OSCE

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

Address

by
Ambassador Rolf Ekéus
OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the **15th Annual Session** of the

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Check against delivery

Brussels, Belgium
4 July 2006

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Parliamentarians,

It is an honour for me to be given the opportunity to address the Parliamentary Assembly General Committee on Political Affairs and Security, as well as Members of the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions and General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, today. As you recall, the Parliamentary Assembly called upon me at its session in Edinburgh 2004 to "initiate a comparative study of the integration policies of established democracies and analyse the effect on the position of new minorities". Reflecting and consulting carefully since then, I decided to respond to the call from the Assembly by commissioning such a study early this year. It gives me great pleasure to present the study to you today. The report has been produced by the Migration Policy Group, a research institute based here in Brussels and headed by Dr. Jan Niessen, who is also present here today. I hope you will agree with me that it is a highly interesting study of an important and topical issue, and one that shows how states are taking the issue seriously and making efforts to manage societies grown increasingly diverse over the last decades.

I would initially draw your attention in particular to the fact that it brings out the relevance of my traditional approach to situations involving national minorities based on the concept of "integration with respect for diversity" to the integration policies followed by a number of states in relation to so called "new minorities".

In the cover note that I have written and attached to the report, I highlight two questions raised by the terms of the Assembly's request regarding the scope of the report, namely what are established democracies and what are "new minorities". As regards established democracies, the study adopts a pragmatic approach by focusing on seven States selected on the basis that they all have substantial experience of implementing integration policies, and all have policies which are well documented and accessible to researchers. At this stage, it would not have been feasible for the purposes of the report to tackle a larger group of countries and would probably not have added greatly to the value of the paper, which already covers a wide range of different aspects of integration policies.

As regards "new minorities", this term lacks legal status or an agreed definition. It was not

understood as the purpose of this study to engage in a discussion about establishing such a definition. Instead, the study has taken the term to refer broadly to those persons and groups, settled in the country, whose presence is a result of more recent immigration. As the study demonstrates, there are many different ways of defining those to whom integration policies can be applied, ranging from persons belonging to national minorities to recently arrived migrants. Therefore the study uses a generic term "immigrants and minorities" in order to encompass a wide range of persons or groups to whom integration policies in specific states apply. Given the variety and complexity of definitions used, it is more valuable for the study to focus on the "how" of integration rather than the "who", and not restrict it to a narrowly defined group.

In this context, one should also highlight the principle of self-identification, namely that everyone has a right to choose whether or not to identify him-/herself as being part of a minority, and no disadvantage should follow from either decision.

Instead of engaging in a controversial discussion on definitions, the current study takes a practical approach in answering the request of the Parliamentary Assembly: what are the integration policies of the participating States concerned, who do they target and which elements of these policies can be considered 'good practices'? In doing so, the parallelism between integration policies concerning national minorities and "new minorities" should come as no surprise. The issue which confronts states and governments is essentially the same whether we are talking about national minorities or "new minorities", namely what policies to adopt in order to manage diversity in their societies in ways which promote stability and prosperity and reduce the risks of tensions and social unrest.

There is nothing new about diverse societies. History shows many examples of successful multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic societies. Rather, it is the emphasis on the ethnically pure nation state in the last century in particular that has been a major source of instability and that has led to large scale violence and violations of human rights.

The diversity of a state reflects the history of its formation and development as well as population movements whether forced or voluntary. The new factor which is increasing the diversity of our societies is, of course, migration, driven by globalisation and economic needs

and opportunities. This growth in diversity is likely to continue and it is of importance for our societies to learn how to handle it.

The study illustrates the wide variety of approaches and policies to the management of diversity adopted by the seven States selected all of whom have substantial policies and experience over a number of years. Describing how states work to manage increasingly diverse societies and highlighting good practices in the process, my hope is that the report will generate a discussion and an exchange of experiences between participating States. I believe that the OSCE with its broad participation and established principles provides a good forum for such a debate.

Mr. Chairman, as HCNM I have always emphasised the importance of state policies aimed at supporting the integration of national minorities, as distinct from forced assimilation. The heart of integration policies is the promotion of participation in the political, economic and social life of the society. What works for national minorities could work also for groups of immigrant origin. In concrete terms integration is about the possibility to contribute to and participate in society. If people from minority groups see that they are treated fairly and on an equal basis with others in terms of the benefits and opportunities which the state can deliver, they are likely to develop a sense of belonging and of having a stake in the future of the state. This is likely to be the best way to counter the sense of exclusion which is often at the root of inter-ethnic tensions.

Integration respecting diversity involves rights and responsibilities for the state, society as a whole (including the majority) and persons belonging to minority groups. A society does not provide a service to its new members by not making any demands on them in terms of learning the language, understanding the values and history and acquiring an education that enables them to take part in the economic and political life of the state and making full use of all opportunities offered.

