

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

**“Communities at Risk: The Impact of COVID-19 on the OSCE’s Most
Vulnerable Populations”**

Guests:

**Margaret Huang, President and Chief Executive Officer,
Southern Poverty Law Center**

Karen Taylor, Chair, European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

**Ambassador Lamberto Zannier, OSCE High Commissioner
on National Minorities**

Host:

**Alex Tiersky, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

*Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com*

TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human right and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, this is our first episode recorded in the era of the COVID pandemic. As my colleagues and I have been processing this new world that we're all living in, we've been struck by one especially troubling feature of the pandemic. It appears that the impact of the pandemic on communities has been anything but equal. In fact, reports from nearly every corner of the OSCE zone, which famously runs from Vancouver to Vladivostok, suggest that minority groups and vulnerable populations have been hit especially hard by the pandemic, and sometimes by the policies enacted by governments to address it.

This is a topic that hits very close to home for the Helsinki Commission, which has prioritized issues of diversity and inclusive communities throughout its history. And this has never been more true than under the leadership of the Commission's current chairman, Congressman Alcee Hastings, whose work has long focused on safe, equitable, and inclusive societies.

So we decided to spend this episode taking a hard look at the COVID pandemic, its impact on minority groups and vulnerable populations, and the role of governments in addressing that impact? Our episode today has two parts. First, we'll hear from some frontline activists who are tracking this set of issues to get a sense of the reality on the ground. But listeners, we aren't going to leave it there.

In our second part of the discussion, I'll be sitting down – virtually, of course – with Ambassador Lamberto Zannier, the OSCE High Commissioner on national minorities. The High Commissioner issued a wide-ranging set of recommendations on, quote, “short-term responses to COVID-19 that support social cohesion,” end quote, in late March of this year, just as the response of governments to the pandemic was really taking shape.

We'll hear more from the higher commissioner on why these recommendations were needed and what he hopes they will achieve. But before we get there, listeners, let's go find out what human rights advocates are saying about how this pandemic is impacting minorities.

TIERSKY: Joining us now is the president and chief executive officer of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Margaret Huang. Margaret, thank you for joining us today.

HUANG: Thanks so much for having me, Alex.

TIERSKY: As our listeners may know, the Southern Poverty Law Center is an American nongovernmental organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of American society.

Margaret, we've asked you here to talk a little bit about what that work looks like in the time of the COVID pandemic. And I guess I'd like to start by asking you if you could give our

listeners a sense of who is included in this category of the most vulnerable members of our society here in the United States that you serve?

HUANG: Well, thanks, Alex. And unfortunately, it's a rather long list of constituencies that we're trying to represent at this time. First and foremost, there are racial minorities. There's been some incredible disparate impacts on Black Americans in the United States. Sadly, only 40 states are collecting data on the racial breakdown of effects of COVID. Forty states and the District of Columbia. And the data from those 40 states and the District of Columbia demonstrates that Black Americans are dying from the COVID virus at more than 2.4 times the rate of whites, and more than two times the rates the rates of Latinos and Asians.

The Southern Poverty Law Center is also looking at other constituencies who are being affected, including for example populations who are behind bars. We've had a number of lawsuits that we filed in Southern states asking governments to release people who pose no threat to society, people who shouldn't actually be behind bars to begin with, because the threat of COVID for people in detention is so severe.

And I would include in that category immigrants who are being detained. We have record numbers of immigrant and asylum seekers who are being detained pending resolution of their asylum cases or their immigration cases. And these detention centers have also been a very, very high risk for a vulnerable population.

Lastly, I'll just note there isn't as much data available but indigenous populations in the United States have also been very distinctly affected. And in three states in particular, including one in the Deep South, Mississippi – New Mexico and Arizona are the other two – indigenous people have been dying at extraordinary rates, and far, far more than their percentage of the population, in some places up to seven times the percentage of their population. So these crises are signaling that we have to take a really close look at how the virus is affecting different communities and really develop strategies to help those communities in the response.

TIERSKY: Margaret, you've talked about the disproportionate mortality rates having to do with the various communities that you serve. I wonder if you could talk about the other types of impacts that some of these communities might be facing that may also be disproportionate.

