

# BAKU DIALOGUES

## POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# The OSCE and Minorities in the Silk Road Region

## Fostering Social Cohesion and Integration

*Lamberto Zannier, with Eleonora Lotti*

At the beginning of the 1990s new conflicts erupted in Europe as new borders appeared on the map following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. As emerging states were striving to assert new identities (or revive old ones), various minorities found themselves living within new national borders, which in a number of cases provoked instability and conflict, with geopolitics complicating these dynamics even further. As quickly became apparent, some of these divisions were so deep that a number of those conflicts remain unresolved.

It was against this background that the OSCE participating States,

in a spirit of cooperation, decided almost three decades ago to establish the function of a High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). The HCNM has a two-fold mandate: firstly, to provide “early warning” at the first sign of imminent conflict in the OSCE area arising from tensions involving national minorities; secondly, to provide “early action” in regard to national minority issues that have the potential to develop into conflict.

This mandate takes the form of assisting OSCE participating States to develop and implement policies that facilitate the integration of diverse societies, which is key to conflict prevention. While the

protection of minority identities and rights is certainly a thread running through the HCNM’s work, minorities and the dynamics between minority and majority groups are approached from a conflict-prevention perspective: a clear recognition that at a time when the degree of diversity in our societies has dramatically increased, the promotion of policies that facilitate integration is one of the most effective tools for preventing crises and conflicts rooted in such diversity.

As the degree of geopolitical confrontation has steadily increased in recent years, international cooperation in preventing and resolving conflicts has become less straightforward, including in the OSCE area. In fact, classic inter-state conflict has almost disappeared around the world. Acute crises and conflicts have become increasingly hybrid and are often characterized by internal

strife, sometimes in the context of failed or dysfunctional states, or violent separatism, in some cases accompanied by quasi-military operations affecting civilian populations. Many societies remain

divided along ethnic, political, religious, historical, cultural, and linguistic lines. These fault lines can ignite crises and conflicts. In order to address them effectively, we have found that traditional, short-term conflict-prevention tools are often-times insufficient and in some cases plainly ineffective.

Population movements, including through immigration, further diversify the demographic composition of our societies, posing specific additional challenges to their cohesion. Against this backdrop, populist or nationalistic policies have found fertile ground in many OSCE participating States, further complicating the challenge of promoting the progressive integration

of societies in an inclusive manner through a broad and balanced range of policies. Along with the increasing appearance of inflammatory language in mainstream political discourse, hate speech

and hate crimes are on the rise. These dynamics have the potential to further marginalize the more vulnerable communities in a given society and, in some cases, can pave the way to radicalization and violent extremism.

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*Lamberto Zannier holds the rank of ambassador in the Italian diplomatic service and recently completed his term as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. He previously served as OSCE Secretary General after having held the rank of UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General as Head of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Eleonora Lotti serves as Personal Adviser to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.*

These political trends also affect national minorities, which increasingly look for support and protection from states with whom they share ethnic, linguistic, or cultural affinity (the so-called “kin-states”). We see many situations in the OSCE where national minorities resist integration, demanding levels of autonomy that would effectively isolate them from the rest of the society of the country where they reside. The space within which we can find common ground between different parties has shrunk. States are increasingly urging the international community to take action against other states’ policies that negatively affect “their” communities residing there, while, in some cases, resisting requests to vet their own policies affecting the national minority groups residing on their own territory.

This, in short, is the geopolitical landscape in which I operated throughout my three-year term as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, which recently came to an end. Within the OSCE space, successive High Commissioners have prioritized their geographical engagement based on various factors, including conflict potential; the level of access, dialogue, and leverage; and the availability of best practices that have the

potential to be successfully adapted to different contexts. Therefore, I did not simply engage with and visit a country because it might face or is facing an imminent risk of interethnic stability. A lot of my work involved engaging with specific countries to become better acquainted with existing regulatory frameworks to protect minority rights, to better understand and if necessary foster progress in relevant integration policies, and to explore and share best practices in key policy areas.

