



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

OPENING ADDRESS

by
Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

**Meeting of the Working Group tasked to develop
the State Concept on Ethnic Policy and Consolidation
of the Kyrgyzstani Society**

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan – 30 March 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is my fourth visit to Kyrgyzstan since June 2010. Over the months I have been closely following the situation in order to be able to assist the authorities in their efforts to restore stability in Kyrgyzstan and create conditions necessary to prevent a repeat of events that happened last year, particularly through exploring how to improve the intercommunal dialogue in the country. I am therefore pleased about the development of the *Concept on Ethnic Policy and Consolidation of the Kyrgyzstani society*, and would like once again to thank President Otunbayeva for her willingness to actively address our shared concerns over the relations between the ethnic communities in Kyrgyzstan. Our gathering here today is part of this process. Let me at the outset thank the organizers of this working group meeting, particularly the Presidential administration's Department for Ethnic Relations and Religious Policy, for giving me the opportunity to address you today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the months following the events of last June, various theories and interpretations about the causes and triggers of the violence have emerged. Most of these assessments agree that a lack of consistent and genuinely inclusive policies on national minorities was one of the main underlying causes. Kyrgyzstan is currently facing a rise in nationalism, tensions between ethnic communities and further marginalization and isolation of national minorities. Thus, it is of utmost importance that adequate policies aimed at the consolidation of the society as a whole and at reassuring minorities of their position in a multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan should be developed and implemented. I see today's meeting as an encouraging sign of the President's commitment to such a policy.

This ethnic diversity should be one of the strengths of Kyrgyzstan. The variety of cultures, experiences, languages and skills of the different ethnic communities can be a strong stimulus for progress. It can contribute to the development of a pluralistic civil society, stimulate economic development and further democratization. This is only possible if all ethnicities and communities are included in the project to build a better society. Kyrgyzstan should learn to reap the benefits of its diversity.

The work undertaken to develop the Concept on Ethnic Policy and Consolidation of the Kyrgyzstani Society should send a strong signal to all the ethnic communities that the authorities in Bishkek will promote the interests of and respect the rights of all citizens, including the national minorities. It could and should become a key policy framework that will build on international standards and offer a roadmap for restoring, improving and maintaining sustainable ethnic relations in the country.

I am pleased that the Concept aims at “consolidation” of the Kyrgyzstani society. Focus should rightly be on the integration *of* Kyrgyz society rather than *into* it. The onus is not placed on national minorities to adapt and adjust to the majority. Instead, the beneficiary of these integration policies is the multi-ethnic State as a whole. Integration is a dynamic, continuous process based on partnership. It requires all members of society, both from the majority and the minority communities, to adapt when necessary, to establish effective channels of communication and to engage in social relations of benefit to all.

Integration includes recognition of and respect for diversity. Protection and promotion of minority rights, including cultural and identity rights, are preconditions for building peaceful and fair relations within plural societies. The guarantee and effective enjoyment of minority rights are vital for ensuring that minorities have a stake and an effective voice in the wider societies in which they live. This requires that minorities are not only given the opportunity to learn the official or State language and to participate in public life, but that they are able to fully utilize these opportunities. Furthermore, it requires that they, like all members of society, respect the rule of law and co-operate with the authorities and so become an integral part of the shared society.

Today we will be discussing a draft of the Concept. It still requires further expert input and consultations. I expect that the Concept and related policies will be in full compliance with international norms and standards and I believe that the HCNM recommendations on minority representation, education, languages and policing in multi-ethnic societies could provide additional guidance for your work. I recommend allocating sufficient time for continued consultations and exchanges of views in order to build trust in both the process and its outcome among all ethnic communities and different strata of Kyrgyzstani society. I urge you to engage representatives of national minorities even more extensively in this process

and to expand the dialogue with ethnic community leaders on the policies outlined in the Concept.

As the Concept will be submitted to the Parliament for adoption, it is essential to convince all Members of Parliament, representing all parties and communities, that this Concept contributes to improving the situation for all citizens of Kyrgyzstan; that the comprehensive reform agenda set out by the new authorities is not driven by a nationalist narrative, but seeks to build a cohesive and genuinely inclusive society, which will in turn guarantee sustainable peace and consistent democratic development.

I urge you to make this Concept viable and implementable. It should reflect reality and set achievable goals. Necessary human and financial resources need to be allocated for the implementation of policies outlined in the Concept. I am certain that the international community will be ready to contribute to the implementation of the Concept if they are convinced that it addresses fundamental issues pertaining to the cohesion and stability of Kyrgyzstan.

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I commend the Government for addressing the interethnic situation in Kyrgyzstan in such a bold and comprehensive way. This is important not only for the people of Kyrgyzstan but also for the people in your neighbouring countries. Tensions in majority-minority relations do not respect international borders. The legacy of national delimitation policies in the region has left ethnic communities in each of the Central Asian republics with ethnic kin in neighbouring States. This background explains the regional importance of the Concept. If passed and, most crucially, implemented, the Concept could help to maintain good and friendly relations between these States and contribute to regional stability and security as a whole.

I hope that your efforts will be fruitful and thus make an indispensable contribution to Kyrgyzstani society. I would like to reassure you of my support for the development of the Concept and confirm that I stand by you as you continue on the complex path towards interethnic accord in Kyrgyzstan.