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The HCNM Persona and Quiet Diplomacy Over the Last 30 Years: Interviews with the Successive High Commissioners

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This contribution includes five interviews with the successive and current HCNMs, namely Rolf Ekéus, Knut Vollebaek, Astrid Thors, Lamberto Zannier, and Kairat Abdrakhmanov.

These interviews were conducted by Stéphanie Cramer Marsal, Independent Consultant, through online platforms or by telephone between February and April 2023. The interview with the present High Commissioner was done in writing.

These interviews are based on a set of questions exploring the triangular relations between the person/background, the mandate, and conflict prevention practice. They have undergone minimal editing so as to provide the reader with the HCNMs' personal reflections and experience in their own words. These reflections have fed into the analysis presented in this volume under the title: "The High Commissioner on National Minorities: Persona and Quiet Diplomacy" by Stephanie Cramer Marsal.

Rolf Ekéus

High Commissioner on National Minorities (2001-2007)

Interviewer: In 2001, you had a long diplomatic career behind you as a Swedish diplomat and had also been entrusted previously with an international mandate to chair the United Nations Commission on Iraqi disarmament. To what extent was the post of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities a logical move for you at that point in time? And could you tell us how this nomination came about?

Rolf Ekéus (RE): The Swedish Foreign Service had enormous respect for Max [van der Stoel] because of its fantastic co-operation with the Netherlands on issues of democracy in Southern Europe. At the time, the Swedish Foreign Minister worked closely with him on the process of democratization in Greece, but also in Spain and Portugal. Max was a highly respected figure in Sweden. He was a great inspiration for me. I was a young boy in his eyes, even if I had been around and relatively senior in the Swedish context (*laughing*). He knew about my work and he was very supportive of my appointment. He also understood that being from Sweden was a good thing. But of course, the decision to propose my candidacy was taken in Stockholm.

Did Max van der Stoel talk to you about this post and encourage you to be a candidate? What kind of exchanges were there at the time?

RE: As a young diplomat, I was a counsellor in the Swedish Embassy to the Netherlands. It was a wonderful and fascinating time for me. I really liked the Netherlands. I feel half Dutch in a sense. I may not speak Dutch so well, but I read Dutch literature in Dutch, not a translation. So, when I got the position and I was posted in The Hague, it was happiness for me. And with Max, we saw things the same way: we could understand each other very well, a sort of brotherly relation if you want. At the end, I think that all this made him positive and optimistic about me as his successor.

What were your views on the HCNM mandate then?

RE: The mandate was of course about democracy. What we talked about in fact was how to shape democracy in countries, especially in relation to the differences or tensions that may exist between majority and minorities communities. Like the Netherlands, Sweden had not had any serious problems or crisis involving majority-minority relations. There may have been some

issues but as HCNM, you don't deal with minority issues in your own country. But fundamentally, both the Netherlands and Sweden had a strong democratic base and I believe that it mattered for dealing with minority issues in Europe.

As you know, I came from the disarmament and the military-security policy area. Of course, national minority issues had a human dimension, but these were also issues entrenched in the security policy area. Max succeeded in keeping up that security dimension in addition to the human dimension. For me, that was the strength of that mandate.

Still on the mandate: it is a rather flexible mandate and is often described as potentially politically intrusive. To what extent was it a challenge to embrace that political dimension?

RE: I was a judge when I started my career. A formally appointed judge, having taken the oath to serve the law. But a few years later, I applied to both the Swedish Court of Appeal and the Foreign Ministry and while I was admitted to both, I decided to join the Foreign Ministry. I had different posts like in Bonn, Kenya, or Tanzania. But I recall being in Bonn in this fascinating time when Bonn was still the capital of [West] Germany and there was an intense spying activity there from both the East and the West. Later on, I became engaged on human rights issues. It is when I came back to Sweden that I moved to the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry and worked closely with the then Prime Minister, Olof Palme. At that point, I jumped into the high political waters. I believe that this was very useful for my work as HCNM: I brought some prestigious posts along and was therefore received and treated well in the OSCE. But it was not just about having had prestigious posts, it is also about doing the job and its practical implications: I was used to work internationally with heavyweight actors, not only supporting them but also understanding the high diplomacy and the interests' games being played and this in relation to disarmament but also regarding human rights issues including minority issues. This was of tremendous political significance for the post of HCNM.

If you reflect on your personal interactions with politicians, what do you think made politicians have trust in you and allow you to intervene on 'their own turf'?

RE: The good reputation of Sweden on human rights and humanitarian issues is one aspect. Therefore, coming from Sweden helped. I should add that during my time as HCNM, Sweden

was not a member of NATO, we were neutral or as it was called at that time, we were ‘non-aligned’. That of course made it easier in my interactions with Russia.

There is also the question of my past engagement. For example, Max [van der Stoel] or my colleagues did not succeed to enter Turkey. I managed to convince the Turkish authorities to visit their country as HCNM due to the co-operation I had with the Turkish authorities during my many years working on disarming Iraq. I had then cooperated with the Turkish military on intelligence matters. They were very appreciative of my work.

A very important part of my job during my time as HCNM was in the Baltic states. And as you know, Sweden and the Baltic states had common history. In Sweden, we had a very deep understanding about the geopolitics and security risks in that region. I think that I brought this understanding when dealing with Russia’s relations with the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia. I could place the issues raised by the Russian population there in that security dimension. A tremendous advantage for me was that I had established good relations on one side with these countries’ new governments and their leadership, and on the other side, I knew Sergey Lavrov well. We had worked closely on the issue of disarmament in Iraq. He was then Ambassador of the Russia Federation to the United Nations and was a top man in the UN Security Council (UNSC), having been President of the UNSC on several occasions between 1995-1999. As for me, I was a diplomat working for the UNSC in my capacity of Chairman of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq. We had almost daily contact, we had coffee together, etc. Normally the UNSC takes decisions on operations and their implementation is then handed over to the UN Secretariat. But at that time - in fact the only time in the history of the UN, decisions were handed over to a specific commission.

In 2004, Sergey Lavrov had just become Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. That was during my second mandate as HCNM. Of course, in his eyes, he was responsible for the Russian minorities in the three Baltic States. The challenge then was to have Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania develop their democracy with such a large Russian minority which was backed up by Russia. I developed excellent relations with the leadership in the three countries, also on a personal level. I became personal friends with the Foreign Ministers in these countries. I talked to the Russian minorities, I travelled to Moscow regularly and continued my personal contacts with Sergey Lavrov. I think that our greatest success was to allow these Russians to become nationals of these countries. The Russians had treated the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians terribly, so it was an extremely sensitive issue to discuss.

And how difficult was it to engage on these issues and to facilitate dialogue then?

RE: I had to find some solutions that could be agreed between Lavrov and the government in Moscow on one hand, and the leaders in Estonia and Latvia on the other hand. It worked out in quite a remarkable way. We managed to reach constructive solutions for the Russian minority in these countries and satisfy some of their demands in terms of education and language but still recognize[d] the importance of the State language. In fact, Sergey Lavrov and the government of the Russian Federation were surprised that solutions like that could be found. These were remarkable solutions, as you can notice today, there is still inter-ethnic harmony in these countries. It is not perfect of course, but there is a balanced approach on majority-minority relations and integration issues.

To what extent did you have the impression of skating on thin ice when facilitating dialogue on interethnic tensions? Are there instances where you felt that you had asked governments to stretch the bounds of the politically possible, or allowed minorities to place unreasonable demands?

RE: I don't think they would say so if you would ask the Baltic leaders. I think they had the feeling that we managed to neutralize the significance of Russian influence in their State by addressing the issues of the Russian minority in a balanced way. I don't think that they felt that I was too nice to the Russian Federation. But the question is important. I indicated that Sergey Lavrov was satisfied, but it was all the more important that Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were also.

Your work as High Commissioner involves intense travelling, it can be extremely demanding and exhausting. To what extent are you able to find the space and time to resource yourself, to think more clearly, and perhaps more creatively too?

RE: I had a wonderful team to help me deal with the work. Some of the staff had stayed after Max van der Stoep's time as HCNM. I had also newly-recruited staff working with me which helped to organize the work. We had a team for the Baltic states, we had a team for Central Asia, and a team for the ex-Yugoslavia. When I was heading the UN Commission on Iraq, I had the whole team of scientists working very closely together. We had team meetings every morning during which information was shared on the various weapons issues. But in The Hague, I couldn't keep the same system of group information. It was a highly professional

working culture, but it was more segmented and extremely cautious. In a way, it was interesting that my staff was more secretive than I was. I tried to keep everyone well-informed about all the details but yes, it was a challenge to keep these wonderful, idealistic, and hard-working persons cooperating with each other.

On a more personal note, I brought a piano to The Hague. That was a good thing for me. I would put on the earphones so I would not disturb my neighbors. I like to play at night. Playing music is important for me. It is important for keeping my calm.

And what about keeping the OSCE and its participating States informed?

RE: I was impressed to see that there was interest from the participating States in the OSCE to be regularly updated on my work. When I prepared for our conversation, I went through plenty of documents and realized how frequently I briefed the whole OSCE community. I remember also how it was appreciated. So, we had these sessions [at the Permanent Council] where I discussed my work and answered questions from participating States and updated them on my work. This gave me access to the whole community of OSCE participating States, including the political heavyweights. That helped greatly to get support for my work. Looking back, I think that this was quite a strong structure for an international organization, even better than the United Nations. But of course, we had a big player, the Russian Federation, that was involved in most things relating to countries in Eastern Europe and in the former Yugoslavia. But at the time, we managed to keep the Russian Federation disciplined enough not to destroy or dismantle our work.

Mandates of international institutions sometimes overlap, and a certain level of competition may exist between them. How did you handle this?

