HIGH COMMISSIONER ON NATIONAL MINORITIES OF THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Summary: The High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) focuses on disputes involving national minorities that have an international character and that have the propensity to cause inter-State tension or to ignite international armed conflict. The HCNM provides early warning if, as a result of these disputes, imminent threats to peace and security between countries are perceived and engages in activities to de-escalate tensions. The HCNM’s approach, firmly grounded in human rights law, is one of ‘quiet diplomacy’. The High Commissioner's office is potentially available to any minority group within the 55 member States of the OSCE whose situation falls within the HCNM's mandate.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Prior to 1995, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was known as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The CSCE was an intergovernmental diplomatic conference, better known as the "Helsinki process", begun during the 1970s as a forum for East-West dialogue during the Cold War. As the descendent of this process, the post-Cold War OSCE is still primarily a "soft security" organization, that is, it is not a defence alliance and does not possess military assets. The main emphasis is on security and, as the name of the organization implies, on cooperation between and among States aimed at achieving security and stability for all its members. The 55 participating States, which span the northern hemisphere from Vancouver to Vladivostock, are committed to ongoing dialogue rooted in fundamental values within the framework of open, democratic societies with free market economies and based on the rule of law and respect for human rights.

OSCE members are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The approach of the OSCE regarding human rights protection is embodied in the notion of "comprehensive security", which recognizes a fundamental link between security and respect for human rights. Recognition of the interdependence among issues of military and political security and human rights, as well as economic and environmental concerns, was set out in the 1975 Final Act of Helsinki. This established ten basic principles governing behaviour both
among the participating States and of governments towards those within their jurisdiction.

The principles, later known as the "decalogue", are divided into three domains or "baskets". The first is the "security basket", which refers to traditional military issues. The second concerns cooperation in the economic and environmental spheres. The third is the "human dimension", which includes human rights and humanitarian affairs. From the perspective of comprehensive security, respect for human dimension commitments, including respect for the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, is fundamental to achieving and maintaining peace and security in the region.

The High Commissioner on National Minorities within the OSCE Framework

Almost all OSCE participating States have one or more national minority groups within their territories. In all those States, respect for the rights of minorities and the promotion of an integrated, multi-cultural society is not only desirable in itself but helps ensuring stability and peace both within and among States.

Within the framework of comprehensive security, the mechanism of the HCNM is placed firmly in the "security basket". The role of the HCNM is to focus on disputes involving national minorities that have an international character and that have the propensity to cause inter-State tension or to ignite international armed conflict. Indeed, in recognizing the need for an institution to address inter-ethnic conflict, OSCE participating States created the HCNM at the Helsinki Summit Meeting of 1992 "as an instrument of conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage". The HCNM is to provide early warning in cases where he believes that minority-orientated problems might escalate and threaten peace, security or stability between States and to take appropriate action to de-escalate tensions. Should tensions escalate, then his mandate requires him to warn the participating States in sufficient time to allow for further steps to avoid the eruption of violent conflict.

The HCNM is, above all, a political instrument and is not intended to supervise States’ compliance with their OSCE commitments or international obligations. He does not function as an advocate or ombudsman for minorities or as recourse for individuals belonging to national minorities. He is a High Commissioner on (not for) National Minorities. Of course, the subject-matter addressed by the HCNM (i.e., minority issues) is strongly linked with the human dimension: adequate protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities contributes towards minimizing ethnic tensions that might otherwise threaten to create wider conflict. The High Commissioner therefore pays close attention to issues of human rights, especially freedom from discrimination, along with respect for minority rights.

The High Commissioner is actively involved in over a dozen OSCE participating States, in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. He is supported in his work by an international staff of ten advisers based at his office in The Hague, The Netherlands. Mr. Max van der Stoel of The Netherlands served as HCNM since the mechanism became functional in January 1993 until July 2001. The current HCNM is Mr. Rolf Ekeus of Sweden.

