

## The Activities of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Conflict Prevention

In the second half of 1995 and the first eight months of 1996 the High Commissioner was again involved in minority questions in a great number of OSCE countries. In alphabetical order: Croatia, Estonia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. Inter-ethnic relations were very often the main topic of conversation. The issues discussed ranged from differences between national and regional authorities, to the prospects for the return of persons belonging to national minorities to areas they had previously inhabited, to problems related to the possibility to obtain citizenship. Also, subjects such as education in the mother tongue and the possibility to use the native language were often discussed.

The question is sometimes raised on what basis the HCNM selects the countries on which he concentrates his activities. The High Commissioner chooses to focus on certain countries when it is his view that they are facing especially difficult and complicated minority problems and because he hopes that his activities can be of some help in coping with them. In general one can say that the states concerned have understood and have accepted that this is the task the High Commissioner was given in the mandate which was agreed upon by all OSCE States during the Helsinki CSCE Summit of 1992. In this connection it is important to recall that it is not the HCNM's task to be just an advocate of minorities but that it is his duty to be an instrument of conflict prevention, to be active in trying to remove the danger of inter-ethnic conflict and to promote inter-ethnic harmony.

The importance of conflict prevention is immediately apparent if one looks at the origins of the conflict in what formerly was Yugoslavia. During the late eighties virtually all foreign observers had been reporting that the danger of an explosion was constantly growing. Still, no steps were undertaken to de-escalate the situation and the international community only came into action after the first shots had already been fired. The lesson the international community has to learn from this is that if the OSCE community of States wants to play a key role in conflict prevention, it has to come into action at a very early stage - as soon as there is a danger of serious tensions developing. Foreign ministers, busy as they are in coping with current crises, will also have to place the potential crises of tomorrow on their agenda. If the OSCE wants to be successful in conflict prevention, in the broadest sense of the ex-

pression, it has to concentrate on the elimination of the potential causes of conflict.

The *raison d'être* of the post of High Commissioner on National Minorities is the acknowledgement by OSCE participating States that problems involving national minorities, if neglected, could develop into violent conflict. In the more than three years of his activities, the High Commissioner has seen ample proof that this conclusion was justified. The problems involving minorities did not necessarily cause violent conflict in fact, but it was clear to all those directly involved that the potential for conflict was present, sometimes not even very far below the surface. At the same time, the High Commissioner also discovered that behind such tensions, there are often other, deeper causes of conflict. If people are unemployed, if they have few or no possibilities for education, if no decent housing is available, if the prospects for their children's future are gloomy, it is no wonder that they are dissatisfied. In many countries in the OSCE area this situation is exacerbated by the fundamental changes societies are going through. Frequently, people in these countries are faced with huge problems in their day-to-day lives, without it always being clear what the future has in store for them. Past ideologies have failed them and new ideologies with tailor-made answers are not at hand. Unfortunately, history teaches us that human nature is such that in a situation of discontent easy answers are sought and scapegoats are readily found. Nationalism then becomes the panacea for all problems. The High Commissioner strongly believes that it should be the task of the OSCE to identify the root causes of conflict and to help combat these, in order to ultimately prove that nationalism, xenophobia, racism and the portrayal of "others" as the enemy, are certainly not the answers to, but indeed part of, the problem.

The basis from which the High Commissioner operates are the values that are shared by all OSCE States. These values apply to all those who want to be part of the OSCE community; they are indivisible, non-negotiable and universal. They comprise the rule of law, democracy, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, pluriform society and the existence of market economy. It would be wrong to perceive these values as belonging solely to part of the OSCE area, or as religious dogmata some OSCE States want to impose on others. Rather, they are the core of the Helsinki process, which starts from a comprehensive concept of security which relates peace, security and prosperity directly to the sharing of the values. In other words, the Helsinki process has taught us that lasting peace and security are only possible in an environment where these values are shared. Thus, the observance of these values is no longer a matter of choice, but a political necessity.

The experience of the High Commissioner shows that, even if agreement is reached on the values that the OSCE States have in common, conflict pre-

vention is not an easy task. It is a tedious process requiring considerable investment over a long period of time. Such investment will have to include significant investment of financial capital, but no less political capital. Although considerable financial capital is needed, one should see this in its proper perspective. Annually, probably less than one percent of what OSCE States spend each year for defence and security would be needed. We are used to think of security in terms of protection against aggression from outside. But a post Cold War concept of European security has to take account of the fact that, as the Yugoslav drama has demonstrated, violent conflict *within* a state can now lead to a major threat for peace and security on this continent. Conversely, the timely provision of financial assistance can help considerably in promoting stability *within* a state. In this context, the HCNM has developed a number of activities in Ukraine, *inter alia* concerning the position of the Tatar population in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The Tatars, and other smaller population groups who have returned from their deportation to Central Asia, are faced with considerable difficulties in trying to build an existence for themselves and their families. There are very few jobs, almost no housing and few opportunities for education. If these problems are not tackled, Tatar discontent might destabilize the situation in this area, which in other political aspects has begun to show a remarkable improvement. But to remedy the situation, large investments are needed, for which the Ukrainian authorities lack the resources, which is understandable in the present economic situation. This means that the international community should be made aware of its responsibility and should step in with considerable financial means. So far, it has been very difficult to persuade a sufficient number of OSCE States of this necessity.

Through his activities, the High Commissioner has also become convinced of the importance of a clear political commitment to conflict prevention. The political message is that quick fixes for social, economic and political problems do not exist, that extremism is never an answer and that conflict prevention is a cause worth investing in. In the end, it is obvious that preventing conflict is cheaper than enforcing or keeping peace and rebuilding societies after a violent conflict. Above all, preventing conflict means that tens of thousands of human lives will not be needlessly sacrificed and that much human suffering can be avoided. Results in this area can only be achieved if activities such as those of the HCNM can count on the political support of the participating States. An important conclusion is that the challenges the OSCE community is facing today can only be tackled successfully if a joined effort is made. Although the problems sometimes seem almost impossible to overcome, especially in those parts of the OSCE that were hit by war, deep economic recession, or serious political conflict, the HCNM believes that if there is a basic willingness on the part of all parties involved to work towards

a peaceful and prosperous OSCE community, much can be achieved which otherwise might seem impossible.