



## High Commissioner on National Minorities

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

### **Forum on Conflict Prevention Bonn 16/6/97**

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent years conflict prevention has acquired the status of 'hot issue' both in the academic world and in government circles. We have come to realize that efforts at preventing conflicts are far more cost effective than measures to bring erupted conflicts to an end. Not only in financial terms, but above all in human suffering. I am grateful to have the opportunity today, here at Keele University, to share with you some of my experiences with conflict.

However different the views about European Integration might be, there seems to be a broad consensus amongst an overwhelming majority of European States about one principle: the need to build an undivided, democratic Europe, where values such as the rule of law, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, pluriform society and market economy, are shared by all. These values form the core of the commitments all 54 Participating States of the OSCE have entered into, thus putting the OSCE in a good position to help maintain these values or to help countries reach the requires level of these values.

It is in this context that you should see my role as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Essentially, my role is to promote measures by governments and the international community, which help ensure that minority questions are no longer a potential source of conflict and thus contribute to making peace and stability extend to and endure throughout in all parts of Europe.

Since I became High Commissioner over four years ago, I have been involved in minority questions in the following OSCE countries, in alphabetical order: Albania, Croatia, Estonia, the FYR of Macedonia, Hungary, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine.

The intensity with which I follow the different situations varies with time. For a certain period of time I might devote more attention to one or a number of these countries, because it is my view that certain questions are particularly acute, but this does not imply that I consider the other situations as less important or resolved. On the contrary, it is my firm belief that all these countries face especially difficult and complicated minority issues, which need continued attention by the international community. As a community of values, the OSCE has the obligation to offer assistance to all of its members who are in the process of applying the full scope of these common values to their societies, which often are going through a difficult period of transformation. It goes without saying that such a transformation is not completed over night.

Nor, for that matter, are there quick fixes or easy solutions for related minority questions. In other words, even if on occasion a number of burning issues might find a solution, the fundamental problems often remain and need prolonged attention. The High Commissioner will therefore have to continue his activities in the situations in which he is involved.

When studying minority issues, one cannot fail to note the intense interest with which the kin state, or "mère-patrie", almost invariably follows the fate of the related minority on the other side of the border. This often leads to an intensive dialogue between the kin state and the state where the minority lives about the duty of a state to respect and foster the identity of a minority on the one hand and the duty of persons belonging to a national minority to be loyal to the state on the other. Such a dialogue is sometimes not free of tensions, but can also bring positive results. Perhaps you will allow me to mention but one example. In the Preamble of the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia, these two countries have laid down a number of important principles regarding the position of minorities.

They agree that they, and I quote, " feel responsibility for granting protection to and promoting preservation and deepening of the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of the minorities living within their respective territories", and they recognize that "persons belonging to national minorities form an integral part of the society and the State of the Contracting Party on whose territory they live", unquote. I attach great importance to this because it stresses the duty of the State to protect and even to promote the preservation and the deepening of the identity of the minority, while at the same time rejecting the notion that the minority can only maintain its identity by

isolating itself as much as possible from the society surrounding it. It is my firm belief that harmonious inter-ethnic relations can develop only on this basis. The fact that this is now laid down in a Treaty between two States is a positive development.

Fortunately, I can report signs of progress in several other situations I am following. Unfortunately, there are also situations where progress is not what I would hope. In these cases, excessive nationalism remains the main obstacle standing in the way of stable inter-ethnic relations.

Mr Chairman,

With your permission, I would now like to turn to a number of activities which are a result of the analysis of minority issues, which I have just made.

Perhaps the most important conclusion from my activities in conflict prevention is that we should devote more attention to the root-causes of ethnic tensions. Conflicts between different groups are often the result of difficulties which, in essence, are not of an inter-ethnic nature. Sometimes a certain population group experiences particular economic or social hardship, which finds its origin in for instance a political or economic transformation process. Due to their specific situation, it is possible, in certain cases, that minorities have more to suffer from hardship than the majority population. Even if this is not intentional, it can easily be perceived as the result of discrimination.

Another example is that sometimes minorities feel unhappy because they do not get what they feel they need in the cultural or educational fields. Often, this is not the result of unwillingness of the Government concerned: it is more a question of the Government having little money to spend in these fields, for majority and minorities alike. A final example are the practical difficulties persons belonging to national minorities sometimes experience in their efforts to integrate into a specific society. These difficulties can be caused by linguistic hurdles, or the lack of information.

Relatively minor problems can, if not tackled, develop into major sources of tension. That is why I have decided to become increasingly involved in the development of contacts and concrete projects to look into and possibly tackle the root causes of ethnic tensions. The first example I would like to mention lies within the field of education. It is clear that education is an extremely important element for the preservation and the deepening of the identity of persons

belonging to national minorities. I came to the conclusion that it would be useful to invite some internationally recognised experts to make recommendations on an appropriate and coherent application of minority education rights in the OSCE region. Accordingly, the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, which works closely with my office, brought together such a group of experts who, in turn, agreed upon the so-called Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities. Soon thereafter, the Foundation organized a Seminar on Minority Education Issues, held in Vienna at the end of November 1996 under my Chairmanship, which enjoyed the participation of Ministers of Education and minority representatives from a number of States where the issues are especially pre-occupying. I was on that occasion pleased to find the Hague Recommendations so well received by relevant parties as a practical and balanced guide for resolution of many specific issues. To the extent that the Recommendations may usefully guide governments in elaborating more appropriate and acceptable laws and policies with regard to minority education, they will serve to resolve or at least diminish an important source of inter-ethnic tension. I am therefore pleased to see several States already having referred to The Hague Recommendations in the context of current national discussions. For example, in early April of this year, there was a major conference held in Riga to discuss reform of the Latvian Law and policy on education with special attention to minority education. At that conference, the Minister of Education stated that The Hague Recommendations would form the basis for Latvian law and policy in this field. This was well received by representatives of national minorities and, if realised, will remove a major source of tension between the majority population and national minorities, in particular the large ethnic Russian population. The Hague Recommendations have now been translated into several languages and are the subject of serious consideration in several situations. Through this kind of modest initiative, I believe much can be done to respond to the root causes of inter-ethnic tensions.

