



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

Address by **Mr John de Fonblanque**

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to the

Thirteenth Meeting of the OSCE Economic Forum

“Economic and Social Integration of Persons belonging to National Minorities”

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Mr. Chairman,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the thirteenth meeting of the Economic Forum on the economic and social integration of persons belonging to national minorities. As it happens I addressed the twelfth meeting of the Economic Forum on the same subject, so I will try to say something different this year. Happily the preparatory seminars of Trieste, Almaty and Kiev as well as the Human Dimension Seminar on Integration of Migrants in Warsaw have provided useful new food for thought.

In his key-note speech on Monday, the High Commissioner on National Minorities explained the importance of integration as a means to avoid or reduce the risks of future tensions involving minority issues. He set out the main elements of a policy of "integration respecting diversity" which underlies many of his recommendations. He explained that such a policy, in addition to its value for conflict prevention also has economic benefits, since supporting and encouraging the participation of minorities in the economic life of the State will give a boost to the economy from which all, not just the minority, will benefit. It is these issues and, in particular, the important practical question how to increase the participation of minorities in the economy which I would like to address today.

There is plenty of evidence that minorities are often worse off in economic terms than the rest of the population. Minorities tend to have higher rates of unemployment, lower pay (including, sometimes, for the same job) and worse promotion prospects, lower standards of health and education and inferior housing conditions compared with the rest of the population. There are exceptions. Some minority communities have strong entrepreneurial talents and make up for marginalisation in the public sector by a strong role in the private sector. Minorities with adjacent kin-States may be able to use their comparative advantage in terms of language and other links to the kin-State to benefit from cross border trade, although such links can be counter-productive if the majority perceive them as giving an unfair advantage to the minority. But the more common situation of national minorities is one of economic marginalisation and deprivation, which fuels a sense of alienation from the State.

An economically deprived minority will often inhabit a remote area with poor infrastructure and bad transport links to the rest of the State. Prejudice and hostility on the part of the majority lead to discrimination which reduces economic opportunities. Corruption may reduce the scope for access to the justice system and, therefore, to legal remedies for discrimination. Poor quality education may lead to inadequate skills in the national language, which cuts the minority off from national life, including the national media and news broadcasts and reduces the minority's ability to take advantage of opportunities for effective participation in the political process.

Economic marginalisation is not confined to established minorities but may also affect migrants and, indeed, deprived groups from the majority community, for example in areas suffering from sharp increases in unemployment. Problems about legal status may add to the difficulties. Lack of citizenship may reduce opportunities for participation and may add to the sense of alienation. For immigrants, difficulties in obtaining residence permits can result in an uncertain status, which cuts them off from recourse to the protection provided by the State and lays them open to exploitation. The shortage of lawful public or private sector employment opportunities may increase crime. In the worst case a downward spiral of deprivation and alienation creates a breeding ground for crime and political radicalisation.

Mr Chairman,

The importance of tackling marginalisation is increasingly accepted. The issue has, for example, figured prominently in EU discussions in recent years. The focus has been not just on the welfare of the marginalised groups but also on the impact of tackling marginalisation on the society as a whole. This includes the benefits to the economy from increasing the contribution of the minority if their potential is more fully realised through greater participation in economic life. It also includes the economic benefit of eliminating the long term costs which marginalisation imposes on society, such as disproportionate costs for health and policing. Above all, it includes the benefit to society from the removal of a source of instability and insecurity.

I will turn now from the question why economic marginalisation needs to be combated to the more difficult question of how to combat it. There are no simple answers. Each situation is different and each requires a different combination of measures and approaches. Many states have policies for combating economic marginalisation. Some are more successful than others. There is certainly scope for more academic analysis and also a need for more data to provide a basis for such analysis. Stimulating the economic activity of a marginalised group involves much the same issues as stimulating economic activity in the State as a whole. These are much debated issues to which there are no magic answers. I will therefore limit myself to suggesting a few broad principles.

