



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

Address by  
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to the conference

**Dealing with the trauma of an undigested past**

**[Check against delivery]**

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Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania for inviting me to join you here today. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss an important topic that is increasingly becoming part of my daily work.

Let me briefly introduce the function of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. My function was established over 26 years ago, with a two-fold mandate. Firstly, the High Commissioner is required to provide early warning at the first sign of imminent conflict in the OSCE area arising from tensions involving national minorities. Secondly, the High Commissioner assists OSCE countries to develop and implement policies that support the integration of diverse societies, which is key to conflict prevention. Over the years, the successive High Commissioners have identified several policy areas that have proved to be particularly sensitive, if not divisive, in diverse societies. Based on this experience, the office has developed concrete policy advice on a number of thematic topics that can help minimize the potential for such issues to drive or reinforce wedges between communities or even between States. This advice – crystallized in our published Guidelines and Recommendations – proposes long-term solutions to structural imbalances, with the ultimate objective of fostering social integration and cohesion.

This is very much needed in today's polarized geopolitical landscape. While conflicts between States over territory or resources have become the exception rather than the rule in the last few decades, the new crises and conflicts increasingly feed on ethnic divisions, often compounded by political or religious differences, or economic disparities. All over the OSCE space, societies have become more diverse. Achieving a balance between protecting States' sovereignty and territorial integrity, on the one hand, and the right of self-determination of peoples, on the other hand, appears increasingly difficult. This is especially true for those relatively young States that are still undergoing nation-building processes. These frequently face the challenge of reconciling ongoing efforts to unify and homogenize their diverse societies with the need to protect the multiple identities that have historically coexisted there. Immigration further diversifies the composition of society, posing specific additional challenges.

Meanwhile, the spread of populism and identity politics worldwide is an additional complicating factor. Minority rights and identities are presented as disintegrating elements, and minorities – or, in general, whoever is “other” – are described as a security problem. Along with the increasing use of inflammatory language in mainstream political discourse and exacerbated by the reach of modern technology, hate speech and hate crimes are on the rise. These dynamics can pave the way to further marginalization and, in some cases, radicalization and extremism.

In addition to these internal dynamics, we witness the emergence of other, equally concerning, external dynamics. For example, the practice of politicizing minorities abroad, who are sometimes used by their so-called “kin”-States as proxies in local crises, is a frequent occurrence, with the potential to affect bilateral relations.

In this context, minority-related issues are not only to be read through the lens of human rights protection but are also extremely relevant to the international peace and security agenda. Policies on language, education, participation – to name but a few thematic fields in which my office regularly engages – can provide the space to unite – or, if not properly designed and implemented, divide – societies. And even when minority issues are not a direct cause of conflicts, how States choose to handle diversity can determine how strong and resilient those societies are to internal or external threats.

The security lens is also the lens through which I look at the issues at hand. As I travel and engage with interlocutors in the OSCE area in my capacity as High Commissioner on National Minorities, I observe how historical memory, by which I mean the way a community chooses to remember its past, is not only an extremely sensitive issue, but also one with real security implications. This is why I am increasingly paying attention to this topic.

We can all agree that collective memory is a constituent element on which identity is built. The glorious and the traumatic past can bond members of a group or a nation together by evoking collective pride or shared grievance. Sometimes, collective pride or shared grievance are just two sides of the same coin. This is referred to as the “mirror of pride and pain”, in which the pride of one group is the pain of another.

In the specific case of trauma, the focus of collective memory is placed on a disruptive historical event, such as war, genocide, loss of territory or displacement. The emotions around that dramatic event are transmitted down the generations through collective rituals and symbols, and are kept alive even when the persons involved in the process have not experienced that disruptive event personally. And yet, that trauma is still very powerful. Over time, collective trauma may actually become the epicentre of group identity.

That is when the present cannot escape the past. Through these shared narratives that are perpetuated over time, groups and nations often establish a causal link between an event in their history on the one hand, and their understanding of their present state and their relation to their environment, on the other hand. These narratives identify roles such as perpetrators and victims, inform readings of and assign responsibilities for current dynamics, and provide moral justification for action. So we can say that groups remember and commemorate events in their histories, including traumatic events, through the prism of their present experience. It is in the present that their competing recollections and interpretations of past events also play out. However, fighting the battles of today through the tragedies of the past can be a very dangerous game.

In quite a few of the countries I have visited, political disputes over what to remember and what to forget overlap with ethnic divisions within society. It is an old adage that history is written by the victor, but in multi-ethnic States it is also too often the case that history is written by the majority. Sometimes this can undermine integration, as politicians pursue ethno-centric nation-building processes that are built on specific historical memories that emphasize and enlarge the differences and distance between groups. This weakens the cohesion of society and makes it vulnerable to interethnic tensions.

The scope of the issue also often extends beyond a country's physical borders. When the official historical narratives of different countries are diametrically opposed, this can aggravate disputes between them. People genuinely feel that their nationhood is being threatened if their historical achievements are denied by other States or if suffering inflicted upon them is not acknowledged, and can therefore respond quite strongly. In a geopolitically tense environment, countries may feel threatened by the narratives in other countries. This can lead to acrimonious exchanges and deteriorating bilateral relations, which is sometimes referred to as "memory wars". Of course, we have to consider the wider context in which these disputes take place, and

that there may be actual threats in the military, political and economic fields. In the current polarized environment that I was describing earlier, the danger of such divisions over the interpretation of history cannot be underestimated.

