Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

REGIONAL CO-OPERATION THROUGH MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND MONGOLIA

address by
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to the
Roundtable of Ministers responsible for education in Central Asia and Mongolia

[Check against delivery]

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Excellencies,
Esteemed colleagues,
Distinguished participants,

Let me begin by thanking the Government of Turkmenistan, the Ministry of Education, and you personally, dear Minister Gurbangeldiev, for hosting us here in Ashgabat. It is a great pleasure to welcome all of you.

This roundtable follows a very positive trend in the region, which has seen increased co-operation among your States across a broad range of issues. The landmark settlement on border issues reached at Khujand in March last year was truly a historic event, which the OSCE leadership, including myself, rightly welcomed. At their consultative meeting in Tashkent last November, the Central Asian leaders undertook to deepen co-operation in culture, science and among young people. And only two weeks ago, they met again at Avaza, here in Turkmenistan, and undertook to deepen humanitarian co-operation, to preserve the cultural heritage that unites peoples, and to widen co-operation among young people. Then, as you also know, when the Presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan met in March earlier this year, education was named among their priority areas for co-operation, and the teaching of each country's language in the other formed part of that conversation. I have also noted the growing dialogue and co-operation in education between Mongolia and Central Asia, and with Kazakhstan in particular.

This roundtable is proposed to continue in this spirit of mutual exchange and co-operation and, more specifically, to see how practical steps forward can be made, particularly in the area of languages in education.

As I have not yet met all of you, I should perhaps first explain why a High Commissioner on National Minorities is so interested in discussing education and language. It begins with my mandate which is to identify and prevent conflicts that emerge from tensions involving national minority issues. Since the appointment of the first High Commissioner on National Minorities three decades ago, we have consistently found that the earliest traces of growing tensions across the OSCE region begin in the classroom.

Children are kept on the margins of education for many reasons: because they live far from a school, because their family is poor, because they have a disability, or because of who their

parents are. Every ministry represented here works on these issues. Language also belongs on this list, and it reaches further than most, because it is present in every lesson of every day. A child who cannot follow the language of the classroom is not only shut out of one part of school, they are shut out of all of it, no matter how well the school is resourced. If left unattended across a generation, this will produce young people who grow up without any common language, in schools where the languages that they speak at home and in their community have little place, and who therefore have few opportunities to get to know one another.

At the same time, I also observe the opposite. When schools give children both a secure footing in their first language and a genuine command of the State language, this helps everyone to play a full part in the life of their country, and to feel that the State is truly working for the benefit of all. It instils a strong sense of belonging, which in turn leads to trust, stability and a cohesive society and prevents tensions from taking root. This is why language in education is one of the core areas of my work, and why all my predecessors have given it special attention.

I should also note that this is a very fitting month for this discussion – more by coincidence than by design – though perhaps it is still a very auspicious sign. I am pleased to highlight that my office's *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* are 30 years old this month. They were the first set of guidelines we issued, and they were drafted to stress that education which includes every child is part and parcel of successful and cohesive societies, and that a child's own language and the State language reinforce one another. And indeed, since their publication, we repeatedly see that the countries that do well, including on education, are those that manage this question in line with the letter and spirit of these recommendations.

Excellencies,

Every government represented here today is interested to see that every child leaves school with a full command of the State language. Proficiency in the State language is, in many respects, the key to further education, to the labour market and to full participation in public life. It is one of the most valuable tools a school can give to a child. It is an investment in your country's human capital. In my conversations with participating States across the OSCE region I am asked the same thing over and over again. How can we ensure that every child masters the State language, while at the same time keeping the language they bring from home? I regard

that question as entirely legitimate and a matter of high importance. It is also, in essence, what Sustainable Development Goal 4 asks of us all: inclusive and equitable quality education for every child.

In order to answer this question, I am glad that we can rely on good evidence from both within and beyond this region. It is clear that a child who first learns to read, to count and to reason in a language they already understand arrives at full proficiency of the State language sooner and retains it more securely, because the skills underlying literacy are acquired once and are then transferable. The same applies to the international and regional languages your economies require, such as English, Russian and, increasingly, Chinese.

Unfortunately, this is not the norm across the globe, and I note that the World Bank, in its 2021 study "Loud and Clear", found that 37 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries are taught in a language they do not understand well. And the consequence is only logical: when children cannot properly follow the educational process, their learning outcomes suffer, their economic prospects are diminished, and the economy as a whole is affected. This is why the World Bank treats the language of the classroom as a question of human capital. It is, in this sense, a question of economic return, and of course also one of inclusion. Being mindful that the role of languages in education is key to inclusive education: it asks the educational system to adapt to the child's needs, rather than expecting the child to come to pre-school, and subsequently school, fully prepared. That is the main logic behind Sustainable Development Goal 4 which we all aspire to.

