



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

**Remarks by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities
Rolf EKEUS**

**to the 2005 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Opening Session**

Warsaw, Poland

19 September 2005

Mr Chairman,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In many regions of the OSCE area interethnic relations continue to give reasons for concern. We must note the occurrences of expressions of extreme nationalism which have tended to become more frequent in recent years and which have an impact on relations between majority and minorities. Over the years we have learned that lack of understanding between majority and minority can contain tensions which in their turn can develop into violent conflict. Indeed most contemporary conflicts have been driven by interethnic or religious friction, a circumstance which has taken massive dimension in Africa, with deeply tragic consequences.

In our part of the world the situation is better than in Africa, as interethnic tensions are not fuelled by poverty, epidemics and illiteracy. But even in the affluent West we can observe how migration and the emergence of new minorities have led to tension and, in some instances, social unrest in participating States. I have repeatedly drawn the attention of the international community, including the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, to the complexity and potential impact on society of the emergence of new minorities and the urgency of starting reflecting upon in which way the OSCE, and indeed the HCNM, can address these situations early to prevent them from developing into serious societal confrontation. The methods and practices of the HCNM in his traditional work space could usefully be applied also on new minority situations. This of course does not exclude that the HCNM continues to have his major attention and responsibility in accordance with his mandate directed towards the large number of questions concerning established national minority issues, whether in the Balkans, the Baltics, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central

Asia.

The common denominator for all these regions is that they include States which have been challenged to create a new identity in the wake of the collapse of the socialist one party systems. National issues and by definition their ethnic, religious and minority dimension, have been core element in this process. A potential for tension and conflict within and between States in this context is obvious. Considering that a fundamental task for the OSCE, and indeed the HCNM, is conflict prevention, my engagement in these regions is highly motivated.

As a matter of fact the institution of HCNM is unique in an international context. Nowhere else in the world does it exist a corresponding mechanism of an international institution authorized to engage in the internal political affairs of a State. That this has been possible at all was based upon the fact of trust between the OSCE participating States in 1992 when the institution was established and the requirement of confidentiality in the operations of the HCNM.

Thus as HCNM I am expected to engage myself for the purpose of addressing tension between majority and minority within a State in order to prevent the situation from developing into friction and even full scale violence with potential even for international conflagration. Obviously I must acquire reliable information and be able to identify indicators of possible problems in concrete cases. Every situation is specific but my experience is that certain common denominators reappear. Key questions to address are

problems around minority education and language use, minorities' participation in political bodies as well as in administrative and executive bodies, not least in the police force, as well as matters connected to citizenship, cultural expressions and repatriation and minority related property issues. The HCNM has to identify the issues which are in dispute and propose solutions frequently through draft proposals for legislation.

When ethnic groups appear unwilling to live together, the easy way out may appear to be a separation of the conflicting groups by dividing a State into separate entities according to ethnicity. However such solution creates new problems and can become a hotbed for international conflict. The dream of ethnically pure nation States carries with it the threat of forced separation, uprooting and deportation. Policies of separation run counter to the fundamental principle of integration, which I consider a cornerstone of the OSCE approach to international security.

From my point of view, integration does not mean involuntary assimilation. It means living together, with tolerance and mutual respect for difference as regards culture, religion, language and historic perceptions. Integration in a multiethnic society of such differences is difficult and challenging. But is an absolute necessity if the forces for separation and conflict would not win out.

The special skills the HCNM is bringing to majority /minority problems where he is operating, is his local presence and contact in confidence with those directly affected by ethnic or religious tension, the methods of integration he delivers and his special experience

of applying international norms to specific situations.

In this respect I work closely with a leading norm-giving body like the Council of Europe.

I have over the last few years developed important contacts with the European Commission, especially in the context of the enlargement process, to which the HCNM has contributed by engagement in minority related problems to ease the accession of candidate countries.

Furthermore I was actively engaged in the ultimately successful efforts to include in the EU constitution the respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities as a fundamental value of the Union.

Thus the significance for international peace and security of rights of minorities, interethnic harmony and integration with respect for diversity is gaining understanding and recognition.

It is left to us now to bring this insight into reality and realization.

I thank you.