### Regional Overview

The eastern part of the OSCE space is an ethnically diverse region with strong traditions of peaceful interethnic coexistence and tolerance. The Caucasus region has a very rich and complex history as the strategic locus of important trade routes and civilizational exchanges between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea and across the Caucasus range. Early Arab historiographers referred to the Caucasus as the “mountain of tongues” to describe its incredible linguistic variety. The region has also been an area of geopolitical conflict, contested by various and successive empires that have frequently redefined its borders whilst contributing to further shaping its ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity.

Central Asia was a strategic plank of the ancient Silk Road that connected East and West: it saw the passage of many diverse peoples, which in turn created a mosaic of diversity that includes nomadic and settler populations, Turkic and Persian-speakers, living side by side in peace in the steppes and high mountains in the heart of Asia.

This entire area—which I understand some have recently taken to calling the Silk Road region—also became an object of imperial rivalries during the “Great Game” between Great Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century. Both the Caucasus and Central Asian regions were largely subsumed into the Russian Empire and later into the Soviet Union, which led to the transformation of the constituent republics during this period spanning almost a century, with mixed legacies. On the one hand, early Soviet policies encouraged nation-building within the USSR, promoting representatives of the so-called “titular” nation into lower-administrative levels of government. On the other hand, national aspirations were thwarted by drawing complex borders,

resettling populations, and employing other divide-and-rule tactics. Nonetheless, the attempt to create a common state identity, with Russian as a *lingua franca*, together with socio-economic and infrastructural development, helped make diverse peoples feel part of a common Soviet destiny.

The breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in a number of challenges in the Silk Road region, which still have repercussions today. New states emerged or regained their independence. Some states, like Tajikistan, descended into civil war along regional, ethnic, and ideological lines. Other Central Asian countries experienced flashes of interethnic violence,

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such as in the Fergana Valley in the 1990s, which reignited in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, claiming the lives of over 400 people and causing displacement. Internal fissures embroiled Georgia

in civil strife and protracted secessionist wars in the 1990s. Nationalist and breakaway aspirations were pitted against each other, drawing in Russian military interventions, and exposing latent and unresolved conflicts. These later

escalated into an armed conflict between Georgia and the Russian Federation in 2008, further estranging reconciliation prospects and leaving *de facto* minority populations stranded. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict started even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and regularly re-escalates, as in April 2016 and July 2020.

Added to the ever-present risk of latent conflicts reigniting, which is further complicated by geopolitics, we see that many countries in the Silk Road region also face the ongoing challenge of managing increasing diversity in their societies. To varying degrees, these states are still undergoing identity and nation-building processes, characterized by an ongoing tension between civic values, of which minority rights are a part, and ethno-centric narratives. As such, governments may find it difficult to reconcile ongoing efforts to unify their diverse societies through language, education, historical narratives, and symbols with the need to protect the multiple identities that have historically coexisted there.

While integration policies that seek to achieve a balance between these two imperatives are in some cases being developed, such efforts are often partial and implementation proves to be challenging.

We often see the securitization of national minority issues and the favor of approaches that focus on the containment of risks rather than prevention. Unresolved tensions and conflicts, as well as outstanding border demarcation and delimitation issues, further aggravate the tendency to securitize national minority issues. As a result, we see local conflicts sporadically emerging in border areas—namely around enclaves or exclaves, which are often inhabited by national minority communities—over access to land and resources. Concerns about the potential spread of Islamist radicalization, including in connection to conflicts in the Middle East, is another factor contributing to real and perceived security risks.

**G**eopolitics also play an important role in interethnic relations. Rivalries between regional and global players—be they Russia, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, or Iran—play out to varying degrees in the Silk Road region. Navigating between differing interests and positions, countries may find it difficult to achieve a balance in their respective foreign policy orientations.

In the South Caucasus, for example, while they play a mediation role, regional players also encroach on the latent conflicts in connection to breakaway entities like

Abkhazia, South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) and Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's proximity and historical ties to Central Asia translate into significant interests, including towards sizable ethnic-Russian communities residing in many countries of the region, in particular in Kazakhstan. China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, which aims at expanding Beijing's economic and geopolitical clout in the Silk Road region, has led to the acceleration of Chinese investment, along with influence, in some Central Asian countries, but also progressively in the South Caucasus. The proximity with China's problematic Xinjiang region, as well as with war-torn Afghanistan, which hosts significant ethnic Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek communities along border areas, also brings to the surface security issues in Central Asia. Similarly, the relative proximity of conflicts in the Middle East raises concerns of potential security spillover to the South Caucasus.

