



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

The Hague, 16 June 2020

**Representatives of OSCE participating States
and Partners for Co-operation**

Vienna

Dear Ambassadors,

Across the OSCE region, and beyond, the question of how to deal with contentious symbols in public spaces has become an urgent issue.

We especially see heightened emotions being expressed in relation to statues and other monuments, which often represent historical figures. Statues in many OSCE participating States have either been toppled or vandalized. People are calling for the names of buildings and streets to be reviewed. Some authorities have already begun to take action in response to the public debate. How Governments deal with this issue has implications for the future stability of our diverse societies. This can be compounded by geopolitical divides, where different interpretations of history can hamper the integration of societies.

In my work, I have come across many situations throughout the OSCE region where opposing perceptions of history have led to tensions between different communities, and these tensions are frequently focused on how history is represented in our public spaces. As is our practice, my office has already mapped out some of the key issues and best practices based on our findings and expert analysis.

Since some OSCE participating States may be considering how to approach these matters right now, I would like to set out some broad considerations that may assist efforts to find suitable responses to the current events.

Ensuring that a shared history is represented in an inclusive manner is one of the ways we can prevent tensions within our increasingly diverse societies, as well as between States. Although exploring and analyzing historical facts is a task for professional historians, the impact of history and the way historical events are memorialized and represented is closely related to identity. Identity issues can be highly emotive, as we are witnessing now.

It may be useful to remember that a specific historical event may be seen as worthy of celebration by some and as traumatic by others. This is known as the “mirror of pain and pride”.

This means that States' efforts to resolve contestations around historical legacies should be conducted with respect for the way individuals relate themselves to history. In the current context: some people may celebrate the toppling of a statue while others are deeply unsettled by it. Solutions need to aim at accommodating the views of all communities affected.

We should also remember that memory plays many different roles. Erasing memory by, for example, removing statues, carries the risk of forgetting difficult pages of our past and the lessons learned since. In my research into this issue, I have come across many different successful attempts to find a compromise on how to treat such symbols. There are more options available than simply choosing between keeping or removing them. In some cases, such objects have been contextualized or repurposed in a way that acknowledges their historical and artistic value, while accommodating the views of different groups in society. They can also be moved to another location. Solutions can be creative.

In seeking to resolve these issues, the opportunity to promote inclusive symbols should be sought. *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, Guideline 50, touches on this issue. For instance, focusing on the commonalities of a shared past and reflecting the linguistic diversity of society are some of the ways in which States can promote inclusivity in public spaces:

“States should take due account of both historical and contemporary community relations. In this context, State policies should aim to foster intercultural links and mutual recognition and the accommodation of all groups in society.

“When naming or re-naming streets, buildings and other public spaces, special attention should be paid to the impact this might have on the integration of society. In this regard, it is essential that such decisions are made in an inclusive and participatory manner and that the outcome is not divisive among groups in society.”

With all issues that have the potential to divide societies, our recommendations are underpinned by the hope that through consultation we can allow all sides, including representatives of minority communities, to express their views and be listened to. This would enable us to find equitable solutions that ensure we can reflect everyone's historical memory in our shared public spaces. In this way, we can use such moments to bring people together by finding common narratives. To increase ownership of public spaces and what they represent. To ensure that the debate remains respectful to the identities and perceptions of all members of society.

The key to dealing with the past is an inclusive and transparent process of dialogue and consultations within societies, which will contribute to strengthen their cohesion and overcome divisions.

Yours sincerely,



Lamberto Zannier
High Commissioner on National Minorities