



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

Keynote speech  
by

**Lamberto Zannier**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the  
**United Nations Forum on Minority Issues**

**[Check against delivery]**

Geneva, Switzerland – 27 November 2019

*Excellencies,*

*UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Dr. Fernand de Varennnes,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*Colleagues,*

When I took over the mandate of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, just over a couple of years ago, I quickly realized how important education is in our work to prevent crises and conflict. In fact, my office has promoted education as an area of strategic importance for developing conflict prevention mechanisms and policies for more than 20 years. As early as in 1996, my predecessor Max van der Stoep launched a set of recommendations, *The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, which set out key principles in this field, principles that are still valid and relevant today and which inspire my engagement in this field. That is why I have decided to join our efforts with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennnes, and with many other stakeholders this year and contribute to the European and Asian Regional Forums by sharing best practices from the OSCE area, as well as presenting our initiatives in the education field. I am interested to hear the regional recommendations reflecting on human rights standards, including the rights of national minorities, which will feature in this year's Minority Forum.

Today and tomorrow, we have a common aim: we are looking for ways to further engage governments and other stakeholders to invest in education as a tool for conflict prevention. In this context, I would like to emphasize the importance of dialogue among all relevant actors on the promotion of effective policies, including in education, that respect and support diversity, and thereby promote inclusive and stable societies.

Our main task today is to raise awareness of how providing education in minority languages alongside opportunities for minorities to gain proficiency in the official language of the country where they reside can help build stable, integrated and cohesive societies. I appreciate the fact that this Forum provides a platform for an informal exchange on the practical challenges related to teaching in minority languages that

various stakeholders in different regions are facing. It also gives minority communities an opportunity to raise their concerns and for government representatives to assess and improve their language-education policies. In this context, the advice of the international institutions and experts that work in this field are of particular importance.

My office has strong expertise and many years of accumulated experience in the field of education as a tool for integration and conflict prevention. Our recommendations and guidelines – and in this context, beyond the Hague Recommendations, I am also referring to *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* and *The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations* – make the case for the relevance of minority education in conflict prevention. In particular, *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* recognize the special role of education within integration policies in the context of cross-community dialogue and interaction. Based on those standards, I have provided advice to a number of OSCE participating States with the aim of ensuring that the implementation of domestic reforms in education is in line with a balanced approach. Let me also point out that, although the text of these recommendations has not been agreed by OSCE participating States, they are accepted as authoritative documents, based on the expertise of my office, reflecting lessons learned and best practices observed, and benefitting from close co-operation with specialized research institutions and key partner organizations, such as the Council of Europe. As I promote their implementation, I regularly remind my interlocutors that integration is a two-way process, and respect for minority rights, including in education, are part and parcel of any successful integration policy.

During my country visits, I focus **on the language in which education is delivered**. I support governments in their endeavours to bridge linguistic divides. I encourage the authorities to support **national minorities' access to quality teaching** of the State language as well as education in minority languages. My institution provides long-standing support for policies aimed at overcoming segregation in education and wider society, while supporting efforts to promote cohesion and integration through

improving learning of the official language. I also provide advice on **how to balance** the preservation of culture and identity of minorities with the need for minorities to be fluent in the official language, or languages, in order for them to be fully engaged in public life and realize their full potential in society, wherever they live.

We have been **promoting approaches that favour multilingual education**. Countries and regions that embrace multilingualism tend to have better educational outcomes, perhaps reflecting a more accepting attitude to other languages. At the same time, I'm aware that solutions to the complex issues of national minority education are context-specific: HCNM recommendations cannot provide a universal solution to resolve all issues. They provide for a framework of dialogue that governments and national minorities can refer to when negotiating what is acceptable for both the majority and the minorities.

As I engage with many countries in my region, I have noticed that the importance of **investment in education policies that value diversity** is increasingly acknowledged, as our societies grow more diverse. However, this has still insufficiently materialized in practice, and has created a need to better showcase positive models, of which numerous examples exist. Still, as a result of increasing political polarization – both within and between States – many still believe that the only tool for integration is the promotion of the State language. As a result, education laws and reforms are still too often shaped with that objective in mind and implemented without effective consultations with minority communities. This has created, and is still creating, tensions and frictions within societies and between States. Together, we must join our efforts and expertise to demonstrate that in the long term only a balanced approach will produce stability and prevent future crises. I believe that here today we have an opportunity to influence government policies with sound and balanced recommendations in the field of education.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to your discussions.