**I**f the interplay of such factors were not complicated enough, the impact of COVID-19 in recent months has added a new challenge to diverse societies in the region and beyond, and constituted an additional dimension to my work as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities at the tail end

of my mandate. Emergency measures to prevent and contain the spread of the virus, as well as longer-term policies to minimize the effects of the crisis, had exposed or further accentuated discrimination, shortcomings in governance, and existing structural imbalances in diverse societies.

The economic impact of the crisis, especially on border areas, which are often inhabited by minority communities, has been significant. I had been concerned by several incidents of discrimination against specific social groups accused of spreading the virus, including on social media. Frustration over the impact of COVID-19—and the perception that some governments may have been mismanaging the crisis—coupled with long-standing socio-economic grievances and discrimination against certain groups, had, in some contexts, increased resentment against the authorities and gave rise to protests or instability.

Cognizant of the security risks that this crisis presents, at the onset of the pandemic I issued a set of policy recommendations under the title “Streamlining Diversity: COVID-19 Measures that Support Social Cohesion.” This advice, which was based on existing guidance developed by the HCNM in a number of secto-



rial policy areas, called for non-discrimination and inclusivity as the driving principles of any response to the crisis.

By the end of my term, many countries had begun to move out of the emergency phase, with governments beginning to embark on efforts to develop sustainable policy solutions to mitigate the impact of the crisis and build preparedness for future possible relapses of the virus. Finding ways to do that in an inclusive way that builds social cohesion, rather than contributing to fragmentation, will remain a challenge for years to come.

### Prevention

The cumulative experience of successive High Commissioners demonstrates the centrality of minority issues to international peace and security. Indeed, present-day crises in the OSCE space often emerge over minority-related issues: legislation that is seen as infringing on rights, attempts by states to grant privileges and protection to “their” minorities residing abroad, and questions related to language, education, citizenship, and

historical legacies—just to name a few policy areas on which I regularly engaged with OSCE States.

However, in my experience, even in instances where minority issues are not the main cause of conflict, how states choose to handle diversity can determine how strong and resilient respective societies are to internal or external threats. This is why policies promoting a balanced management of diversity are a powerful structural and long-term conflict prevention tool, and hence one of the main pillars that had guided my work in the Silk Road region and beyond. There remains an urgent need to build resilient societies in order to protect ourselves from the risks that I have outlined above.

The main reference for this kind of policy support to participating States is a series of Recommendations and Guidelines that successive High Commissioners have developed in a number of specific sectorial areas over the past three decades. Drawing inspiration from international law and norms, these aim to share best practices encountered in OSCE participating States, based

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on the experience of the successive High Commissioners in their work directly engaging on these issues.

While these documents do not represent a consensual set of principles agreed upon by the participating States, an overall respect for the institution—grounded in the personal accountability of the High Commissioner and designed in cooperation with renowned experts and partners in the field—give these Recommendations and Guidelines authority and the ability to influence policies. I found that this technical and thematic approach was an effective way to address sensitive issues in a non-politicizing way, which had proven to be fundamental in building and maintaining trust—a cornerstone of the mandate of any OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

The thematic Recommendations and Guidelines range from an overview of the policies needed to promote the overall processes of integration (or the challenges of looking at national minority issues from the perspective of inter-state relations), to others which address more specific angles, such as education, language, participation, media, policing in multi-ethnic societies, or access to justice.

In practical terms, my team and I often presented contextually relevant thematic Recommendations

and Guidelines in our interactions with participating States, and offered advice on how these could be operationalized. In my experience, this thematic approach was exemplified through our programmatic activities. Pilot projects provided practical examples of what can be done in these thematic areas with built-in exit strategies that aimed at local ownership by national authorities and minority groups, sometimes augmented or reinforced with support from donor participating States.

The need to promote, contextualize, and give practical examples of the principles enshrined in the Guidelines and Recommendations guided much of my work in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Below I present a few examples of how we engaged in the region. These should not be considered in isolation; I had consistently advocated for comprehensive approaches that link policies in different thematic areas, feeling that this represented an effective way to build integration and cohesion. This is why, along with supporting the development of specific sectorial policies, my office invested resources in assisting countries in these regions to develop and implement comprehensive integration strategies, in line with The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies.

