



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

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**PREVENTING ETHNIC CONFLICT
IN EUROPE, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA:
OSCE HIGH COMMISSIONER ON
NATIONAL MINORITIES**

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), Ireland

[Check Against Delivery]

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to address you today. Foreign policy think tanks, such as the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) in Dublin, often play a decisive role in reshaping our conventional wisdom. The thoughtful research and recommendations provided by the IIEA and similar institutions offer us, the practitioners, new perspectives on developments that we may fail to notice in our daily professional lives. I therefore look forward to an intellectually stimulating exchange of views.

Ireland was an important actor in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and continues to play a vital role in what is now the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or the OSCE as it is commonly known. In particular, your country's advocacy of human rights is widely recognized and appreciated. It dates back to the Helsinki Declaration of 1975. The then Prime Minister of Ireland, Liam Cosgrave, stated in Helsinki in 1975 that “respect for such human rights is a necessary condition if friendly relations and co-operation between States are to be developed.” I cannot agree more.

I am particularly grateful for your country's political and financial support to my office and, not least, for Ireland's contribution to my work in the form of its human capital. In this regard, I am happy to be accompanied today by my colleague, Ambassador Brendan Moran, who is Director of my office in The Hague.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my remarks to you today, I will address the question of inter-ethnic relations. I will explore ways in which we can actually build societies that are at peace with themselves, with their neighbours and with the wider international community.

My use of the term “inter-ethnic relations” is deliberate. This reflects the essence of what I do as High Commissioner. My prime task is not the protection of minorities. I in fact deal with minority and majority issues with the ultimate purpose of preventing ethnic conflicts. It is notable that my title is High Commissioner on National

Minorities, not for – as is the case with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The focus of my attention, therefore, relates to the interface between ethnic groups, whether they are minorities or majorities.

The origins of the High Commissioner's post lie in the early 1990s. During those turbulent years, we witnessed violent conflicts that erupted within States over mistreatment, perceived or actual, of minority communities. This ushered in a new era in our understanding of conflict. The classic inter-State hostilities about such issues as territory and wealth have been replaced by a new type of conflict generated by tensions between the majority and minorities or between ethnic communities within a state. Neighbouring States are often drawn into such conflicts with a detrimental impact on international security.

This was the background for the decision by the OSCE in 1992 to create the position of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. OSCE participating States agreed that democracy, economic prosperity and good neighbourly relations also depend on respect for minority rights. Further, they decided to hold each other accountable for progress in this area and gave the HCNM a strong mandate to scrutinize their internal affairs as far as inter-ethnic relations are concerned.

My task is therefore twofold: to sound the alarm bell and to dampen the coals when violence seems imminent. The HCNM is a mechanism for addressing root causes of conflict and elaborating policies for integrating multi-ethnic societies with respect for the diversity of all ethnic groups. My conflict prevention work involves fact-finding in the field, providing legal and policy advice to governments, mediation and initiating tension-reducing projects.

Ladies and Gentleman,

This year the HCNM celebrates its 15th anniversary. We may be young but I will claim that we – should I say unfortunately – are quite experienced. You may wonder then whether the High Commissioner has been able to find the perfect recipe for healthy inter-ethnic relations after 15 years in business. It may be stretching the truth to say, yes. But we are certainly very familiar with the ingredients required.

The starting point for me is dealing with the majority-minority relationship within the State. It is the responsibility of each government to provide for the security and protection of everyone within its jurisdiction, including minorities. In this context, I believe that it is important to avoid adopting extreme approaches. The minority question should not be addressed through forced assimilation of minorities. It must be an all-European responsibility to preserve the cultural richness and diversity of our nations. Nor should minority problems be resolved through separation, exclusion or Apartheid, policies that may aggravate the situation or create new difficulties. Minority issues should actually be approached with the aspiration to integrate all groups harmoniously into the society on the basis of full respect for their cultural identity.

In addition to this guiding principle, there are several key components required for an integrative minority policy. I will call it my six-point plan.

One: opportunities must be created for minority participation in public life, at national and local level and in both executive and legislative bodies, especially with regard to issues that directly affect the daily lives of minorities. It is very important that minority MPs or local councillors genuinely represent their communities. Moves to handpick minority legislators for their obedience to the party line further alienate minority groups, making them either cynical and politically passive or sometimes even more confrontational.

Two: education plays a crucial role in multi-ethnic societies. It is one of the ways that national minorities can pass on their culture to future generations and, thus, preserve, promote and develop their minority characteristics. This is achieved through instruction in minority languages in secondary schools or, at the very minimum, the teaching of minority languages as a subject on the curriculum. At the same time, the education process needs to assist national minorities in attaining proficiency in the State language.

Managing languages in education is without doubt a prime challenge in most situations that I deal with. Some countries seek to reinforce the role of the majority

language through education because its development has been held back in the past. Sometimes, there is a temptation to do so at the expense of minority languages. I caution against such moves and, for example, advocate bilingual or multilingual education as a viable solution.

In addition to the question of language, careful consideration should be given to the place in school curricula of the history and culture of all ethnic communities within a State, not only that of the national majority. This inclusive approach has proved to be a powerful tool in promoting integration. I am happy to note that Ireland is a leader in this respect through its guidelines on '*Intercultural Education in the Primary School*' for teachers and school management.