RE: There was naturally some competition with the Council of Europe. Obviously, the HCNM was most active on standard-setting: the HCNM had Recommendations on education, language, participation which were issued by Max [van der Stoep] and in my time, we worked on new Recommendations on media and policing. The HCNM and the OSCE were visible on human and minority rights. We in the HCNM had such a strong political mandate. The Council of Europe may not have liked that as they considered themselves the top organization on human rights. For me, the Council of Europe did good work on human rights, and I had full respect

for the ideas and principles that they formulated. But they may not have been as operational as in the OSCE. So, there were some sensitivities there.

Despite this, we managed to keep some harmony in our relations with the Council of Europe. And as we had some Swedes in high level positions in the Council of Europe, that made it easier for me to iron out possible differences.

To what extent do you need to be an optimist to be HCNM? And would you describe yourself as an optimistic person?

RE: I still feel very strong on working for peace, to prevent war and to prevent weapons of mass destruction. I have always tried to find solutions and negotiated with the Russian Federation and the United States on disarmament. As you probably know, as chairman of drafting the convention of chemical weapons, I have a paternal relation to that very important treaty. And I was heavily involved in developing the biological weapons convention.

What about finding solutions today?

RE: I now see great difficulties on how to formulate such solutions. In the present situation, we should continue to look for compromises without giving up important moral principles. And that's extremely difficult. The OSCE is treating all States on an equal footing. It has many potentials but sadly these have been neutralized.

But after my time as HCNM, I haven't given up on my hopes and continued working for peace. I became the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which [has] developed a focus on disarmament and developed high quality research. I have continued to follow the issues of disarmament and facilitated the start of the dialogue between the US and the Iranian leadership, managed to get the Russian Federation on board, as well as the United Kingdom and France. We did some good work which unfortunately stopped with the Trump administration.

What message would you like to extend to conclude this conversation?

RE: The security dimension of the HCNM: I believe that this is a good starting point for a discussion on the 30th anniversary of the institution. Europe managed to develop the idea that minority issues are significant issues for international security and conflict prevention. The HCNM mandate is based on that idea. Me and my colleagues were able to further develop that

idea based on what Max [van der Stoel] had already created. This was such an important breakthrough. And that is most important to reflect on the relevance of this idea today.

About launching further reflections on the institution: would you say that we should look into documenting the history of the institution beyond what was done for Max van der Stoel's time in the publication "Quiet Diplomacy in Action"?

RE: I have gathered a lot of materials here with me. Notes, briefings, speeches. There is so much more to tell that is important for us to look back at. So, yes, it would be good to continue to have the history of the institution being documented and have my time covered.

Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (2007-2013)

Interviewer: When you took the position of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 2007, you had already a long diplomatic career behind you. To what extent was taking up that mandate a logical move at this point in time? Did you have any hesitation?

Knut Vollebaek (KV): I was Minister of Foreign Affairs up until 2000, before I was appointed Ambassador to the United States in 2001. I stayed for six and a half years in the US. This was a long posting and there were already talks about my next assignments, possibly in Geneva or in Copenhagen. Then came this suggestion that I should be a candidate for the post of High Commissioner. I knew the position from my time as Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE in 1999 and I knew Max [van der Stoep]. I was familiar with his work, and I was rather impressed with what he had achieved. I saw the post of the HCNM as a unique and very useful instrument of the OSCE. I therefore did not have to think too much before I accepted Norway's proposal that I should be a candidate. However, it was not plain sailing: there were some other contenders to the post, including some very strong candidates. It was therefore not obvious that I would be elected. So, when I finally was, I felt grateful.

To what extent was it a challenge to start your own mandate with such a highly regarded legacy of the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoep? Could it be that your work was overshadowed by Max van der Stoep?

KV: If I had come immediately after Max van der Stoep that might have been a challenge. But as you know, Rolf [Ekéus] was High Commissioner after Max so I knew that it was possible also for other personalities to do this job. I am certain that Rolf Ekéus will agree with me, that rather than finding Max's legacy challenging, it was inspiring. I was very impressed with Max's work. That work gave me a sense of direction. I believe that it was very important that he was the first High Commissioner: his legacy was strong and showed us that with good work, willingness to get involved and ability to find solutions that job could be done.

Max passed away during my period as High Commissioner, but during most of my years in The Hague, he was still coming to the office, picking up his newspapers every Saturday. He had given clear instructions that the newspapers had to be left in the office for

him to pick them up that day. He still had a key to the office. We had luncheons together from time to time, and he was always very keen to follow up with me on the work, asking me what I was involved in and how I saw things. He was also asking how the Dutch were treating me and the Office. He stayed involved in a very nice and caring way. He was like a father figure. I suppose that the HCNM was like his child. He had shaped it in many ways being the first High Commissioner and was keen to stay engaged which I regarded as an expression of positive interest and support more than anything else.

The High Commissioner is described as an instrument of quiet diplomacy, which very much fitted the personality of Max van der Stoel. How did you deal with this quiet diplomacy approach? Was it a good fit for you too?

KV: The quiet diplomacy approach might be difficult for some politicians. It is true that I had been a politician on two occasions: Deputy Foreign Minister in 1989-1990 and then Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997 to 2000. But I like to say that I am more a diplomat than a politician. I wasn't a career politician, but circumstances brought me there. My career was mainly one of a diplomat. I suppose diplomats are more keen to do a good job than seeking the limelight. At the same time, I believe that it was important to have this political background because you are dealing with politicians and undoubtedly, a political background helps. Having been a politician may also give you a kind of status or position that allows you to get access. But I think the experience of a diplomat is equally useful for the HCNM activities because you need to work a lot behind the scene and try to find compromises and agreeable solutions. Politicians are often more inclined to insist on publicity in order to gather support. As a diplomat you do not need publicity, so 'quiet diplomacy' was fine with me.

We talked earlier about Max van der Stoel and his legacy. Latvia was a country where Max van der Stoel had been most active. When I went there, the Latvian press had written that there was a new High Commissioner coming. They were wondering what he was like. After my visit, they concluded that I was obviously just "another Max van der Stoel". I took this as a compliment, even though it obviously wasn't meant to be one. I remember that there was even a cartoon about me in the Latvian press. I believe there was a need to make a little bit of a mockery of me to convey this idea that I didn't understand the situation in Latvia or rather the way Latvia would have liked me to understand it.

Was there some kind of a little voice in the back of your head that provided you reassurances, support, and inspiration in difficult negotiations?

KV: There are different tools here. My previous experience with the type of conflict that the High Commissioner deals with was very useful. I was negotiating a peace agreement between the Government of Croatia and the splinter Republic of Serbian Krajina in 1993. And then having also chaired the OSCE in 1999 as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway was of great help: I had been travelling a lot in the former Yugoslavia, I knew the issues there, I had met the politicians of the region and they also knew me, to the extent that made it easier to meet again in my new position as HCNM. The same went for other regions of the OSCE. The Norwegian Chairmanship of the OSCE gave me great insights into the dynamics of the regional conflicts, as well as into the OSCE as an organization including the special mandate of the HCNM. This was helpful in positioning the HCNM in relationship to other OSCE actors.

Talking about a ‘little voice’, I would claim an important source of inspiration for me, was my staff. I had a fantastic group of people around me. I didn't do this job on my own. I had great inputs from the staff, they were experts on the subjects we dealt with, and I felt confident with the quality of their information and reasoning. And I think that is the most important thing: when you are met with opposition, which is rather common in the context of the HCNM, I could still be confident that my arguments were solid, that they were based on real facts and good judgement. It was not a question of being right *per se*. The most important is that you're not put off by somebody countering you and creating a doubt in your own line of arguments. If that is the case, you are not only becoming much weaker as a negotiator, but your interlocutors may lose confidence in you because you leave the impression that you don't know your subject. That is why having good advisers and listening to them is so important.

The High Commissioner's mandate leaves you a lot of room for manoeuvre and a lot relies on your political judgment. You have advisers saying you should do this or that, other contacts may tell you something different. To what extent did you make your decisions based on your political instincts?

Any decision should be based on solid facts and sound judgement. I suppose my political experience came in as a useful background in order to understand the dynamics in a political situation and what is possible to achieve. At times, experts or academics may be putting forward proposals in absolute terms, with the rights and the wrongs clearly spelled out.

As a politician, you will have to find solutions that might not necessarily be either of these options presented to you. As a young man, I used to have clear ideas of black and white. In my older days, I realize that most things are grey. Then I try to go with the lightest grey. But I hope that my decisions still were more based on rules or principles rather than political instincts. I would ask my advisers and myself if there were any international law or principles applying to the specific situation we worked on. What does this or that convention say on such or such issue? Then I would try to find a possible way out which would be closest to these rules or principles. You know that compromises will be needed but there are limits to your compromises.

What do you believe made politicians letting you enter their own turf and having trust in your interventions on politically sensitive issues such as minority issues ?

KV: I suppose that it might be a combination of background and personality. Obviously, if they had known me and did not like me, it wouldn't have been very helpful (*laughs*). But we were fortunate with the Norwegian Chairmanship in the OSCE: we managed to reach some important decisions at the Istanbul Summit in 1999. There was an experience that the Norwegian chairmanship was trustworthy and principled even under difficult circumstances. An example might be precisely the Istanbul Summit. As we reached agreements after difficult negotiations, the Russian Delegation claimed that there had been a misunderstanding when Russia went along and voted "yes". The representatives insisted that the voting should be opened again. When I refused, the reaction was very strong and the Russian delegation left the Summit. Half a year later I was in Moscow. I was no longer Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway. This was a private visit: I had been invited to address the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow to talk about the OSCE. The same Deputy Foreign Minister who warned me that I had ruined the OSCE at the Istanbul Summit, was at the Academy to introduce me. I thanked him for his presence and told him that he didn't need to do this. But then he said that he wanted to do it. He explained to me how important I had been for the OSCE because I had been principled and did not deviate from these principles when asked to. I was speechless. But it showed me that even if people strongly disagree with you, if they experience that you are not fooling them, then they can work with you. If you, on the other hand, change agreements or misrepresent them in public, you cannot expect people to have confidence in you in the future. I believe you then have lost your role as an honest broker. The High Commissioner doesn't have an

enforcement mechanism. It doesn't have sticks, it has only carrot[s], and good friends in the OSCE are important.