The first principle is that economic participation cannot be separated from other forms of participation which are essential to integration, such as political participation and cultural participation or from the essential means of promoting participation, such as education and access to the media. Participation in public and political life at national and local levels will help persons belonging to minorities to ensure directly, through their own efforts, that they receive a fair share of the benefits provided by the State, including employment, infrastructure, and social programmes, such as health education and housing. But there is also an indirect link. Political participation will develop a sense of engagement in the State, of being stakeholders in it. If persons belonging to national minorities see that the State offers them opportunities and can provide them with solutions rather than problems they are more likely to develop a sense of loyalty and to be ready to accept their responsibilities, such as respect for the law and paying taxes. This will in turn facilitate acceptance by the majority of the process of integration, including economic integration.

Another aspect of integration which is important for economic and for political participation is for minorities to participate, at least to some extent, in the culture of the majority. In particular minorities have a responsibility for learning the State language, which is likely to be an important factor in gaining access to employment including public service employment. The State should provide minorities with opportunities to learn the State language, while at the same time respecting their right to maintain their own language and culture. More generally, a good quality education, which gives students real fluency in using the State language and eventual access to higher education is the key to strengthening minority access to economic opportunities in the future.

The second basic principle for promoting economic participation is the strict application of non discrimination. This is the key to providing equal opportunities for persons from minorities to participate in the economic life of the State. It is also the key to dispelling the sense of alienation. Removing discrimination both in the private and public sector is an important duty of modern states. It is also a major and complex task, which involves

changing attitudes and behaviour. Legislation banning discriminatory practices, for example in employment, is important but is only the first step. Many states have set up institutions with a specific mandate to prevent discrimination. The State will also need to devise mechanisms in the public sector to ensure that it is impartial in its own activities, particularly as regards such matters as recruitment, the distribution of State benefits and the enforcement of law.

The third basic principle is however, that non-discrimination is not enough. When minorities are in a disadvantaged position, special measures will be needed to bring them up to the level of the majority. Of course, every situation is different and special measures must not result in reverse discrimination. A simple example of a special measure would be the building of a road to bring communications with the area inhabited by the minority up to the level of communications with the rest of the State. A more complex measure would be a regional policy designed to boost economic activity in the region inhabited by the minority (or a wider region including the region inhabited by the minority). Such a policy could include incentives for the location of businesses in the region with a view to providing greater opportunities for economic participation by the minority. Measures could also take the form of institutional changes designed to empower the minority or the region by giving it greater responsibility for its own economic development, but without disengaging State support. Measures could involve other actors including businessmen, NGO's and international organisations whose support can be mobilised for promoting economic participation of marginalised regions in the interest of long term stability.

Mr. Chairman,

Participation in economic and social life is a key element in the integration of persons belonging to national minorities. But I believe it has a good deal in common with the wider agenda, to which increasing attention is being given in many States, which is the need to combat economic and social marginalisation. This agenda does not just concern established national minorities but also migrants, or new minorities as they are sometimes called, and other excluded or vulnerable groups. It has become increasingly accepted that these problems have to be tackled with priority, not least because, if allowed to persist to the point where they lead to extremism and even terrorism, they can pose threats to security and stability. The experience which some OSCE participating States have of tackling these issues can be of value to others facing problems of economic marginalisation. There is therefore a good case for a dialogue which will enable these experiences to be tapped for the benefit of all. Such a dialogue would be fully in accordance with the classic OSCE function of establishing best practice through the exchange of views and experiences.

In conclusion therefore I would like to underline the suggestion made by the High Commissioner on Monday that the OSCE should take forward the discussion on integration, of which economic and social integration is one important aspect. Integration has a central role to play in tackling the dangers and long term costs to our societies of marginalisation, whether of minorities or majorities or migrants. Further dialogue, perhaps leading to the development of a set of broad principles representing best practice, would be of interest to many OSCE participating States. I hope this Forum can agree to recommend that this dialogue will be taken forward.