



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

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WELCOMING REMARKS

by

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at the

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within the framework of the

Inter-State Dialogue

on

**Social Integration and National Minority Education
in Central Asia**

[Check Against Delivery]

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Mr. Minister, Mr. Governor, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

It gives me great pleasure to be with you in Samarkand today.

Central Asia has historically been a hub of learning and a magnet for some of the world's great scholars. Samarkand has played a special role in this history.

For me, this place symbolizes the quest for knowledge and progress. It is a city permeated with intellectual curiosity where astronomers, mathematicians and poets pursued the art of discovery. The names of Ulughbek, Al-Kashi and Omar Khayyám not only resonate in the hearts of people of Central Asia, they truly belong to all humanity.

The city is also known as a meeting place for peoples from different cultures and diverse beliefs as well as being a multilingual city. This openness to ideas and learning helped make Samarkand a world centre for scholarship. Thus, this city is uniquely placed for a discussion on how education can help us bring our multi-ethnic societies together.

In Tashkent in November 2006, the countries you represent took a pioneering step. You decided that the often thorny and contentious question of national minority education need not be a source of tension between your States. Instead, you opted for frank dialogue, exchange of best practice and mutual assistance.

Two and a half years on, the Inter-State Dialogue on Social Integration and National Minority Education is gaining momentum. We read on the newswires that Uzbekistan provided textbooks and literary works for school libraries in Tajikistan; that Tajikistan sent a team of in-service trainers to Tajik schools in South Kazakhstan Province; that Kazakhstan organized a conference for teachers in Kazakh-language schools of Central Asia and delegates from other States attended; that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concluded a bilateral education agreement that covers the practical issues of national minority education.

I would like to congratulate your Ministries on these first important steps. They demonstrate the value of helping each other and accommodating national minority needs in education. The four meetings that have so far been held in Astana, Bishkek, Tashkent and Ashgabad produced some good and constructive ideas, some of which I just mentioned that the countries

have already followed up. Some of the other ideas developed still await your attention and co-operation. Despite the progress achieved, I urge you to do more and to build on the spirit of collegiality that is emerging within the framework of the Dialogue.

As we have learned at the four Working Group meetings, the educational challenges faced by your countries are complex and real. They relate not only to national minorities. There are multifaceted, ongoing education reforms taking place in all five countries. It may seem like a daunting task at times to provide for meaningful national minority education and to support minority-language schools – *in addition* to addressing other needs. Yet, minority education has to be an *integral* part of your education systems.

As a result of past policies, national minorities often do not speak the State language. They are often unaware of the history, geography and culture of their host State. As the USSR disintegrated, the entire supply chain for minority-language schools broke down in 1992. Consequently, these schools face shortages in the supply of textbooks, teachers and in-service training.

Luckily, these Inter-State Dialogues make us all realize that these challenges, common to all five States, can be overcome. Furthermore, they can be tackled in ways that promote social integration and minority rights at the same time.

I am particularly encouraged by the fact that bilingual and multilingual education is taking root in Central Asia. The Inter-State Dialogue has contributed to this through the exchange of experiences and learning from other regions where multilingual education has enabled societies to grow together and has already benefited majorities and minorities alike. Kazakhstan is rolling out its trilingual programme and Kyrgyzstan is deliberating a state action plan on multilingualism. Other States are contemplating similar undertakings.

Bilingual or multilingual education has a number of important advantages. Firstly, it equips children with a range of enhanced skills: the development of a rich vocabulary, increased sensitivity to multiple meanings, a better understanding of complex language structures and the ability to understand abstract concepts. Bilingual or multilingual education also helps students to learn additional languages more easily. This capacity is of ever increasing importance in our age of globalization, with the expansion of the Internet and other modern

communication media. Language opens up new avenues and provides new opportunities by giving access to different cultures and countries.

Bilingual or multilingual education also has advantages beyond pure academic attainment. It is a means of fostering increased social interaction. It can build friendships irrespective of ethnicity.

I see the spread of multilingual education in Central Asia as a profoundly encouraging sign. It is a sign of a growing realization that national minorities need to master the State language. Without knowledge of the State language they are destined for a life on the periphery. Alienation and marginalization will have negative ramifications for the cohesion of your societies.

Multilingual education is also a sign of your countries' commitment to mother tongue education and the avoidance of forced assimilation. The preservation and development of minority identity is virtually impossible without instruction in minority languages in secondary schools or, at the very minimum, the teaching of minority languages as a subject on the curriculum.

Multilingual education proves that linguistic management in education is not a zero-sum game. By introducing multilingual education in Central Asia, you are proving that languages can thrive side by side and need not develop at the expense of each other. As High Commissioner on National Minorities, I wholeheartedly applaud and support your initiatives in this field.

All Inter-State Dialogue meetings convened have emphasized the role of the teacher. Indeed, quality education in general is impossible without well-trained teachers. To provide minority-language education you need good minority-language teachers. There are some worrying developments in the region in this respect. The teaching corps in minority-language schools is aging. Within 10 to 15 years minority-language instruction may simply cease to exist because of the lack of teachers. True, many minority students are given the opportunity to study their native language and literature with state support. But what about other subjects like mathematics, biology, chemistry or geography? In my view, the question of training teachers from minority-language schools in these subjects has been neglected.

We must pay more attention to this issue. Easing movement of education professionals across borders, simplifying mutual recognition of pedagogical qualifications, facilitating student exchanges and targeted scholarships for future teachers – all these measures would help. Equally important, however, are domestic opportunities for young minority school-leavers who want to become teachers of physics or astronomy in their own language.

Distance learning could be a decisive factor in tackling the deficit of teachers in the aforementioned subjects in national minority schools. Distance learning courses, developed jointly by the States of Central Asia and specifically tailored to the need of preparing future teachers, could be a powerful and, more importantly, economical means of meeting this challenge. Under such a system, for example, it would be possible for a young ethnic Uzbek in Tajikistan to receive a higher pedagogical education in Uzbekistan without leaving the country of residence and, later, to work as a minority-language teacher.

Earlier in the day our Uzbek hosts showed us their considerable achievements in the development of minority-language textbooks. I have also seen progress in other States throughout my travels in Central Asia. Nevertheless, many minority-language schools still lack textbooks and teaching materials. We should not lose sight of this problem. This is where the Inter-State Dialogue process can make a difference. Textbook author meetings, joint training programmes and exchanges of best practice would bring us a step closer to quality and accessible minority-language textbooks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The innovative ideas of the Inter-State Dialogue meetings have been put to paper. Some of them have been realized. Others are in the pipeline. It is however important that you – the States of Central Asia – take the lead in pushing forward these co-operative undertakings. I am therefore enthusiastic about the proposal of yesterday's preparatory expert meeting to set up an Inter-State Dialogue resource centre. This institution could become the driver of the co-operation process and instigate practical projects to assist your collaboration.

In closing, I would like to do away with a common misperception about national minorities. Some see them as an inevitable security threat for inter-State relations. This is wrong.

Minorities can serve as bridges between States; they can bring our countries closer together; they can foster good neighbourly relations. Your Inter-State Dialogue on Social Integration and National Minority Education in Central Asia is a vivid example of how national minority issues can be discussed and solved in a mutually respectful and beneficial way.

Keep up this good work and be assured that you can count on HCNM support for your efforts!

Thank you for your attention.