



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

**MINORITY ISSUES AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE OSCE  
REGION.**

Address by  
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to the  
**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**[Check against delivery]**

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for coming today. It is a pleasure to be here in Washington when spring and summer really is arriving. While it is not my first visit to the United States, it is the first time I am here in my capacity as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

I will say a few words of introduction about my institution. The post of the High Commissioner was established in 1992 at the Helsinki summit of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. The presence of ethnic minorities within countries and across borders was very much on the international and European agenda, as bloody conflicts were breaking out or in danger of breaking out throughout the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia. The delegates in Helsinki agreed on the need for an impartial institution to engage in early warning and early action to prevent interethnic tensions from leading to conflict. The emphasis was on conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy and confidentiality, given the often sensitive nature of minority disputes; the aim was an institution that could act independently of all sides.

I draw your attention to the fact that I am the High Commissioner *on* –not *for*—National Minorities. This is not merely an issue of semantics. It reflects that my institution is not an ombudsperson for minorities but rather a conflict prevention instrument. I use methods of quiet diplomacy to provide recommendations and expertise to OSCE participating States, to facilitate dialogue and to raise awareness in the international community about issues or situations with conflict potential.

One could say that the institution is a child of the 1990s. But has this child of the 1990s outgrown its relevance, amidst the security challenges facing the OSCE region today?

National minority issues may not be in the daily headlines as they were in the 1990s, but they are still making headlines. We continue to see situations when the real or alleged failure to respect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities generates tensions between or within states. Minority issues are not the main causes of these conflicts: there is nothing inherent about diverse societies that make them more prone to conflict. But how States choose to handle diversity can determine how strong those societies are, how vulnerable to internal or external threats.

Successive High Commissioners have accumulated some experience through observing how States manage diversity. We know that protection and promotion of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities is an essential foundation for stable societies. The international legal framework for minority rights has only strengthened in last two decades, which helps my work considerably, even if there remain major gaps in implementation.

But minority rights are not enough to build an environment that is safe and secure for all members of a society. Good governance should involve pro-active measures to ensure that all members of society –minorities and majorities-- are able to participate in economic, political, cultural and social life. This means addressing structural and other barriers to participation. States also have a responsibility to foster a climate where diversity is respected, to encourage a common and inclusive civic identity and to facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding among communities.

Unfortunately I see too often in my travels in the OSCE region that not enough is being done in this regard. From some political leaders I hear statements such as “Everyone has equal opportunities here.” “Nobody is discriminated against.” I observe minimalistic approaches and a failure to take seriously the need to address challenges to integration. The short-sighted path of using identity politics to win votes is unfortunately often too tempting to refuse. Zero-sum rhetoric dominates, where an accommodation for minorities is seen as harming the majority; where minority demands are viewed as potentially dangerous and destabilizing. Minority representatives sometimes tell me that they feel under pressure to prove their loyalty to the States where they reside.

But if States fail to take seriously their responsibilities to build inclusive, just societies, we see the consequences. We see societies where national minorities do not trust that the authorities will protect their interests. They lack a sense of belonging to the society and divisions between communities can harden. Internal or external spoilers may find it easier to take advantage of such situations. Without good channels of dialogue with the authorities, minorities may be more likely to turn to so-called kin-States for support, which can generate wider tensions.

I am often asked what leverage I have to ensure that my recommendations are taken up. I cannot threaten punishments or dangle rewards. Much of what I do is call on the self-interest of States to implement their minority rights commitments; to practice good governance and create conditions for participation and inclusion. I try to share and pilot good practices from within the region: This might include the creation of institutional structures to address minority issues; the financing of classes for minorities to learn the State language; the development of integration strategies, or programmes in schools to foster interaction and multicultural education. We have more examples than ever before of what can work to promote inclusive societies characterized by good governance and rule of law. Of course, the solution must fit the context. There are no ready-made solutions.

A unified front within the international community is also critical. When possible I use opportunities afforded by the EU accession process to push for progress and commitments on minority issues. I work closely with other parts of OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the UN to send consistent messages. I rely on the support of the OSCE participating States. But we should be honest about the challenges of reaching political consensus in the OSCE region today, and admit that there is not necessarily a shared understanding of what is “rule of law” or “good governance”. It would certainly be very difficult to achieve today an agreement like that reached in Helsinki in 1992, to establish a High Commissioner on National Minorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Other issues are dominating the headlines in the OSCE region these days. Migration flows; violent extremism and terrorism; hybrid warfare. Speaking about the language rights of minorities or about the need to promote participation of minorities in the public service may seem pedestrian, even anachronistic, amidst the myriad security challenges in the region. But this is a narrow view. From the beginning the OSCE was based on a comprehensive approach to security. Anything that can make societies stronger and less divided, that can reduce marginalization and suspicion, that can defend States against unfounded accusations or harmful propaganda, is more important than ever from a broader security perspective.

In 1992, the year my mandate was agreed in Helsinki, large-scale riots broke out in Los Angeles over the acquittal of police officers charged with beating Rodney King. Grievances can build up and may need only a trigger to quickly ignite. Repairing the damage done to

communities and societies takes much more time. Preventing grievances and tensions from developing demands political will and vision and long-term approaches.

The delegates in Helsinki in 1992 had that vision. Yes, the world has arguably become more complicated since then, with developments that they may not have been able to imagine.

The mandate of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities—the child those delegates in Helsinki produced—remains an important instrument. It has grown up, has gained experience and knowledge, but is far from retirement.

However the effective implementation of my mandate requires the full support and commitment of all 57 participating States. It requires them to live up to the principles and obligations embodied in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the Copenhagen Document of 1990 and subsequent agreements. It requires early warning signals to be heeded and acted upon. None of this can be taken for granted. But it is in all of our interest to work toward it.

Thank you. I very much welcome your questions.