HUANG: Absolutely. So when the pandemic broke out in the United States and many, many businesses, schools, and other facilities shut down, the impacts were far greater for communities that struggle with poverty and have low incomes and low access to social services. Sadly, in the southern part of the United States many of those states actually have limited social services for their entire population. But because there are a significant number of Black Americans, Latinos in the South, those communities have particularly felt the brunt of the economic impact of the virus. Many children in the South who go to public schools rely on the public schools for two meals a day. And those children are now at high, high risk of food insecurity at home. A lot of the public school systems in the South have been trying to organize to respond to this, but it's very difficult.

Much of the South is a rural area. And rural populations face very different challenges from those in the urban areas. While the pandemic has perhaps spread more slowly in the rural areas, there are far fewer hospitals, far fewer ICU beds, intensive care unit beds. There are far fewer ventilators. So if there is a spike, and there have been many spikes in rural communities, there's very little capacity in the medical community to care for the people who are getting sick.

TIERSKY: You've mentioned that out of our United States there are only 40 and the District that are collecting data that is specifically disaggregating the various communities that we've been talking about. What does that tell us about potential policy responses and what you would consider appropriate?

HUANG: Unfortunately, we've only seen two states that have actually developed a taskforce of specialists to look at the racial disparities and the impacts. Those two states are New York and Michigan, both of which have had very serious disparate impacts among different racial groups. However, as I mentioned, the data across all of the states that are collecting that data show that this disparate impact is not limited to those to states. What it's telling us is that governments are not being careful to understand the impact of the virus.

And granted, the virus has been with us for a relatively short time. It's not easy for institutions of government to respond quickly and to develop the necessary capacity to understand these. But in this case, it's rather urgent, because it's quite difficult to think about how do we plan for the long term with the likelihood of the virus being with us for some time. How do we ensure that communities are going to be able to not just survive, but to thrive in spite of this pandemic?

I think the other issue, which perhaps is not as obviously related to the pandemic, is that we've seen a rather shocking number of police responses in different communities during this virus. We've been seeing some extraordinary protests across the country about police violence and brutality against communities of color. I think it's just worth noting that the protests that have emerged, the killings that are occurring, this is tied up with the pandemic.

Communities are being told every day they are at high risk, that they are dying in higher numbers. There's no response, no acknowledgement from government. And then when disasters happen, when tragedies happen – like the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis – the reaction of communities is to feel that governments are not taking care of their people. And we have to think about these strategies for addressing these problems if we want to avoid the kinds of violent protest and violent police response that we've been seeing.

TIERSKY: Margaret, has the Southern Poverty Law Center started to sketch out some policy responses that you all would like to see? You've talked about ensuring that governments gain a better understanding of the problem, to start with. Secondly, you've also mentioned that they need to acknowledge that there is a disproportionate impact of this pandemic. What response would you like to see beyond that in terms of proactively leading to the thriving society that you've also described as the end goal?

HUANG: So, as you've noted, in addition to identifying the problems, they have to collect data. The fact that there are 10 states who aren't collecting data is also a signal that governments aren't doing what they need to do. So we need to know what it is that we're confronting, and how many people we're talking about, and what are the goals in terms of reduction both of the deaths overall as well as the disparities. Secondly, governments have to get proactive in thinking about how they support their population during this moment.

For many communities, they are unable to work from home. If you work in a low-income sector, service sector, retail sector, food delivery service, you are far more likely to contract the virus than somebody who's able to work from their home, like I am today. And so we have to think about how do we keep those populations safe? What are the things the government can do to help protect people who are going back to work?

A number of the outbreaks, particularly in rural parts of the country, have happened in poultry and meatpacking plants. Again, those plants, those industries have not provided sufficient personal protective equipment, PPE, to their employees. And the numbers have skyrocketed. Governments can intervene. Governments can require that businesses provide that kind of protective equipment so that all of the employees who are going back to work and helping to feed the country will be protected as they do so.

And finally, we have to think about access to medical care. While the U.S. government has provided relief in the forms of the CARES Act, much of the resources have actually gone to the well-resourced hospitals, the well-resourced communities. We haven't seen attention being paid to the communities that start with less. And in fact, many rural and southern communities have a huge disadvantage when it comes to access to health care. So we really need to think about a strategy not just to make money available to anyone, but to make money available to those areas that actually really need the help.

