



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

**INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION:
PREDISPOSED TO CONFLICT?**

Muller Lecture

by

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Check against delivery!

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the 1992 OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Prague, Hans van den Broek, then Dutch Foreign Minister and a founding father of the institution of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, successfully described or predicted, if you will, the nature of contemporary conflicts:

"Ethnic tensions, both within and between nations, will prove the most dangerous threat to stability and the common security on our continent in the years to come."

From the former Yugoslavia to the former Soviet Union, from Sri Lanka to Darfur and from Rwanda to Xinjiang, we have witnessed since 1992 how crippling inter-ethnic conflict is. Ethnic animosity implodes societies. It has devastating effects on the majority and minorities alike. It leaves them impoverished, bereft of education, sanitation and food. It deprives them of a future and leaves scars that need generations to heal.

Civil strife in one country often spills over to others. It draws neighbours in, often submerging entire regions in the misery of war and destruction.

The violent break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia brought home to all of us how explosive disputes between ethnic groups can be.

When, seventeen years ago, the CSCE, now the OSCE, created the institution of a High Commissioner on National Minorities – or HCNM – this office was the first instrument specifically designed to prevent ethnic conflict within States and to avert conflict between States over national minority issues.

The HCNM plays a preventive role by providing early warning and, as appropriate, early action at the earliest possible stage in regard to tensions involving national minority issues which have not yet developed beyond an early warning stage, but, in the judgment of the High Commissioner, have the potential to develop into a conflict within the OSCE area, affecting peace, stability or relations between participating States.

These words do not read like a novel, but they do quite shrewdly put the fundamentally humanitarian or human rights oriented principles of minority protection into a security context. In other words, the High Commissioner's mandate directs him to apply the international normative system relative to minority situations for the purpose of prevention of conflict in concrete cases.

This mandate is far-reaching. It allows me to investigate national minority issues within a State and is based on the particular principle of the OSCE *acquis* that "commitments undertaken in the field of human rights are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned." The rationale behind this principle is that issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law are of international concern, as respect for these rights and freedoms constitutes one of the pillars of international order.

The High Commissioner can act independently and does not need approval from the OSCE decision-making bodies or from the State or States concerned. This is crucial in order to be able to act in a timely manner.

It is important to note that not all minority issues fall within my mandate. Only such inter-ethnic issues which, in the judgement of the HCNM, have a potential to develop into a conflict are to be considered.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I received the invitation from your Society, I thought I should avoid an abstract talk. My job is rather practical. I actually spend most of my time examining minority issues first hand in the field. The former Soviet Union is one region I have visited many times since taking up the position as High Commissioner, so I have selected it as a case study for our discussion this evening.

The large swathe of land to the east of Riga, Warsaw and Bratislava is of great importance to the West. The former Soviet Union is a vital source of energy and natural resources. It is a major market for Western goods. It is a promising investment opportunity for Western banks

and entrepreneurs. The Netherlands, for example, is a leading trading partner with Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and many other countries of that region.

While business is exploring new worlds, public opinion is often ignorant about the complex challenges these countries are facing. We know a lot – particularly you in this country – about the wars in the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, we in the West are surprisingly unaware about such trouble spots as Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh or Crimea. It took a full-scale war last August to move conflicts over Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions to the top of the international agenda.

Today, let us together try to fill the information gap and investigate what we can do to prevent ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To understand ethnic cleavage in the former Soviet Union, we need to dig deep into history.

The Russian Empire gained most of the territories that are now independent States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. While its ethnic policy on the newly acquired lands differed, one thing is certain – ethnic diversity was not cherished or celebrated.

Any ethnic nationalisms that emerged in the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century were brutally suppressed. Even the most modest cultural, religious and educational rights were denied to the non-Russian subjects of the Russian Empire. Schooling in local languages was discontinued. Religious services in local languages were banned.

Once in full-swing, assimilation generated resentment and resistance. In 1830 and in 1863, uprisings by Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian nobility and peasants ended in bloodbaths. The Tsar's Governor General, Mikhail Muravyov, who was in charge of the 1863 operation, famously remarked after finishing his bloody business that "[w]hat the Russian bayonet did not accomplish, the Russian school will."

Assimilation continued to intensify and one of its prime manifestations was the 1876 Ems Edict by Tsar Alexander III, which banned the use of the Ukrainian language.

