

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

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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 Stoep, 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 Wörner 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

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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?

I think this is an academic debate which is not very interesting. If you look at most countries today, they are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, and becoming increasingly so because of globalization. This presents new challenges, but also new opportunities. And it does not necessarily follow that diversity leads to instability. Indeed, in today's situation the opposite is true. If you accept the premise that states must be ethnically homogeneous, then you have to carry out population transfers and ethnic cleansing. While it may be hard sometimes to solve minority issues, we can not wish away the multi-ethnic reality of our societies. So the challenge is to manage problems, and build a greater appreciation for diversity. After all, the economic development of Western Europe depends on multi-ethnicity. So there has to be a balance between development and social cohesion, which includes looking at immigration and integration. And again, I think the High Commissioner can be helpful.

How do you deal with the sense of stigma that some countries feel when dealing with the High Commissioner? And what kind of leverage do you have to get countries to follow your advice?

One reason that countries should listen to me is that there is a proven record of good results in what my predecessors have done, and that we can point to some recommendations that have worked. States should therefore realize the self-interest of protecting persons belonging to national minorities, and the obligations that they have taken upon themselves by being Parties to minority-related instruments. The fact that I have a conflict prevention mandate, rather than being a human rights watchdog, also makes me less threatening to some. So too does the underlining principle of confidentiality. My leverage comes from partnership, for example with the European Union, and the backing of the OSCE.

But if you become involved in a situation because of a potential threat to security is there not a risk that your very involvement could 'securitize' an issue?

This is a difficult question and depends on the specific context. I am aware of the risks, and sometimes we tread a fine line. Take the case of policing. We work with police in several OSCE countries to improve their skills in addressing minority issues. But in the process we must be careful that we simply do not provide useful tools without changing mentality. Furthermore we stress the standards and norms that countries should live up to, and we compliment the work of other institutions that address human rights more directly.

How do you get development banks, financial institutions and the private sector more involved in preventing conflict?

Prevention is a hard sell. It takes a great deal of courage and foresight for an institution or government to set aside money for conflict prevention rather than post-conflict rehabilitation or peace-keeping. There are so many urgent issues

for governments to address today that it is a low priority to invest in something that is off the radar screen. When we approach politicians or authorities for support on an issue, they sometimes say to us, we don't have a budget for this, we do not receive questions about this issue in parliament, there is nothing about it in the press, so I'm sorry you will have to wait. I think this is maybe one of my greatest challenges — to convince governments that conflict prevention is a very important investment in security, in development, and in stability.

Why do Norwegians understand this better than most? You have no doubt heard the joke that wherever there is a conflict, there is a Norwegian trying to solve it.

I am not certain that Norwegians do understand this better than most. However, our commitment — as I see it — stems from an interesting broad-based consensus for more than a hundred years between conservative Christian groups and the radical labour movement that solidarity work is important and a kind of obligation for us.

And then you discovered oil. . .

Well, yes, but even before Norway discovered oil, there was a strong urge to get involved. We started the first governmental development project in 1952 and the NGOs were involved long before that. This may have been perceived as altruism. Now there is a greater understanding that this is in fact realpolitik and in our national interest. We have seen how wars in far away places have a direct bearing on Norway because we then have to send peacekeepers, invest in peace-building, receive refugees, or we lose access to important markets. This has an impact on Norway's national security and economic interests. So world stability is in Norway's best interests. And I think that is the best way to get people to understand the merits of conflict prevention — and provide the political and economic resources needed to carry it out.

You have mentioned globalization a few times. The dark side of globalization is transnational organized crime. Where crime and conflict merge, it is sometimes difficult to separate greed from grievance, and what may appear to be an ethnic conflict has more to do with criminality under a nationalist cloak. Is this something that you come across in your work?

We are confronted with this problem. Sometimes minorities are portrayed as criminals or culprits of bad things that go on. We address it in the sense that we work with Ministries of the Interior and Justice, and police forces in order to help them work with ethnic groups, and to educate them on disassociating crime from ethnicity. Again, it's an issue of integration — to find ways of reducing social conflict.

Your work in the OSCE seems inextricably linked with the situation in Kosovo. During your first week as Chairman-in-Office (in January 1999), you went down to Kosovo, and the issue dominated the year of Norway's Chairmanship. Your first visit as High Commissioner on National Minorities was to Serbia to discuss ethnic tensions in Kosovo. You describe yourself as 'status neutral' on the Kosovo question. What is your role there?

The High Commissioner's mandate relates quite well to the situation in Kosovo, whatever status it has. That's why I felt very comfortable in telling my interlocutors in Kosovo that the advice that we provide applies under any circumstances. One of the imperatives for doing this goes back to 1999 when, as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, we were engaged in stopping ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. My present role is also to strive towards securing Kosovo as a multi-ethnic society.

How realistic was it to stop the Kosovo crisis with 1300 unarmed OSCE 'verifiers'?

To one extent it didn't work, because we had to go to war in the end. Indeed, because the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) did not manage to fulfil its mandate, the international community was engaged in negotiations to introduce an armed peacekeeping force — the issue came up at Rambouillet. But this was not something that Milosevic would accept. At the same time, not least because of Srebrenica, there was a sense that OSCE verifiers should not become non-active witnesses of atrocities. That's why NATO went in. It was a very difficult decision, but I think we did not have any other option in the end.

