



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

address by

Kairat Abdrakhmanov

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

to the 1455th Plenary meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council

Vienna, 7 December 2023

Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet at one of the most challenging times that not only the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe but also the world at large has known in the recent past. The ongoing impasse, mutual distrust and our inability to find common ground on several key issues have significantly impacted many aspects of my work since I assumed this position three years ago. Nevertheless, I continued implementing my mandate and carrying out the tasks of this institution to the best of my ability. Therefore, I want to express my sincere appreciation and deep gratitude to the participating States and their authorities for their continued engagement, constructive dialogue and good co-operation with my institution, as well as their strong support for my mandate. Your support for and trust in the OSCE and its institutions was on full display last week at the 30th Ministerial Council in Skopje. I appreciated the unity and resolve that you displayed to ensure the continuity of this organization. Our path forward is firmly “rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals” as described in the Astana Commemorative Declaration that reaffirmed the relevance of, and our commitment to, the principles on which this Organization is based.

I am very grateful for the strong working relationship that I have enjoyed with the OSCE leadership, including Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Director Matteo Mecacci, Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) Teresa Ribeiro, and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Secretary General Roberto Montella, as well as with the OSCE Secretariat and field operations.

I sincerely thank the Chairpersonship of North Macedonia and Chairman-in-Office, His Excellency Bujar Osmani, for the effective leadership in facilitating comprehensive dialogue with all participating States this year.

In these unsettling times, when multilateralism is constantly questioned and challenged, preserving and strengthening the spirit of co-operation and respect for our fundamental norms and principles is critical to the future of our organization. I believe that sustainable peace and security in the OSCE area rests on our ability and willingness to work together, recognize and

respect differences and rebuild trust. It starts with dialogue – specifically, meaningful and result-oriented dialogue – to ensure mutual understanding and build confidence and security, both within and among the participating States. From this perspective, I would like to review the work of my office, including my engagements with the participating States, in alphabetical order and present to you the other activities undertaken in the second half of 2023.

As I reported previously, my office, in co-operation with the Council of Europe office in Tirana and the Delegation of the European Union to Albania, provided technical assistance to the Committee on National Minorities in Albania, at their request, by supporting the drafting of the Committee's new Strategy and Associated Action Plan 2023–2026, aimed at facilitating the implementation of its important mandate. I am pleased to report that with the specialized support of my institution, the Strategy has now been finalized and approved by the Committee on National Minorities. I welcome this step and plan to continue working with this important body.

In November, my office participated in Estonia's annual conference on integration. The visit also provided an opportunity to discuss ongoing policy changes with officials and national minorities. I note that preparations are proceeding for the shift towards providing education in only in the Estonian language. In this regard, I advise Estonia's authorities to invest adequate resources, maintain transparent dialogue with minority communities and integrate the current policies with programmes that will help ensure that minorities continue receiving at least a portion of their education in their mother tongue.

My office continues its support to the Ministry of Education and Research of Georgia, especially with its commendable initiative to evaluate the progress of the multilingual education programmes provided in the areas compactly populated by national minorities. This evaluation forms part of a comprehensive assessment of a broad range of essential parameters that affect the success of multilingual education in these areas. Most notably, it can improve relations between the Ministry and the local communities, families and teachers.

My office builds synergies through multiple projects and programmes in Georgia. For example, some of the national minority youth who previously took part in our project supporting political participation joined former monitors from national minority-populated regions to design and

pilot a new network to boost community-level early warning through analysis and community dialogue.

I am pleased to note that my programmatic activities supporting implementation of Kyrgyzstan's integration strategy Kyrgyz Zharany are ongoing. This includes providing expert assistance to the Ministry of the Interior in updating training courses on policing in multi-ethnic communities and providing training courses for trainers on conflict prevention, jointly with the UN Human Rights Office in Bishkek. Developing modern and contextually relevant training courses is an essential step in ensuring that the rights and interests of minority communities are respected, and that the authorities are equipped to prevent and manage conflicts effectively.

I also welcome ongoing preparatory work with Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Education and Science in the development of a concept on multilingual education. At the same time, I note that this work is likely to be affected by the implementation of legislation regulating the use of languages in education and in public life. I am confident that my excellent working relationship with Kyrgyzstan's authorities will provide an opportunity for constructive dialogue through which we can find a balanced approach to language use in all areas of life.