In this context, 2020 could potentially be a very critical year. As key anniversaries of our recent history approach, it is important not to let geopolitics prevail.

So how do we minimize this risk? How do we move past collective trauma and use historical memory to build bridges, rather than to reinforce divisions? It would be easy for me to say “focus on the future”. However, societies or communities will not be able to let go of a trauma by an act of active forgetting. Policies that seek to suppress all memory of traumatic events or to deny the traumatized the knowledge of what happened in the first place will leave society paralyzed by its inability to process its past.

Acknowledging and recognizing the suffering experienced by a group or a nation through, for example, public apologies are sometimes the only possible starting point. A couple of weeks ago, I heard the story of a minority representative whose family, like many more in the same community, had been displaced from the country in which they resided and lost their home following Second World War. Decades later, the trauma of this loss is still vivid. My interlocutor is now an elected official in the country to which he had fled. As part of his political programme, he is asking for a symbolic one dollar as a sign of acknowledgment of the suffering inflicted upon his community. He does not want his family home back: he just wants a symbolic one-dollar bill. However, this may never happen, as the State’s narrative around the historical events leading to the expulsion of his community is very different from his own reading.

With acknowledgment and recognition, the children of those who have experienced traumatic events may not feel that they need to take action to redress historical wrongs in the name of their parents. Sometimes, however, acknowledgment and recognition may not be enough. Establishing the truth and seeking redress in some cases is the only way for a community to move on. Transitional justice mechanisms, for example, can expose evidence about terrible crimes. Without such evidence, social, ethnic, or political groups involved in violence may be less inclined to accept responsibility for them. Most importantly, these mechanisms can help survivors, but also the successors of survivors, regain a sense of dignity and self-worth. As such, they can contribute to recovery and reconciliation, both at the individual and societal

level. But for these mechanisms to yield sustainable results, a bottom-up approach is preferable. In order for them to really contribute to peace, it is also important that they are conceived with the intention of balancing the needs of individuals to seek redress with the society's long-term interest to ensure stability. It is also important that they are seen beyond their symbolic value. A couple of months ago, I was talking to an official representative of an indigenous community that has recently obtained the establishment of a truth commission for past wrongdoings against the community. Talking about his expectations from the truth commission, he was adamant that such mechanisms would fulfil their role only if they are given appropriate budget, resources and public profile. The latter is particularly important, as it has the ability to influence public opinion, which, in this case, still displays instances of discrimination against the community. Changing public opinion would therefore contribute to reconciliation in a more sustainable manner.

Acknowledgment, public apologies and reparations are valuable in that they can provide some kind of historical closure, which can serve as a symbolic departure from the past and help construct a more inclusive memory about a society's shared history.

But how do we foster inclusive memories and narratives? How do we ensure that historical memory is not used to divide societies? Observing how divisive this issue can be, I have recently been wondering what specific advice I could offer to participating States to minimize the potential for conflict in a way that makes it acceptable and worthwhile. As such, I have been relying on a group of experts in the field – some of whom are here today – who have helped me brainstorm on this issue. Still, I have no perfect recipes, nor universal solutions, but just some preliminary thoughts. I think we should work on three levels:

The first is *history education*, which determines what future generations will learn about their past. Both what we teach and how we teach it should reflect the diversity of society and acknowledge the presence of multiple and sometimes contrasting perspectives and narratives. History education content should be flexible, and focus on developing students' critical, historical and inquisitive thinking skills so they can make well-informed judgements about historical facts.

The second level pertains to *public spaces*, where States make visible whom and what should be remembered. I think it is important that the public representation of historical memory –

such as through monuments, symbols or topographic – promotes a sense of belonging for as wide a spectrum of the population as possible, including national minorities. Inclusiveness should be a driving principle in decision-making processes about symbols in public spaces, and be visible in their outcome. In the OSCE area, I have come across various examples of monuments, statues, street names and other manifestations that are a source of contestation between communities. 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. While every case is different, I found this a very effective way to address conflicting historical narratives and disagreements over public representations of history.

We should also pay attention to the *legal dimension*, through which States sometimes regulate historical memory and criminalize certain interpretations of historical events. States operate with a wide margin of appreciation for determining historical narratives. This should be balanced against allowing, if not encouraging, critical discussion of the past, including the protection of free speech, and in particular safeguarding academic freedoms.

While inclusiveness is a fundamental principle, it will not work if only applied to how historical memory is represented and regulated. Preventing conflicts and overcoming trauma requires looking at society as a whole. Therefore, as the experience of my office has shown, efforts in the field of historical memory should be accompanied by policies that foster inclusiveness and integration in a wide range of fields, including education, language, access to justice, participation in public life and in the police, and representation in the media. A holistic approach is what really makes a society cohesive and resilient to crisis and conflict.

Thank you for giving me the space to share these reflections and I look forward to hearing your perspectives on this important topic.

Thank you very much.