Faced with social and ethnic pressures, the Tsarist Government relaxed its ethnic policy somewhat, following the first Russian revolution in 1905. As a result, the press and publishing houses in minority languages flourished and ethnic mobilization amongst minorities stepped up.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By that time, another actor had emerged that would reshape inter-ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union, namely, the Communist Party. Lenin saw the tsarist repressive policies as an unprecedented opportunity. He described the Russian Empire as a "prison of nations" and invited its ethnic groups to join the struggle against tsarism. By embracing the doctrine of self-determination of nations, the Communists sought to exploit the Russian Empire's inherent weakness and to convert nascent national movements into Communist followers.

By and large, the Communists succeeded in drawing ethnic minorities into their ranks and splitting the nationalists. They made use of the overlap between the social and ethnic cleavage in the Russian Empire and advanced the idea of the world proletariat brotherhood, while denouncing "bourgeois nationalism."

In the wake of World War I and during Russia's civil war, anti-Communist minority movements tried to secede from Soviet Russia and establish their own nation-states. While some of these attempts succeeded (primarily in the Baltic region), the Communists frustrated these efforts in other cases by relying on their supporters amongst minorities.

At the end of the civil war, the Communist leadership instituted the first phase of its ethnic policy – indigenization or nativization. This policy sought to depart from the tsarist assimilationist past and to promote and support the development of minority cadres, languages and cultures. The rationale behind this new course was to counter the quest of ethnic minorities for independence by granting the forms, but not the contents, of nationhood.

The Communists believed that indigenization would help them win the hearts and minds of minorities. As a result of indigenization, the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities in the USSR were thriving by the end of the 1920s. A generation of poets, writers and musicians

burgeoned. Millions of minority peasants became literate by attending schools in their own language. The by-product of indigenization was also the emergence of the ethnically conscious Communist elite in the Soviet republics, which began to represent and defend republican interests.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These developments posed a threat to the Communist totalitarian ambition. The central party never intended that the native elites should represent their nations or should spearhead the awakening of ethnic consciousness. In a way, nativization was a marriage of convenience for the Communist leadership when it felt under strain. As it asserted its dominance over the country, this policy came to be seen as a burden or even a danger to the authority of the Communist Party.

In the early 1930s, Stalin reversed indigenization and orchestrated sweeping purges of regional communist leadership and intelligentsia under the slogan of fighting "bourgeois nationalism." The outcome of this onslaught was the destruction of ethnic elites that emerged in the 1920s. Soviet republics were reduced to nationhood that was merely folkloric façade.

In 1938, a new law made the study of Russian as a second language compulsory in all non-Russian schools. Political rhetoric also began to emphasize the leading role of the Russian people in the "brotherhood of nations."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Soviet ethnic policy of the 1930s and the 1940s should also be seen in the wider context. It was a time of major upheaval in the Soviet Union. Collectivization, industrialization and World War II had a profound impact on the ethnic make-up of the country. Millions of non-Russians were sent or exiled to Russia and Central Asia. Millions of Russians were settled in ethnic republics in order to assist Soviet administration and industrialization. In the midst of World War II, Stalin denounced entire ethnic groups as treacherous and deported them to Siberia and Central Asia. Various Caucasian peoples in Russia, Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Meskhetians in Georgia fell victim to this ethnic cleansing.

In the post-war years, Soviet ethnic policy saw further shifts towards assimilation. Khrushchev declared the emergence of the new community of peoples, a Soviet nation. This merger of nations into one single nation presupposed fluency of the entire population in one single language.

In 1958, the Soviet Education Act was amended. On the one hand, it acknowledged the long-standing Leninist principle that each child should be educated in his or her mother tongue. On the other hand, it insisted that the question of which languages children should learn or be instructed in was a matter of parental choice.¹ While parental choice is of course legitimate, we all know what the word "choice" actually meant at this time in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet republics therefore widely opposed it. It meant that new settlers into the Soviet republics no longer had to study the local language as a second language. It also meant that indigenous minorities ended up sending their children to Russian schools. The centre pressed all the Soviet republics to introduce legislation to reflect this change and forced it through in those that opposed it most vehemently.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a result of these changes, minority languages were gradually being squeezed out of education, public administration and broadcasting in favour of Russian. Many minority-language schools switched instruction to Russian; many universities stopped offering minority-language tuition; television in the Soviet republics reduced the number of minority-language broadcasts. Those who resisted assimilation and sought to preserve their ethnic roots were branded as "natsmeny" – a pejorative abbreviation of the phrase "national minority."