To what extent did you encounter challenges in building this kind of interinstitutional cooperation and did you see an evolution during your two mandates?

KV: In the HCNM, we worked very closely with the two other independent institutions, the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RoFM) and the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). I did not have a stick, but they did. Working together we could develop both carrots and sticks. While both ODIHR and RoFM are more public and vocal in their guidance and even criticism of governments, I could work behind the scene and assist the governments in fulfilling the demands made by the two other institutions. This co-operation might depend on personal relationships. I was fortunate to have good relations with my colleagues, and I believe that is important in order to fulfil our mandates.

I also believe that the Chair of the OSCE has an important role to play, and that the Chair should lend strong support to the Institutions as independent organs of the OSCE. I believe the Chair should come from a country that is not itself involved in conflicts in the OSCE region. Domestic issues might also hamper the efficiency of a chairperson.

As Foreign Minister of Norway, I dedicated almost half of my time to the OSCE in 1999 because of the conflict in Kosovo. I also tried not to mix the bilateral role of Foreign Minister and the role as the OSCE Chairperson when I visited participating States on behalf of the Organization. I believe such a distinction is important in order to create the necessary trust and credibility.

And what about the cooperation beyond the OSCE?

KV: There was some competition with the Council of Europe. That might be unavoidable. However, at the same time the mandates are to some extent complimentary. I used to say that the Council of Europe is setting the principles and the rules, and then the OSCE takes you by the hand and lead you to “the promised land.” At times, I believe the Council of Europe found us too pragmatic though. I did have a couple of meetings with the Council of Europe’s Secretary General and with the Human Rights Commissioner where we tried to sort out these differences. I believe we did manage to do that.

In my time, the HCNM had a very close co-operation with the European Union. Several countries were in the process of seeking EU membership. In order to be accepted by the EU, the countries had to fulfil a number of obligations in line with the HCNM advice. That was very helpful to us. I remember very well an early visit to a country that had just become member of the EU where the Foreign Minister with great surprise asked me why I did visit the country since it already was a member. I then took on my schoolmaster role to explain that interethnic relations were not solved once and for all, and that the Minister had to think of these issues every morning when waking up (*laughs*). We very well knew that the process of getting into the European Union was an important phase for reforms on some key issues and the cooperation with the various institutions that were dealing with some of the same issues were useful for achieving them.

At the same time, how did you deal with the challenges of passing some of the difficult messages when the leverage or interest is not there, and you see a situation continuously deteriorating? Were there cases when interlocutors may have felt you had been too alarmist and felt a certain loneliness in your work?

KV: To a certain extent, you work with this continuous feeling of loneliness. But that started before being HCNM. Already in 1999 when I was Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE, I was quite alarmed by the situation in Central Asia, and I conveyed this to some of my European colleagues. I told them that they should focus on Central Asia as the interethnic relations there could develop into conflicts like those we had seen in the Balkans. In essence, their replies were: first, they had a lot on their agenda, they were so involved in the Balkans and did not have the resources to divert to another region. Second, they had not had a question in their Parliaments about Central Asia, so why should they bother? And third, they hadn't read any article in the press about Central Asia. In sum, this was not an issue in their capitals. So yes, working on preventing conflict is indeed very lonely. Firstly, as a politician or as a Foreign Minister, you don't get votes because of talking about things that haven't yet happened. Secondly, it will be quite a challenge to get funds from your Ministry of Finance. And thirdly, it does not make you very popular to be pressing on issues that most people do not care about. So, you must be aware of all of this. You may use past events and experiences to a certain degree and give examples of how disastrous the lack of prevention has been in order to get support. We used the experience of the Balkans in my time to call on countries to intervene in a timely manner so that we could avoid similar situations. We highlighted the disastrous

consequences if nothing is done to reduce interethnic tension. We underlined all the lives lost, the costs of rebuilding a country or a region for that matter after a conflict and the need to accommodate refugees. Prevention may not be a popular issue, but it is actually quite important for our countries and the lives of our local communities in the long run.

The lack of follow-up to your warnings, this loneliness – all of this could be distressing. To what extent do you need to be an optimistic person to hold this post ? And what would drive your optimism?

KV: I may quote my good friend Madeleine Albright who left us last year. She used to say: “I’m an optimist who worries a lot”. I think that there is a balancing act between being a naive optimist and a realistic pessimist. A realistic optimist might be the ideal combination. You need to believe in what you are doing first and, in that respect, believing in the HCNM mandate is fundamental. The driving force is both the examples of the serious consequences of not achieving the results you want and believe are correct and good, and also the examples of good results, not matter how small that they might be.

How did you manage to keep an optimistic attitude and energy amid all the turmoil, the high pace of travels, the pressure? Was there something that helped you there?

KV: The work gave me that energy. At some point, my assistant told me that I had 250 traveling days a year and that my wife would leave me for good if I would continue like that (*laughs*). I am afraid that I continued travelling, but fortunately my wife did not leave me.

As I already underlined, the work itself gave me energy and motivation. I suppose I have to say that being Foreign Minister is the top of my career. However, the position as High Commissioner was very rewarding, because I felt that I could make a difference for people in spite of all the problems and obstacles we were faced with. One of my earliest travels was to Georgia, where I visited some of the Armenian-populated areas. I went to a small and remote village and visited the school where everything seemed to be falling apart. We met with some schoolteachers and I understood how important that meeting was to them. They were seen. They were heard. We listened and tried to understand. We could be a kind of go-between between them and the government. That role was meaningful to me. I must admit that I prefer field visits to conferences. In spite of good decisions made around conference tables, they risk being irrelevant to those they are meant to help. To be in the field and try to understand the

problems as they are experienced by people themselves, I believe that I, at least sometimes, could be instrumental in conflict prevention, which was my mandate. No doubt that gave me energy.

To what extent have discussions on issues of minority rights, integration and diversity taking place back at home influenced your approach as High Commissioner?

KV: For better or worse, you bring with you your heritage or background. I am sure I did the same. This may be useful at times. It may also be a problem to draw too much from your own experience and your own background. I used “my heritage” sometimes as High Commissioner in my discussions, mentioning for example Norway’s approach to our national minorities and to the indigenous Sami people. Using Norway as an example was meant to show that we had many shortcomings, and that Norway has had to ask forgiveness for bad behaviour and forced assimilation over the years. At the same time, I believe we had some good experiences that I could use as examples for others. One has to be careful not to be perceived as pretending to be somebody coming from ‘the perfect solution country’, trying to export whatever you have to other countries. If you do that, the communication line will be broken.

More importantly for my work, I found that having the political support of participating States and knowing that they cared for the institution was essential. I felt that some countries had given up on the OSCE. Even in my own country, Norway, the OSCE was not high on the political agenda. Allow me here to give some credit to Sweden, whose support was extremely important in my time. I remember, for example, that the Swedish representative asked me how Sweden could best support my work through their interventions in the Permanent Council in Vienna. This approach mattered.

To what extent coming from Norway also played a role in the way people perceived you, trusted you and gave you access?

KV: There was this sort of unwritten rule in the OSCE that representatives from big countries should not take important positions since they may be perceived as having more difficult political baggage than representatives from smaller countries. So, coming from small and well-functioning countries is important, and I believe that coming from Norway at that time, at least, was not to my disadvantage. Norway is generally not perceived as having a hidden agenda. That is important.

To what extent did you have the impression of skating on thin ice when facilitating dialogue on inter-ethnic tensions? Are there instances where you feel that you have asked Governments to stretch the bounds of the politically possible, or allowed minorities to place unreasonable demands?

KV: I believe that we tried to be rather even-handed. The High Commissioner is not an ombudsperson for minorities. He or she is the High Commissioner on National Minorities, not for National Minorities. That means that we have to try to find a solution amenable both to the majority and the minorities. I did push governments, but I have a hard time thinking of unreasonable demands. We also, at times, told minorities that they had to adjust to the majority around them in order to play a meaningful role in society. One way to play such a role was through mastering the State language. That is why we placed such great importance on education and language training.

And what would be your greatest frustration in this respect if you can share that?

KV: Frustrations cannot be avoided. Just now we live through a disastrous war in Europe. We see how some European institutions are powerless, at least for the time being. They were established on the backdrop of other wars, beginning with World War II, in order to create mechanisms for conflict resolution. The frustration is that these institutions and instruments are not used. The frustration is the lack of political will. The HCNM could not have stopped the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But we know that interethnic tension is a source of conflict in very many European countries. We also know that cross-border activity, so called kin-state activity, is a source of conflict. That is why we also came up with a number of thematic guidelines both for domestic and cross-border behaviour. It is frustrating to see that these guidelines are ignored when we know how useful they could have been.

To conclude on a positive note, were there moment (s) of great satisfaction, those moments where you felt your work led to something good.

KV: I cannot point to just one example, but what I felt made me optimistic about the future was my meetings with representatives from civil society. I met fantastic people that dedicated their lives to improving the situation in their countries. That was extremely inspiring. I do hope that our support gave them motivation to continue their work. Their work gave me at least motivation to continue mine. Some of them could risk retaliation from talking to me and

presenting their complaints, like representatives of the Georgian or Mingrelian population in the breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia. They obviously believed in what they were fighting for when it came to language and culture. I was very happy to support them. But I also knew that the local authorities might come after them. And they did. This was a dilemma for our activities. However, their courage, no doubt, gave us inspiration to support them as much as we could. I believe that the hope in many of the OSCE participating States lies with the representatives of the civil society.

Astrid Thors

High Commissioner on National Minorities (2013-2016)

Interviewer: Back in 2013, when you took up the position of HCNM, you had already a long political career: you had been a member of the Finnish Parliament, a member of the European Parliament, and Minister of Migration and European Affairs. To what extent was taking up that mandate a logical step for you? Did you have some hesitation?

