



# High Commissioner on National Minorities

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**Controlling ethnic tensions in Europe: The experience of the CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities  
Address by Mr Max van der Stoel, CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to the Oxford University  
Civil Liberties Society  
Oxford, 28 October 1994**

[1. Introduction]

Mr. Chairman,  
Questions concerning minorities are of great importance for developments within many European states and for the stability of Europe as a whole. Tensions involving national minority issues can have the potential to develop into a conflict, as is tragically evident from conflicts such as in former Yugoslavia, Nagorny-Karabakh, Georgia and the like. Conflict is not any more taking place exclusively between states, but is also a phenomenon arising from within a state, potentially leading to international consequences.

From this angle, the processes of democratisation in formerly authoritarian states acquire additional significance. They find a touchstone in the way governments are prepared to deal with the concerns of those citizens which belong to ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities. If a state is not prepared to treat them with respect, to give them a say in their own affairs and to accord them fully the rights which citizens belonging to the majority also have, then one can have doubts about its overall preparedness to strengthen democracy. Moreover, tensions will arise which may have

unforeseeable consequences.

The minority questions confronting our continent are in most cases of an essentially political nature. They are connected to issues which touch upon the essence of the development of the state and society. Often, they are intimately related to issues which go to the heart of national self-awareness and the very existence of states. Human rights issues as well as economic questions may be part of the equation. What is called for is an approach which brings together and integrates the various dimensions of the problem at hand.

## [2. Role of the CSCE]

Mr. Chairman,

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the CSCE or Helsinki process as it is also called, offers such a way of dealing with minority questions. It proceeds from a comprehensive concept of security which relates peace, security and prosperity directly to the observance of human rights and democratic freedoms and the existence of a market economy, encompassing both long-term and short-term aspects.

This approach is also very important with regard to issues concerning national minorities. Proceeding from a normative basis of political standards of behaviour, CSCE activities concerning national minorities take a broad view and are not limited to promoting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Spurred on by the incidence of the conflicts which now ravage parts of Europe and the human suffering they are causing, the CSCE is playing an increasingly important role in conflict prevention, with a special emphasis on potential ethnic conflicts. In this context, the establishment by the CSCE Summit in July 1992 of the post of CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was a logical step. I will return to this later on, if I may.

Mr. Chairman,

Conflict prevention activities by the CSCE are of a double character: Not only are they directly aimed at forestalling violence, they can also be characterised as efforts at building a durable peace in Europe. They involve the promotion of the establishment and development of a viable democracy and its institutions, creating confidence between the government and the population, not least including persons belonging to minorities, structuring the protection and promotion of human rights, the elimination of all forms of gender or racial discrimination and guaranteeing respect for

minorities.

Building the peace also requires the peaceful transition from a command economy to a flexible market-oriented system. As we can see in Europe, such a transition is not painless, and we should make sure that the pain created is as limited as possible. Otherwise, dangerous social tensions may develop and people may become more open to authoritarian and even xenophobic influences. Some will be looking for a scapegoat, and a minority is a likely candidate for that role.

Mr. Chairman,

Obviously, CSCE activities aimed at conflict prevention and peace-building can only be as effective as the political response by the CSCE states to it, that is on the concrete political and other support they are prepared to invest in it. Conflict prevention is a process often requiring large-scale investments over a prolonged period of time, but it is an effort worthwhile undertaking. In humanitarian, financial and political terms it is much cheaper than peacekeeping or rebuilding societies after a violent conflict. Experience shows that most conflict, including ethnic conflict, is not an unavoidable natural disaster but can be prevented if the necessary efforts are made.

### [3. Mandate and Role of the CSCE High Commissioner]

Mr. Chairman,

The CSCE disposes of a whole range of tools which are relevant for minorities' issues. Many of those have been established or developed in response to the ethnic conflicts for which the CSCE initially found itself ill prepared. If in the following I concentrate on the CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, it is because I know that particular instrument best and not because I underestimate the importance of others.

According to his mandate, the High Commissioner is an instrument of conflict prevention. As such, he has a two-fold mission:

- first, to try to contain and de-escalate tensions involving national minority issues which could lead to violent conflict, in particular international conflict, and
- second, to alert the CSCE whenever such tensions threaten to develop to a level at which he would not be able to contain them with the means at his disposal.