But without a mandate from the United Nations.

That's true, and I would have liked a stronger UN mandate. However, we had statements from the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the Security Council referring to the conflict as a threat to regional stability and we used what we call 'Chapter VII language' with reference to the UN Charter.

One way of accommodating legitimate minority grievances is to grant a degree of self-government, even autonomy. It strikes me as odd that with the High Commissioner's experience in this field (for example the Lund Recommendations), you are not involved in trying to thaw some of the frozen conflicts in the OSCE area which have to do with power-sharing.

The High Commissioner's mandate is for conflict prevention — early warning and early action — rather than crisis management. That doesn't mean that we are not involved in any of the frozen conflicts, but there are some limits because of my mandate and there is a useful division of labour with other international actors.

Back to Kosovo for a moment. You were Chairman-in-Office when the OSCE's Kosovo Verification Mission was withdrawn. Did you make that decision?

Yes, I remember it well. It was the night between the 19th and 20th of March 1999 — and the bombing started on the 24th. I was under a lot of pressure to withdraw at a much earlier stage, from countries that had personnel in the KVM. Violence was increasing against the KVM. But my line was that as long as there were negotiations going on, KVM should stay, because then there was still hope that a peaceful solution was possible. Withdrawal could create a situation on the ground that could jeopardize the negotiations. This was tough going, because there was a lot of opposition. When the negotiations broke up in Rambouillet, and there was nothing we could do anymore, my argument lost its power, and it became evident (from visits to the region) that the situation was getting worse, and that the local population had lost hope in KVM because it could not guarantee their security. Because of that I felt that there was no reason for KVM to be there anymore. After consultations with others, it was decided to withdraw — that was my decision as Chairman-in-Office.

Did you think that this would be the beginning of a war?

Yes. And I told Milosevic that, and he was unmoved. When the KVM was withdrawing, I said to him that I would not tolerate any kind of action against the OSCE convoy as it left Kosovo. In less than 24 hours, we had everyone out. Then I went back to NATO, to Javier Solana, and said we shouldn't give up, we have to give it one more try. So that is what I did, I contacted Milosevic again. I don't think he thought that we would withdraw. I said, now you see that we are serious, and I suggested that he should accept the proposed armed observer force. I called Milosevic on the morning of the 24th of March, and said that I had spoken with the Secretary-General of NATO. I said that he had one more chance as I had the assurances of the NATO Secretary-General, that there would be no bombing if he accepted the negotiated entry of an armed force. Milosevic said that there was no need, and that I was making up all these problems. When I said that Albanians were fleeing, he said that they were just going on a picnic. I remarked that people don't usually pile all of their belongings on to tractors when they go on a picnic. When I said that Serbs were burning houses, he said, 'no, they are just burning hay which is normal at this time of year'. When I said that there were too many soldiers in the region and this is a violation on the agreement, he said, 'oh, they are just there to protect you Mr. Vollebaek'. So I said, 'Mr. President this is a serious matter, if you don't address this, there is nothing more I can do, and I think the bombing will start soon'. He said, nonchalantly, 'let it be'. When I put down the receiver I was very depressed. That was around 11:00 on the 24th of March, and that night the bombing started.

Do you think there is a role now for Serbia as a 'kin-state' to support Serbs in Kosovo?

According to the Ahtisaari plan there certainly is a role for Serbia to support ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. We are working on a set of recommendations on the issue of kin-states, and I believe there is a role for kin-states, but it is important that this role is carried out in a way that does not create further conflict within and between states. It is definitely legitimate for a country to be interested in its people's situation in a neighbouring state, but interest does not imply a 'right' under international law. In other words, kin-states do not have the right to protect national minorities abroad, the protection is the responsibility of the States where minorities reside. It is also the responsibility of the international community to ensure that human rights, including minority rights, are respected and protected. Here again, kin-states can play a role as members of the international community. It should also be in the kin-state's interest to facilitate integration of minorities, including kin-minorities in societies of which they are part to the extent that they participate actively.

If the host state abrogates its responsibilities, whose job is it to protect national minorities?

We have to draw the attention of the international community to the problem, using multilateral institutions and organizations. It should also be in the interest of the kin-state to use these channels, since they would then have more leverage than simply taking up the issue bilaterally.

In 2005 you chaired the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons. What are your impressions on what has happened since then to strengthen the effectiveness of the OSCE?

The report was purposely short and practical in its approach. The point was to have something that was possible to implement. I think it is still relevant and I hope it is possible to find the political will to address the issues raised in the report.

But there isn't any political will and almost nothing in the report has been implemented.

I know. It comes back to the issue of the perception of the OSCE as a useful tool. I still think — otherwise I wouldn't be here — that the organization still has an important role to play in the OSCE region. The challenge for us on the inside is to make ourselves relevant to the extent that the participating States realize that we can make a difference. The European Union now plays a more important role than it used to, NATO has enlarged, Russia- US relations are different than before, so the geo-political context has changed. In the long run, I think the big powers would regret if they made decisions among themselves without pulling in the rest of us, because that is the only way that we can see ownership to these negotiations or agreements. The OSCE is still relevant, we just have to do better at making ourselves seen as relevant.