Astrid Thors (AT): I had never imagined myself in that role. I remember that as a young person active with the Swedish Assembly in Finland, I went to Greece to participate in a debate on the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. I didn't understand at that time that I would later work so closely with these issues. But of course, when the Finnish government suggested that I would be their candidate, things fell in place. It found it a logical move when looking back at my past engagements.

I remember that we had intense debates in my political family on the individual and/or collective dimensions of minority rights. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union, we have had the golden years for making progress on human and minority rights and minority interests, with the Copenhagen criteria establishing requirements in terms of human and minority rights for EU accession. When I entered the European Parliament (EP), my work focused on the delegations to candidate States where you had minority issues. I started with the Delegation to the EU-Slovakia Joint Parliamentary Committee in 1997 at a time when you had repressive measures against the Hungarian minority. That was also the time when I got closer to the work of the HCNM. The opinion and recommendations of the HCNM on the Slovak amendments to legislation were providing us in the EP [with] very helpful guidance. Then I switched delegation in 1999 and was Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Romania Joint Parliamentary Committee where I dealt with similar minority issues. And then finally, I was member of the Delegation on Latvia at a time when you still you had many questions on language education and access to citizenship, among others.

I also recall that when I was Minister for European Affairs in 2007, some attention started to be paid to the Roma question. At that time, there was no EU strategy, no resources for Roma integration. In fact, you had structural funds that could not reach the Roma population.

So, all this experience working on minority issues came together when I took up the post of High Commissioner.

You came with your own background and personality. How did you manage to find your own way, your own tempo? How did you deal with the legacy of Max van der Stoel? To what extent is it possible that Max van der Stoel may be overshadowing your work?

AT: As always when mandates such as the one of the HCNM are discussed and agreed, there will be some different interpretations possible. I felt that Max van der Stoel's interpretation of the mandate and his legacy provided a safe path to operate. And it was very important to go back to his time and examine what his ways of operating were, where he had been successful. Max van der Stoel's interpretation of the mandate was a sort of guidebook, you could even say a Bible. It was more helpful than overshadowing your own work.

How did you experience the HCNM quiet diplomacy approach, given that you've worked more with EU institutions where politicians are perhaps more vocal? Were there times when the quiet diplomacy approach left you frustrated?

AT: Of course, it was different. The political constraints in the different countries were important to realize when quiet diplomacy would be working or not. You would also ask: can you get other actors to support your suggestions, will they use their political power and diplomatic resources to work in the same direction as you?

But in many negotiations, as well as in quiet diplomacy, as many as possible should feel that they have gained something in the process.

The HCNM mandate relies on the post-holder's judgement: it is a rather flexible mandate and is often described as potentially intrusive. To what extent was it a challenge to be given such a mandate?

AT: Yes, I felt that we had some participating States seeing the mandate and work of the High Commissioner as intrusive. They might also have feared that there were some political risks for them, even though the quiet diplomacy allows for confidential dialogue. In some instances, trust was lacking: some countries would say yes to our suggestions but in practice, they did not mean it when looking at their practical implementation. I now see that a lot of questions that I dealt with some six years ago are still on the table. Lack of progress may be frustrating.

Your work as High Commissioner involves intense travelling, it can be extremely demanding and exhausting. To what extent were you able to find the space and time to resource yourself, to think more clearly, and perhaps more creatively too?

AT: Yes, the travels were demanding. Anybody who wants to become High Commissioner should not be prone to nausea (*laughing*) because, yes, you should be prepared to travel on minor roads far away from the capital to meet people. At the same time, these field visits were so rewarding because you hear the concrete stories of your minority interlocutors and understand their concrete situation. Sometimes you were faced with diplomatic demands to start your visit with a meeting with the Foreign Minister or the highest official in the capital, before you went to the field. While I understand this protocol, this left me sometimes frustrated because you have so much more to discuss once you have been to the field.

So yes, it was a lot of travels, but I was very lucky to live in The Hague which is so well-connected to the airport and is such a liveable and lovable city. It is also so close to the sea and the nearby nature. Running was a great way to empty your head. In fact, I realize that during my years in the Hague, I rarely went to Amsterdam, perhaps twice for concert or art exhibition!

The HCNM does not have sanctions in its toolbox and, while it may have a few incentives, it relies mainly on influence, negotiations, and persuasion. To this end, the HCNM needs friends and partners. How difficult was it to mobilise international friends and contacts? How did you experience the differentiated and competitive positions or stances adopted by different organizations, or even within the organization?

AT: You need to build a broad coalition for change to happen and that includes the support of participating States of the OSCE and its chairmanship. And that was not always there.

I did very much appreciate the good co-operation with the Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE which was so crucial in the year 2014. There were diplomatic efforts then and support was there in different parts of the OSCE, in Vienna, in Kyiv, and in Bern. That cooperation was most valuable.

The Council of Europe is of course an important partner, and I felt that their experts working in the minority field understood the differences regarding our mandates, but [also]often understood our priorities and our way of working. Information sharing was also

important and so was supporting each other, if possible. Sometimes it was also part of our agenda to support the implementation of CoE findings or judgments.

In some countries, international organizations and INGOs were very active and had much more resources to organize flashy conferences, something we did not have in the HCNM. I remember thinking at the time that it must have been difficult for the people, for instance in Ukraine with whom we were working in the field, to decide on how to engage in all these international different processes. It may have been too crowded at times.

You mentioned the EU work, its impact with the enlargement process. You knew the EU structure very well and it is an important player. Were there times where you felt that your messages didn't resonate enough within the EU? Were there times when you felt lonely on some of the issues you wanted to push for?

AT: Of course, there were some moments where you feel rather lonely. For example, on the question of access to a country, I cannot recall that we got support from other participating States. Sometimes access to a country was denied for very domestic political reasons. When I now observe the situation, it might be more difficult to get support for minority questions inside the EU.

On the other hand, I felt that the European Commission appreciated our evaluation of the minority situation when they were elaborating their progress reports on countries as part of the enlargement process.

Beyond the EU, good cooperation with the UN and its Special Representatives was important. A new form of cooperation came about when the UN established an office in Ukraine and started monitoring the human rights situation in the different parts of the country.

At the same time, the HCNM had a long experience in Ukraine and accumulated valuable knowledge and information over time. Was there some acknowledgment of the HCNM experience by other actors?

AT: The HCNM experience was appreciated and sought after, like our mapping of the different actors and factors that explained the political developments. Different actors realised that coordination was needed. In the HCNM, we organised meetings to share our understanding and evaluation of the situation. Now, I guess that the issue of how minorities in Ukraine have

been misused has made it a whole more difficult issue to coordinate and bring all the different actors on board.

If you reflect on your experience interacting with politicians, what do you think made politicians have trust in you and allow you to intervene on ‘their own turf’?

AT: I think that the ultimate reason for our intervention lies in the mandate: it is to convince our governmental interlocutors that their society will be more stable and will be in [a] much better position to withstand crisis and manipulation if their policies are inclusive. This is also the thing to sell. But what is deeply enshrined in the mandate is also my deep conviction. We had ample examples of manipulations during my time and we were already confronted with the spread of misinformation which is even more serious today. When representatives of minorities did not understand the communication from the government, they could lose trust in the authorities, be frightened without any reason or in other ways lured into action.

I said to my interlocutors that I could understand that the State wants to have a main language, a State language to strengthen societal cohesion. But I also said that they had to be practical: if all not all members of the society get important information in an understandable way, they will be much more open to misinformation. This creates risks of divisions in the society that can be later be abused politically.

It became so obvious in 2013 and onwards that the HCNM mandate was setting the right path on the issue of national minorities and integrated societies and that the Ljubljana Guidelines were an asset for helping our interlocutors to reach more stability. And having both the mandate and your conviction together may help politicians to perhaps realize that this is indeed the right path. But politicians may say yes to you, but then they don't really follow up what they said. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, we were working with the government towards a policy that would give more space to the minority languages, but at the same time, the authorities would implement another regulation that went in contradiction to this goal, emphasizing the State language. This was leaving us a little bit frustrated.

Of course, having a more personal connection with the interlocutor with whom you try to negotiate is of help as you have better access to decision-making. I recall that when meeting with the President of a country I knew well, he asked me in a very direct way: ‘what are the two things you want from me this time?’ I had met him on several occasion before and we could have very straightforward conversation[s]. In another instance, I had good contacts with

the speaker of the Georgian parliament, who helped us to prevent a negative draft legislation for national minorities and interethnic relations from becoming law. He could give us more space to provide our advice and avoid the harmful consequences of passing this legislation. So yes, sometimes developing personal bonds may be helpful but having only a personal bond with a certain politician doesn't bring about change in the long run.

To what extent do you need to be an optimist to be the HCNM? And would you describe yourself as an optimistic person?

AT: I think that I maybe more of a realistic person. My optimism lies in my belief in education, because education is about forming the future society. Working with young people and bringing people together makes you also realize that we are all alike and that you can find friends outside your own group. I remember that the then Secretary General of the OSCE commented that the HCNM was the educational branch of the OSCE. It is true that we had been much engaged with education. We had good experts and projects and could do some good work.

This balancing exercise between contradictory demands lies at the heart of the mandate. And sometimes you may have had the impression of skating on thin ice. If you look back, were there examples where you feel that you my have asked the government to stretch the bounds of the possible, or if you allowed minorities to place unreasonable demands.

AT: I wouldn't say that we asked too much. On the contrary. For example, some countries had put rather extensive demands on their neighbouring countries as part of the EU enlargement process. In these situations, we could be the voice of reason.

And do you think that this voice of reason should have been more aggressively or more strongly articulated, or would it have been perhaps preferable to be more outspoken about it, with the risk of perhaps losing the confidence of the parties ?

AT: In some countries like in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I would have wanted to do more, as we saw how polarisation grew and small differences between languages were politicized. At the same time, the younger generation started to protest against what they saw as detrimental divisions between groups. But the entities in the country did not want to be seen as minorities, The legacy of the Dayton Agreement and subsequent decisions was also there.