Mr. Chairman,

The situations in which I am at present directly involved are the following, and I present them in chronological order of my involvement:

- Latvia and Estonia, with regard to the Russians living there;
- Slovakia (the Hungarian minority) and Hungary (the Slovak minority);
- Romania, in particular concerning the Hungarian minority;
- the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and its Albanian population;
- Albania with regard to the Greeks in southern Albania;
- Ukraine, in particular the situation on the Crimea;
- and finally the inter-ethnic relations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

These situations all require long-term attention and do not dissolve after a first visit by the High Commissioner. Let me turn to them in some more detail.

Since January 1993, I have been involved in the situation of the Russian populations of Estonia and Latvian government to take action to combat expressions of ethnic hatred and to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of violent attacks on other ethnic groups, particularly against the Roma.

Interethnic relations in the so-called Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or FYROM have been a subject for attention since June 1993, that is relations between Macedonians and Albanians. In my recommendations to the Government of that CSCE observer state, I concentrated on the holding of a census under international supervision and on the establishment of an Albanian-language faculty for the training of teachers. I also stressed the need to strengthen the competencies of the Council for Inter-Ethnic Relations. Political developments within the Albanian community of the FYRIM have also drawn my attention.

Furthermore, I have been involved in the situation of the Greek minority in Albania for quite some time now and have paid as many as eight visits to that country over the last year or so. Earlier on, I focused inter alia on constitutional provisions regarding persons belonging to national minorities to be reflected in future legislation, the establishment of a special office for minority questions, and legislation in the field of education. The main issue which Greek representatives have been raising so far is the position of Greek-language education outside the officially designated so-called minority zones. They want to return to the system which was established in 1991. I am now working out a

formula on this issue which should be acceptable to all parties.

As a matter of fact, I have just returned from Albania where I spent a week with two eminent and internationally respected experts on minority issues, one of them a British citizen, Sir John Thomson, the Chairman of the Minority Rights Group. The issue of education was a very prominent one.

In Ukraine, the situation is marked by discontent amongst the Russian population, largely caused by their perception that living standards in Russia are higher because the reforms are going faster in that country. The success of the economic reform programme launched by President Kuchma will therefore also be of importance to interethnic relations in Ukraine.

Obviously, the economic reform process falls outside my ambit, but there are other issues which do also have an impact on interethnic relations in Ukraine. One of the more significant is the issue of language. In my recommendations, I stressed that efforts to increase the knowledge of the Ukrainian language must not lead to fears of forced "ukrainisation" among Russians. Possibilities to use the minority language, alongside the official Ukrainian language, in state organs could be widened.

I also visited Crimea where Russians constitute 62% of the population on the peninsula. Discontent on the peninsula has manifested itself in calls for greater autonomy from Kiev and stronger ties with Russia. I would note that part of the overall situation there is the question of the Crimean Tatars, who were expelled to Central Asia by Stalin in the Second World War. 250,000 of them have now returned to the Crimea, but the problem of their resettlement is far from being solved. Many of them live in very bad conditions.

It seemed important to me that efforts were undertaken aimed at promoting the beginning of a genuine dialogue between the central government in Kiev and the government in Crimea. Parties will have to be helped to come to agreement on a mutually acceptable formula on the relationship between Kiev and Crimea. The CSCE decided to send a team of CSCE experts on constitutional and economic matters to Ukraine, accompanied by one of my Advisers. Extensive meetings and discussions were held with political and economic leaders in both Kiev and Simferopol.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, I focused on issues regarding citizenship, notably on possibilities for a simplified

procedure for the acquisition of citizenship in the Russian Federation if a person decides to move there. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, ethnic tensions are not high at present. However, a significant nationality-related problem the country faces is the exodus of skilled people such as doctors, nurses and administrators. They are mainly Russian or Ukrainian. The Kyrgyz themselves do not have the trained people to replace them which is going to hamper Kyrgyz economic progress. The Government recognises this problem and is doing what it can to ensure that ethnic relations are good in an effort to keep skilled workers in the country. A further issue which could generate tensions is that almost all good agricultural land is in the south where the Uzbek population of Kyrgyzstan lives.

As for Kazakhstan, the issue is increasing Russian dissatisfaction with the governmental policy of kazakhisation as a result of which many Russians in administrative posts were replaced by Kazakhs. They also perceive the privatisation programme as favouring the Kazakh population at their expense. As a result, resentment between the Slav and Kazakh communities is growing. The Russians who are concentrated in the north do not plan leaving since they have been living in that area for centuries. For these reasons, I also presented recommendations on the use of the Russian language, on the ethnic balance among public officials and on mechanisms to address complaints regarding ethnic discrimination.

Finally, at the request of the CSCE states I have also made a special CSCE-wide study of the situation of the Roma, or Gypsies as they are commonly called.