## Education

Education is an extremely effective sectorial policy that can promote balanced integration. The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities advise that education policies should strive to find an appropriate balance between respecting the right of persons belonging to minorities to be taught their culture and (in) their minority language. The idea is to enable them to maintain their identity as well as address the need to create a common educational space with equal opportunities for all to receive quality education.

Many of the states comprising the Silk Road region share a Soviet legacy of segregated minority schools. More recently, however, many countries have increased their respective investments in teaching the state language, which is important to enable national minorities to pursue higher education and, further, a career in their country. This is translating into an overall trend of reduced teaching in and of minority languages, which some see as a threat to minority identities. Education experts have identified multilingual education as an elegant way out of this puzzle, thus ensuring the promotion of state or official language(s) whilst preserving minority languages in

the school system. Over the years, successive High Commissioners have refined the OSCE's engagement in several participating States in the sustainable promotion of mother-tongue-based multilingual and multicultural education.

In Central Asia, support has been provided to education authorities' efforts to elaborate legal frameworks and policies for multilingual education; develop methodological materials for teacher training and train teaching staff at pilot schools and preschools; and bring education authorities and practitioners together to foster regional cooperation on multilingual education in regular summer schools and focal point meetings. This unique approach has been embodied in the HCNM Central Asia Education Programme (CAEP), which has become a flagship program of the Institution.

Currently in its third phase, this program operates with in-service training centers on the basis of Memoranda of Co-operation signed with the Ministries of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It supports mother-tongue-based multilingual education in schools and preschools with Uzbek, Uyghur, and Tajik languages of instruction in Kazakhstan; with Uzbek and Russian languages of

instruction in Kyrgyzstan; and with Uzbek language of instruction in some schools in Tajikistan. It provides support at the policy and practitioner levels to uphold the right to mother-tongue education and improve state-language proficiency. The program also produces methodological publications posted on its educational resource website.

This long-term engagement has had a positive impact. The program has supported the creation of a center for Uzbek-language textbook development and publishing in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The experience of minority schools in Kazakhstan in piloting mother tongue based multilingual education has shown how to implement trilingual education reform (teaching in Kazakh, Russian, and English) in minority schools, while ensuring a continuation of subject teaching in the minority mother tongue.

In Georgia, in the early 2000s we supported state language classes for ethnic Armenians compactly settled in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The authorities eventually took over this function via the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, providing language classes to civil servants in various minority-populated regions. Inspired by policy dialogues with successive High Commissioners, Georgia also established

the 1+4 Program, allowing minority students to improve their state language skills during a preparatory year and then continue with regular bachelor studies at selected universities. This helped motivate minority school graduates to stay on in Georgia for their higher education.

During my tenure as High Commissioner, we accompanied these processes by piloting multilingual education in schools with Armenian and Azerbaijani languages of instruction in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions of Georgia, respectively. While there was overall progress in state language acquisition by minority students, several challenges in terms of teacher capacity and resources remain. Recently, efforts were refocused to promote mother tongue-based multilingual education in selected schools and preschool institutions in these two minority-populated areas, also supporting the vision for minority education developed by the Georgian Ministry of Education.

## Language

The High Commissioner's approach to language follows the same principles enshrined in the promoted education policies. The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National

Minorities posit that state policies should balance the need for shared language(s) as a common basis for the integration and functioning of diverse societies—with the obligation to safeguard and promote linguistic diversity, including by protecting the linguistic rights of minorities.

This principle recognizes that language is a key component of identity, which, if threatened, can cause instability. At the same time, language, and, in this context, proficiency in the language(s) of the participating State where minorities live, is an essential vehicle towards their participation in the country's economic, social, and public life. This is why it is a vital element of any integration policy.

In the South Caucasus and Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *lingua franca* progressively shifted from Russian to the language of the “titular” majority, which in some cases needed to be revived. For national minorities, this often meant having to learn a new language. This was sometimes also accompanied by a reduced attention to the preservation and development of minority languages by countries engaged in nation-building.

There is, therefore, a need to continue promoting the state language as a key tool for integration but within a balanced approach that also safeguards the linguistic and education rights of national minorities. This approach to language had formed the basis of my policy dialogue with relevant authorities in the participating States of Central Asia as well as Georgia.