It wasn't really an issue of keeping the confidence of the different parties. How can you keep quiet when you saw the old educational material[s] that were provided to the young people and the lack of resources to produce something new. You know that the children needed something better, but you knew that the resources of the country were lacking. So, you must strike a balance between what is possible and what is needed. And how can it be best achieved? You always came back to that. And yes, in some instances, you need to be outspoken.

Moving now to your experience as a Swedish Finn, if this is how you would identify yourself: to what extent has your experience back home - in Finland – and discussions on issues such as integration, language or autonomy influenced you?

AT: I was rather cautious with this. I never tried to refer to Finland. For me, that was very clear from the beginning: referring to Finland would immediately lead to remarks that your example is not possible in country X. I would have been told that I come from a peaceful country, a wealthy Scandinavian country.

On the other hand, I also knew that there were some expectations. I had some interlocutors who pulled me in these discussions and asked for Finland's support or mediation, for example mentioning the possibility of former President Ahtisaari's involvement in this context. There are of course different models of minority accommodation in Finland: the Åland Islands' model of autonomy, and the municipal model of mainland Finland. There were very specific circumstances that led to the autonomy of the Åland Islands some hundred years ago. In fact, I don't think that there is any model that is so easily adaptable to other circumstances.

But I often realized how fortunate I am to come from a country where we had an influential author, who wrote books emphasizing that everyone who wanted to promote the enrichment of Finland, no matter if he/she spoke Finnish or Swedish, Yiddish, or Sami, should be considered a Finn. These reference books were used by virtually everyone between [the] late 19th century and Word War II. The notions conveyed in these books could hopefully be more valid generally.

To conclude on a positive note, would you be able to tell us about moments of satisfaction/achievement, even if the issues you are dealing with are complex and may not find straightforward or lasting solutions?

AT: Of course, my mandate started in 2013 and it was dominated by Ukraine and the Crimea question. That was an obvious illustration of the misuse of minority issues that I talked about earlier. There were moments of great satisfaction. In particular, when you realize that after years of HCNM engagement, some results were obtained. One such results is the Multilingual Department of Economics in Bujanovac, in Serbia. We used all the possibilities we had then: the support of the Serbian Ministry of Education, the University of Novi Sad, Albanian language teachers in North Macedonia, the funding from the international community. There was also the dialogue on Gagauzia in Moldova that was to a large extent the fruit of our HCNM work as well as the integration strategy for the country. And the work in Georgia was sometimes groundbreaking, like to work to have political parties meaningfully include minorities.

Lamberto Zannier

High Commissioner on National Minorities (2017-2020)

Interviewer: How did you experience the quiet diplomacy approach of the HCNM? Was it a natural fit for you? Were there times when the quiet diplomacy approach has left you frustrated?

LZ: I didn't have any problem with the quiet diplomacy approach. Being a career diplomat and having had jobs like Secretary General of the OSCE or Head of UNMIK in Kosovo, I knew very well that there were issues that you could not simply mention in public. And the same applies of course to the post of the High Commissioner. It would be wrong to give a press conference and report on what you have been hearing or what you've been discussing with the government and minorities. The quiet diplomacy approach will never disappear, that will remain a part of the job. Having said that, we live in a world where issues have become more complex, with many more actors involved than before. I already experienced this in Vienna as Secretary General of the OSCE and that I took these lessons away when I moved from Vienna to The Hague. As Secretary General of the OSCE, I knew relatively little about the work of the High Commissioner. I felt already then that communicating on your work was important and that, when necessary, you could be vocal when the changes that you are promoting don't happen. One of the tools you have is indeed to speak up.

Strengthening the authority of the High Commissioner is important: using the traditional tools, like promoting the various recommendations and guidelines and ensuring a high degree of professionalism in what you do. Liaising with the other key actors in this field, like the Council of Europe, also contributes to that.

However, this may not be enough. You also need to look at how you can use social media. I started this as High Commissioner and it picked up rather fast: we started to develop some short films about the HCNM recommendations, but also his activities, including in some cases interviews where I would explain my work and the challenges we faced. Some other videos were more factual, showing where we were, what we were doing, and with whom we were meeting. All this was posted on Facebook. I noticed that there was quite some interest for the various HCNM initiatives, including the thematic recommendations. We started looking at Twitter and some of the other ways of communicating. So yes, a new angle was opened.

Coming back to the way the HCNM was perceived in Vienna: would you say that there was some kind of secrecy surrounding the work of the HCNM in The Hague? Or is it more that the work was not well-understood outside those who are directly involved with the HCNM? Would you say there was an accountability issue there?

LZ: This was not an accountability issue because the High Commissioner was highly respected. An accountability issue would have arisen if we, in Vienna, had received complaints. This was never the case. The HCNM was simply not as visible as other institutions. For example, other OSCE institutions like the ODIHR or the Representative on the Freedom of the Media, hold regularly conferences or events to which they invite civil society, ambassadors, the Secretary General and other stakeholders. There is great awareness on their work and through that, active support for what they are doing. The High Commissioner operates in a space that is more confined. For example, I don't remember ever attending an HCNM conference as Secretary General, with the only exception of the 15th anniversary of the institution in The Hague, in the presence of Princess Beatrix who was Queen at the time.

Overall, interactions with the HCNM were limited to a couple of issues, for example difficulties with the issuance of the HCNM report on the formerly deported people in Crimea in 2013, at the very time when Ukraine was Chair-in-Office of the OSCE. I was asked to help with exerting pressure, but with little success in the end.

True, the recommendations and guidelines are there, but they are mainly looked at by a restricted group of experts. As High Commissioner reporting to the Permanent Council in Vienna, I realized that there was a selective knowledge of the institution: Ambassadors knew the specific issues concerning their own countries and I would usually have a reaction on these. In fact, we had a series of bilateral engagements rather than a collective engagement. There was general knowledge and support for the work of the HCNM, but it was difficult to get into debates or argumentation on cross-cutting issues concerning minorities in interstate relations or minority protection and security. Detailed knowledge was lacking. In this sense, I would say that this is also a difference with the other institutions where you would witness complex debates and at times heated debates on certain issues. I have never really seen that in the case of the HCNM apart from the direct discussion with the States concerned.

Trust is also a fundamental cornerstone of the High Commissioner's engagement. When you reflect on your time as High Commissioner and your interactions with politicians,

what do you think made them trust you and share some confidential or sensitive information?

LZ: I would argue that the institution is the person of the High Commissioner. And I think it really boils down to the prestige of that person. True, the institution is known and well-respected by national minority groups. It is also known by governments, especially those sectors of governments that deal with national minority issues, whether it is integration, education, or other issues. I remember that in a conference in Tallinn, I was a panellist in a session that was moderated by the President of Estonia. We had a very good discussion and I ended up sitting next to her for dinner. To be frank, I don't think she knew much about my office, but we could continue to build on the discussions of the day. I then informed the President that I was working on a new set of recommendations dealing with minorities and the new media. And I pointed out that Tallinn is such a European capital of digital media that we should launch the guidelines there. These are now called 'The Tallinn Guidelines'.

Impartiality is key. After my mandate as HCNM was not extended in 2020 (like the mandates of the other heads of institutions), I received some phone calls: as I had been working on very controversial issues in Latvia, the first one to call was the Latvian Ambassador who told me he was sorry that we are missing a person who understood the issues so well. The Russian minority representatives conveyed to me the same message just a few days later. I therefore think it is also important to be able to place the High Commissioner in a position where there is broad appreciation for the work done and to show your impartiality and that you are acting in the interest of the long-term goal of promoting stability in the relations within the society. This is partly personal and partly dependent on the quality and professionalism of the individual as well as his or her team.

And to what extent did your background as OSCE Secretary General help in that regard, or did it complicate matters in some instances?

LZ: In general, governments, especially Ministers of Foreign Affairs, knew who I was, so it was easier for me. I had also developed relations with them in former positions and that helped later. For example, I knew well H.E. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev from his time as Director General of the United Nations Office in Geneva. I was warned by colleagues in The Hague that there had been issues to obtain meetings with the Kazakh Foreign Minister in the past, but when I visited not only did I meet with a number of Ministers, but also had a very positive

meeting with the President. I knew many of the Foreign Ministers from my previous job and therefore it was easier to organize meetings and have an open discussion on often sensitive issues. So, yes, a lot comes down from previous relations and interactions, and in the long term the frequent rotation of people who hold top positions in the Organization weakens the effectiveness of the OSCE.

You came to this post with your own background, relationships and also personality. How did you manage to find your own way, your own tempo? How did you deal with the legacy of Max van der Stoel? To what extent might that legacy have overshadowed your work?

LZ: Actually, I think that Max van der Stoel played a very positive role in raising the profile of the office. The Max van der Stoel Award and related ceremony are great opportunities to enhance the profile of the office and explain what the Institution is concretely doing. I must also say that I was sometimes disappointed to see that in the Netherlands, people knew Max van der Stoel as a Foreign Minister, but did not particularly know him as a High Commissioner on National Minorities. I tried to explain this in my time as High Commissioner. The fact that we could use his legacy, his name, also in the Netherlands through the Award, was an advantage for raising the profile of the institution. But he was operating at a different time: of course, some of its work was and remains universally valid, and I remember quoting him in some of my public presentations. Some other work was simply specific for his time: we needed to modernise. That is the case, for instance, of the strict adherence to the notion of quiet diplomacy in the 90s. This is not a criticism to what was done at the time, but the recognition that we now communicate in different ways compared to 30 years ago.

The mandate leaves a lot of space for each High Commissioner to be creative. It rests a lot on the judgment of the High Commissioner. At the beginning, was this something that you felt was a little bit overwhelming?

LZ: Oh, I just loved it. I found it a great advantage to be given space for creativity. As Secretary General of the OSCE, every few hours an ambassador would be knocking at my door or looking for me on the phone with various kinds of requests or complaints or other comments. I rarely had that in The Hague. Quite the opposite: I had to go looking myself for the representatives of the countries and engage them on the issues that we were working on. I could decide what were the key priorities and where I should move and in which direction on which topic and in

which region, and simply informed the Chairmanship and the other Institutions of my plan of work.