TIERSKY: Margaret, many of our listeners are familiar with the Southern Poverty Law Center's extremely important work on hate crimes. Are there particular aspects of the pandemic that relate to the center's work in this area that you'd like to tell us about?

HUANG: So as many people have seen, there have been reportedly many examples of aggression, of violence directed at Asian Americans across the country. Many of my fellow Asian Americans have actually been very afraid to leave their homes during this crisis. There has been, unfortunately, quite a lot of threat directed at the Asian American community, a lot of blame being assigned to Asians for having brought the virus here in the United States.

Our organization focuses on understanding where hate and extremism is coming from, tracking the groups that promote it, and trying to uncover them and bring their efforts to the light of day, so that they can be rejected by the wider population.

TIERSKY: Margaret, thank you for offering your views for the podcast today. We really appreciate your joining us. I'd like to make sure our listeners know how to find out more about the Southern Poverty Law Center and its work, particularly on this set of issues.

HUANG: Great. They are welcome to visit our website, which is SPLCenter.org. And we have information about our COVID response on the website. But you can also follow us on Twitter, on Facebook, and on Instagram.

TIERSKY: Margaret Huang is president and chief executive officer of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Margaret, thanks again for joining us on the podcast today.

HUANG: Thanks so much. Appreciate it, Alex.

TIERSKY: Joining us now from Germany to provide us a European perspective is Karen Taylor. She is the chair of the nongovernmental advocacy group European Network Against Racism.

Karen, thank you so much for joining us here on Helsinki on the Hill.

TAYLOR: Thank you for having me.

TIERSKY: Karen, can you start by telling our listeners a little bit about the organization that you lead?

TAYLOR: Yeah, sure. The European Network, which we all just call ENAR, it's the only pan-European movement which combines advocacy on the European level as well as building a strong network of antiracist organizations across Europe. So we are represented and we have members from 26 different countries, from the very grassroots level until advocacy organizations. And our office itself is based in Brussels, where we ensure that laws and policies address racism and reflect the experience of racialized people. So we do provide kind of unique space for organizations to connect under one head and to exchange strategies with each other, but to also do advocacy work on the European level.

TIERSKY: Understood. And, Karen, I understand that ENAR has made it a priority to do advocacy around the impact of the current COVID pandemic that we're living through, and in particular the impact of the pandemic on minority groups in Europe. Is that right?

TAYLOR: Yeah, that is right. We just relaunched our research on racist incidents around this whole pandemic. And from January to April we had testimonies of 119 racist incidents, which range from racial profiling, racist violence, problem in the employment and housing department, as well as denial of access to basic services, such as water, electricity, or access to the health care system. So we see across Europe it's different communities – and when I talk about the marginalized communities, these are especially people of African descent community, the Jewish community, Sinti and Roma, the Muslim community, and the migrant communities, in particular to the refugees. So we do see that all these groups are highly touched not only by the health care consequences of this – of this crisis, but by the whole surrounding.

TIERSKY: These are clearly communities that have faced challenging circumstances prior to the pandemic. Tell us a bit more specifically about the pandemic impact itself.

TAYLOR: So we do see that when it comes to these marginalized communities, it's highly likely that their risk of morbidity and mortality is higher than the rest of the population, the majority population. The treatment of these groups sometimes is denied, especially when it comes to undocumented communities, but also in Eastern Europe to the Roma – Sinti and Roma community, which also live in camps.

And talking about camps here again, we have the refugees in the middle of this crisis who, of course, cannot – these camps cannot provide the distance which is needed. So when we look at Germany, there's been an outbreak in one of the camps in west Germany where 156 people were impacted at once by the disease. So even though now in Germany the numbers are going down and the restrictions are being opened again, we do see that special communities are still – yeah, still have a target on their back because their circumstances don't allow it for them to live in security.

TIERSKY: Karen, what would you like European governments to do, both on a national level and on a European level, to respond to this particular set of challenges?

TAYLOR: I believe that the EU institutions should launch an inquiry into the impact of the pandemic as the consequences on racialized and other marginalized groups in the EU and develop responses on the basis of that. When I look at Germany in particular, we do need race disaggregated data to really see the impact of COVID-19 on the racialized communities, because for now there is lack of these kind of data. And also, quite recent there has been the shooting in Hanau in Germany where nine people were shot, mainly part of the Muslim community, and Sinti and Roma.

