



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

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
**Second Regional Conference on Co-operation with
National Minorities in South-eastern Europe**
“Fostering Economic Development in Diverse Societies across South-eastern Europe”

[Check against delivery]

Podgorica, Montenegro – 21 November 2025

Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,

It is my distinct pleasure to join His Excellency Minister Gjeka in welcoming you all to this event today.

This is the second regional thematic conference on co-operation with national minorities in South-eastern Europe that my office has organized with our partners in the region.

The first conference took place in Sarajevo last year, and I am pleased to co-organize this second conference together with our Montenegrin partner, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights. I would like to thank the Minister and his colleagues for their co-operation and support. My starting point for this meeting was our long-standing conviction that the effective integration of our diverse societies benefits everyone, both minority groups and larger society. My predecessors set that out in the 2012 *Ljubljana Guidelines on the Integration of Diverse Societies* and my office has built on it since then.

Furthermore, I am convinced that all States gain from the greater involvement of national minorities in social and economic life, as we explained our 2023 *Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Social and Economic Life*.

At the same time, societies across South-eastern Europe – and beyond – are looking for new drivers for economic growth.

For this reason, today's topic – the link between diversity and economic development in the Western Balkans – merits our attention. Your presence and engagement are a further indication of the potential there is in working on this.

It is not a topic that has played a prominent role in the context of country-specific or regional strategies, whether aiming to boost economic growth, attract foreign investments or create jobs. However, there is real scope to identify new drivers for growth across the region, where societies are hugely diverse and multi-ethnic, and where this diversity is not limited by borders and boundaries.

Besides economic growth, the benefits of investing in the participation of national minorities in social and economic life are equally significant for integration processes. Economic growth and improving livelihoods are a priority for everyone and have the potential to bring people with different linguistic, ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds together.

As people collaborate and build common purpose – in the workplace, in community businesses and in the networks of trade and service that connect us – this creates shared experiences that strengthen understanding and co-operation. This has the potential to advance social cohesion in diverse societies and also regionally across borders and boundaries.

Indeed, there is an obligation to guarantee economic opportunities for everyone in a society. Marginalizing national minorities, or leaving them economically disadvantaged, tends to bring direct and indirect costs to a society as a result of reduced contributions to the common good and the increased costs associated with putting policies in place to address the numerous consequences of exclusion. It also risks fuelling divisions and tensions within a society.

For all these reasons, there is an opportunity, and a need, for us to create ways to utilize and leverage this rich diversity to foster economic growth and advance social cohesion.

Innovative and creative thinking is key here. Some good practices and successful initiatives that will be presented today will hopefully act as inspiration, and I encourage you to be bold and courageous in your discussions.

Furthermore, co-operation between the private and public sectors, potentially with support from international development partners, is crucial to bring ideas to life and create an enabling environment in which they can thrive.

I am pleased that we have four Ministers present here today, which demonstrates the interest from your respective authorities in this topic.

But ideas and initiatives alone are not enough. We need to address the way diversity and ethnic communities are presented in narratives and public discourses. Too often, diversity, minorities and multi-ethnicity are seen as sources of tension and instability.

By focusing on diversity and economic growth, we can demonstrate that diversity can bring real, tangible benefits to all citizens. This is possible, even if it will not be easy or quick. Just like building long-term economic growth, it requires sustained effort.

I therefore hope that our exercise today will have a positive impact, and that it will not be a one-off event. To this end, my office will be drawing up a set of conclusions and recommendations based on today's discussions, which we hope will encourage continued discussions and further events around this topic – as well as concrete projects and initiatives on the ground. I look forward to continuing to engage with you on these issues in the future.

Finally, let me say a few words of thanks. Most importantly, I would like to thank all of you for being generous with your time and being here today with us – particularly the Ministers, as we all know how busy you are.

I would like to thank the technical experts – many of whom have travelled here from different parts of the region. I am very grateful to all for your time, interest, and intellectual and professional contribution to this exciting exercise.

Special thanks go to our Expert Facilitator, Nenad Djurdjevic, for his invaluable support in preparing the technical side of the programme and for facilitating the technical panel discussions later today.

I would also like to thank the Montenegrin authorities and particularly the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights for convening this event and for their co-operation with us and organizational support.

I wish us all an interesting and productive day.

Thank you.