When I took office, I slowly built on the issues dealt with previously, looking at all the recommendations that have been issued. For instance, I went to Graz to launch the Recommendations concerning access to justice for national minorities. We then had an event in Oslo on the Linguistic Rights of Minorities, we launched the recommendations on minorities and the media in the digital media in Tallinn and then went to Lund to review our Recommendations on the effective participation of national minorities in public life.

Having witnessed in many instances how historic narratives and symbols, like monuments, statues, [and] street names affect minorities-majority relations in a number of OSCE countries, I started engaging with historians to look at the issue of memory politics and how historic narratives reflecting unilateral or even partisan perceptions may be used as [a] trigger for tensions or even conflict, as we have seen in the case of the Russian Federation and Ukraine. We put a lot of efforts in this subject, even if some Ambassadors warned me that this is extremely sensitive and that I should pay attention. But this is a key tool for conflict prevention, so we kept on working on the subject: we organized an event with a number of international experts at Harvard University, I attended events in Oxford, The Hague and Paris and built a network of organizations working on this topic. I also addressed the concerns of the Delegations in Vienna, explaining that there are best practices that should be better known and understood, and pointing out that there are several ways to address these sensitive issues. But then we were confronted with COVID-19 in the last year of my mandate, and that forced me to slow down the pace of the initiative. My mandate was discontinued and it was for my successor to decide how to proceed with this delicate but important matter.

Your work as High Commissioner involves intense travelling, it can be extremely demanding. To what extent were you able to find the space and time to resource yourself, to think more clearly, and perhaps more creatively too?

LZ: This job requires a lot of travels and yes, travel is quite tiring. But there is always a lot of time during travel, so you have time for reading books, especially history books which I like very much. You also have a lot a time on the plane to relook at your dossier and discuss issues with colleagues in preparation for the visit. But in my short intervals [of] being in the Netherlands, I used to use every free moment to be out. Some of the colleagues somewhat

jokingly used to call me the “Bike Commissioner” because I was biking everywhere. I had very often long walks or long bike rides which gave me lot of time to think and plan. These were the moments of being out with myself and being able to regroup.

For the rest, I think that I am a team person. I always have an open door for colleagues to come in and talk to me. I also found the office structure too hierarchical with advisors reporting to heads of sections (covering different geographical areas) and heads of sections reporting to me. I had a chat with the heads of section and said: ‘I don't want to undermine your role, but I want to be in touch with everybody’. We found a way to alternate meetings with the heads of section with periodical staff meetings with everybody and more focused meetings with the individual advisor working on a specific issue. And I sometimes barged into the meetings of each section just to listen to their own internal discussions because I was interested in knowing also what is behind the issues.

As High Commissioner, you receive different strong or perhaps conflicting views on what should be done. As we know, advisors/ experts may be quite opinionated on what needs to be done. And how did you deal with that?

LZ: Let's say in the beginning I relied a lot on their advice: I try not to be opinionated myself and I relied a lot on what my advisors had to say. This was, however, not necessarily what would become the policy of the office in the end. And course, I come to my interlocutors with a plan, but I am never there to preach. I tend to be a good listener and I always want to hear and understand what my interlocutors feel about the issue at stake. I want to give them the space and the time to voice their own concerns and their own views. That may require creating opportunities for socializing with your interlocutors outside the scope of the formal meetings. And based on that, I may change the plan and convince my colleagues that this is indeed the best course of action. We would then try to reflect together and see how policies could be adjusted to the extent necessary to produce the desired result, which is that of a more stable and better integrated society.

The High Commissioner doesn't have any enforcement mechanisms, nor sanctions; it has very few carrots, maybe some incentives, especially in connection with accession to the EU. A lot of the work relies on influence and persuasion. To what extent were you able to mobilize international and other partners to increase your influence, and what was your approach when dealing with sometimes competitive positions?

LZ: It is the toughest part. There were situations in which you saw very clearly what you needed to achieve, and you struggled to change things to move them in that direction. Yes, you need to look for allies and you can find them at two levels: in the country itself and with external partners such as, for instance, the Council of Europe or UN organizations. In the case of the OSCE, field operations engaged on projects may create leverage on host country policies. Building alliances to move everybody in the same direction may create more conditionality as well as more power of persuasion. But of course, it doesn't always work.

I had good access and once access is there, opportunities are there. For instance, I remember having meetings with members of the parliament in Riga who were very negative on all our recommendation regarding historical monuments. That was one of those cases where we had to look for other avenues, including more public diplomacy as I then reported more openly on the issue to try to put pressure externally, without much success in the end, unfortunately.

The risk, however, is that the HCNM may be perceived as having an *a priori* agenda and lacking neutrality. For example, I met with representatives of Russian speaking communities through the Russian cultural centre in Kyiv, which has also affiliate organizations in various places in Ukraine, like in Kherson, for example. I always engaged with them to hear what they had to say. I remember that there was some pushback around my meeting with them: the Ukrainians warned me that this organization was manoeuvred by Moscow. My argument was that listening to the problems that members of the Russian-speaking communities put forward is important and if you penalize them, you will give more arguments for Moscow to say that your policy is discriminatory. If you listen to them and do something to accommodate their concerns, then it will weaken or remove arguments from those who act as their sponsors. These tensions in Ukraine became so acute that in the end I was even invited to a UN Security Council session to report on the language legislation in Ukraine. I took a position that both Russians and Ukrainians came to thank me for after my presentation. We did not fall in the trap of being perceived as being pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian but simply stuck to the principles and policies promoted by the HCNM. Of course, we had very carefully prepared the statements. I always like to speak freely, but that was one for which I had a written speech. And we had gone over it a number of times because we needed to walk that very fine line and weigh every single word of what we were saying.

Were there times when you had the feeling of stretching the boundaries of the politically possible?

LZ: In the case of Ukraine, for instance, it was extremely difficult to engage politically because the direction taken in the Parliament on a number of laws was not entirely reflecting our advice. I remember that at the time when Kyiv wanted to ban the Russian language as an official language, in early 2014, I spoke at a public event but had to face strong negative reactions: I told them to be very careful on this and not to launch into initiatives that would divide the society. I advised them to take their time, launch a national debate on these issues. I was then told that Ukraine had to strengthen its own identity, and language was key to that. But then, of course, when we looked more in details into the provisions of the language legislation, we saw that there were provisions sanctioning the use of languages of countries that were not member States of the European Union. You realize then how artificial this mechanism was and how discriminatory it was with respect to some minorities as compared to others. And that was something that I said at the United Nations in New York.

And to what extent was your message supported by others international partners?

LZ: I was rather on my own. The European Union didn't seem to have a problem with these developments in Ukraine: I went to Brussels to discuss our concerns, but there was no willingness to interfere. In fact, I did not feel a lot of interest in listening to our arguments and even if they understood them, they were not willing to take openly a position on this. The Council of Europe was with us, but together we could not activate the EU.

When you left the post of Secretary General, you had farewell reflections whereby you shared your concerns on the state of affairs in Europe. To what extent do you need to be an optimist person to take the post of High Commissioner?

LZ: I always tend to be an optimist, even if at times I may be a 'discouraged optimist'. I am also a realist, as I do acknowledge what I see on the ground and what the difficulties are. But I don't give up easily either: I always keep arguing against what I feel are the wrong policies. And if you fail, you fail, but I think it is important to always think that there is a chance. That is my optimistic approach.

Do you think that there were a lot of missed chances during your time as HCNM?

LZ: If chances that were missed, they were not necessarily because of lack of engagement by the High Commissioner. For example, I travelled to Tajikistan and went up to the Kyrgyz border. I saw these places on the border where they had incidents. And I spoke to the Kyrgyz and to the Tajiks at the highest level of government. I told them that they needed some international mediation, not necessarily by my office. I pointed out that they have border issues and related to this, minority issues and that something needed to be done. And both said this is a bilateral issue, they were working on it. I should not worry. And as you know, they had dozens of people who died in the following years. I had raised my concerns in the Permanent Council and the two countries reacted the same way, but nobody else took any notice of it. And even though I said it very clearly, nobody took action, perhaps because it is far away.

Then you ask yourself: was there something else that I could have done to push the issue? Sometimes you're also overwhelmed with so many issues that require the High Commissioner's attention. And then of course, COVID-19 was the kiss of death for us: the first trip that I had to cancel was to Turkmenistan. I was disappointed because we had another breakthrough at the time: we had convinced the President of Turkmenistan to introduce multilingual education in areas inhabited by a substantial number of Uzbek minorities. This was accepted in principle and we were going to have a seminar in Ashgabat to discuss in detail how this could happen. Because of the cancellation of that visit, this issue was postponed and is not yet solved. Things also started moving in Moldova. We encouraged and supported the dialogue between the parliament and the Gagauz authorities. But then the war in Ukraine created tensions and complicated communication between the two sets of actors. Still, we had a basis and even after my mandate was discontinued, I continued being engaged and moderated an online event with the Moldovan Parliament and Gagauz authorities.

To what extent have discussions on issues of minority rights, integration and diversity taking place back at home influenced your approach as High Commissioner?

LZ: I would say marginally. Of course, there are some models of minority accommodation in Italy that have been much studied internationally. In the same way, the HCNM has a strong co-operation with the European Centre on Minority Issues in Flensburg, it has also developed a long-standing relation with EURAC in Bolzano/Bozen.

I come myself from a region of Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, which is perhaps less known than Alto-Adige Südtirol and its minority regime, but it has also its own local language and road signs are displayed in two languages. I know from my time as Head of UNMIK in Kosovo that these models of minority accommodation have been often referred to as good practices. The international community has been sending delegations from Kosovo and other places to study these models. I wanted to see these schools for myself since we were sending representatives of minorities to this region of Italy. That said, these rather sophisticated models of minority accommodation are difficult to export in places where you have poor economic conditions. You always need to keep in mind the context.