Overview of Applicable Standards
OSCE Norms

Within the OSCE, respect for human rights is acknowledged as a fundamental element of security and has provided the context for the elaboration of new standards, especially concerning the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The Helsinki Final Act stipulates in Principle VII:

The participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the rights of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before the law, will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms and will, in this manner, protect their legitimate interests in this sphere.

After little movement in the preceding fifteen years, progress on minority issues greatly accelerated after 1989. In June 1990, the Copenhagen Document on the Human Dimension of the (then) CSCE was adopted; it is still regarded as the basic OSCE standard-setting instrument concerning minority rights. The Copenhagen Document also includes a long list of provisions concerning democratic institution-building and the rule of law.

Taking individual human rights as its point of departure, paragraph 33 of the Copenhagen Document commits States to "protect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities on their territory... in conformity with the principles of equality and non-discrimination." States also commit themselves, where necessary, to take special measures to ensure this equality. These special rights and measures do not constitute preferential treatment for persons belonging to national minorities. Rather, they aim to achieve equal and meaningful enjoyment of rights in fact as well as in law.

While the concept of minority rights grows out of the concept of individual human rights, it is only the joint exercise of these rights that enables persons belonging to a national minority to preserve their identity. The Copenhagen Document grants all persons belonging to national minorities a number of specific rights that may be exercised both individually and in community with other members of the group. These include, inter alia:

- the right to "express, preserve and develop" their identity and culture, free from any attempts at forced assimilation (para. 32)
- the right to use their mother tongue in private and public and to exchange information in their mother tongue (paras. 32.1, 32.5)
- the right to establish and maintain minority educational, cultural, and religious institutions and to seek funding for them, "in conformity with national legislation" (para. 32.2)
- the right to practice their religion, including using religious materials and conducting religious educational activities in the minority mother tongue (para. 32.3)
- the right to maintain "unimpeded contacts" with those with whom they share common origin, heritage, or religious beliefs, within and across frontiers (para. 32.4)
- the right to "effective participation in public affairs, including participation in the affairs relating to the protection and promotion of the identity of such minorities" (para. 35)
States are to "create conditions for the promotion of... [minority] identity" (para. 33) and "will endeavour to ensure" that members of minorities "have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue, as well as, wherever possible and necessary, for its use before public authorities" (para. 34).

Although individuals may exercise their rights in community with others, there is no basis for "collective" rights per se within the OSCE framework. In particular, there is no connection with the right to self-determination (a fear sometimes expressed by government authorities or the majority population), as paragraph 37 of the Copenhagen Document makes clear:

None of these commitments [i.e. specified minority rights] may be interpreted as implying any right to engage in any activity or perform any action in contravention of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, other obligations of international law or the provisions of the [Helsinki] Final Act, including the principle of territorial integrity of States.

Additional minority-specific provisions are set forth in the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which notes the determination of States to "foster the rich contribution of national minorities to the life of our societies", and the 1991 Report of the Geneva Meeting of Experts on National Minorities, which represents the conclusions of three weeks of discussion among experts from CSCE States on the issues of national minorities and the rights of persons belonging to them.

International Standards

The HCNM's approach is firmly grounded in international human rights law. He relies upon the international standards to which States have already agreed to provide a framework for dialogue and for his eventual recommendations. Since all OSCE participating States are members of the United Nations (except Switzerland) and some three-quarters are members of the Council of Europe, they are legally bound by various treaties adopted under the UN and Council of Europe, as well by bilateral treaties, in addition to their politically-binding OSCE commitments. Reference to existing human rights standards that States have voluntarily undertaken protects the HCNM from accusations of arbitrariness or of creating his own yardsticks for monitoring progress. Reference to the standards also helps to ensure consistency in the HCNM's own assessments and positions, so that he may not be accused of applying double standards.

