

# **The challenge of diversity: Is integration an answer?**

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

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

## The challenge of diversity

Common to all the different interpretations of integration is the assumption that it is a response to the growing diversity of our societies. Diversity, ethno-cultural or confessional, has been characteristic of social relations for centuries. It is neither new nor unprecedented. In contrast, the notion of cultural uniformity is a relatively recent construct linked to the establishment of nation States and to the concomitant rise of nationalism as a political ideology. Cultural uniformity within nation States is a myth, however, while diversity is a reality that most of us are happy to accept and embrace. Violence and conflicts often erupt precisely when people try to put the myth into practice and make the nation — defined in ethno-cultural terms — and the State congruent. This often happens in times of major international change accompanied by the formation of new States and the collapse of the old, mainly multi-ethnic empires. It was against such a background that my institution, the HCNM, was established and mandated to deal with intra-State tensions involving majority and minority communities that had the potential to threaten international security in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

The experience of the HCNM has shown that it is in the early stages of transition and democratization, when institutions are weak and nationalist mobilization strong, that managing diversity becomes particularly challenging. There is a risk of different identity groups building separate, enclosed societies with limited interaction and co-operation across group boundaries. In such cases, groups may also challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the State in which they reside, so further undermining the processes of

consolidation. States that are weak and insecure fail to perform their duties and obligations, including the protection of human and minority rights, and pose a potential risk to the security and well-being of their own citizens along with others for whom they may be responsible. The most difficult challenge for any multi-ethnic State, therefore, is to integrate its own diversity in a way that upholds state integrity and sovereignty, while at the same time respecting differences in culture and identity.

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

In my experience, when States fail to achieve integration with respect for diversity because either civic integration or ethno-cultural diversity is not upheld and appropriately balanced, tensions are more likely to develop into conflicts. In this context, the protection and promotion of minority rights including identity rights is a minimum standard for managing diversity and a precondition for building peaceful, interethnic relations within States. The guarantee and effective enjoyment of minority rights is vital for ensuring that minorities have a stake and an effective voice in the wider societies in which they live. This requires that minorities are not only given, but also take, the opportunity to learn the official or State language(s), to participate in public life, respect the rule of law to co-operate with the authorities and to become an integral part of the shared society. In order to set processes of integration in motion, persons belonging to national minorities should be encouraged to engage at many different levels in public life and to assume the same responsibilities for building peaceful, functioning democratic societies as other members of the population. At the same time, they should have an opportunity to learn and speak their mother tongue and preserve their cultural identity. Minority cultures, languages and traditions also form an integral part of the overall cultural heritage of any multi-ethnic State and should be celebrated rather than feared and suppressed.

At the same time, the provision of minority rights within the legal system and the creation of a legislative framework for the protection of national minorities, while essential, are not enough to prevent conflicts or to govern diversity in a democratic way. For minority rights to be worth the paper they are written on, they must be effectively implemented. This requires adequate resources, both material and human, secured and

applied through the steady political will of the authorities. For rights to be properly implemented, they have to be underpinned by a system of good and democratic governance. In fact, integration is as much about good governance as it is about the respect for fundamental rights. Good governance, in this context, ensures that all stakeholders, including minorities, participate in and influence the decision-making process. It also encourages the development of adequate policies that promote social cohesion and the integration of diverse societies while respecting the plurality of cultures and views. This makes for better and more widely accepted decisions, and so reduces the risks and costs of conflict.

## Prevention through integration

These are the reasons why integrating diversity has long been one of the cornerstones of the HCNM's conflict prevention strategy. Admittedly there is no universal recipe for achieving the levels of integration that are necessary for the peaceful and democratic functioning of a multi-ethnic State. Given the increasingly wide range of minorities, it is unlikely that a single set of policies would be appropriate for them all or applied in the same way. In the HCNM's experience, for conflict prevention to be effective it has to be context specific. At the same time, however, I have been able to identify certain common elements and needs that seem to recur in the cases in which successive High Commissioners have been involved.