At the same time, I also found that on some occasions, referring to Italy made my message more credible. For instance, when I was in Latvia, I gave the example of the Victory monument in Bolzano. That monument has been reshaped in a way that is no longer controversial. I suggested that something like this could be envisaged in Latvia: not demolishing the monuments but add some inscription or maybe create a museum on the sufferings of the Latvians during the Soviet occupation next to it. I could tell that this has worked in Italy and by offering my own personal and direct experience. I felt that made my arguments stronger.

Perhaps to finish on a positive note, would you be able to tell us about moments of satisfaction/achievement even if the issues you are dealing with are complex and may not find straightforward or lasting solutions?

LZ: There were many positive moments, with a few setbacks every now and then. But what mattered most to me was the realization that we were recognized and listened to and that the result of our efforts was a slow but steady progress on most of the issues on the agenda. So, overall satisfaction, I would say. Unfortunately, in the end, HCNM suffered, like everybody else, from the resurgence of nationalism and the return of geopolitics which affected multilateralism in general. Combined with the impact of COVID-19 (another topic on which we had issued a set of recommendations, as we had witnessed in many cases discrimination of minority groups), this reduced the impact of HCNM activities for a time, but the impact of the work done over the years remains visible and I believe that the prestige of the Institution will guarantee its survival and the continuation of good work for many years to come.

Kairat Abdrakhmanov

High Commissioner on National Minorities (from 2020)

In 2020, you had a long diplomatic career behind you. To what extent was taking up the mandate of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities a logical move for you at that point in time? Did you have any hesitations?

KA: The appointment of a diplomat from Kazakhstan to carry out this important mandate is a testament to the trust that the OSCE community has vested first and foremost in the country of Kazakhstan and its well-documented and recognized ability to manage diversity for the benefit of its multiethnic, multi-confessional people. It is also an acknowledgment of Kazakhstan's well-known international initiatives that seek to reinforce multilateralism, promote dialogue, and maintain global peace and security.

To this end, as a career diplomat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, I was actively involved and engaged with many of these important initiatives of my home country from the initial conception phase right through to the implementation phase.

Additionally, my experience in the diplomatic corps gave me an opportunity to travel extensively around the world and see first-hand how other countries manage their diversity. During this time, I got to know my counterparts in various government bodies and expand my network of professional and personal contacts. This allowed me to build valuable relationships and establish rapport with key figures, which is very important in my line of work.

Therefore, I can say that being nominated for this post by my country was a privilege and honour which humbled me greatly and filled me with immense gratitude. I think, indeed, it is a natural fit for me because issues such as creating opportunities for national minorities, diversity management, respect for diversity, building societal cohesion as a means for strengthening security from within the State, and promoting dialogue for peace are all subjects that I have familiarized myself with throughout my career within the foreign service. At the same time, as a historian, I am aware of shortfalls caused by the mismanagement of these issues and know how this has affected entire communities and States, especially within the OSCE region. Therefore, I was ready and willing to take up this challenge and share my experience and expertise in this important new role.

Nowadays, I discover that many of the interlocutors of my Institution are the very people I crossed paths with in the past when I served in various posts in the United Kingdom,

Israel, Austria, and Sweden, as well as at the OSCE and the United Nations in New York. This indeed helps me in my work, especially with regard to initiating conversations on a warm, friendly, and positive note.

How did you experience the quiet diplomacy approach of the HCNM? Was it ‘a natural fit’ for you?

The quiet diplomacy aspect of my mandate has been crucial to initiating and maintaining the dialogue with my interlocutors because it eliminates the pressure and predisposes people to an open and frank conversation. When the conflict-prevention mandate of the HCNM was established thirty years ago, the participating States of the OSCE accepted the potentially “intrusive” nature of the mandate as long as the confidentiality of talks and negotiations was ensured. It is not surprising, therefore, that all 6 successive High Commissioners have relied heavily on quiet diplomacy as one of the key methods in their work.

If you reflect on your experience so far, as well as on your personal interactions with politicians, what do you think makes politicians have trust in you and allows you to intervene on ‘their own turf’?

KA: As I mentioned above, the quiet diplomacy aspect of my mandate has been instrumental to building trust between the parties concerned by limiting public exposure. To this day, it encourages interlocutors to have trust in my mandate and allows me to intervene on ‘their own turf’ as you say, especially when confidentiality and quiet diplomacy are observed and practised. There is also the previously-established personal rapport that I mentioned earlier. The rapport in the capacity of the mandate is also conducive to setting the stage for a dialogue based on trust.

At the same time, I need to be mindful of the considerable degree of sensitivities when discussing certain issues. In this regard, I recognize that seeing that fine line, observing the delicacy of the situation, and seeking to balance the interests of all parties involved is the key to creating successful, lasting, and peaceful solutions to the issues at hand.

To this end, the four T’s that were promoted by Kazakhstan when it held the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010 come to mind. They are: Trust, Tradition, Transparency and Tolerance. Trust is necessary for the successful and productive outcome of all engagements. Tradition is a set of values that we agreed to uphold, which is our commitment

to the fundamental principles and values of the OSCE. Transparency is openness in communication and co-operation. Tolerance is important for strengthening intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue. Indeed, we need to display and exercise tolerance, we need to uphold the commitments to the fundamental principles and values of the OSCE that we all agreed to, and we must also seek to build trust within and between people, communities, countries, and civilizations. I believe these values must be promoted today as well.

The HCNM mandate relies on the post-holder's judgement: it is a rather flexible mandate and is often described as potentially intrusive. To what extent was it a challenge to be given such a mandate?

KA: Fortunately, my mandate has a clearly defined focus and purpose, namely, to contain and de-escalate any tensions involving national minorities within the OSCE area. The High Commissioner on National Minorities acts as an instrument of conflict prevention by continuously guiding the 57 OSCE participating States and helping them to create equal opportunities for all in their diverse societies, including national minorities. I do this work using a collection of Guidelines and Recommendations developed by consecutive High Commissioners on National Minorities over the years. These Guidelines and Recommendations provide advice to the OSCE participating States on how minorities can be integrated into all aspects of society in order to increase cohesion and strengthen the society from within. So far, successive High Commissioners have produced a total of 9 sets of recommendations on specific thematic issues that affect national minorities. They cover a wide range of issues from education, linguistic rights, and the effective participation of minorities in public life - to the use of languages in the media, policing, access to justice, integration, inter-State relations, and the media in general. All of these have a focus on national minorities. There is also a whole host of international documents from the EU and the UN that guide the work of the High Commissioner.

To give you an example, as my Institution gets ready to mark its 30th anniversary this year, the Council of Europe is also preparing to mark the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of its two key legal instruments pertaining to national minorities: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. I also maintain close contact with relevant UN institutions and mandate holders. The United Nations remains an important partner for my mandate and its overarching

goal of conflict prevention, peace, and security. To this end, I am constantly seeking ways to increase synergies between us in order to “deliver as one”.

You came with your own background history and personality. How did you manage to find your own way, your own tempo? How did you deal with the legacy of Max van der Stoel?

KA: Max van der Stoel, the first High Commissioner on National Minorities, served as the High Commissioner when the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia came apart. This took place during the most dramatic pages in the history of the world and the OSCE in particular. Today I witness how States where the first High Commissioner worked to prevent conflicts continue to value his invaluable contribution to strengthen security, peace, and co-operation in their countries. Max van der Stoel masterfully conducted a dialogue not only with governments, but also with civil society, on sensitive matters pertaining to national minorities. Today, this type of skill is demanded more than ever, especially when it comes to preventing the politicization and instrumentalization of national minority issues.

Therefore, the legacy of the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoel, has been and remains instrumental to my work, and subsequent High Commissioners can probably attest to this as well. The Silent Diplomat, as he was known, displayed a firm commitment to upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms in the world, thereby shaping the international human rights agenda and solidifying conflict prevention as the pillar of the OSCE.

This year we mark the 30th anniversary of the opening of HCNM office in The Hague when the first High Commissioner officially took up residence in Prinsessegracht 22 in The Hague. In light of this anniversary we will be hosting an event in The Hague later in 2023 during which we will bring together all of the previous High Commissioners and welcome them once again to the ‘city of justice and peace’. At that time, we plan to hold a reflective discourse with the former High Commissioners on what the mandate meant to all of them and how they tried to continue the legacy of the late, great Max van der Stoel.

I think we all agree on one thing - Max van der Stoel’s legacy is indelible, it lives on, carries on guiding the work of my mandate, and will continue to do so for all successive High Commissioners.

The first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoel, said in his acceptance speech¹ that “preventive diplomacy adds a new element to the classic methods of diplomacy; it opens new

possibilities for creativity and imagination.” He added that “...because there is relatively little experience in this field, there is also the need to move cautiously in order to avoid pitfalls.” This statement rings true to this day and could not be more relevant in our current geopolitical reality.

Your work as High Commissioner involves intense travelling, it can be extremely demanding and exhausting. To what extent are you able to find the space and time to resource yourself, to think more clearly, and perhaps more creatively too. Are there books, music, or places which help you at times of pressure?

Every visit that I undertake, I equate to rediscovering the world. From my early childhood I had taken particular interest in matters related to international relations, on issues ranging from wars and conflicts to detente and disarmament. I am talking about the 1970s, which was the period of the Cold War (unfortunately, the world today is looking increasingly similar to those times, which I had hoped we had done away with by uniting our efforts). In school, I was interested in history and the stories of days gone by, especially stories related to international affairs, but concentrating attention on their chronology rather than on the essence of, let's say, the Middle East conflicts during the 1970s.

Later, the academic, university years opened up different avenues of research into the subject of international relations, not to mention the opportunities that became available in the diplomatic corps, which I ultimately chose as my profession. One thing that I have concluded through this is that, regardless of one's own personal experience or the level of one's official position, it is necessary to continuously learn and try to understand the essence of an issue in order to skilfully combine theory with practice.