I have taken note of the high-level negotiations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on border issues. I welcome this dialogue, stressing that safe and open borders are instrumental for peace, stability and social cohesion across diverse societies. In this regard, I reiterate my commitment and readiness to provide advice and support to the authorities concerned.

I continued my open and constructive dialogue with authorities of Latvia. I have followed the adoption and implementation of several policies relevant to national minorities. In this regard, I have been approached on a number of issues, namely the discontinuation of education in minority languages, the fate of State-funded media in minority languages, issues related to the use of minority languages in the electoral process, and policies and measures related to historical memory and public symbols.

I am also closely following developments related to the implications of the immigration reform for permanent residents. I welcome an amendment allowing those who failed the Latvian language exam to pass it within two years. I recommended to Latvia's authorities to favour

approaches whereby specific individual concerns are addressed based on a reasonable, proportional and case-by-case assessment.

My office continues to engage with a broad variety of stakeholders in Moldova along several dimensions pertinent to the successful integration of its diverse society. As I already reported to you, my office organized a first Public Administration School for national minority youth in Moldova that included internships in State institutions. Following the positive feedback of the participants and the host institutions, my office is currently preparing the second edition of the Public Administration School and internship programme, which will take place next year.

I have continued supporting the Ministry of Education and Research and its ongoing work to develop a nationwide concept for multilingual education as well as the education authorities in Gagauzia. My experts have also facilitated dialogue on language policy to address the politicization of linguistic identities.

Finally, my office has been supporting stakeholders in Chisinau and Comrat to enable the effective and mutually beneficial functioning of the autonomy in Moldova.

In November, I visited Norway, including Oslo, Tromsø and Karasjok. I met with members of Norway's Government and parliament, representatives of the Arctic Council and the Sámi parliament, and a range of other interlocutors, including several national minority representatives. I appreciated the opportunity to learn more about efforts to address challenges related to climate change and sustainable development. The intersection of climate change, environmental degradation, national minority issues and security has increasingly featured in my work, including through discussions with my interlocutors. Therefore, I was pleased to learn more about structures and mechanisms in Norway aimed at ensuring participation of persons belonging to national minorities and the indigenous Sámi in decision-making processes.

Based on the feedback I received from national minorities and indigenous Sámi, I discussed with the authorities the importance of consultations that are inclusive and effective. This would involve increasing the frequency and evolving from what national minorities and indigenous Sámi currently perceive as information and discussion *about* them to a more meaningful dialogue *with* them.

During my visit, I had the opportunity to enhance my knowledge about efforts to facilitate social cohesion in the country. I took note of the generous financial grants for the operational costs of national minority and indigenous Sámi organizations and welcomed initiatives to protect and promote national minority and indigenous Sámi languages, including through dedicated funding. All of my interlocutors recognized the importance that knowledge about national minorities and indigenous Sámi plays in fostering a cohesive society. In this regard, I was encouraged by the Pathfinder Program, through which Sámi and Jewish youth travel to schools to talk about their cultures and experiences, which I recommended to the authorities be extended to include all national minorities.

I continue to engage in intensive dialogue with the Russian Federation as a kin State to a sizeable ethnic Russian population residing in States beyond its borders. I also monitor the impact of the ongoing war on the situation of this ethnic group, as well as others. To this end, I am concerned to learn that some members of this group have experienced difficulties in expressing core aspects of their identity, such as through the use of the Russian language, due to a fear of actual or perceived intimidation.

I reiterate my call on all participating States to increase their efforts to monitor, prevent and combat all forms of discrimination, including anti-Russian sentiment, and to uphold democratic values and refrain from public rhetoric that can fuel hatred and violence towards any minority group. At the same time, I underlined to the Russian Federation's authorities that efforts to safeguard the rights of ethnic Russians abroad will be stifled without a peaceful resolution of the war.

I visited Serbia in September for the 14th meeting of the Stakeholders' Committee of the Bujanovac Department of the Subotica Faculty of Economics of the University of Novi Sad. The meeting was productive and insightful, with all stakeholders expressing their commitment to the success and sustainability of the Department. I remain convinced that the Department, established in 2011, is an excellent example of how co-operation can strengthen social cohesion. To this end, I look forward to working with all partners to further promote and support this initiative.

The stakeholders also discussed the preliminary findings of an assessment on how to improve the teaching and learning of Serbian as a non-mother tongue in southern Serbia, which was conducted by my office together with the Government of Serbia Co-ordination Body for the Municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja. This assessment can serve as a good basis to determine areas of action on this crucial topic, which continues to be brought to my attention as an obstacle to the increased participation of national minorities in economic and public life.