In 1977, the Soviet Union introduced its new Constitution. It had to be reproduced by all Soviet republics in respective republican Constitutions. For the first time in Soviet history, republican Constitutions contained no reference to the language of the titular republican group as the State language. The removal of this symbolic gesture caused further disillusionment and even evolved into open demonstrations in Georgia in April 1978.

¹ Smith, J. "Soviet Nationalities Policies" in *Encyclopedia of Russian History* (Macmillan Reference, 2003).

Surprisingly, Georgian was reinstated as the State language in the Georgian republican Constitution following these protests.

Creeping assimilation engendered a sense of injustice amongst the intelligentsia in the Soviet republics. It fuelled separatist sentiments just waiting for the opportunity to erupt.

By the time of Gorbachev's ascent to power, the Soviet leadership was convinced of its success in suppressing national identities and cleansing Soviet republics of their ethnic selves. Gorbachev and other ideologues of glasnost and democratization saw nationalism as no threat to the Soviet Union's existence.

They had, however, miscalculated the resilience of national identity and the enduring memories of short-lived nationhood and indigenization. Unrest in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in December 1986 signalled the onset of a tide of nationalism that swept across the USSR. What started as a movement in defence of the local culture and language soon took on a political dimension and articulated secessionist demands.

As the Soviet economy crumbled, ethnic conflicts erupted in Nagorno-Karabach and the Ferghana Valley. At the same time, the Soviet Government no longer had either the political muscle or the economic incentive to solve these conflicts. On the contrary, its attempts to violently suppress ethnic movements in the Baltics and in Georgia precipitated its demise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Having discussed at length the Soviet nationalities policy, let us now study its lingering legacy in current inter-ethnic relations in the region.

Stalin's national delimitation is the main culprit.

His project fashioned Soviet republics based on the identification of "leading" ethnic communities. It was, however, conducted in such a way that substantial national minority communities were created in each of the republics. Internal Soviet administrative boundaries mattered little. But when they became international borders, almost all States of the former Soviet Union became ethnically heterogeneous, with Armenia being the only exception. With

independence in 1991, inter-ethnic relations in the former USSR acquired an inter-State character.

The Soviet leadership also, knowingly or unknowingly, promoted the primordial notion of the nation. All members of a particular nation shared collective traits and characteristics, which could be positive or negative. As a result, entire ethnic groups could be declared unreliable and exiled.

Stalinist deportations produced enormous ethnic problems. When some of the exiled groups were allowed to return in the early 1960s, they found their homes and territories occupied by new residents belonging to another ethnic group. The deported peoples are struggling to return to their land, to restore their rights and to repossess their homes. This however generates tension with the new owners of another ethnicity.

Communist primordialism also challenges the social cohesion of newly independent States and compromises international security. In 1992, for instance, an ethnic Armenian in Georgia probably identified him- or herself more with Armenia than with Georgia. The same pattern is to be found throughout the former Soviet Union.

What is more dangerous is the fact that political elites tend to adopt this approach. For some politicians in Kyrgyzstan, for example, ethnic Kyrgyz in neighbouring States are of greater concern than the protection and promotion of minority rights in Kyrgyzstan. This school of thought uses the lack of respect – real or perceived – for kin-minority rights in other States as an excuse to suppress minority identity on its own turf. The propagation of this view in order to influence public opinion puts further strain on inter-ethnic relations at home and on relations with the neighbours.

The Soviet legacy is particularly devastating in education. The Soviet education system provided education on a segregated basis. Ukrainians tended to go to Ukrainian schools, Russians – to Russian schools, Uzbeks – to Uzbek schools and the list goes on. Following the 1958 education reform, children increasingly went to the Russian-language schools. The study of the particular republic's leading language was optional. The system was of little help in the promotion of inter-ethnic integration. Such a regime hardly contributed to the

development of tolerance and mutual understanding between young people of various ethnic backgrounds.

What is even more striking is that some Soviet republics supplied personnel, curricula and textbooks to their co-ethnics in other Soviet republics. For example, Uzbek-language schools in Kyrgyzstan were effectively a part of Uzbekistan's education system and vice versa. This complex network of mutual obligations vis-à-vis national minority schools existed throughout the country. Such an arrangement meant that minority-language schools in each of the Soviet republics effectively belonged to the education system of a neighbouring Soviet republic. The break-up of the Soviet Union led to the severance of this mutual obligation network.