However, integration of diverse societies is a complex affair which requires time and effort. One should therefore be careful not to jump to conclusions: integration has not "failed", even in circumstances where difficulties exist and more needs to be done. Nor should polarisation of the debate lead to a one-sided focus on the need to integrate, to adapt and to conform on the side of persons belonging to minorities. While learning the state language, and respecting

the inalienable human rights standards is non-negotiable, states should respect the religious, ethnic and cultural identity of the groups they seek to integrate. All integration policies need to strike a balance between these elements, between the need for cohesion and the need for respect of identity and diversity. The protection of human rights and the rule of law provide the basis for finding the right mix between these elements.

In addition, states also have the responsibility to help the majority understand and deal with the increasing diversity in society. Education and measures to raise inter-cultural awareness are vital to this effect.

As the study shows, in order to manage diversity successfully, states need to adopt an active policy. First and foremost states need an effective anti-discrimination policy. This is not just a matter of passing laws against discrimination but of enforcing them effectively by developing strategies and plans, including infrastructure and statistics needed to set and monitor targets. In fact, the key demand which persons belonging to different minority groups make, whether "traditional" or "new", is to be treated in the same way as the majority, to have equal chances of getting jobs, an education, adequate housing and so on. Implementing a successful anti-discrimination policy therefore is the cornerstone of any integration policy resting on the fundamental principles of equality and inclusiveness.

Second, states need to take active steps to promote a policy of inclusiveness and equal opportunities in all areas. I have recently drawn attention to one area of public activity which deserves particular priority, in the recommendations I have commissioned and endorsed on policing in multi-ethnic societies. But many other bodies, both public and private need to be mobilised as part of a policy to oppose discrimination and promote inclusiveness. Education is an area of particular importance both for practical purposes to enable persons from minorities to acquire the skills needed to participate effectively in the society and because it is often through the experience of education that attitudes to diversity are acquired and developed. The importance of giving minorities a voice in decision-making and involving them in the political life of the state is an issue I have always stressed.

The paper shows that much of the agenda that I have described is accepted by the countries under study. There is widespread agreement about the need for legislation against discrimination. There is broad acceptance of the need to facilitate immigrant access to the

labour market and acceptance in many countries of the value of involving migrants in political life. But as the study also points out there is a wider range of views and a growing discussion about cultural issues. Against the background of recent events in the Netherlands, UK, France and Canada for example, questions about the need for shared values have come to the top of the agenda. This poses difficult questions for all our societies. A process of reflection is needed which will be facilitated by open debate. I would like to contribute one or two thoughts to this process on the basis of my experience as HCNM.

The first is that measures which sustain diversity and maintain cultural differences can play an important and positive role in fostering integration and preventing conflict demonstrating respect for different cultures and equal treatment. However, there is concern in many countries that multicultural policies serve to cement differences and thereby solidifying existing inequalities. It is important to distinguish between recognising differences and entrenching those differences as insurmountable. Recognising differences requires governments to develop specialised approaches aimed at helping people to accommodate and negotiate their differences in ways that allow for genuine equality and help to minimise the risk of conflict.

Second, integration involves interaction, not just tolerating a plurality of cultures. A well integrated society is one in which all participate and interact in joint activities. Separation between communities and groups which I have sometimes observed in post-conflict situations is not normally a good basis for building a well-functioning society with good prospects of future stability. Of course the right of minorities to maintain their identity including their culture and religion must be respected. But this should not, if possible, be achieved in a way which prevents the deepening of participation in the wider society. Policies which lead to increasingly separate communities risk making society vulnerable to tensions and strife.

Third, however, support for interaction and participation is not the same as support for uniformity. It does not imply that people have to put aside their differences. Shared values are important in relation to fundamentals such as respect for human dignity, the rule of law and human rights. For the rest we need to respect differences and to learn to see the diversification of our societies as enrichment.

In conclusion, let me underline that I hope that today's presentation will generate further discussion among participating States. Managing the diversity of our societies is essentially a pragmatic matter on which we all have much to learn from each other. I hope the study which I have commissioned at your request will contribute to the learning process. All the States studied have developed integration policies – increasingly these have a very practical focus: what are the problems, what measures work?. The issues are particularly evident at local level, where the integration debate increasingly takes place whether it is the mayors of large cities or leaders of ethnic or religious communities, all are familiar with the same challenges and all struggle to find adequate solutions. This is why the concept of "learning societies" is useful. We need open debate: not on who is to blame, but on what kind of society we want and how to get there. In any event, the willingness to accommodate inevitable change is crucial. It is my belief that the OSCE provides a good forum for taking this mutual learning process forward.