And the response of the German government to that was the founding of a government committee which will now deal or tackle racism in Germany on a high government level. It's crucial for this committee to include this new development of the whole pandemic into their program, and to really focus not only on rising extremism, what we mainly do here in Germany, but to really talk about institutionalized racism and everyday racism in this country.

TIERSKY: Karen, thank you for that. And thank you very much for joining us on the podcast today. How do our listeners find out more about the great work of your network?

TAYLOR: So you can go on ENAR.eu. Where you find more information about this survey I talked about. We also launched a map where you can see the different spots of where the different kind of incidents happened. We are also talking about deaths in police custody. We're talking about denial to health care treatment and so on. And also on Facebook we have launched a kind of discussion forum where we join members, and non-members, to join – to connect and join the discussion, and feed us with their information.

TIERSKY: So ENAR.eu is the website. Karen Taylor is chair of the European Network Against Racism. And thank you very much for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill, Karen.

TAYLOR: Thank you.

TIERSKY: Listeners, let's now move into the second part of this episode, the discussion with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Ambassador Lamberto Zannier. The High Commissioner works usually quietly and behind the scenes to diffuse tensions involving national minorities before they potentially develop into a conflict. Zannier, an Italian diplomat, joined us from his office in the Hague.

High Commissioner, welcome to Helsinki on the Hill.

ZANNIER: Thank you very much. Glad to be with you.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, as you know, we've invited you onto our show to talk about the needs of national minorities and marginalized communities in the new world of the COVID pandemic. But before we get to that, our listeners are generally familiar with the OSCE as an institution, but they may be less knowledgeable about what exactly the high commissioner on national minorities does. So why don't we start there. How would you describe the purpose of the Office of High Commissioner that you hold?

ZANNIER: The Office of the High Commissioner was established in the early '90s when new borders appeared in Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the former Yugoslavia. Because what we saw is that these borders were dividing people, were creating minorities. And this was leading to confrontational relationships within society and to conflict. So my mandate is a conflict prevention mandate.

And I'm focusing on these relationship within the societies. In fact, it's a very, how can you say, modern mandate, and very current, because what we see today is an evolution in the pattern of conflicts, that tend to stem increasingly from inside states. Inter-state conflicts have almost disappeared. But conflicts arise from differences within – fault lines within the society, whether these are based on ethnicity, or on religion, or on different political – on linguistic divides. There are all sorts of things.

Then, of course, this is compounded by the return of geopolitics. So we see also international players positioning themselves behind one or the other group, and in a way creating additional problems. So what we do, we try to invest in making societies better integrated, and more resilient to conflict. And for that, we have developed over the years a number of recommendations and guidelines that we disseminate to the participating states, as we call them in the OSCE, covering key aspects of these integration policies. Issues around education, the use of language, access to media, the question of participation, full inclusion of every individual in the society in every aspect of the life of the country.

TIERSKY: Sure. I understand that your office is typically thought of as an office that both promotes broad recommendations that you've described that go out to all of the OSCE participating states, but also has a role that is thought of as kind of quiet diplomacy. Do you consult with individual countries, individual governments on minority-related concerns that you might have on a regular basis?

ZANNIER: Yes, of course. That's what we do. And the methodology, as you say, is that of silent diplomacy, seen from outside, because many of these issues are sensitive. So we talk to minority groups. We have connections with civil society. But we talk to governments. We assist governments also in developing legislation, taking into account our recommendations. Our recommendations are broad guidelines. So they need to be implemented in light of, you know, the environment in which we operate. Which is very different, of course, from country to country.

But we also facilitate the transfer of best practices from one place to another and discourage policies that we see problematic in other – in other circumstances. In many countries we see internal polarization; we see identity politics emerging. And this sometimes focuses very much on narratives that are relatively nationalistic and focused around issues of importance to the majority. And those who are not part of that are increasingly excluded.

TIERSKY: But, Mr. High Commissioner, let's just offer our listeners a little bit more concrete examples. I was looking at your very active social media feed. And I noticed that in the pre-COVID era, if we can even still think of that, it feels like a lifetime ago, you had traveled to Lithuania, for example, or I saw you had some very active work in Georgia. Can you tell us a little bit about the types of conversations or projects that you worked on in those – in those locations, just to illustrate some of what you're talking about?

