

Conference on Linguistic Rights of National Minorities Ten Years after the Oslo Recommendations and Beyond

**The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (NCHR), University of Oslo
18-19 June 2008**

**Welcoming remarks by Mr. Peter Stenlund, Ambassador of Finland to Norway,
Representative of the OSCE Chairmanship**

Mr. Chair, High Commissioner
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this conference celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities on behalf of the Finnish Chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). I would like to express the Chairmanship's appreciation to the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights for organising this conference.

The unique strength of the OSCE in preventing conflicts and enhancing mutual understanding and dialogue lies in the Organisation's comprehensive approach to security, covering the politico-military, the economic and environmental and the human dimensions. In its Chairmanship programme for 2008, Finland emphasizes that the work of the OSCE is based on common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and stresses the importance of the implementation of political commitments that the participating States have undertaken.

The Finnish OSCE Chairmanship gives its full support to the activities of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ambassador Knut Vollebæk and his office in providing early warning on ethnic tensions and in supporting the participating States from Vancouver to Vladivostok in implementing their commitments. The work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in the area of linguistic rights is a fundamental contribution to the maintenance of peace and security in the whole OSCE region.

The contribution of national minorities to co-operation among participating States was recognised already in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, but it was not until in Vienna in 1989 that the participating States explicitly recognised the protection of the identity of national minorities as a principle relating to the security in Europe. The Copenhagen document of 1990 on its part provides basic human rights, including linguistic rights, of national minorities - actually I had the privilege of being a member of the Finnish delegation in Copenhagen. The Oslo

recommendations are a valuable tool when OSCE political commitments are put into practice by authorities.

The right to use one's own language freely both in the private and public sphere is of great significance for his or her identity and self-expression, and also for the community as a whole to which the individual belongs. The enjoyment of linguistic rights is essential in the realisation of human rights in a broader context. For instance, the right to freedom of expression can be fully realised only where individuals can freely use their own language. Effective participation by national minorities in decision-making that affect their rights cannot be ensured without securing linguistic rights of minorities. Overall, promoting linguistic rights contributes not only to the realisation of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but also to preventing tensions and conflicts in our societies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Finland the Swedish speakers are guaranteed the right to use their mother tongue, which is the second official language. The Swedish speakers do not consider themselves a national minority, even if the language is spoken as mother tongue only by less than 6 % of the population. The autonomous province of Aaland Islands is a separate case - in this province Swedish is the only official language.

The indigenous Saami people, the Roma, the Old Russians, the Jews, and the Tatars could be considered to be national minorities within the framework of international standards established for national minorities. The definition of the Saami in Finnish legislation is partly based on linguistic criteria and Saami is a regional minority language - actually several Saami languages are recognized. The Saami have the right to use either Finnish or Saami before courts of law as well as state and municipal authorities whose jurisdictional or administrative areas cover all or part of the Saami Homeland. The Saami Homeland, as considered by the Saami themselves, is crossing the national borders between Finland, Sweden and Norway, and even Russia.

The Roma language has the status of a non-territorial minority language in Finland. Even though Finland can be content with having quite successfully ensured linguistic rights of minorities, there are still areas where work needs to be done for their further promotion.

The provision of education in the Romani language for Roma children is constantly under efforts and improvement. In addition to national efforts, in the Council of Europe framework Finland has supported Romani language curriculum development during the past years. Finland has carefully taken note of recommendations made by international organisations, including the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommendations and resolutions to Finland in 2007 with regard to the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The spirit of the Oslo recommendations is of interest for Finland also in the context of the traditional Finnish-speaking populations in our neighbouring countries Norway, Sweden and Russia. In Norway Norwegians of Finnish origin in the North, or the Kveeni, is recognized as one of the national minorities. So is the people in the Finnforest in the Norwegian-Swedish border region north-east of Oslo, even if Finnish is not spoken as a traditional language anymore.

Co-operation between ethnically, culturally and linguistically related populations living in different countries can be used as an additional factor enhancing inter-state relations. Finland works actively for the co-operation between the Fenno-Ugric peoples living mainly in Finland,

Estonia, Hungary and the Russian Federation. We look forward to the Fifth World Congress of Fenno-Ugric Peoples to be held in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia on 28 June.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Linguistic rights are a fundamental element for the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. It represents a continuous challenge for both States and minorities. Celebrating an important international instrument such as the Oslo Recommendations helps attain the goals in the recommendations.

Thank you.