This is what brings us to multilingual education. The term itself can be misleading because it sounds like one single tool that can be either adopted or declined. But this is not the case. Multilingual education is better understood as the deliberate application of the languages a school already contains: which languages are used in the early learning process, when and how the State or another language enters the system, and how a child is guided from the one language to the other. Every country represented here already makes those decisions, every day. The question before us is whether they are made deliberately, based on the evidence, and with a clear view of the results they produce.

I wish to underline that there is no single model on how best to use different languages in education. Methods differ, for example, in how long the first language remains the medium,

how early the State language is introduced, how subjects are divided, which of the many teaching approaches is used, and how much is decided by the central ministry rather than the school. What suits a compact community with well-resourced schools of its own will not suit a classroom with five first languages in it. The right design follows the diverse contexts that exist in this region, and that variety is a reason to compare notes and to discuss which models can best be implemented and how we can learn from each other.

Excellencies,
Colleagues,

The work involved to ensure that multilingual education is managed well is substantial, but I share from my many conversations across the OSCE region that the work is very similar in most countries. It takes teachers who are trained in the specific methodology of teaching the State language as a second language. It takes modern textbooks and agreed subject terminology, and it takes resources and time that give schools a realistic chance to prepare. Then, of course, there is the issue of assessment and evaluation, which has become a central question in education policy everywhere. Global assessments have their uses, but I note that several regions have concluded that they are better served by assessments of their own design, built around what their own schools are trying to achieve. Sustainable Development Goal 4 already carries an indicator for part of this, on the proportion of learners whose first or home language is the language of instruction. However, reporting about it remains uneven across our region.

Minister,
Excellencies,

That brings me to co-operation on these matters, and to why I believe this region is well placed for it.

Almost every State language represented at this table is also a language spoken at home by communities across a border. Each of you educates children whose home language is a neighbour’s State language, and each of your State languages is spoken by communities abroad as their home language. At the same time, your countries are home to smaller communities

whose languages also cross your borders, and whose linguistic heritage is an important part of the diversity of your societies.

All of this makes co-operation a matter of plain mutual interest, and it means that an improvement any of your countries makes is of direct value to the others. What each of your countries does at home gives the region something worth exchanging, and what the region builds together makes the work at home more achievable.

Your authorities recognized this some 20 years ago. In Tashkent, in November 2006, your countries took what my predecessor called a pioneering step: you launched the Inter-State Dialogue on Social Integration and National Minority Education in Central Asia. Its working groups met in Astana, Bishkek, Tashkent and here in Ashgabat. Within three years it had produced real exchanges between your countries: Uzbekistan supplied books and literary works to school libraries in Tajikistan; Tajikistan sent in-service trainers to Tajik-language schools in southern Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan convened teachers from Kazakh-language schools across the region; and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concluded a bilateral agreement covering the practical questions of minority education. That work was then taken up through the Central Asia Education Programme, which my office implemented together with all of you and jointly with UNICEF, for almost a decade from 2012 to 2021. It combined capacity building and technical assistance with regional exchanges in the form of training for teachers and school directors, regional summer schools and study visits between your countries.

That work showed how much opportunity there is to work together.

There is another reason why I am committed to this conversation. Central Asia and Mongolia have developed genuinely good practices in education and languages, and in multilingual education in particular. This was built by people in this region, and I am glad that some of them are in this room. I would like to help develop it further and to show it to the rest of the OSCE community. I am pleased to say that this is something my office does already. Just this year, for example, we brought experts from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to Moldova to train school and kindergarten managers on how to introduce multilingual education in their institutions.

Excellencies,
Colleagues,

My office would like to continue to be your partner in addressing issues related to languages in education, both at the domestic and the regional level. What I hope to take from today's proceedings is your belief that the subject matters and aspiration to carry it forward together.

My office and I are willing to commit to facilitating exchanges, learning and the promotion of language-in-education policies at the regional level, and to help mobilize the international community around these questions. I am eager to discuss this with you.

I will stop here, because we have a dynamic day ahead and the value of today lies in your contributions. I will be listening with great interest. I would particularly welcome hearing where things have proved successful, but also where they were difficult and what was learned from this and, most importantly, where we can come together to build the human capital on which strong, successful and cohesive societies depend.

Thank you once again for your hospitality, Minister, and I look forward to our discussion.