The challenge of diversity: Is integration an answer?

Knut Vollebaek

‘Integration’ is a relatively recent buzzword and as happens to such en vogue concepts, it has acquired many different, often contradictory, meanings. For some, integration signifies the promotion and accommodation of ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious diversity (hereinafter ‘cultural diversity’ or ‘diversity’); for others, it is a synonym for assimilation. In some instances, integration is applied in the context of immigrants who have yet to become nationals of their States of residence; in others, integration appears to be more relevant to traditional national minorities. In some academic writings, integration is used to mean acceptance and accommodation of cultural differences, in others it means the exact opposite and is understood to emphasize commonalities rather than differences. The ongoing resurgence of an integration discourse has been triggered mainly by debates surrounding immigration and its consequences for Western democracies. Yet the institution that I represent, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), has been promoting the notion of integration since the very beginning of its existence and has done so primarily in the context of state-building, democratic transition and post-conflict reconciliation.

Successive High Commissioners have promoted ‘integration with respect for diversity’ as an overarching strategy for the sustainable prevention of conflicts and consolidation of multi-ethnic societies. As an institution, the HCNM has accumulated considerable knowledge and experience in promoting and facilitating inclusion and participation for all members of society, while recognizing and accommodating their differences and simultaneously promoting inter-action between different groups. Given the divergent interpretations of integration and the way it is applied, I believe there is a danger of various actors, national and international, engaging in parallel discussions and sending disparate, if not conflicting messages. There is a need to assess and analyse both the conceptual and practical application of integration in different contexts, identifying existing overlaps and differences in order to develop better informed policy options. The aim of this article is to describe briefly the HCNM’s approach to integration, the context in which it has been developed and the wider analytical relevance it may have.

The challenge of diversity
Common to all the different interpretations of integration is the assumption that it is a response to the growing diversity of our societies. Diversity, ethno-cultural or confessional, has been characteristic of social relations for centuries. It is neither new nor unprecedented. In contrast, the notion of cultural uniformity is a relatively

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1 Ambassador Knut Vollebaek is High Commissioner on National Minorities of the OSCE.
recent construct linked to the establishment of nation States and to the concomitant rise of nationalism as a political ideology. Cultural uniformity within nation States is a myth, however, while diversity is a reality that most of us are happy to accept and embrace. Violence and conflicts often erupt precisely when people try to put the myth into practice and make the nation — defined in ethno-cultural terms — and the State congruent. This often happens in times of major international change accompanied by the formation of new States and the collapse of the old, mainly multi-ethnic empires. It was against such a background that my institution, the HCNM, was established and mandated to deal with intra-State tensions involving majority and minority communities that had the potential to threaten international security in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

The experience of the HCNM has shown that it is in the early stages of transition and democratization, when institutions are weak and nationalist mobilization strong, that managing diversity becomes particularly challenging. There is a risk of different identity groups building separate, enclosed societies with limited interaction and co-operation across group boundaries. In such cases, groups may also challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the State in which they reside, so further undermining the processes of consolidation. States that are weak and insecure fail to perform their duties and obligations, including the protection of human and minority rights, and pose a potential risk to the security and well-being of their own citizens along with others for whom they may be responsible. The most difficult challenge for any multi-ethnic State, therefore, is to integrate its own diversity in a way that upholds state integrity and sovereignty, while at the same time respecting differences in culture and identity.

It is my strong belief that a lack of integration potentially leading to segregation along ethnic lines carries a risk of conflict in multi-ethnic States. The weaker and the less secure such States are, the greater the risk. There are several reasons for this. First, a lack of integration increases the probability of discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, leading to their alienation and disenfranchisement. The line between separation as a form of accommodation and a form of exclusion is a very thin one. In fragile, post-conflict societies there is a strong tendency towards separation, which tends, in turn, to entrench ethnic differences and inhibits the development of an overarching and inclusive civic identity. Second, alienated minorities often feel that they have no stake in their respective wider societies and lack incentives to participate and contribute. As a result, State-building fails to become a joint project in which members of all ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious groups contribute to building a shared future. Ethnic relations under such circumstances often develop a zero-sum dimension whereby achievements of one group are seen to be at the expense of the interests of another and minor differences obscure common needs and goals. Third, minorities who feel excluded in States where they reside and who share a sense of ethno-cultural or religious belonging with majorities in other States tend to seek support from their so-called kin-States across the border and risk being ‘instrumentalized’ in political