I took the opportunity of my visit to Serbia to meet with interlocutors in Belgrade and southern Serbia. In discussions with the authorities of Serbia, I was informed about the country's efforts to improve the implementation of its already robust legal and institutional framework for national minorities. I was encouraged to hear that a revised draft Action Plan for the Exercise of the Rights of National Minorities benefited from comprehensive consultations and is expected to be adopted by the Government in the coming period.

I continued my regular consultations with representatives of the Albanian community in Serbia. As I mentioned during my meetings, it will be necessary for minority representatives and central authorities to work together to address any outstanding issues. For this reason, I continue to encourage national minority representatives to use existing channels and legal remedies in Serbia. I assured all interlocutors that my institution remains at their disposal to provide support where needed and in line with my mandate.

Ukraine remains at the top of my agenda. I continue to assess the impact of the war against Ukraine on national minorities. At the same time, I am supporting Ukraine's efforts to strengthen policies and institutions in the field of inter-ethnic relations in co-ordination and close co-operation with international partners. My office's constructive dialogue with Ukraine's officials has been ongoing, including with the Verkhovna Rada's Commissioner for Human Rights and its Minority Council, the Education Ombudsperson, the State Service on Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience with its various consultative fora, and representatives of national minorities.

I continued to pay attention to the situation of the people living in those parts of Ukraine that are under the effective control of the Russian Federation and reiterate that the holding of "local elections" in the current circumstances constitutes a departure from the principles enshrined in *The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*,

specifically that “No State may exercise jurisdiction over the population or part of the population of another State within the territory of that State without its consent.” I also reiterate that in the territories of Ukraine under the effective control of the Russian Federation it is necessary to provide education in the Ukrainian language and to offer cultural and history instruction to enable the preservation and expression of core aspects of Ukrainian identity.

Despite the difficult context, I have continued my support for legislative design and policy-making processes in Ukraine without interruption. I have intensified my efforts to strengthen the strategic processes designed to operationalize the Law on Ukraine’s National Minorities (Communities). I also continue to provide support for other ongoing legislative processes, including those regulating the status of the Crimean Tatar people, in co-operation with ODIHR. I have also taken note of the postponement by one year of the deadline for the implementation of the education reform in schools with EU languages of instruction. I have encouraged Ukraine’s authorities and neighbouring countries’ authorities to use this extra year to intensify bilateral dialogue on education issues and beyond, with the participation of national minorities in Ukraine, and I have offered my good offices to that effect. More specifically, with regard to national minority matters that feature in relations between Ukraine and Hungary, I encouraged direct co-operation between any relevant institutions in the two countries that could help find legislative or political solutions acceptable to all stakeholders.

I was privileged to receive an invitation and attend the Inaugural Global Anti-Racism Champions Awards Ceremony in August 2023 in Washington D.C. During my visit, I had the opportunity to exchange notes with my interlocutors in the United States on the current security situation in the OSCE and discuss diversity governance in the country. I appreciated the opportunity for frank discussions on issues relevant to my mandate with interlocutors at the Department of State, including the Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice Desirée Cormier Smith, the Bureau of Indian Affairs within the Department of the Interior, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Metropolitan Police Academy and their Community Oriented Policing Services in the Department of Justice, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Congress of American Indians, among others. I hope to continue the productive exchange with my interlocutors in the U.S. in the coming period.

While I was in the U.S., I appreciated the opportunity to visit the Metropolitan Police Academy to learn first-hand about the recruitment procedure for new officers through Community Oriented Policing Services provided by the Department of Justice, including important courses on inclusive policing, de-escalation and adolescent racial equity. I was pleased to learn about the efforts of the Department of Justice, aimed at building partnerships and trust with the communities they serve. As outlined in the *Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies*, police need to receive training and other forms of professional support to understand and respond appropriately, including to the sensitivities of minorities, so that they are able to carry out their policing roles effectively in ways which promote harmony and reduce tensions. With this in mind and in consideration of the wide range of law-enforcement agencies in the U.S., I would encourage the authorities to dedicate more time and resources for such crucial training.

The recent escalation of violence in the Middle East threatens to undermine social cohesion within the OSCE area. Any intolerance and discrimination based on ethnicity or religion can have long-term implications across all communities, especially for national minorities. It is imperative that all OSCE participating States effectively address hate crimes and hate speech and promote peace and understanding among diverse communities.