Access by minority school graduates to university education has also been complicated. During Soviet times, most minority children were able to study in their kin-State without paying fees. With the introduction of international borders, this is no longer possible. Meanwhile, university education opportunities at home have also dwindled. This was the result of the reduction or discontinuation of university-level minority-language teaching. The introduction of a system of independent testing in some countries designed to measure the academic aptitude of university applicants was another cause. Such testing is usually conducted in the State (majority) language or Russian, which presents a challenge to children who have followed an entirely minority-language curriculum.

These disintegrative policies led to a catastrophic situation in 1992. First, national minorities in the newly independent States did not speak the State language. Second, national minorities were unaware of the history, geography and culture of the State in which they found themselves, following the demise of the USSR. Third, schoolchildren of various ethnic groups hardly met or interacted in the school environment. Fourth, the entire supply chain for minority-language schools broke down in 1992. As a result, these schools faced shortages in the supply of textbooks, teachers and in-service training. All this has had a detrimental effect on the quality of education in minority-language schools and, ultimately, on the career and life prospects of their graduates.

Segregation and increased assimilation in the late-Soviet period policies produced poorly developed States and weakly articulated notions of national identity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Policies that the leadership of some newly independent States pursued in the early 1990s were not helpful either. Little in the way of the integration necessary for long-term stability has been achieved. Furthermore, the failure to address the sources of discontent between majorities and minorities has led to the build-up of ethnic tensions in some critical areas.

The fragile nature of inter-ethnic relations in many parts of the region is being further threatened by the difficult socio-economic situation. The collapse of the Soviet economic system and the poor legacy in terms of economic infrastructure from that period has left many countries in poverty. In an environment of resource scarcity, access to wealth and opportunity has, in most cases, become linked to ethnic belonging. Employment, particularly in the public sector, is skewed in favour of persons claiming majority identity, notably in the police and security forces. Knowledge of the State language is increasingly being set as a prerequisite for employment in the state sector. At the same time, little is being done practically to spread knowledge of the State language among non-speakers.

In recent years, the pressure exerted on inter-ethnic relations by the difficult socio-economic situation has been compounded by political developments. In particular, there has been a tendency to put more and more stress on the core nations, their languages, cultures and history. A combination of bottom-up and top-down factors has promoted this process. Governments have sought to use nationalism to shore up their legitimacy in the face of economic difficulties.

Furthermore, important sections of the majority communities consider the correction of perceived historical injustices done to their nation to be a principal task of the governments of the newly independent States. Together, these factors have meant that the governments, to one degree or another, are supporting policies that encourage the assimilation of national minorities.

The domestic stress on advancing the interests of the titular nations within States has had an impact on external relations in the former Soviet Union. States are becoming engaged to an increasing degree with their ethnic kin through policies to extend privileges to co-ethnics outside the kin-State and by policies of ethnic repatriation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now come back to the title of my lecture. Are inter-ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union indeed predisposed to conflict? My answer is: not necessarily. Although ethnic groups may have a centuries-old history of difficult mutual relations, conflicts between such groups very often have more immediate political causes. This applies also to the former Soviet Union where the challenges and threats stem from the complex legacy of the USSR nationalities policy; from the excesses of nation-building in the wake of the USSR break-up; from intrusive policies by some kin-States in respect to their kin-minorities.

As elsewhere, the mobilization and manipulation of ethnic and national identity are functions of elite politics. Threats to identity, whether real or imagined, are often accentuated in order to promote narrow interests. Most ethnic conflicts are not "natural" or "inevitable" occurrences, even in the wake of dissolving multi-ethnic and multi-national state structures. "Ethnic conflicts are the result of extremist politics as well as the basis for future rehearsals of political extremism," according to the former HCNM, Minister Max van der Stoep. In such an environment, moderate forces in these countries are either forced aside or must reinvent themselves in more extremist terms.

The international community has to do whatever it can to ease the tension and help the countries tackle the problems they are experiencing.

As High Commissioner, I devote a lot of attention to these States. I travel to them regularly. I meet policymakers and minority leaders. I visit minority schools and talk to the teachers, children and their parents.