The HCNM frequently assesses and makes recommendations on whether domestic legislation that concerns the rights of persons belonging to national minorities conforms with international standards, most often in the areas of language, education, political participation or citizenship. In this way, the HCNM assists governments in meeting their international obligations and commitments by acting as a kind of "translator" of norms and standards in a variety of situations. Although the OSCE did not create the HCNM's position to monitor States' compliance with international standards, in some respects he has assumed a kind of "gate-keeper" role vis-à-vis those States that strive to meet entry criteria for other Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as the European Union.

International standards for the protection of minorities sometimes lack clarity, which leaves them open to interpretation and possible inconsistencies in application. In response to these gaps, and in order to assist policy- and lawmakers more generally, the HCNM has on three occasions sought the assistance of internationally recognized experts to clarify the content of
minority rights in specific areas and to offer generally applicable recommendations. These sets of recommendations provide States with guidance in formulating policies for minorities within their jurisdiction in the spheres of education, language, and participation in public life.

They are:
- the Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities (1998)

States are expected to respect their minimum international commitments; but the broader values of the OSCE urges governments to go beyond the minimum in responding to the reasonable demands of minorities and others within their society. Accordingly, the HCNM frequently encourages governments to accommodate desires voiced by minorities, and he assists all the parties in finding reasonable compromises in this regard.

Who is Entitled to Minority Rights?

OSCE instruments speak of "persons belonging to national minorities". In the context of the Helsinki process, the term "national minority" is generally understood to mean a non-dominant population that is a numerical minority within a State but that shares the same nationality/ethnicity as the population constituting a numerical majority in another, often neighboring or "kin", State. In practice, there is considerable latitude left to each State to establish the definition that it will apply within its own jurisdiction and there are substantial differences among such definitions within the OSCE area. However, this does not mean that States are free to make any unilateral determination, no matter how unreasonable, as to the existence of a minority. The enjoyment of minority rights requires no formal legal recognition of a group by the State.

The OSCE approach to the problem of definition follows the principle that to belong to a national minority is a matter of individual choice and that no disadvantage may arise from the exercise of such a choice. In short, while individual States may define what a minority is, the question of who does or does not belong to a minority can be determined only by the subjective feelings of its members. The HCNM has followed this approach and has stated that "the existence of a minority is a question of fact and not definition." He has, in addition, identified some objective criteria for what constitutes a minority: that is, a group with linguistic, ethnic, or cultural characteristics distinct from the majority and that usually not only seeks to maintain its identity but also tries to give stronger expression to that identity.

In practice, the lack of definition may have serious implications in real situations. For example, the term "national" in "national minority" has been interpreted by some to imply that persons belonging to a minority must be citizens of the State in whose territorial jurisdiction they are found. This interpretation has caused problems and increased inter-ethnic tensions in some OSCE States.

The High Commissioner's Mandate

Pamphlet No. 9 of the UN Guide for Minorities
The OSCE monitors human rights through a number of different mechanisms, but by far the most important for minority issues is the office of the HCNM. The High Commissioner's basic mandate is to

provide "early warning" and, as appropriate, “early action” at the earliest possible stage in regard to tensions involving national minority issues that have not yet developed beyond an early warning stage, but, in the judgement of the High Commissioner, have the potential to develop into a conflict within the CSCE area, affecting peace, stability or relations between participating states, requiring the attention of and action by the Council or the CSO [the Committee of Senior Officials, now the Senior Council].

The HCNM therefore has a twofold mission: first, to de-escalate tensions, and, second, to act as a "trip wire" to alert the OSCE when such tensions threaten to escalate to a level where they can not be contained by means at his disposal. In accomplishing this mission, the HCNM should work through quiet diplomacy and direct confidential contacts. He may receive and collect information from any source and maintain contacts with anyone (except those who practice or publicly condone terrorism). He may also receive specific reports from and seek to communicate with the parties directly concerned, including governments, associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other groups of persons, including representatives of national minorities. He may visit any OSCE participating State and communicate freely with anyone he chooses, including high-ranking government officials, to obtain first-hand information and, “where appropriate, promote dialogue, cooperation and confidence between” the parties. He is to be "an eminent international personality" who will act impartially and will "work in confidence and will act independently of all parties directly involved in the tensions."

