



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

OPENING REMARKS

by
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to the
Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
‘National Minorities, Bridge Building and Integration’

[Check against delivery]

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Ambassador Pohl,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to address you on behalf of the institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities at the opening of this third Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting. The focus of this meeting is on “National Minorities, Bridge Building and Integration”, following the innovative suggestion of the German Chairmanship-in-Office of the OSCE.

As many of you may already be aware, the mandate of the former High Commissioner, Astrid Thors, ended in August this year. The new High Commissioner has not yet been appointed and until this happens, as Director of the HCNM Institution, I have the privilege of being, the Officer in Charge during this interim period. It is in this capacity that I stand before you today.

This is a good moment to explain the role of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, or ‘HCNM’ as we often say. Especially, what it is and what it is not. The Institution was established over 20 years ago in the wake of outbreaks of inter-communal tension in Europe at the end of the Cold War and in particular the violent break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Both then and now, the participating States recognized the need for an independent institution that could fulfil a ‘trip wire function’ of ‘early warning and preventive diplomacy’: flagging and defusing any tensions involving national minorities in the OSCE area *before* they escalated out of control. An autonomous and flexible mechanism of this nature was considered paramount in the interest of preventing conflict and preserving and maintaining peace in the OSCE area. For this reason, the position of the High Commissioner on National Minorities belongs firmly in the politico-military dimension of the OSCE, even though our abilities relate to the human dimension.

The High Commissioner’s mandate is to provide ‘early warning’ and, where appropriate, take ‘early action’ at the first sign of tensions involving national minority issues, which in his or her judgment could potentially lead to conflict and threaten peace and stability in the OSCE area. The HCNM does so through quiet diplomacy, working discretely with all of the parties concerned.

Because of the nature of this mandate, the High Commissioner tends to speak out only when tensions threaten to spiral out of control. Yet, at the same time, every serving High Commissioner has taken a long-term view on conflict prevention. Working from the premise that ‘prevention is better than cure’, successive High Commissioners have equipped governments with the tools and expertise they need to build integrated, cohesive societies with full respect for diversity, which in turn prevents the build-up and escalation of tensions over minority issues. HCNM has done so by providing tailored, expert and impartial advice – both thematic and country-specific – on how to best manage various issues and tensions involving national minorities both within and between States with a view to alleviating grievances, building inter-communal trust, and strengthening societal cohesion.

The knowledge and tools the High Commissioners offer are based on more than twenty years of accumulated experience. They consist of Guidelines and Recommendations on specific minority issues for use by the participating States, such as the *1996 Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, the *1999 Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life*, the *2008 Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*, and the most recent *2012 Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. Furthermore, we continue to work developing new sets of guidelines, such as our recommendations on ‘Access to Justice and National Minorities’ which will be published in 2017.

Throughout the next two days you will hear examples of the applications of these guidelines – with or without direct references. We will also hear how education and integration policies, as well as inter-state co-operation tools and participation mechanisms can foster social cohesion and serve as bridges between communities.

All too often in the news today, we see the tragic human consequences of failed inter-communal relations. We, therefore, commend the German chairmanship of the OSCE for taking an innovative and positive stance on diversity and inter-communal relations by focussing on the *positive* aspects of – metaphorically speaking – “bridge building”, with and through national minorities.

Former High Commissioner on National Minorities Astrid Thors was honoured to be invited by the German Chairmanship of the OSCE to co-ordinate a research project on the abilities of minority-majority communities to build bridges and provide opportunities for reconciliation within societies and between states. The concept of using minority-majority relations as “bridge builders” takes its point of departure in the opportunities which lie in the variety of connections that can be built upon diverse societies. Such connections can be – and are being – used positively to promote peace, security and economic development both within and between States. The task posed by the “bridge building” concept is to look closer into these opportunities and identify those policies and mechanisms which can transform the opportunities into reality. The project is a joint undertaking of the European Centre for Minority Issues, the European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano and Associate Professor Nina Bagdasarova. Members of the research team, Professor Jens Woelk from Eurac, Dr. Zora Popova from ECMI and Dr. Nina Bagdasarova are here today to present examples of their preliminary results at the beginning of each working session. Further findings will be presented on 8 December at the Ministerial Conference, where I hope to see you all again.

This endeavour is still very much a ‘work in progress’. Therefore in this meeting the project genuinely seeks input and positive examples of successful “bridge building” with and between communities from your own regions. Indeed, we ask each and every one of you to see the discussions at this SHDIM as an integral part of the research proceedings and an opportunity to feed into the ongoing research conducted by our partners.

In addition to the contribution of our research partners to today’s event, I am also very much looking forward to the presentations by our distinguished introducers who will be sharing examples of good practices from their own regions. Among them is this year’s winner of the Max van der Stoep Award - the Association of Historical Research and Dialogue from Cyprus, which demonstrates the remarkable case of what *can* happen when committed and courageous individuals from different communities join forces for a common goal. In this case, the intention was to use history teaching from multiple perspectives as a tool for reconciliation in Cyprus and to foster a mutual understanding of a shared, yet divisive, history. In other words, bridging the existing divide through historical understanding and critical thinking. I hope that their uplifting example will serve as a particular inspiration to all of us. More generally, as indicated in this SHDM’s Annotated Agenda, throughout these one-and-a-half days we will also explore legal mechanisms for bridge-building across States;

various opportunities which exist to promote the bridge-building role of national minority issues across various policy areas; as well as ways in which the civil society can be empowered to build bridges on the grassroots level.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear participants,

I look forward to our constructive discussions on these topics over the next two days, as well as to hearing how the HCNM as an institution can be of further assistance in this field.

Thank you for your attention, and also for your willingness to debate these important issues.