



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

OPENING ADDRESS

by

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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

Opening Session

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

[Check against delivery]

Warsaw, Poland – 11 September 2017

Dear Deputy Minister [of Foreign Affairs of Austria Michael] Linhart,
[OSCE] Secretary General] Thomas [Greminger],
Chairperson [OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Director Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir],
[OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media] Harlem [Désir],
Excellences,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to address this important meeting for the first time in my new capacity as High Commissioner on National Minorities. I relish the opportunities which my new position affords, and I look forward to best serving the Institution's mandate.

The themes discussed at the HDIM are fundamental to the HCNM mandate.

The HCNM was established almost 25 years ago as a conflict prevention mechanism, mandated to detect tensions related to ethnic relations that could potentially lead to conflict and to provide early warning to the wider OSCE. Our experience has shown that the protection of human rights, and minority rights in particular, is central to conflict prevention. This understanding is well grounded in the OSCE comprehensive approach to security.

Since its establishment, the focus of the HCNM has gradually moved towards addressing the structural causes of conflict. My predecessors and the teams assisting them have gathered significant expertise on how sound policies and legislation can help address the needs of minorities, defuse tensions and prevent tensions from escalating into full-blown conflicts. Part of this work has been distilled into a series of thematic Recommendations and Guidelines.

Over the years, the main thread of the HCNM's work has become the support of policies helping the integration of diverse societies, or, in other words, how diversity can be successfully managed in today's societies. Integration of diverse societies is viewed by the Institution as a key to facilitating security and stability, both within and among participating States. After all, all protracted conflicts in the OSCE area have at their origin a failure of integration, for various reasons. This shows why a successful integration policy is a forceful conflict prevention tool.

The emphasis on integration derives from the understanding that simply accommodating minority culture, identity and political interests may not be sufficient to build sustainable and lasting peace. Nor is the prospect of assimilating minorities into society sufficient to advance and preserve peace, stability and joint prosperity in our societies. As a result, successive High Commissioners have recommended that States adopt measures and implement policies aimed at promoting the integration and cohesion of diverse societies.

The case for integration and the sound management of diversity could not be more topical today. And the mandate of the HCNM is thus, I believe, more relevant than ever. The challenges we are currently, collectively facing highlight both the need and urgency for sustainable and sustained integration processes within our societies, across the whole OSCE region.

Challenges related to migration, which are dominating today's political and policy agenda, are a case in point. The link between migrations and the HCNM mandate, while perhaps not obvious, is manifold: migratory movements may often result in increasing pressure on existing minorities in countries of transit or destination; also, newcomers increase the demand for integration and diversity management, calling on all of us to shape and provide responses in full compliance with our human dimension commitments, which could defuse rather than incite tensions.

I am afraid that on this point the overall outlook is not very positive. Despite the OSCE's multiple and articulated commitments in this field, aggressive nationalism and divisive politics of identity seem to be on the rise in many countries. Fear-mongering and targeting "otherness" are used as conventional tools in the political arena. Hateful rhetoric stigmatizes certain communities, deepens divisions, and thus polarizes societies. This topic, and conversely, the merits of policies supporting the integration of diverse societies, will be dealt with in detail during working session 10, co-organized and led by my team and ODIHR.

I would also like to emphasize that responses to security threats and other challenges should not lead to worsening relations among communities and to increasing tensions within societies and between participating States. Stigmatizing and isolating specific communities, and securitizing minority issues, are a recipe to widen the distance between ethnic groups and make solutions more difficult to achieve. Ultimately, this will make a society fragile and insecure, rather than more secure. On the contrary, policies which are devised to actively involve members of minorities have a greater chance to succeed and be sustainable.

This applies also to policies aimed at countering violent extremism. Policies that single out religious or ethnic communities can have a detrimental effect on the relationship between State and society due to lack of trust in the State. A discourse portraying minorities as a security threat – and particularly as a group susceptible to violent extremist ideology – risks giving rise to nationalist sentiments among majority communities and contributes to existing inter-ethnic tensions. The pressure upon national minorities under the pretext of fighting against violent extremism could be counter-productive and actually fuel the phenomenon rather than prevent it.

The agenda for discussions over the next few days embraces a full range of topics under the human dimension umbrella. Several of these topics – from fundamental freedoms to equal participation in political and public life, and to non-discrimination –illuminate various aspects of the integration discourse that my Institution stands for. My team and I look forward to those discussions and to reflecting on their outcome in our work, and I would like to thank you all in advance for your meaningful inputs over the next few days.

A topic of crucial relevance that the HCNM has recently focused on is “access to justice”. A specific set of Recommendations on “Access to Justice and National Minorities” has been developed and finalized, with the concurrence of relevant experts and the input of OSCE Institutions, and will be presented, in co-ordination with the Chairmanship-in-Office, later this autumn. I trust that as with previous sets of HCNM Recommendations and Guidelines, this will be a valuable tool in strengthening cohesion and justice within societies across the OSCE.

I would like to conclude my remarks by thanking you all for your support and I look forward to working closely with you.

Thank you for your attention.