Quiet Diplomacy: The Mandate in Practice

While the mandate offers general guidelines on how the High Commissioner should operate through quiet diplomacy, it does not prescribe precisely the approach or the means through which he is to implement his mandate. The actual working methods have been largely developed by the first High Commissioner, Mr. van der Stoel, during his term from 1993 to mid-2001.

In the mandate, the transition from early warning to early action is rigidly structured. However, the HCNM has avoided strict characterization of his actions, and most of his activities have concerned early action, e.g., multiple visits to the countries in which he is involved, thereby avoiding the need for formal early warning.

The mandate also contains an “exit strategy” under which the HCNM should defer to the Chairman-in-Office (i.e., the foreign minister presiding, on an annually rotating basis, over the OSCE Council of Ministers, the OSCE's central decision-making and governing body) and the OSCE's Senior Council, if he deems that his scope for action is exhausted because the conflict has escalated. However, this strategy has never been employed.

Contacts and Information-Gathering

Pamphlet No. 9 of the UN Guide for Minorities

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With the assistance of his advisers, the HCNM collects and analyzes information from all relevant sources, including wire services, the Internet and other media, government representatives, independent experts, NGOs and secondary sources, such as journals and reports. He also maintains contacts with OSCE missions and receives information through internal OSCE channels. While he does not act as a complaint mechanism, he is open to direct approaches and submissions from concerned persons. There is no special format for reports or information to be transmitted to the HCNM, but any communication should be in writing and signed with full names and addresses. It should contain a factual account of the relevant developments, and only information that can be substantiated should be included. On the basis of such information, the HCNM's attention is drawn towards situations that may fall within his mandate.

**Initiating Direct Contacts**

The HCNM's mandate is unusual in terms of the authority granted to him to become directly involved in the affairs of a State. The HCNM enjoys a virtual right of entry into, and freedom of movement within, any participating State. He may decide to become involved purely on the basis of his own judgement in a particular situation, without the formal consent of the State. Although the HCNM does not need the approval of the State concerned, once the HCNM decides that he would like to visit a particular country, and in keeping with the OSCE principle of "cooperative security", he seeks the cooperation of the government involved in facilitating a visit. Such cooperation is almost always forthcoming and creates a positive working environment during visits and subsequent work.

The HCNM is often asked to explain the basis on which he has chosen to become involved in certain States and not others. Obviously, the degree to which issues concerning persons belonging to national minorities affect local or regional security is key. The HCNM therefore considers the available information in terms of indicators of potential conflict and makes a decision on this basis. Such calculations remain, to a certain extent, subjective and rely on the good judgement of the HCNM, based on his own experience and intuition. Two main factors influence his decision: the extent to which he considers that his involvement is needed and the potential for him to have a positive impact. The HCNM has said that he will engage in a situation if there is any chance that his involvement might influence the situation positively; and he has been willing to take on difficult situations even where the chances of success are low. When deciding whether to become involved, the HCNM also considers whether his involvement would bring some added value, particularly in cases where a number of international actors are already involved and efforts could be duplicated or even interfere with one another.

While the HCNM is aware that some States may regard his involvement as a stigmatization or implicit criticism of their treatment of minorities within their jurisdiction, the HCNM has always stressed that his involvement simply reflects the degree to which States face complex and often sensitive problems. His activities reflect the OSCE’s commitment to assist States in addressing their problems, living up to their commitments and, ultimately, maintaining security and stability.

**Independence and Accountability**
Crucial to the HCNM's involvement is his independent status. His involvement does not require the specific approval of the Senior or Permanent Council (the forum of representatives of OSCE participating States that meets weekly in Vienna) or of the State(s) concerned. Not being dependent on decisions made by consensus-based negotiating bodies means that he can move quickly and independently.

