



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

Address by  
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to the  
**Meeting on “Contested Historical Legacies in Public Spaces”, All Souls College, Oxford**  
**University**

**[Check against delivery]**

Oxford, United Kingdom – 25 March 2019

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm grateful to Oxford University and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation [IHJR], and particularly to Edward Mortimer and Marie-Louise Ryback, for the invitation to join you today for this Task Force meeting. This is an opportunity to discuss an important topic: the use and abuse of historical legacies for political purposes, and the tensions that can arise as a result of what is sometimes called "memory politics".

As I travel and engage interlocutors in the OSCE area in my capacity as High Commissioner on National Minorities, I witness how new crises and conflicts are increasingly feeding on ethnic divisions. While societies have become more diverse, identity politics is on the rise. Integration processes are progressing slowly and the protection of rights is often insufficient, leading to the marginalization of certain groups in society and, in some cases, to radicalization. In this polarised environment, minorities are frequently instrumentalized to serve political and national agendas in the wider geopolitical landscape. When I meet with minority representatives, but also with government institutions – and the ministries of education and culture with whom I engage regularly are very relevant in this context – I notice the impact of this trend in many areas.

Disputes about monuments, street names, the use of flags, and so on, are often mentioned to me as a source of disagreement and controversy between majority and minority communities. It is becoming increasingly difficult to enact policies fostering the progressive integration of societies in an inclusive manner, while simultaneously protecting the identity and culture of minority groups. And this leads to fissures in our increasingly diverse societies. In the field of education, new trends towards more investment in teaching in the State language (which is undeniably important for integration), with a reduced investment in multilingual education, which is perceived as strengthening the identity of minority communities, is creating tensions within multi-ethnic societies. These tensions are often conveniently fuelled or exploited by external players, in the current geopolitical environment. We also see examples of minorities resisting integration, demanding levels of protection that would effectively isolate them from the rest of society in the country where they reside. In the background, conflicting historical narratives often emerge as a primary source of these tensions, which can lead to clashes between different communities in society.

History and memory have always been sensitive political issues, but it is increasingly apparent that there are very real security implications. Memory politics are part of identity politics, and we are witnessing first-hand how divisive forms of populism and nationalism drive wedges between communities in countries across the world. As you well know, myths and memories are an integral part of ethnic and national identities. All nations use historical interpretations to create a common sense of purpose. Nationalists then prefer to tackle the questions “who we are” and “where we are going” by selectively focusing on the questions “where we came from” and “what we have achieved and endured”.

This is where it gets difficult and where the potential for conflict exists. Each nation makes its own choices, often preferring to remember its successes and tragedies while skipping other – normally darker – pages, including the suffering that it may have inflicted upon others. This is sometimes referred to as the “mirror of pride and pain”, where the pride of one group is the pain of another, and vice versa.

Focusing on the political impact of historical memory in the OSCE space, I believe we should look at three areas: the education system, where education ministries write or approve an official history curriculum; the legal sphere, where parliaments adopt “memory laws” that establish official historical narratives or sometimes even prohibit alternative interpretations; and the public space, where heroes or historical events are remembered through statues, street names, monuments and other symbols.

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 inter-ethnic tensions.

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. Also, we cannot disregard the fact that the memories of an often recent violent past may still be vivid, and that the process of reconciliation and elaboration of the trauma that war has brought may not have been completed, and indeed may not be completed for some time to come. So, one first very general conclusion is that concerted efforts are required in this polarized environment to encourage and support dialogue and reconciliation, both within and between States.

The topic of symbols is intrinsically related to the principles of inclusion and integration. This is why my predecessors included it in the 2012 *Ljubljana Guidelines on the Integration of Diverse Societies*. Guideline 50 focuses on fostering inclusive public spaces: “States should promote integration by respecting the claims and sensitivities of both minority and majority groups regarding the display and use of symbols in shared public space. While being mindful of freedom of expression, States should avoid the divisive use of symbols and discourage such displays by non-State actors. Where appropriate, opportunities to promote inclusive symbols should be sought.”

When we discuss monuments and other symbols, many people immediately think of the Balkans. In North Macedonia, ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians have each erected their own statues, and the legacy of the Skopje-2014 project is still visible. Just last month in Georgia, tensions erupted between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis over a statue to an ethnic Armenian hero of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. In the US, we have seen what happened in Charlottesville amid rising tensions related to confederate statues. I keep running into contested symbols everywhere I go, as ethnic minorities increasingly make their voices heard and challenge the hegemony of the memories of the majority. I have recently come back from Latvia, where a large Soviet-era statue in Riga recurrently leads to heated debates. In the Netherlands, where I live, there are groups calling for the renaming of streets or the dismantling of statues of colonial-era administrators. In my native Italy, I visited the town of Bolzano/Bozen where a politically charged frieze to Mussolini was changed by artists after

an open competition. I understand that the Rhodes Statue here in Oxford was also controversial.

But how do we apply the Ljubljana Guidelines to these cases? This is easier said than done. Since 2012, the HCNM has not engaged countries on this issue in an operational way. Some may be resistant to any engagement at all. They may think that history – and all that symbolizes it – should be left to historians, as some representatives of OSCE governments have in fact told me. I would be happy to do that... if everyone did. But I have noticed that too often, politicians do not heed this advice, and fall for the temptation to use history to play identity politics. This is also why I cannot leave education to teachers and I cannot leave language to linguists. So my answer would be: the display and use of historical legacies in shared public spaces may be too important to be left to historians.

While I fully recognize the sensitive nature of this issue, I believe my Institution is well placed to explore, within the limits of my mandate, how it can help policymakers manage disputes in a pragmatic way. Just like the display and use of symbols in shared public space, language policy and education policy are sensitive identity issues internal to States, but over 25 years of HCNM experience has shown that such tensions can be defused by quiet advice and expert assistance, by helping to establish inclusive procedures and by sharing best practices. The devil is often in the detail, and when it comes to these issues, it is not only about what is decided, it is often more about how and by whom it is decided.

That is why I am glad IHJR is looking at these matters, doing a sober and comparative analysis of different country cases and trying to learn what works... and what does not. I therefore strongly support the idea of the IHJR assisting policymakers by identifying principles, processes and best practices on how to resolve public disputes over the display and use of symbols in public spaces. I increasingly see a space for my Institution to help share best practices, and, as I explore my engagement, I would be very grateful for your suggestions on what kind of concrete advice or assistance to OSCE States could be offered to minimize the conflict potential in this area, in a way that makes it acceptable and worthwhile. I will also inquire more systematically in my bilateral engagements to what extent and how I can, within the context of my mandate, assist counterparts in resolving disputes in this very sensitive field.

I am impressed at the breadth of your analysis, with cases from all corners of the globe. I believe this adds the necessary context to what many incorrectly see as a uniquely European phenomenon, or even worse, only an Eastern European problem. This is a global trend, and one that requires global and creative thinking to address. I believe this issue will stay on the agenda for many years to come, which makes IHJR's work very timely.

I am therefore looking forward to your views and our discussions. Thank you very much.