Dear colleagues,

Let me now turn to our thematic activities. My office's work on gender issues has continued during the second half of the year. In September, I addressed the Chairpersonship's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Conference in Tetovo, North Macedonia. I presented our findings from recent research into the intersectionality of gender and national minorities and discussed how we plan to enhance our work in this direction. Specifically, we have intensified our co-operation with experts to explore the possibility of developing policy advice on the topic in the mid to long term.

On 17 October, I participated in the OSCE-UNHCR Regional Conference on Access to Civil Documentation and Prevention of Statelessness in South-Eastern Europe, jointly organized and co-led by my office, alongside ODIHR, the OSCE Mission to Skopje and UNHCR, under the auspices of the 2023 OSCE Chairpersonship of North Macedonia. I am grateful for the collaboration and participation of OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Minister of Foreign Affairs

of North Macedonia Bujar Osmani, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Gillian Triggs, ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci, and Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje Kilian Wahl. I am particularly indebted to Mr. Valentin Rakip, a former stateless person whose personal experience and presentation at the opening of the Conference highlighted that tangible change is possible when we work together on issues of mutual concern.

We brought together more than 100 senior experts in South-Eastern Europe to take stock of the progress made, outline the remaining challenges, identify practical solutions and suggest concrete steps that governments can take to end statelessness by 2024 in South-Eastern Europe. The conference explored the achievements made within the framework of the #IBelong Campaign and looked beyond 2024. To support all 57 OSCE participating States to prevent and address statelessness, my institution and ODIHR made a joint pledge: “HCNM and ODIHR pledge to build capacity and exchange good practices on addressing statelessness in OSCE participating States over the next five years by, *inter alia*, organizing one annual joint activity on addressing statelessness together with UNHCR.”

This year many of the activities of my office were conducted under the auspices of the 30th anniversary of the institution of the HCNM. I used the opportunity of this important milestone to emphasize the crucial role of multilateralism in conflict prevention by reinforcing my institution’s relationships with long-term partners, enhancing co-operation with other international organizations and fostering new partnerships in areas pertinent to my mandate. International co-operation, especially with the United Nations and Council of Europe, as well as other regional actors, has been instrumental to the successful implementation of the HCNM mandate in every one of the 30 years of our operations. To this end, in the second half of the year, I continued my close co-operation and engagements with a number of officials representing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Labour Organization, the Council of Europe, European Union and the Organization of American States to discuss ways to translate our co-operation into meaningful results for everyone, including national minorities.

During the reporting period, I continued my engagement with the EU on matters related to my mandate. In September, I hosted a delegation from the Working Party on the Western Balkans Region, COWEB, in my office in The Hague to discuss how my institution can support the

authorities in South Eastern Europe to advance social cohesion. The following month, I participated in the OSCE-EU High-Level Meeting in Vienna, alongside the heads of the other OSCE institutions, which offered an opportunity to exchange views with the EEAS leadership and several Directors-General of the European Commission.

During the year, I co-hosted activities with several United Nations bodies, including an event on preventive diplomacy at the UN in New York with other regional organizations, and, most recently, a roundtable on conflict prevention with the Office of the United Nations at Geneva, which is marking the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights on 10 December.

Within the framework of our 30th anniversary, I hosted several other joint activities throughout the year, including a roundtable with the European Centre for Minority Rights Issues (ECMI) on six High Commissioners' work over three decades. You will also recall the event co-organized with the OSCE Chairpersonship of North Macedonia, which I held in Vienna to reflect on my institution's engagement in South-Eastern Europe over the past 30 years. I am grateful for the participation of so many delegations at that event. I am also marking the 30th anniversary by producing a commemorative photobook illustrating the engagements undertaken by the six successive High Commissioners. Finally, my institution donated a commemorative bench to the city of The Hague in gratitude for hosting our office for three decades.

To conclude the year of 30th anniversary activities, I hosted a high-level event on 24 October in The Hague, which was generously supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands. The event brought together senior representatives of participating States and representatives from many partner organizations with whom we have co-operated throughout the year, as well as the leaders of OSCE structures, Permanent Representatives to the OSCE, the diplomatic corps in The Hague, academia and civil society representatives and many other friends and supporters of my institution. I had the honour of participating in a panel discussion with the former High Commissioners on National Minorities. We shared insights and reflections on our approaches to the mandate and lessons learned to apply to the future work of the institution.