In a related project, a questionnaire on the use of minority languages was sent to all OSCE participating States. This corresponds with the wish expressed by a number of countries that comparative studies would be made on the situation of minorities in OSCE States. Many countries have already sent me their reply to this questionnaire; some replies are still pending.

My office is in the process of evaluating the replies and I hope to be able to draw some conclusions later this year, with a view to determining common practices and to revealing the variety of existing approaches from which each

State may wish to draw in relation to particular situations.

Other projects in the educational field for which I have taken the initiative are support for the improvement of minority education, including the training of teachers and the publication of school books. These projects are being developed in close cooperation with the authorities, inter alia, in the FYR of Macedonia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.

Another area of increased activity is the promotion of dialogue involving representatives of the authorities and of minorities. Disputes frequently arise because of insufficient mechanisms for dialogue at the national level. In response to this problem, I have promoted the development of structures for dialogue and the establishment of other instruments of democratic discussion and decision-making.

This dialogue can be of a structural nature, such as the Council on National Minorities in Romania, the Presidential Round Tables in Latvia and Estonia, or the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan and the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakstan, where representatives of majority and minorities gather regularly to discuss issues of mutual interest. Conclusions reached at such meetings can be submitted to the authorities, in the form of recommendations, and can thus, with time, become an integral part of policy-making in these countries. It will demonstrate on the one hand that the authorities are willing to listen to minorities' concerns and on the other hand that minorities are willing to participate in the political life of the country in which they live.

Although to some this might seem a small step, I firmly believe that such an approach can lay the foundation for full participation of all groups of the population in development of the social fabric of the country in which they live. No doubt, this is an essential prerequisite for civil society.

There are also numerous possibilities for forms of dialogue organized on an ad-hoc basis to help solve acute problems. Examples I would like to quote here are Croatia, in particular with regard to questions arising when the temporary UNTAES administration of Eastern Slavonia, Western Sirmium and Baranja has come to an end; Kazakstan, in particular with regard to the inter-ethnic situation in the North of the country and the FYR of Macedonia, concerning inter-ethnic relations in that country. In recent years, I have organized several round tables bringing together all relevant parties. During these round tables, which often take place outside the country concerned, representatives from all sides have the opportunity to freely express their concerns and expectations, thus contributing to a better exchange of information. My hope is that this could help to create an

atmosphere of mutual trust. In any case it can help to dispell any misunderstandings there might be due to a mere lack of contacts.

The complexities and peculiarities of local problems often require wide consultations with all interested and affected persons, with persons belonging to national minorities being vulnerable to unaccomodating majoritarian decision-making. Since several disputes in fact involve problems of limited subject-matter jurisdiction for which centralized decision-making processes are not always best equipped, it is often the case that lower level, that is decentralized, decision-making processes would respond better to minority concerns. The decentralization that is thus needed, may be achieved either territorially, for instance in the form of local self-government, or through distribution of limited powers of jurisdiction on a personal basis. In any case, it is in my view an evident requirement of good and democratic governance that persons affected should be involved in the process of decision-making, at least in the form of consultative participation.

Another type of project I would like to mention is in the field of information. For example, in Latvia and Estonia aliens (including a large number of ethnic Russians) have to pass language exams and tests on the history and the constitution of these countries in order to obtain citizenship. Many Russians wish to do so, but they face a number of obstacles such as a lack of language training facilities and a relatively heavy financial burden. Also we came to the conclusion, which is shared by the authorities, that there is a clear need for more information about the requirements for obtaining Latvian and Estonian citizenship. I have asked the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations to help with the publication of an information pamphlet in both the State language and Russian about these requirements. These pamphlets have been published in recent weeks. I hope they can contribute to narrowing the information gap in both countries. This might help dissipate frustration on the side of those Russians who are genuinely interested in Latvian and Estonian citizenship.

The initiatives I have mentioned so far are only possible thanks to the generous financial contributions of a number of States, as well as other donors such as International Organizations and NGO's. I do believe that this money is well spent, because with quite modest amounts possible causes of serious tensions can be removed and inter-ethnic harmony promoted. In other words, these are areas in which relatively small investments can yield important conflict prevention results.

Looking back at the past years, I believe considerable progress has been achieved in conflict prevention relating to

national minorities, while a lot still remains to be done. First and foremost, we must have an open eye for longer-term developments with a view to anticipating future crises and not only pay attention to already existing conflicts. The success of preventive diplomacy ultimately depends on the concrete political and other support States are prepared to invest in it. I do hope States remain committed to conflict prevention, since it is a precondition for the stability that is needed if European Integration is to cover the whole European continent.

Thank you, Mr Chairman