While situations in States differ, my general message is the same. The approach I advocate is integration with respect for diversity. Minority rights must be respected and promoted. Rights do, however, come with responsibilities: learning the State language, respecting the country's territorial integrity and understanding and appreciating its history.

Most frictions take place around the issue of language. Newly independent States have every right to choose their State language. We have to respect this right. At the same time, efforts to revive a particular language need not be made at the expense of minority languages.

Justice cannot be restored through injustice. Ethnic Russians, for example, who found themselves in the newly independent States in 1991, bear no responsibility for the tsarist or Soviet assimilation. Their linguistic rights should not fall prey to the vengeance of the new elites.

I try to convey to governments and minorities alike that there are innovative ways to deal with the language issue. The language dilemma is not a zero-sum game. One just needs to be creative.

Take broadcasting. It is vital that minorities know what is happening in their own country. News programmes in minority languages foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. They encourage participation in public life. They promote a sense of loyalty to the state.

Some countries see minority-language broadcasting as a threat and are reducing it. This is a short-sighted policy. It is much more prudent, for instance, to air the news in the State language with subtitles. This has the added advantage of promoting language fluency. Under this arrangement, both sides benefit.

Whenever a delegation from one of these States visits me here in the Netherlands, I recommend that they study the Dutch experience in Friesland, where news broadcasts and other programmes are widely subtitled into Frisian and vice versa.

The same logic of inclusion applies to the use of language in public administration. One can insist that all medical documents are made available in the State language. But isn't it sensible to announce a flu epidemic, for example, in a variety of languages used in the country? Isn't it logical to communicate emergency information about public utilities to minorities in these languages? Isn't it a sign of good governance when the police reach out to ethnic communities in their own languages?

Education is yet another area requiring an overhaul throughout the former Soviet Union. It is important to preserve minority language teaching in these countries. What is equally important, however, is to integrate minority children into the mainstream of society. This is not possible without a proper knowledge of the State language. Minorities will be marginalized and ghettoized if they fail to master the State language.

How do we reconcile these demands? Interactive, innovative methodologies of State language teaching would definitely help. Another creative solution is to introduce multilingual education whereby various subjects of the curriculum would be taught through the medium of different languages. All these projects need to be introduced gradually, through consultation and persuasion. A "big bang" approach would only heighten the tension.

Finally, participation is the key to inter-ethnic harmony. Be it in the parliament or police, a political party or the civil service, minorities need to feel a part of the society in which they live.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I try to support my recommendations by projects in the field. I am very keen to demonstrate that my advice is practical and implementable.

In Georgia, hundreds of non-Georgian civil servants in the Armenian-populated region of Samtskhe-Javakheti have attained proficiency in Georgian and progressed in their careers thanks to the HCNM language training. Similar projects are under way in Moldova and Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, with the help of a Dutch donation, the police now learn how to engage minorities through the participation of minorities in their training programmes. In Kazakhstan, the authorities have embraced the idea of subtitling and are now looking for ways to realize it. In Georgia, news broadcasts in minority languages are already a reality. In Ukraine's Crimea, schoolchildren are learning from an early age what it means to be tolerant and appreciative of other cultures. In Central Asia, I sponsor a regional dialogue on education so that countries can assist each other with minority textbooks, curricula and in-service training.

As High Commissioner, I am very grateful to the Dutch and other donors for their support of these initiatives.

These concrete projects help people understand that not only inter-ethnic cohabitation, but co-operation and interaction are within their reach. All these projects are small-scale and often function as pilot schemes prior to the implementation of a particular programme. The High Commissioner on National Minorities is not a surrogate for the State. It is the State's responsibility to take care of its entire population, including national minorities. This is why I am always adamant that governments are closely involved and that, eventually, they take over the responsibility for the projects.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our economies and our societies are increasingly intertwined. A sneeze in one place will cause a cold in another.

The international community has to help the former Soviet Union republics grapple with ethnic tensions. We need to be patient, persuasive and persistent. We need to point to our own bitter experiences and to recognize the post-Soviet States' achievements. We need to listen more and strengthen the real dialogue.

No doubt, international institutions are well placed to advance progressive ideas and defuse tensions. However, people-to-people contact is fundamental in this sort of dialogue, if it is to be sustainable. Your Society and other associations like yours can play an important role in this effort.

Thank you for your attention.