The 30th anniversary event also gave me a good opportunity to introduce our newest set of HCNM thematic Recommendations and Guidelines: *Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Social and Economic Life* (Socio-Economic Recommendations). Drafters, experts and practitioners presented the main principles of the new Recommendations and discussed their relevance and application. These Recommendations supplement my institution's approaches concerning social and economic inclusion, conflict prevention and national minorities, including women and youth. From my observations, the OSCE participating States have everything to gain from the greater involvement of national minorities in socio-economic affairs. If minorities remain under-educated, underpaid and under-employed because of discrimination or hindered access, whether intentional or not, the economy of the entire country or region may suffer, with possible adverse consequences for members of the majority and neighbouring countries as well. That is why my new set of Recommendations offers practical guidelines on how policy- and decision-makers around the OSCE area can bridge the gaps in realizing social and economic rights, including for national minorities.

As mentioned earlier, in November in co-operation with the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, I organized a roundtable on *Promoting Conflict Prevention through the Socio-Economic Inclusion of Minorities*, which provided an opportunity to present the Socio-Economic Recommendations as a tool for conflict prevention. With participation from experts as well as representatives of the UN member states, international organizations and civil society, including youth, the roundtable considered how to create fair policies that effectively tackle the social and economic challenges experienced by minority communities, particularly women and youth. The panellists discussed lessons learned, shared best practices, especially in the post-pandemic setting, and proposed relevant approaches for inclusive socio-economic policies.

New realities in the OSCE area render inter-State and regional co-operation an ever more critical component of a sustainable security architecture. In this context, I am glad we had another opportunity to bring together representatives of institutions responsible for national minority issues and inter-ethnic relations from several participating States to exchange experiences at an inter-agency roundtable in The Hague in November. These institutions play a crucial role in building cohesive and inclusive societies, and their co-operation with each other is a cornerstone of regional stability. Building on the success of similar meetings in

previous years, we discussed policies and practices in evidence-based policy-making and data collection as essential tools for diversity governance. The discussions showed that accurate and robust data is paramount in developing sound policies tailored to the needs of beneficiaries, with full respect for the principles of equality, inclusivity and integration. I will continue to provide such forums for the exchange of experiences and building of partnerships among my interlocutors in the future.

Lastly, it is my honour to announce that 2024, we will organise the 11th Max van der Stoel Award. My office has engaged in preparations for the award selection process and will circulate information about the nomination procedures early next year. I encourage all delegations of OSCE participating States and OSCE structures to nominate candidates.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The work of my office and the implementation of numerous projects outlined in my report was reinforced through the generous financial contributions of participating States, which I would like to mention in alphabetical order. I thank Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland for their support. Additional funding facilitated the implementation of many initiatives highlighted in this report. Our shared responsibility is to maintain the role and relevance of all OSCE institutions and mechanisms, the proper functioning of which, besides stable leadership, can only be ensured with adequate financing and budgetary resources. I would like to commend the Chairpersonship of North Macedonia for hosting and organizing a multitude of wide-ranging thematic events this year. Their strong leadership ensured the future and continuity of the work of this organization. I commend Ambassador Igor Djundev, Chairman of the OSCE Permanent Council, Permanent Representative of North Macedonia to the OSCE and His Excellency's able team for steering this Council during this challenging year.

Distinguished colleagues,

Many conflicts that are flaring around us today could have been averted. An ounce of prevention, as we all know, is worth a pound of cure. Therefore, we must come together and do all we can to preserve the integrity of the conflict-prevention mechanisms and

peace-building tools we have built in the past decades. We must deploy all our efforts to seek sustainable solutions that bring everyone lasting and long-term peace and security by respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States and by facilitating the peaceful coexistence of people within and between States.

This was the original reason why the institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities was created 30 years ago. Conducting this work in the current geopolitical environment has been challenging and, at times, barely possible. But it was necessary. Therefore, thank you all for the support and the trust vested in me during my first term in office. Finally, I would like to thank my dedicated team from the bottom of my heart for their support, commitment and integrity in facilitating the delivery of my mandate.

Lastly, I would like to wish a productive 2024 to the Chairpersonship of Malta, including His Excellency Ian Borg, Minister for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Malta, my dear colleague, Ambassador Natasha Meli Daudey, Permanent Representative of Malta to the OSCE, as well as to the entire team of the incoming Chairpersonship.

I thank you for your attention.