The HCNM is ultimately accountable to the OSCE through the Chairman-in-Office, with whom he may consult prior to an on-site visit and to whom he reports confidentially on his findings. The mandate is carefully formulated to avoid any indication that the Permanent Council can give instructions to the HCNM or overrule him; but the High Commissioner cannot function properly without the political support of States. Close institutional links with the political bodies of the OSCE and the collective support of participating States provide the necessary backing to encourage implementation of his recommendations.

Confidentiality

While the HCNM enjoys wide access to information, his mandate prescribes that he work in a confidential manner. His discreet, low-key, and confidential approach is designed to gain trust and cooperation from all parties; it also helps avoid the inflammatory statements that public attention sometimes provokes. Parties are often more open to consider various options behind closed doors when they know that they will not be subject to external pressures or be seen to be climbing down from declared positions. The commitment to confidentiality is intended to keep matters within the internal governmental framework of the OSCE as a whole, but it does not preclude the HCNM from working in cooperation with other international bodies, such as the Council of Europe, as he often does.

The HCNM has developed the practice of making recommendations to States through a formal exchange of letters between him and the appropriate government ministers. These recommendations are regularly made public, after having been presented and discussed in the OSCE Permanent Council. In this way, quiet diplomacy is pursued for some time, but there is ultimately some public accountability. Circulation of this correspondence to OSCE delegations at the initiative of the Chairman-in-Office allows the OSCE community to become acquainted with the HCNM's concerns. A brief synopsis of his activities is included in the monthly OSCE Newsletter for other interested persons.

The HCNM generally avoids substantial contacts with the press, except in specific situations where he judges that public statements might be beneficial to his work.

Cooperation

The HCNM takes a non-confrontational and non-coercive approach to his engagement with the parties involved and seeks to work with them to find solutions to sources of tension. This reflects his conviction that meaningful and sustainable progress depends upon the good will and consent of all parties involved. Compromise solutions reluctantly conceded under external pressure are not likely to last. While the HCNM is an instrument of "short-term" conflict prevention, aimed at defusing tensions that are likely to spark imminent conflicts, he also aims to encourage ongoing dialogue and cooperation between the parties and to establish lines of communication that will endure in the long term. Through his recommendations, he encourages the parties to take concrete steps to address underlying issues of contention and so
lead to a sustainable de-escalation of tensions. His persistent engagement serves to ensure that appropriate follow-up is taken by the States directly concerned and by the OSCE as a whole.

Impartiality

In order not to compromise the High Commissioner's diplomatic efforts in engaging the continued cooperation of all parties, and in view of the sensitivity of the issues he is called upon to address, it is important that he should not be identified with any one party.

Impartiality should not, however, be regarded as synonymous with neutrality. The High Commissioner may identify himself with positions held by any of the parties that he considers to be credible and viable in advancing the conflict-prevention process. While he is an impartial actor without vested interests, in that he does not bring an OSCE "agenda" to the table, his assessment of competing claims and opposing positions is based on a commitment to international standards and fundamental OSCE values. His judgements, rather than exhibiting partiality to the political interests of one group, reflect a partiality to upholding these commitments.

Implementation of the Mandate

The Helsinki Final Act and the documents born of subsequent follow-up meetings are not legally binding instruments. Since OSCE commitments are political in nature, there exists within the OSCE framework no individual complaints mechanism comparable to that under, for example, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (see Pamphlet No. 7). However, that should not diminish the significance of the OSCE regime. The OSCE's "politically binding" instruments are designed to promote ongoing security through dialogue, rather than coercion, and States are engaged at a high political level to respect their commitments and to ongoing bilateral and multilateral discussion of their treatment of minorities.

Rather than promoting an ideal or "enforcing" rights, the HCNM seeks to find a solution that is workable and constructive within the specific context, that is, the best solution that is likely to be accepted by both or all parties. In short, he seeks pragmatic solutions based on what is politically possible. Behind this pragmatism, however, lies a coherent and consistent approach, grounded in fundamental OSCE values and international standards.

