes are not properly addressed, this may cast doubts on the lasting stability of the State.

Surely, the spotlight on the incidents in the Struga area should not distract us from addressing the more fundamental questions. What do these tensions tell us about interethnic relations in the country? What do these outbursts of grievance observed, not only in the last weeks but for some time, signal? Burning of flags, expressions of “hate speech”, attacks on religious monuments: all these incidents should lead us to question the existing policies and how these policies have shaped society in such a way that tensions resurface repeatedly.

How can the political forces of this country and other key actors work to tackle the root causes of such phenomena and not only focus on emergencies? This is a question that I would like to discuss with you today. I have also raised this question in my meetings with the Heads of the main political parties and religious communities, whom I met yesterday. I will also discuss it with President Gjorge Ivanov and with Prime Minister Gruevski later today.

Conflict prevention – which is my mandate – does not only focus on urgent situations. It is also concerned with the structural causes of conflicts that require a longer-term approach. There are many policy areas that need to be addressed. I am sure that you have heard about my engagement in the country through the media coverage that I have been given in my previous visits. Indeed, I have often been portrayed as a champion for integrated education. I have repeatedly – some might like to say stubbornly – called on the authorities to take

resolute and courageous measures to promote integrated education. This could prevent children of different ethnic backgrounds from growing up in mutual indifference or ignorance about each other. Separated schools are prone to strengthen stereotypes and prejudices. We have to create a common space for our youth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Measures need to be taken in a range of policy areas, from law enforcement, media and language to social integration. But, as I have highlighted here and elsewhere, education is highly relevant for preventing tensions from escalating. I say this based on experience. I have seen the increasing trends towards separation along ethnic lines in many countries. Especially in post-conflict societies, this can induce tensions and potentially threaten social cohesion. This is why I will relentlessly continue to engage the authorities in education reforms that are essential for the integration of society. Like you, I want the best for this country. In order to achieve that, all ethnic groups have to participate in building the society. Whether they are ethnic Albanians or Macedonians, Turks or Serbs, Bosniacs or Roma or Vlachs, they should all be able to contribute to, and have a stake in, the country's prosperous future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are many questions ahead of us and I look forward to listening to you and discussing the long-term challenges of ethnic diversity and how you intend to address them through policies.

Thank you for your attention.