Coming back to the subject of travel, before my visits to new regions, for example to south-eastern Europe, I always try to learn more about the history, culture, traditions, and customs of the people, especially by reading key classical pieces of literature from the region. What can be better than walking through the historic places that are described in literature, especially when it has to do with places that changed the course of history?

My current travel schedule is indeed very intense. On average, I undertake about 2 visits per month, and in some months, it may even be more than that. These travels usually mean long hours on the plane and in transit to my destination. Fortunately, this gives me time to catch up by listening to podcasts and reading books or articles from a variety of mass media outlets.

I usually use my time in transit to listen to podcasts relevant to the subject of my visit or my work in general. Listening to discussions of third parties helps me to become better informed about subjects relevant to my mandate and to understand the issues from different perspectives. Seeking different opinions is vital for creating lasting and sustainable solutions to existing problems.

The recent 175th anniversary of Abai, a Kazakh poet, philosopher, composer, and founder of Kazakh literature, provided a splendid opportunity to revisit and re-read his “Book of Words”. Abai Kunanbaiuly is known for calling for the expansion of the national consciousness and for advocating the pursuit of knowledge, building a strong moral character, and seeking spiritual enlightenment. Abai’s “Book of Words” is a collection of his thoughts on a variety of subjects, including humanity, love, friendship, kinship, education, moral character, general social and public order, and many more. Despite the passage of time, his words of wisdom remain timeless and continue to comfort, guide, and inspire people, including yours truly. Abai was a visionary philosopher who called for the modernization of our consciousness by emphasizing the importance of constantly improving one’s skills and knowledge, which is what we call ‘lifelong learning’ today. He was truly a man ahead of his time with universal wisdom that transcends time and transforms lives to this day.

Abai’s anniversary was accompanied with various events around the world, including the unveiling of statues dedicated to Abai in all corners of the world. A bust of Abai was also unveiled in the United Nations Office in Geneva. At the opening ceremony, the symbolic meaning of the opening of the bust of Abai at the Palais des Nations in the year of the 75th anniversary of the UN was noted by many participants. Abai’s work contributed to the rapprochement of cultures and countries, and his ideas of tolerance and love are especially relevant today. I hope Abai’s wise words – “Love all humanity like your own kin” – will continue to guide us and contribute to our understanding of the need to strengthen dialogue, build peace, and reinforce multilateralism.

My dream is for the OSCE to establish its own Goodwill Ambassadors to promote interethnic friendship and the peaceful coexistence of peoples, languages, cultures, and religions, so that they can reinforce and increase the effectiveness of the OSCE’s work and add extra value with their ‘soft power’. The same noble mission could be successfully and efficiently carried out by sports stars given that sport, by its very nature, promotes peace and

tolerance and reinforces human connections. Especially when there are in fact so many amazing athletes residing in the OSCE participating States.

The HCNM does not have sanctions in its toolbox and, while it may have a few incentives, it relies mainly on influence, negotiations, and persuasion. To this end, the HCNM needs friends and partners. How difficult is it today to mobilise international friends and contacts? How did you experience the differentiated and competitive positions or stances adopted by different organizations, or even within the organization?

KA: The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as its name suggests, stands for cooperation in the Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic space for the sake of security. The OSCE is a unique organization compared to others because we are a consensus-based organization which is only possible through cooperation and communication. Therefore the willingness and ability to engage in a dialogue and have open and constructive communication is a prerequisite for the success of this process.

To a large extent, the artificial division into two camps situated to the west and east of Vienna reflects the uniqueness of the OSCE: its diversity, the different levels of democratic advancement among the 57 participating States, its geographical span, and the mosaic of kin-State relations.

Despite their differences, our participating States face similar and not uncommon challenges. This brings us all together and motivates us to put our differences aside and unite to maintain security and stability within the OSCE region through collaboration, co-operation, and communication.

To what extent do you need to be an optimist to be the HCNM? And would you describe yourself as an optimistic person? And if that is the case, what drives your optimism?

KA: Being an optimist is of value not only for a High Commissioner but for all people in general. Optimism sets the stage and ambience before the execution of any action. Optimism also sows seeds of hope. When we hope that a positive or meaningful outcome is possible, we can all perform better. Therefore what drives my optimism is the firm belief that goodness, justice and common sense will prevail, no matter how hard the path toward it may be.

To what extent did you have the impression of skating on thin ice when facilitating dialogue on interethnic tensions? Are there instances where you feel that you have asked Governments to stretch the bounds of the politically possible, or allowed minorities to place unreasonable demands?

KA: In my guidance to the participating States, I continue to emphasize the importance of creating sound policies when it comes to national minorities. It is all about formulating policies that increase opportunities for all, including national minorities. Opportunities create possibilities. Possibilities help people unleash their full potential and become productive, participating members of society.

Opportunities start with a basic education for all, including national minorities. Therefore, increasing opportunities in the education sector, including access to quality (official) language teaching for national minorities is the key in this process. Providing safe access to quality education increases the chances of national minorities accessing other opportunities in employment and in public and political life.

In fact, the very first thematic recommendations developed by my Institution were *The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*. This set of recommendations recognizes how important the right to education is in order for national minorities to integrate into the broader society. Whenever we advise the participating States on how best to integrate their diverse societies, we recognize that language plays a very important role in this. I therefore continuously advocate for multilingual education because it preserves the identity of minority communities, yet allows them to integrate into the wider society. The recommendations of my Institution recognize the right to learn in one's own mother tongue, but at the same time underscore the responsibility of everyone to learn the State language in order to participate fully in society and be included in all aspects of it.

My office continues its efforts to provide assistance to governments in order to help them develop policies and capacities for implementing multilingual education. Multilingual education not only increases the quality of education, but it also increases the number of youths, especially girls, entering higher education. National minorities with higher education have a higher earning potential and this, in turn, increases their chances to access other social and economic opportunities and participate in public and political life.

I continue to emphasize that when politicians think of their constituents, they must be mindful of all of their constituents, including those who happen to belong to national minorities.

To what extent have discussions on issues of minority rights, integration, and diversity taking place at home – in Kazakhstan - influenced your approach as High Commissioner?

KA: Kazakhstan is well known for its international initiatives that call for peace, dialogue, and co-operation. But let me focus here on the two that are especially relevant to my mandate.

First, it is the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, established in 1995 as a unique public institution, which is responsible for managing interethnic harmony in the country. The success of this entity inspired neighbouring countries to establish similar structures of their own. Today, with recent reforms undertaken by the President of Kazakhstan, the Assembly has strengthened both its role and its mandate. It is now a consultative and advisory body to the Government. It is responsible for the effectiveness of interactions between the State and civil society in the field of interethnic relations. I hope that the Assembly, with its newly defined and reinforced role, will continue to add value and strengthen the society from within.

The second important initiative that I wish to highlight is the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which is held in Kazakhstan every three years. Recognizing the value of cultivating and maintaining dialogue between the leaders of the world's major religions, Kazakhstan spearheaded this initiative in 2003 and since then has regularly brought together religious leaders in the capital city, Astana. I had the honour to deliver remarks at the 7th Congress held in Astana in 2022. Participants of the Congress come together to discuss the role of religion and religious leaders in the spiritual and social development of humankind. This past year, the participants discussed the role of religion and education in enhancing the respectful coexistence of religions and cultures and the role of religious leaders and politicians in promoting global interreligious dialogue for peace.

I want to emphasize that I come from a country with a rich history and a complicated past and, as a result, a multicultural and multi-ethnic population that has lived side by side in peace and harmony for generations. Thus, celebrating our diversity and deriving strength from our unity comes naturally to us. This also means that respect for diversity and tolerance is taught to us from a very young age. At the same time, I am well aware of our past, especially

where we come from, how far we have come, how and what we did to get to where we are today and, more importantly, what we have to do to safeguard what we have.

I was raised with a deep appreciation for the value that diversity brings to our society. Respect for the inherent diversity of language, culture and identities has always been a source of strength for the people of Kazakhstan. It makes Kazakhstan strong from within. Unity and peace in a society is vital for the future of any country. This is what I continue to emphasize to all my interlocutors now. This is why we must spare no efforts to ensure that diversity is respected, promoted, and protected at all times.

I have recently started to rediscover the regions of southeastern Europe and the western Balkans. While doing so, I noted the similarities in the heritage and history of that region to that of my own. In that sense, I recognize that they too can capitalize on their diversity and derive their strength from it. This can help to build strong and resilient societies and contribute to peace and security in the OSCE region and beyond.

Would you be able to tell us about moments of satisfaction/achievement, even if the issues you are dealing with are complex and may not find straightforward or lasting solutions?

KA: When my work translates into a meaningful and tangible outcome on the ground and makes a difference in people's lives, I feel content. This can also be the case when participating States come together, put their differences aside, and agree on a common course of action or a landmark document.

To give you an example, the Astana Commemorative Declaration, which was adopted by the OSCE participating States during Kazakhstan's Chairmanship of the Organization 11 years ago, is a case in point. It states: "We, the Heads of State or Government of the 56 participating States of the OSCE, have assembled in Astana, eleven years after the last OSCE Summit in Istanbul, to recommit ourselves to the vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals."

I routinely recall and reference this document in my various public and private addresses and point out that this was the last political document that reconfirmed the Organization's comprehensive approach to security based on trust and transparency. It was the time when the OSCE community displayed unity and reaffirmed its commitment to common and indivisible security and co-operation in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian continent.

Mr. Walter Kemp, a friend of my Institution who has extensively written about my mandate and the OSCE in general, said at the time: “Whatever happens in the future, Astana will be considered a turning point in the history of the OSCE. Either it was the beginning of a new era, or the beginning of the end”.²

The Astana Summit demonstrated that, with enough political will and capital, it is possible to put our differences aside and work together, not only for our shared commitments and common goals, but also towards strengthening the OSCE’s effectiveness and its future in general.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/7/78633.pdf>

² See: <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2017/09/03-Kemp-fin.pdf>