Three: we cannot avoid the role of language in public life. This is a highly charged topic with a great deal of symbolism attached. It also has significant impact on the daily lives of minority communities. I call for a practical, cool-headed approach to linguistic management. International standards have in fact a lot to say on language use in multi-ethnic societies.

Minorities should have the right to write their names in whatever way they wish. They should be allowed to profess and practice their religion in the language of their choosing. This right applies to the internal activities of private enterprises, community organizations and NGOs too. Public institutions in regions where minorities are present in significant numbers and where the desire for it has been expressed also need to offer services in a plurality of languages. At the same time, minorities have a responsibility – and a vested interest – to integrate into the wider society through the acquisition of a proper knowledge of the State language.

Four: a recurrent issue in my work concerns broadcasting. It is closely linked to the issue of language. I promote balanced media policies and the adoption of laws that can meet the needs and interests of all sections of the population in multi-ethnic societies. Fortunately, technological advances can now help turn these policies into reality. Translation, post-synchronization and subtitling can all be used to facilitate the use of multiple languages in the field of media at little extra cost.

Five: the police-minority relationship is a prominent factor in inter-ethnic relations. The police operate at “street level” and have direct contact with all ethnic communities. They often represent the sole agency of the criminal justice system with which various ethnic communities ever come into contact. As a result, the police have the power to influence the attitudes and public perception of national minorities about the rule of law in a State and its capacity to act in just, legitimate, and accountable ways. We must strive for police services that are representative of the society that they serve and are responsive to the concerns and wishes of all ethnic communities. Such a police service has the potential to promote stability and serve as a conflict prevention and resolution mechanism within the State.

In 2001, the Garda established the Racial and Intercultural Office as part of its community relations operations. Its key function is “to advise, monitor and co-ordinate all policing activity around racial, ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.” Moreover, 500 ethnic liaison officers have been appointed to improve police-minority communication. Here, Ireland's experience can be of interest to other countries.

Within the OSCE we are happy to be able to draw on the expertise of one of Ireland's most experienced police officers, the OSCE's Senior Police Adviser, Commissioner Kevin Carty, who is promoting the principles of community policing throughout the OSCE area and who assisted my Office in the preparation of the Recommendations on Policing in Multi-ethnic Societies in 2006.

Ladies and Gentleman,

So far, I have spoken about what a State can do to promote harmony within its own borders. Not all, however, depends on the State where minorities reside. This brings me to the last component of my six-point plan, namely, national minority issues in relations between States.

There is a tendency in some States to believe that their nation consists not only of the majority ethnic group within their territory but also includes ethnic kin in other States. Indeed, Ireland as well as my home country of Norway have significant diasporas in other States. It is natural and legitimate that we want to preserve and strengthen our

traditional bonds with these communities. As Norway's Ambassador to the United States, I thoroughly enjoyed my task of promoting cultural ties with ethnic Norwegian nationals of the United States. The United States, in my opinion, also welcomes such efforts as a way of building bridges between countries.

However, the problem arises when such an interpretation of the notion of nation is used to claim an inherent and permanent interest in the situation of ethnic kin abroad for political ends. This argument was advanced in the recent war in the Caucasus.

As High Commissioner, I am concerned about such behaviour on the international arena. Unilateral steps to protect “ethnic brethren” abroad can jeopardize international relations. Under international law States are not permitted to intervene unilaterally or to exercise jurisdiction over citizens of another State without that State's consent.

In fact there are other ways for States to pursue legitimate interests with regard to national minorities abroad without straining inter-ethnic or bilateral relations. Your country's positive role in the Northern Ireland peace process immediately comes to mind.

Earlier this month, I launched a set of recommendations that provide representatives of States, national minorities and international organizations with advice on how to address questions concerning national minorities in the context of inter-State relations. I hope this guidance will bring us a step closer to improving dialogue between OSCE participating States on these sensitive issues.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The opening of Europe's borders and the great migration trends of recent years throughout Europe pose significant challenges to both new migrants themselves and to the receiving countries. It would be remarkable complacency to believe that inter-ethnic relations need our daily attention in the context of Eastern Europe or Central Asia only.

This is why I believe that many of the recommendations which the High Commissioner has issued over the years have relevance to the situation of new migrants. Bearing in mind my early warning and conflict prevention mandate, I am currently engaged in an examination of the potential role I may be able to play in dealing with this highly sensitive issue.

I am aware that over the last decade, Ireland has experienced a very significant increase in the number of non-nationals living in the country. According to your most recent census, they represent more than 10 per cent of the population. I welcome the positive efforts that the Irish Government have taken already to ensure that the rights of these new migrants are respected and also the excellent work that is being done by the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism to promote the rights of both new migrants and the traditional ethnic minorities in Ireland. This work deserves to be publicized internationally.

Dear Friends,

I hope my introduction has provided you with some understanding of what the HCNM does and what we stand for. I look forward to taking your questions.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage greater involvement of the Irish public in the OSCE. In fact, I see it as one of the aims of my visit here. I have just provided a number of examples of Irish “know-how” that could make a difference in the context of other countries. This is the beauty of the OSCE. Our organization is a unique platform for 56 countries to compare how similar challenges are tackled creatively by different members of our OSCE family, which spans more than 5,000 kilometres from Vladivostok to Vancouver. Allow me again to thank Ireland for being such a faithful supporter of our work. I look forward to further partnership with the Irish Government, academia and civil society.