### Participation

The effective participation and representation of persons belonging to national minorities in public life was a main area of focus in my work as High Commissioner, as it is indicative of their level of inclusion and integration in society as a whole. My core message was that minority participation in decisionmaking is an asset that generates substantive gains both

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for the minorities themselves and the state in question. As such, I approached it not only from a rights-based perspective but also through a conflict-prevention lens.

A meaningful level of representation and participation of minorities in all aspects of a country's public life—such as in

elected assemblies, executive structures, the public sector, the courts, and the civil service—is vital to foster trust in the institutions of the state. This helps ensure ownership of decisionmaking processes by all members of society, which in turn positively affects social cohesion. I believe a balanced approach to education and language in diverse societies is a prerequisite to and starting point in ensuring participation and representation of all members of society, with respect to their own specific identities.

As mentioned earlier, participation of minorities in public life—is a vehicle towards greater social cohesion—is indeed one of the end goals of the policy advice we provided in these specific fields as well. The principles above are articulated in The Lund Guidelines on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, which marked its twentieth anniversary last November in Lund, Sweden.

The principles enshrined in the Lund Guidelines were at the heart of my policy dialogues with relevant authorities in the various OSCE participating States. For instance, on several occasions I inquired about the level of representation of persons belonging to national minorities in public services and parliaments and encouraged the collection of disaggregated data to

measure progress, while respecting the right to self-identification and privacy. Members of my staff also regularly took part in OSCE/ODIHR election observation missions, including in Central Asian countries and Georgia, to observe and assess the participation of national minorities in election processes.

In Georgia, over the past five years we promoted the political participation of national minorities by bringing them closer to mainstream political parties. Activities included conducting research and writing policy papers; discussing participation at multiparty roundtables where minority representatives engage with party leaders; supporting visits by party representatives to minority regions and visits by minority youth to the capital; engaging expert consultants to help political parties develop agendas for integration; and organizing minority youth internships in mainstream political parties. We also produced a video called Everyone's Voice Matters that highlighted the impact of this internship project on participants.

In the months preceding the conclusion of my term, the COVID-19 pandemic had come to show more starkly the importance of the participation of minority communities in economic life—an area that



had increasingly become a priority for me. Lockdown measures and border closures put a strain on the South Caucasus and Central Asia and particularly affected vulnerable communities, including national minorities. The latter are often disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled labor and the informal economy, or are located in cross-border areas with related economic activities. The absence of prior savings, combined with job losses, a reduction in wages and working hours, limited access to social protection benefits, and a reduction of remittances from abroad, were all shown to be factors that negatively affected already vulnerable communities.

### *Rule of law*

The principles of participation also apply to the judiciary and law-enforcement agencies. Here my guiding document was called the Recommendations on Policing in Multi-ethnic Societies. Therein, the theory was developed that when the police and military are representative of the composition of society and are responsive to the wishes and concerns of all ethnic communities, they have the potential to promote stability within the state and increase the state's legitimacy in the eyes of society, including among minorities.

A police service that is seen to incorporate sections of society that are otherwise excluded or marginalized, as well as one that invests in enhancing communication with all communities, will be more likely to secure the acceptance and cooperation of their members, which tends to lead to sustainability. This not only strengthens interethnic relations, but also increases the operational effectiveness of the police, improves intelligence-led policing and crime reporting, and enhances trust with national minorities.

The same applies to the judiciary. Lack of adequate representation of minority communities in the judiciary diminishes minorities' confidence in the justice system. In addition, factors such as the failure to adequately prosecute crimes that disproportionately affect minority communities, such as hate crimes committed against them by members of the majority, further undermine trust. This also diminishes the deterrent effect of the system. In multi-ethnic societies, the state should promote access to justice for national minorities through positive measures, such as removing disproportionate socio-economic barriers to accessing legal advice. These are some of the key elements of The Graz Recommendations on Access to Justice and National Minorities.