Questions are often raised with respect to who should be integrated and how. Currently, the prevailing discourse focuses on the integration of minorities, usually with an immigrant background, into mainstream society. This is particularly apparent in the way the EU member States define integration, often linking it with the naturalization of third-country nationals. Such an approach presupposes the existence of a more or less monolithic, dominant culture to which minorities have to adapt. It also places the primary responsibility for change on minorities rather than on society as a whole. Traditional national minorities that I am familiar with tend to challenge the hierarchical relationship that often develops between majority and minority communities, which is why my focus has been on the integration of societies rather than into societies. This means identifying multi-ethnic States and societies as a whole as the beneficiaries of integration policies and not only specific groups. It also implies that integration is more of a process based on partnership than an outcome: it requires all members of society, from both majority and minority communities, to adapt when necessary, establish effective channels of communication, and learn how to engage in mutually beneficial social relations. Integration, from my perspective, does not begin with migration and end with naturalization. It is a much broader notion that defines the peaceful *modus vivendi* for plural, multicultural societies.

It should be noted, however, that policies of integration, no matter how well intentioned, may be resisted by minority communities and may even generate tensions. This is particularly true for post-conflict societies where trust in State- minority relations is absent and channels of communication have broken down. Integration measures, in this context, can be seen as an imposition from outside by members of minority communities and can be met with suspicion and even hostility. The timing, presentation and legitimacy of State policies, therefore, are essential in order to generate goodwill and minimize short-term risks for the sake of long-term benefits. One has to keep in mind that there exist stages in the lifecycle of conflict resolution and democratic transition and integrative measures may be too premature and even counter-productive at the earlier stages of this cycle. Time, effort and investment are needed to restore reciprocal bonds of trust between ethnic groups and establish basic operational order and only then develop more integrationist policy options and political institutions. The key is to make 'integration pay' through incentives that are both contextual and appropriate. In this context, education, participation and media are areas that can be singled

out.

An indispensable instrument for the prevention of conflicts through integration is education. Investing in education may require patience and a long-term perspective but it is the most sustainable and ultimately rewarding mechanism with which to shape and prepare future generations for responsible citizenship. It is through education that we can expect children to learn how to be respectful, tolerant and fair members of society, who will ensure that traditions of pluralism and democracy take root, are maintained and further developed. It is through education that students learn how to question stereotypes and combat prejudice, how to deal with multiple perspectives and develop critical thinking. Schools that teach the history and culture of all members of society to their pupils, not only through books but also through socialization and the fostering of bonds of friendship, are laying the solid foundation for the future of their countries. It is for this reason that I have argued strongly against the trend of segregated education along ethnic lines that seems to have become so prevalent in many post-conflict societies. The long-term costs of such separation are too high to be allowed to continue or to be encouraged.

A balanced education system needs to combine tuition in and through the minority language with tuition in the State language. Learning their mother tongue and, where appropriate, studying in their mother tongue is essential for national minorities in order to preserve and develop their culture and identity. At the same time, learning the official language or languages is a precondition for the full enjoyment of their rights and life opportunities. This includes the rights to participation, association and engagement in public life. It also ensures better mobility and access to employment throughout the State and beyond. In addition, integration as a process depends largely on communication across and between groups, something that can hardly be achieved if there is no common language or languages. It is through communication and dialogue that all parties learn about each other's concerns and learn to appreciate each other's interests. Through dialogue, they can find common ground and ultimately reconcile conflicting positions.

Another critical aspect of integration is effective participation by national minorities in public life. It allows minorities to contribute and to take advantage of opportunities offered by the society they share with others. In some instances, equal treatment and non-discrimination may require the introduction of special measures targeting minorities in order to ensure their adequate representation in elected bodies, in public administration and in law enforcement bodies. Sometimes legal guarantees are needed to ensure that minorities have access to social services and the labour market, and to guard against direct or indirect discrimination. The role of governments in this process is vital. They can encourage the participation of minorities in public life by establishing adequate legislative frameworks that remove any constitutional or legal barriers to the selection of persons belonging to national minorities for employment in the public sector or to stand for election. Participation should not be nominal or symbolic, but should have a direct bearing on the decision-making process. The aim is to bring decision-making closer to those most affected, to involve them in the process and, by doing so, to achieve better policies and legislation. This is not only about rights, but also about the overall governance and stability of States. As the first High Commissioner Max van der Stoep pointed out, 'if minorities feel that their voices are being heard through the democratic process, they will be unlikely to resort to less acceptable means for representing their interests'. Integration through participation is therefore an important element in forging a mutually beneficial relationship between the State and minority communities based on a civic contract of rights and obligations.

