



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

address by
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to the
Panel discussion on
“Preventive Diplomacy in the Changing Landscape of Modern Conflicts:
The Role of Regional Organizations”

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Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the second edition of the panel discussion “Preventive Diplomacy in the Changing Landscape of Modern Conflicts: The Role of Regional Organizations”. I am delighted that this seems to be becoming a regular occurrence. Last year, following a meeting by Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GMAAC) in Uganda, to which I was invited and where I had the opportunity to exchange views with a number of representatives of African countries, I took the initiative to gather a number of regional organizations here in New York to discuss how to capitalize on our different roles and learn from our respective experiences in conflict prevention. The discussion brought up some interesting ideas, and generated new relations and contacts. UN Secretary-General Guterres, who has been at the forefront of what he calls “a surge in diplomacy”, personally encouraged me to continue on this path. This brings us here today.

There could not have been a more suitable week for this event to take place. Our discussion coincides with the final leg of the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which is reviewing a number of SDGs that are relevant to both my mandate as High Commissioner on National Minorities and to the discussion today. Strengthening partnerships for sustainable development, as foreseen by SDG 17, is indeed the end goal of this exchange. SDG 16 (*Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*) also resonates well with the work of my institution. I cannot help but notice that the term *inclusive* appears twice in the wording of SDG 16. This is where I would like to focus in my intervention.

Please allow me to make a side-note about my position, which was established more than 25 years ago by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), now the OSCE. My mandate is two-fold: first, to provide early warning and early action to prevent ethnic tensions from developing into conflict; second, to assist all of the 57 OSCE participating States in developing and implementing policies that facilitate the integration of diverse societies. At a time when the degree of diversity in our societies has dramatically increased, the promotion of policies that facilitate integration, through the inclusion of all

social groups with respect to their diversity, is in my experience and in the accumulated experience of my predecessors, one of the most effective tools to prevent conflicts. The current geo-political environment seems to further validate this principle.

Compared to the time in which my position was established, classic inter-State conflicts have almost disappeared. Instead, we now witness acute crises and hybrid conflicts characterized by internal strife, sometimes in the context of failed or dysfunctional States. Violent separatism is also on the rise, in some cases accompanied by quasi-military operations affecting the civilian population. Meanwhile, societies have become more diverse. Achieving a balance between protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States on the one hand and the right of self-determination of peoples, including minorities, on the other hand, appears increasingly difficult, especially for relatively young States that are still undergoing nation-building processes. The re-emergence of nationalism, populism and identity politics, along with an increase in hate crimes and hate speech, is worrying, and can pave the way to further marginalization and, in some cases, radicalization and extremism. Against this backdrop, the practice of politicizing minorities abroad, which are sometimes used by their so-called “kin-States” as proxies in local crises or conflicts, is on the rise.

The recipe to counter this situation, and to prevent further tensions potentially arising from it, is once again, *inclusive* policies that help to strengthen the cohesiveness of our diverse societies and, in turn, their resilience to conflicts and crises. Over the years, my office has developed a set of guidelines and recommendations on a number of policy areas - such as education, the use of language, rule of law, policing, media, participation and inter-State relations. These guidelines aim to help the 57 OSCE States to strengthen integration and the resilience of their societies. I will share some of the key concepts with you shortly, and I am looking forward, distinguished colleagues, to hearing your experiences in this area as well.

This year in particular we will focus on the role of youth and the importance of balanced policies as tools to promote the full participation of every member of society, including the younger generation, in public life. I am happy to see youth representatives from both the UN and the OSCE here today. Not only are you the most legitimate voices to express the needs and demands of young people, but in many cases you also provide innovative solutions.

Focusing on youth allows us to address the root causes of segregation and exclusion from the onset. In certain contexts, minority youth are victims of multiple and interlocking forms of discrimination preventing them from realizing their full potential and actively contributing to society at large. When this happens, all of us lose out in the long term. As with all under-represented groups, it is only when youth have a chance to make their voice heard that they will take ownership of decision-making processes and trust the institutions of the State. Research has also shown that the sense of hopelessness, frustration, and anger that often comes with perceptions of injustice is a factor that can lead to young people participating in political violence. Empowering youth is therefore essential for conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts.

In that sense, youth can hugely benefit from inclusive policies and programmes, and through them become agents of change. I would like to give you some examples of how my institution has supported youth and helped them grow from their role as beneficiaries of policies and programmes to being active members of their society and partners in conflict prevention efforts.