In Georgia, for example, we provided assistance to drafting the Law on Police. We focused on community policing, which has come to be reflected in the curriculum of the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. In Kyrgyzstan, between 2005 and 2009, we carried out a project promoting multi-ethnic policing in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior. My office later supported the Community Security Initiative (CSI), established in southern Kyrgyzstan following the 2010 Osh events, through activities aimed at enhancing cooperation and trust between law enforcement and minority populations. In Kazakhstan, we launched a capacity-building project on policing in multi-ethnic societies and a series of training sessions on the Policing Recommendations for senior and mid-level police officers at the Ministry of Internal Affairs Institute in Aktobe. During my last visit to Kazakhstan in September 2019, my office worked with partners to organize a workshop to present the OSCE's "community policing approach in multi-ethnic societies." Specifically on access

to justice, my staff had also hosted roundtables to present the Graz Recommendations in Central Asian countries and Georgia.

### *Media*

The Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media and the recent Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age advise that state policies should aim at building the capacity and awareness of the media to reflect and respond to the diversity within societies, including by promoting intercultural exchange and challenging negative stereotypes and ethnicity-based hatred.

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We had engaged with public broadcasters in Central Asia and Georgia to advocate for media content in minority languages, which should not only be restricted to folkloric topics, but rather include

a range of topics of public interest and reflect minority perspectives as much as possible. For example, we discussed multilingual subtitling and language quotas in broadcasting on television channels in Kazakhstan. We also supported



minority regional television stations in Georgia, as part of wider efforts to support media outlets created by minorities themselves.

As we move further into the digital age, I believe it will be important for media content relevant to minorities also to be represented on new platforms. As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, new media can easily become a vehicle for spreading hate speech, which often targets specific groups in society. It is therefore important to invest in shared media spaces that promote social cohesion and contribute to countering discrimination and ethnicity-based hatred.

### *Historical legacies*

Another recurring issue that I observed throughout the OSCE region, including most recently in connection with ongoing anti-racism movements, is the damaging impact of competing and confrontational historical narratives on interethnic relations. The way people understand, remember, and value history is an important factor in the shaping of identity. When approaching the past, one can often observe that people may glorify and commemorate their achievements, victories, and sufferings, while glossing over darker chapters revolving around the tragedies and suffering they may have endured or inflicted on others.

As a result, different groups often attribute different meanings to the same historical events, or simply end up focusing on different events. Disparities in the way people see and remember history can divide societies for decades or even centuries after the events in question had occurred, including along ethnic lines. This is what some call the “mirror of pride and pain,” where the pride of one group corresponds to the pain of the other.

All over the Silk Road region, memory and trauma related to the experience of conflict and displacement continue to play a key role in shaping historical narratives, which may pit communities against each other—both within and across borders. Sometimes the object of contention is a statue or a monument, or a toponym; at other times, the curriculum taught at school; or again the so-called “memory laws” through which governments may impose singular historical narratives and prohibit alternative interpretations of the past.

To overcome such issues, I called for inclusive approaches to history and memory that have the ability to unify rather than divide different groups in society. This principle is also enshrined in The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies, which indicate that “States should take due account of both

historical and contemporary community relations. State policies should aim to foster intercultural links and mutual recognition and the accommodation of all groups in society.”

A group of historians, experts, and I had been exploring good practices in this field. I was inspired, in part, to focus on this after my visit to Petropavlovsk in northern Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russians make up the majority of the population. I remember being struck by the many concrete examples of powerful symbols of interethnic unity that I found there, such as the Abay-Pushkin monument, dedicated to two of the most prominent Kazakh and Russian poets.

### *Geopolitical Realities*

Many of the countries in the Silk Road region have taken significant strides in the direction of devising integration strategies that contribute to inclusive societies. Challenges remain however, not least to resolve latent con-

licts, but also to implement, in a comprehensive way, inclusive policies that support social cohesion. I am proud to have had the opportunity to accompany them on this journey.

The work of the High Commissioner, however, does not take place in a political vacuum and relies upon the continuous support and cooperation of the OSCE participating States. In that sense, the institution’s Recommendations and Guidelines are only effective tools for conflict prevention if countries are willing to integrate them into their policies and operationalize them accordingly. The global geopolitical climate sometimes fails to facilitate these processes.

I remain convinced that there is a need to invest more in cooperative platforms as a way to counter trends towards geopolitical polarization. Existing tools for common reflection, dialogue, and concerted preventive action also need to be strengthened. The OSCE can and should remain a primary avenue for such cooperation. **BD**

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