



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

STATEMENT

by
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to the
530th Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council

Vienna, 28 October 2004

Mr. Chairman,

I have just returned from a visit to Georgia where I met senior Georgian officials, including the President, the Prime-Minister and the Foreign Minister as well as representatives of national minorities. I also attended the joint HCNM/ Georgian Parliament Seminar "Civic Integration in Georgia: Reflections on Problems and Solutions". I believe that the Seminar is a first step in the direction of elaboration of a Strategy of Civic Integration of the country, an initiative announced by Government of Georgia during my last visit to Tbilisi in early March.

The nature of my dialogue with Georgian authorities, was open and constructive. The Government is fully supporting the HCNM's activities in Georgia, in particular the implementation of the Conflict Prevention and Integration Programme in Samthkhe-Javakheti, a region where the Armenian speaking population in many respects is isolated from the rest of the country. They also welcomed my involvement in Abkhazia. From my side, I encouraged the Government to promote further reforms, in particular in the field of education, aimed at integration of national minorities into Georgia and strengthening the relation between the majority and the ethnic minorities in the country. I also encouraged the Georgian Government to consider ratifying the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and pledged the expertise and advise of my Office in drafting a Law on National Minorities, if the Georgian Parliament would be willing to adopt such law.

Following discussions with the Georgian Government and the United Nations, I have become involved in certain aspects of the situation in Abkhazia with a project aimed at enhancing the skills of teachers of the Georgian and the Abkhaz languages in the districts of Gali, Tkvarcheli and Ochamchira. The project is now fully funded and the implementation has begun in August 2004. The intention is that this Project should build also the confidence between communities in Abkhazia and will facilitate teaching in Georgian in Gali Region in full accordance with international norms. Speaking about Abkhazia, I like also to mention that, in the framework of OSCE –UN cooperation, I have supported that efforts should be made to implement the recommendations made by the Joint UN-OSCE Assessment Mission to the Gali District of Abkhazia, Georgia (20-24 November 2000), including the opening of a branch of the joint UN-OSCE Human Rights Office, currently operating in Sukhumi.

On 11-13 October, I visited **Latvia**. The main purpose of my visit was to make a first-hand assessment of the situation following the implementation of the first stage of the educational reform in the secondary minority schools. The reform, which limits the amount of subjects being taught in other languages than Latvian to 40%, started on 1 September this year. During my visit, I restated my long-standing support for the right, and indeed duty, of a State to promote national integration, in particular by supporting the acquisition of proficiency in the State language. At the same time, the State must respect and protect the right of the minority to maintain their cultural heritage and to receive adequate opportunities for instruction of and in their mother tongue.

I therefore support the right of the Government of Latvia to conduct this reform. However, I recognize that introducing a system of bilingual education is a complex, as well as an innovative, undertaking. It puts additional challenges on the authorities, teachers and pupils to ensure that the quality of education is not compromised. It is therefore important that all the necessary material and training are made available, and that sufficient quality checks are made in the affected schools at regular intervals.

I would like to commend Latvia for the efforts that the Government has made in the past months to improve communication with the minority population regarding this reform. I would also like to express my appreciation for the fact that the reform was introduced flexibly, taking into account the specific situation in each respective school. I must however stress that this program is an ongoing process which will not be completed for another three years and that the authorities will need to maintain a careful approach if the quality of education is not to be put at risk. There are a number of issues which need to be dealt with. I have therefore particularly stressed the need for a close and ongoing dialogue, including with the teachers, students and parents concerned.

I was pleased to note that the number of applications for citizenship, including the number of registrations of children has remained at a higher level than in the past. This is a welcome trend which may be partly due to Latvia's accession to the European Union. However, I believe that more must be done to encourage such applications since a large part of residents in Latvia still are non-citizens. It is crucial that all these applications should be speedily handled and that the Naturalization Board gets sufficient funds to avoid a back-log building up.

Furthermore, I again encouraged Latvia to study possibilities to increase the rights of non-citizens, especially by granting voting rights in municipal elections. Latvia would here follow a trend in the EU.

