Ethnic cleansing and integrating diversity: Interview with Knut Vollebaek, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

Walter Kemp1

He was Foreign Minister of Norway and OSCE Chairman-in-Office during the Kosovo crisis in 1999. He was one of the last people to call Slobodan Milosevic before NATO started to bomb Yugoslavia. And since July 2007 he has been OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Walter Kemp talks to Knut Vollebaek about ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, and integrating diversity in multi-ethnic societies.

What are your impressions after first few months as High Commissioner?
It has been an exciting time, even though I thought I knew the institution somewhat. In the past I had a close cooperation with Max van der Stoel, particularly when I was Chairman-in-Office (in 1999), and I realized at that time that the HCNM is an important institution. He also made my work easier. Sometimes I would arrive in a country just after he had visited, and it was a bit like following John the Baptist — he had prepared the way — and everyone was impressed and content with his recommendations. The mandate is an important one — highly relevant. The job is challenging, but very meaningful. It is a prime manifestation of conflict prevention, and I think slowly people are coming to realize the importance of preventing conflict.

Why do you think that this model of conflict prevention, this institution, has not been copied in other parts of the world?
This institution was created against the backdrop of violence in the Balkans in the 1990s, which shocked many people. I remember meeting with (former NATO Secretary-General) Manfred Worner the very morning after the Berlin Wall came down. He was a tough guy, but even he had tears in his eyes when the wall came down. We all thought that with the collapse of Communism and the end of divisions in Europe, peace would prevail, and that we were entering a new era — that things would change. But within less than two years, we were suddenly facing wars of the like that Europe had not seen since the Second World War. This made such an impact on Europeans that it was clear that we had to do something. There was such a drama, that drafters of the High Commissioner’s mandate were perhaps willing to go much further than would have been possible under more normal conditions. Perhaps that political will is...

1 Walter Kemp is Senior Advisor at the UN Office in Drugs and Crime and editor of Security and Human Rights.
lacking in other parts of the world. And you could argue, even in the OSCE area, that it would be hard to agree to the same mandate today if you were starting from scratch.

If the origins of the High Commissioner’s office stem from a specific set of historical circumstances, why is the HCNM still needed and relevant 15 years later in a much different Europe?

We haven’t been able to address all of the issues that we had hoped to address. For example, we see that in many places there are still challenges stemming from the remnants of the former Soviet Union, like the legacy of Stalin’s forced population transfers. Inter-ethnic issues are high on the agenda of countries in transition. And the rest of us should admit that also we need to more effectively integrate diversity in multi-ethnic societies, not only where there are historical groups, but even ‘new minorities’ or ‘non-traditional minorities’ and the new challenges that this presents in the context of globalization. There is a danger of conflict in many of our societies, and the High Commissioner has some tools and experience which could be helpful.

So is there a role for the High Commissioner West of Vienna?

Yes, because of the conflict prevention mandate that the High Commissioner has. That is reflected in a report that we wrote on integration issues in Western Europe. Of course, it is important to underline that there are a number of differences between so-called ‘new minorities’, and more traditional minorities, and we have to keep those in mind if we do work in this area. But I don’t think that governments should shy away from looking at this question just because it is politically sensitive. After all, many countries feel that their minority issues are sensitive, and are hesitant to have them addressed by the High Commissioner. Concretely, I think it could be useful for many countries to look at the many tools that the High Commissioner has developed and see how they can be applied, even in situations that may be different from those for which they were originally created. Also in countries with good legal frameworks, the challenge is to implement effective integration policies and strategies — and to take a practical approach. I stress that we are only at the beginning of this process, and it is important for us to make sure that we work closely with participating States, and with other OSCE institutions active in this field, for example the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in its work on religious tolerance, and promoting non-discrimination. This is crucial because I am often confronted with situations where ethnic and religious identity overlap, and this gives another dimension to conflict prevention.

Some would argue that nation-states are the strongest type of country, and that multi-ethnic states or federations are inherently unstable. Therefore we should not resist the break-up of multi-ethnic states, nor should we promote the fruitless task of integrating diversity. What do you think of this argument?