



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

## **THE POWER OF PREVENTION**

Panel presentation by  
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to the  
**Forum on Minority Issues**

**[Check against delivery]**

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Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

It is my pleasure to address this Forum and to kick off this first panel discussion.

When approaching the topic of Preventing and Addressing Violence and Atrocity Crimes Targeted against Minorities, what came first to my mind is that we cannot talk about this topic without talking about power. Indeed, minority rights can be seen as a way to ensure checks and balances in the power dynamics of society. I would like to discuss power in two senses: power when misused and abused, and power when used wisely and shared.

Because of the conflict prevention mandate of my Institution, I focus on situations when interethnic tensions have the potential to lead to conflict within or between States in the OSCE region. Rarely do conflicts flare up out of nowhere—there may be a spark, but usually they follow years or decades of exclusion, where some groups are gatekeepers to the corridors of power while others are left on the outside. Monopolization of power by one or a few groups leaves societies inherently unstable. Divisions can harden, eroding trust between groups and giving rise to mutual suspicion and the breakdown of dialogue.

In such situations, disruptions caused by political upheaval or resource shortages can quickly transform into conflicts between different groups in the absence of healthy governance systems, channels of communication and a culture of respect for diversity. There can be a temptation for those in power, when faced with adversity, to take the easy way out – blaming those who are in a weaker power position. In extreme cases, power over vulnerable groups is wielded in its worst form, with human rights violations and atrocities.

With the aim to prevent these situations from occurring, my Institution focuses on addressing long-term structural causes of conflict, working with OSCE participating States, civil society and other actors to help make diverse societies more resilient and responsive to the needs of all communities. This includes providing advice on legislation to make it consistent with minority rights obligations. It includes advice and assistance to States on ensuring that civil servants and law enforcement bodies are representative of the communities they serve and speak their languages. It includes work in the field of education, where ideas about “the other” can first take root if schools and education systems foster separation.

This work is particularly challenging in the context of the OSCE region, where the process of nation-building is still dynamic in a number of States. Efforts to consolidate national identities that focus on one community's ethnic identity while ignoring others can give rise to feelings of resentment rather than unity. Such efforts may be guided by short-term political considerations, a misperception that diversity is a weakness rather than a strength, or desires to redress distant or more recent historical injustices. The reasons States fail to promote an inclusive civic identity can even be understandable, but the consequences can be catastrophic.

That is why it is critical for authorities to use wisely the power that has been vested in them. Sovereign States have rights but they also have responsibilities and legal obligations, including the responsibility to protect human rights including minority rights, to practice democratic governance and not to discriminate. Promoting the integration of society is another important State responsibility, as stated in the *Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. This means the adoption and implementation of policies aimed at promoting integration in areas such as language, education, participation, media and access to justice. The *Ljubljana Guidelines* and my Institution's other thematic recommendations provide guidance to States on the development of such policies.

In the work of my Institution we have also seen how States can use their power beyond its jurisdiction, using so-called "kin" minorities in other States as an excuse for excessive intervention and even the provocation of violence. As noted in the *Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-state Relations*, concerns for minorities in other States can be legitimate but should be addressed in the frameworks and mechanisms provided by international law. Questions of motives and credibility arise when States demonstrate greater interest in minorities abroad than at home. And the international community has the responsibility to use the power at its disposal to stop abuses and atrocities before they occur.

The great Desmond Tutu once said that he told the apartheid government: "You may have the guns, you may have all this power, but you have already lost. Come: join the winning side." The winning side is where all members of society have a voice, where all enjoy equal access to opportunities and where lines are not drawn on the basis of racial, ethnic or other identities. I hope that in the course of this Forum, we will learn together about how we can all be on the winning side.