Addressing the Root Causes of Conflict

In the HCNM's experience, many of the problems involving national minorities involve a lack of respect for human rights, including specific minority rights, which over time gives rise to frustration, resentment, alienation, and a sense of injustice. Problems arise when persons belonging to national minorities feel they are being discriminated against, either in the protection and promotion of their own identity and culture, or by being excluded from certain processes or opportunities in the public sphere -- including access to an equitable share of the State's resources. In turn, such tension may be exploited for political purposes, whether by representatives of the majority or minorities. The consequent instability and insecurity damages the whole society and, if not addressed, may eventually give rise to violence.
Integrating Diversity

The HCNM generally promotes an inclusive, integrationist policy towards resolving tensions. This implies that minorities be given adequate opportunity to maintain and develop their distinct identities while still being a part of, and making a contribution to, the wider society. The HCNM frequently stresses to States the advantages of protecting and promoting the rights of minorities: if persons belonging to national minorities are content within the wider society, they are less likely to pursue policies or strategies against the interests of the majority. Similarly, "kin-States" are less likely to be attracted to irredentist policies if they perceive that "their" minorities in neighbouring States are treated well.

Integrating diversity is often a question of "good governance", which requires that governing institutions act in the interests of the whole population by creating comparable conditions and opportunities for all. This relies, first, on recognizing cultural diversity as an asset rather than a threat, and, second, on acknowledging the plurality of interests within the State.

The HCNM stresses the importance of the following elements in achieving good governance and promoting integration:

- recognizing, protecting, and promoting the identity of persons belonging to minorities
- allowing minorities the opportunity to participate effectively in public life, including the political decision-making processes
- providing minorities with access to a fair share of public goods, including economic opportunity
- sensitivity to the linguistic and educational needs of minorities, which are closely connected with the right of each individual to develop his/her identity

At the same time, the HCNM often reminds minorities that, while they have rights, they also have responsibilities to respect the integrity of the State and to contribute to the wider society of which they are also part.

The High Commissioner's Recommendations

The HCNM's recommendations to governments spell out his concerns regarding the issues that in his opinion are at the source of tensions. These are often sensitive issues that the government may want to avoid. The recommendations are designed to provide a framework within which governments and minorities can address legal, policy, institutional, and process issues. To this end, they typically refer to specific policies and administrative practices and are usually precise and detailed. They are not intended to apportion blame, but rather to make constructive contributions to both the analysis and resolution of sensitive issues.

Tension-reducing Projects

In addition to his diplomatic activities, facilitation of dialogue, and specific recommendations, the HCNM has increasingly undertaken, or encouraged others to undertake, projects on the ground that directly address the sources of disputes. These projects aim to reduce inter-ethnic tensions either by providing frameworks within which problems may be solved or by solving matters themselves. In the latter category, for example, have been educational projects,
ranging from producing new school textbooks or providing legal aid to establishing a new university. Most projects are small in financial terms, but they help close gaps that might otherwise gape. The number and size of such projects have increased in recent years.

Further Information and Contacts

The HCNM's office is in The Hague, and all correspondence should be addressed there:

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The principal documents of the CSCE/OSCE are available on the Internet at www.osce.org. The HCNM's recommendations, statements, press releases, speeches, etc., are available at www.osce.org/hcnm.

The Hague, Oslo, and Lund Recommendations are available in a number of different languages both on the Internet and in hard copy. The Hague Recommendations are reproduced and discussed in a special issue of the *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* (vol. 4, no. 2, 1996/97); the Oslo Recommendations are available in vol. 6, no. 3, of the same journal (1999); and the Lund Recommendations and explanatory note are reproduced in J. Packer, "The Origin and Nature of the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, *Helsinki Monitor* (vol. 11, no. 4, 2000) pp. 29-61."

Hard copies of these and other HCNM publications can be obtained from the High Commissioner's office.

A great number of works have been written on the Helsinki/OSCE process generally and on the High Commissioner on National Minorities, in particular. The most recent and comprehensive work is Walter A. Kemp, ed., *Quiet Diplomacy in Action: The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities* (Kluwer, 2001).