The media is another important tool for promoting interethnic understanding and fostering a shared civic

identity. Addressing entrenched negative perceptions and shifting mindsets, attitudes and behaviour within societies can be one of the greatest challenges for civic integration. In this context, the media can be a progressive force within society, playing an important educative role. Balanced reporting on sensitive issues, especially in post-conflict societies, is essential because the lack thereof almost inevitably exacerbates tensions and may even serve as a trigger for a conflict. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of the media manipulating facts and images, and rather than challenging the negative stereotyping and established prejudices, this actually further entrenches them. Responsible journalism, therefore, is a matter that deserves our support and attention. It can be a powerful tool for promoting prevention through integration.

In sum, the HCNM's approach of integration with respect for diversity tries to avoid the extremes of assimilation and separation. It sees no contradiction in maintaining a distinctive identity — be it cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic or a combination of these — and being an integral part of society at large. It assumes the complementarity of civic and ethnic elements of identity and the possibility of simultaneously belonging to both a particular ethnic community and a wider community of all citizens. Integration defined in this way requires a degree of openness and flexibility as well as a wish on the part of both majority and minority communities to participate and engage. It can only be achieved through a system of democratic governance and respect for fundamental rights, including minority rights, since this is the only effective way of ensuring that identity, however defined, does not become a source of exclusion and discrimination. When this is not the case, the legitimacy of the State diminishes in the eyes of the minorities and the potential for confrontation grows. This cannot serve the self-interest of a State because in the long run nothing can be more dangerous than a group of dissatisfied and alienated citizens united by a common kinship and a sense of not belonging to the State in which they reside. It is the perfect recipe for generating tensions that could destabilize both internal stability and international security.

### Lessons learned by way of conclusion

The HCNM's approach to integrating diversity was developed in response to post- Cold War challenges of transition and post-conflict State building in the 'new' Europe. One question is whether such an approach can also be relevant in other situations or whether it is too specific to the original context for which it was developed and has no wider applicability. In this respect, what is relevant and appropriate for the Armenian and the Hungarian minority in Georgia and Slovakia, respectively, may well be irrelevant and inappropriate for Moroccans in the Netherlands. Looking beyond the notion of direct applicability, however, a thorough analysis is required to discern whether lessons learned in one context can offer valuable insights and guidance in another. Learning from the experiences of my institution has led me to a number of conclusions in this regard.

First of all, there is a direct link between integration and state consolidation. They are interdependent and interconnected. Effective integration is contingent upon the existence of a well-functioning, democratic State. In turn, the State requires a degree of coherence and social integration in order to be well-functioning and stable. Integration, as a rule, encompasses sets of policies, institutions and laws that are embedded in the practice of stable, democratic States. They neither coercively homogenize people nor entrench unjustified differential treatment of people.


Secondly, the State must provide legal and institutional guarantees for the protection of human rights and human dignity. In some instances this requires special measures and the realisation of specific minority rights that are largely contextual and can be enjoyed depending on the size, territorial concentration, historical

settlement and the legal status of persons belonging to minorities. Differentiation is acceptable provided it is reasonable and proportionate.

Third, the nature and root causes of conflict may differ in different contexts, but in many instances violence is preceded by radicalization and is often fuelled by the media. Political and nationalist radicalization can be characteristic of all members of society, majorities and minorities alike, particularly when they feel marginalized and alienated. The normal political processes break down and the likelihood of conflict increases when the simultaneous radicalization and polarisation of different groups within a multi-ethnic State occurs. The involvement of all members of the society in established political processes and the presence of a professional and balanced media becomes essential for dealing with radical forces.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that diversity is not a problem in itself, nor is it necessarily linked to conflict. We tend to hear only about the situations that erupt, but remain oblivious of the untold cases of peaceful and harmonious coexistence that never reach the headlines. Education in its broadest sense — schools, the media and cultural exchange for example — will teach us how to enjoy our differences. Admittedly, diversity tends to present a challenge during times of transition, misfortune or economic crisis. Difficult times, however, should not serve as an excuse for lowering standards; on the contrary, respect for human dignity is even more vital in times of hardship than at any other time.





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