During my visit, I noted that there had been no progress on the ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. I reiterated my recommendation to Latvia to ratify the Convention, not least as I believe that such a ratification would send a positive signal to the minority community.

I remain concerned about the lack of understanding between the majority and the minority in Latvia and indeed the continuing tendency to polarization of views. While I am fully aware of the difficult history of Latvia which has contributed to shaping current views, I believe that it is essential that a process of dialogue is initiated in order to develop a basis of mutual understanding between the two sides. I am ready to provide my assistance for this purpose.

I look forward to continue my engagement with the Latvian Government.

Educational reform in Central Asia is, I believe, a priority not only as a means to accelerate development in the region but also as a way to strengthen security. Over the last year and a half I have been devoting considerable attention to this issue. In September I visited **Uzbekistan** to attend a conference that my Office was organising jointly with the Ministry of Public Education. The conference was devoted to exploring the ways in which social integration can be promoted in the context of educational modernization. This event was, in my view, a considerable success and I look forward to further practical co-operation with the authorities in Uzbekistan on this important issue.

As I have informed this meeting previously, I would welcome the opportunity to deepen my co-operation with the authorities in **Turkmenistan**. I last visited Turkmenistan in early November of 2003. I continue to stand ready for a further visit.

The HCNM has been involved in **Ukraine** for many years, especially with regard to the situation on the Crimean peninsula.

Following my visit to the country in September, I would like to commend the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities to integrate the Crimean Tatars who have returned from their places of deportation where they were sent to sixty years ago. These efforts are being appreciated both by the Crimean Tatar population and the international community.

However, I believe that the support of the international community for the authorities effort's to deal with issues as complex as the distribution of land, the participation of the minority community in public life and the role of the Crimean Tatar language as means of official communication on the peninsula remains essential for the success of social integration. I urge both participating states and other international organisations to continue and even increase their support for these efforts.

I stand ready for further co-operation with the authorities and the minority community on issues that my office has expertise in.

In the South Eastern Europe I continue to focus my attention mainly on the issue of education. **In F.Y. Republic of Macedonia** I remain involved and support the SEE University project. After this year enrolment, its student's population has exceeded 5000 (with almost 25% of non-Albanians – 75% Albanians). To my knowledge this is the largest undertaking by the OSCE with regard to higher education. The university has already significantly improved the existing ethnic under-representation in higher education in the country. I also work with the Ministry of Education on the founding of the new state University in Tetovo, in particular to ensure the multiethnic and multilingual approach to the teaching process, its future relations and complementarity with the SEE University, as well as marginalisation of radical elements. In co-operation with the OSCE Mission to Skopje and Amb. Pais, we look forward to supporting the follow up to my recommendations on inter-ethnic relations in primary and secondary schools.

In **Serbia and Montenegro**, besides contributing to the implementation of the Law on National Minorities, I have focused my attention on addressing the educational rights of the Albanian minority in South Serbia, *inter alia* contributing to the work of a commission for the development of history curricula in the Albanian language schools in the region. In **Kosovo**, I look forward to the outcome of the discussion on the Mission's Policy Paper on its role in youth and education issues, the field I have already offered my experience.

In **Croatia**, I concentrate on the implementation of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (CLNM), in particular the provisions regarding education and proportional representation of minorities in administration and judiciary, issues I intend to follow up during my incoming visit to Zagreb.

With regard to **Moldova** I have during the last four years been closely engaged in efforts to solve the dispute over the Moldovan schools in the Transdnestrian region which teach Moldovan/Romanian in the Latin script. I am deeply disappointed by the Transdnestrian authorities who continue to prevent hundreds of Moldovan children in Tiraspol from attending their school. Although some progress has been achieved in the past weeks, a lasting solution is not in sight. None of the Latin script schools has been provided with reliable legal and practical conditions for their operation. Harassment and intimidation of teachers and parents have not stopped. The Transdnestrian policy of suppressing the State language of the Republic of Moldova is unacceptable not only because it violates fundamental rights of ethnic Moldovans, but also for the reason that it impedes determining a special status for Transdnestria and bringing about a final conflict settlement in Moldova.