Education, including language education, is the starting point. Today, more than ever, we need to recognize the often neglected link between education and conflict prevention. Sustainable peace is built upon quality education for all, with no discrimination against – or self-exclusion by – segments of the population. In diverse societies, integrated and multilingual education, which my institution has been promoting and concretely supporting for decades, has borne promising results in terms of social cohesion. In most of the contexts in which I operate, we help policy-makers to achieve a balance between protecting the mother tongue of minorities and the need for minorities to be fluent in the State language(s), in order for them to be fully engaged in public life and realize their full potential in society. That is all the more important at this juncture in time, when in certain countries in the OSCE region new trends towards increased investment in teaching in the State language (which is undeniably important for integration), coupled with a reduced investment in multilingual education, which minority communities perceive as undermining their identities, is creating tensions. These tensions are often conveniently fuelled or exploited by external players, who may use minorities as proxies in the wider geopolitical game. That is why language and education are so central to the peace and security agenda, and warrant our attention. HCNM's *The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* and *The*

Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities place education and language on the conflict prevention agenda.

Change cannot happen overnight. However, achieving an inclusive education system that provides equal, high quality opportunities – irrespective of age, ethnicity or any kind of affiliation – should be a long-term strategic commitment for all of us.

In addition to this longer-term policy work that tackles the root causes of exclusion and conflict, my institution has also carried out targeted actions to support youth empowerment. We are, for example, particularly proud of having recently supported a youth-driven initiative aimed at ending ethnic segregation. Every two years, my institution, together with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presents an award - the so-called Max van der Stoel Award named after the first High Commissioner on National Minorities - to an individual, a group or an organization for their outstanding achievements in improving the position of national minorities. Last year, the prize went to an informal group of students from the town of Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina for their inspiring and courageous opposition to ethnic segregation in school. Throughout 2016, they vigorously campaigned against a decision by the education authorities to separate students based on ethno-centric curricula in line with the “two schools under one roof” model prevalent in the country. Practices such as this persistently reinforce ethnic divisions and are rooted in the structural legacies of the armed conflict of 1992 to 1995, which played out in that region, as well as the subsequent constitutional framework laid out in the Dayton Peace Agreement. While in the immediate post-war period specific measures were indeed a necessary compromise to avoid a relapse into conflict, 22 years later this is no longer warranted. The students of Jajce understood that and took action to reverse a situation that only serves to cement divisions in society. Instead of sitting idly on the side-lines, they advocated for – and managed to achieve – an approach that takes into account the differences and sensitivities surrounding the school curricula, while firmly rejecting classroom segregation. This youth-driven, grass-root level initiative – which used the well-fitting motto “segregation is a bad investment” – perfectly reflects the values of integration and inclusion which I advocate.

I have other examples. In Southern Serbia, an area with a sizable Albanian minority, we have promoted the creation and further development of “the Bujanovac department”; a branch of the Subotica Faculty of Economics of the University of Novi Sad. This is the first truly

multilingual and multi-ethnic higher-education institution in southern Serbia, where Albanian and Serbian students study together in a shared space. The significance of this is two-fold. Students acquire a number of new skills that can offer them increased opportunities for their future. Language, in particular an increased knowledge of the State language, is a key aspect. But, most importantly, they also get a chance to get to know each other, make friends and share their student life. In the micro-cosmos that is their university, they see that integration is possible. As one student we interview

put it: “We have not spent much time together before. You have to become friends if you want to live in harmony, and this university gives us that.”

When communities break isolationism, enjoy genuine interaction and the mutual benefits that this brings, participation by all - majority and minority groups alike - in a country's public life is more likely to happen. However, in the short term, positive actions to encourage the participation of youth can be useful tools. With a view to encouraging the participation of national minorities in political life in Georgia, since 2014 the HCNM has been supporting a project to create opportunities for dialogue between political parties and minority representatives. One main project component aims at fostering engagement of minority youth in politics through internships in political parties and capacity-building workshops. Such activities encouraged a number of young people to run in local elections. While they did not succeed to be elected, by just participating in the process, they showed that cross-ethnic affiliation based on a joint political agenda is possible, and hopefully inspired other youth, including minority youth, to follow the same path.

In my view, the best results are achieved this way: through the combination of short-term interventions that demonstrate the acceptability and effectiveness of the principles we stand for, together with an investment in long-term structural policies. The regional dimension provides an ideal framework in which such reforms can be discussed and promoted. It is, however, imperative that we make our common interest to preserve regional stability prevail over emerging trends that threaten to erode our long-established tools of co-operative security and good faith dialogue. In the face of the ever-changing landscape of modern conflicts, we owe this much to our future generations.