ZANNIER: Yes. When I talk about conflict prevention, this doesn't mean that I detect the beginning of a crisis and I run there as a fireman to try to put out the fire. But I need to take always a longer-term vision, try to see what are the problems that if left unaddressed down the line will create, or have the potential of creating, a major crisis. So the fact that I visit a country when I address certain things doesn't mean that there is an impending problem, or an imminent problem. But it means that I'm focusing and I'm assisting authorities, and in a dialogue with the minorities to identify those areas where policies need to evolve to promote this better level of integration.

So I travel everywhere. I was in the U.S. I was in Russia. Recently I was in Lithuania. I was in Central Asia, in Georgia, dealing with issues. In Georgia, one of the programs that we had, just to give an idea, has to do with the political participation of minorities. There are Azeri and Armenian communities and relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, because of the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, is not so easy. And the communities feel this complication.

In Lithuania we're exploring recently another issue that is becoming complicated, which is that of conflicting historical narratives. There is something that historians call the mirror of pain and pride. A big victory for some can be seen as a drama for others. So a history that glorifies certain things can be seen by others as close to offensive, or certainly not understood.

So we're looking at how you can introduce multiple perspectives in this, because then you have symbols. You have monuments, names of streets, et cetera. And you see that some people like them, others don't. So we need to have also there a process that's more inclusive.

TIERSKY: Mr. High Commissioner, thank you for those examples. One element that I'm really struck by in your describing your own role is, I travel everywhere, and I travel all the time. Maybe that's a useful way for us to shift to the meat of our conversation, which is we live in a new world. We live in a world under the pandemic. I'd like to start by asking you how the pandemic has impacted your own work, and the work of the High Commissioner's Office. Of course, I'm assuming you can't travel in the same way. How do you gather information? How do you engage in the types of diplomatic activity that you're accustomed to doing under these new conditions?

ZANNIER: Actually it has changed my way of operating very significantly, but I've been surprised myself in discovering that we can really use online platforms much more productively than we thought we could be, we could do. In fact, I've had meetings, pretty operational meetings, with regular interlocutors that I would see during my travels via online platforms. And I've discussed rather complicated issues and to full satisfaction, I have to say. And the same goes for contacts with minority groups. We have now online exchanges.

So of course I cannot go there and look at the situation, and especially now in this time of COVID crisis when we're focusing on the impact of the crisis on minorities. It could be good also for me to go and see some of the problems we're talking about, not to be also entirely dependent on what one or the other says, but also to form my own opinion about the situation. But, you know, short of that, we manage to gather quite a bit of information.

So we are watching the policies and the initiatives taken by governments at the beginning of the crisis. We felt that the issue of protecting the diversity of the society and ensuring that all social groups are included in the policies, and there is an equal treatment for all, was not at the forefront of the concerns of many governments. And so we started to see problems of discrimination. We started to see problems with hate speech. We started seeing problems with access of some of the population to basic services, including health services.

And so we have developed a number of principles. And then we have looked at the recommendations that we used routinely to address minority-related issues. And we lifted out of those, those elements that are relevant for the handling of the – of these problems in the context of the COVID crisis. So we issued a set of recommendations, in fact, to countries relating to how policies should address the needs of minority groups, and should take into account diversity of our society in the response to COVID.

TIERSKY: So, Mr. High Commissioner to take a step back it seems you gave an initial statement in late March; from what you've said, it seemed to be a response to reports that you've been getting that were concerning that you've outlined. And then a second more, let's say fulsome, set of recommendations came, I think, on the 22nd of April. And those are the ones I we're going to be diving into now.

Let me ask you first, who are these recommendations intended to reach? And how do you disseminate them? How are you trying to promote them?

ZANNIER: Well, first of all, we gave them to all governments by the diplomatic representations in the OSCE. So every government has now officially received our set of recommendations. And so as we engage with them, we can tell them: We advise you to do this and that. Are you doing it? And so that is giving us a pretty strong basis, if you want, for the subsequent action.

One certainly of the directions in which I want to move is that of parliaments. So in fact, we also, with the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, and we are planning to have still an online webinar with a number of parliamentarians from OSCE countries to disseminate also within parliaments our own recommendations, to make sure that there is an awareness the recommendations are there, and also explain what they're all – what they're all about. So this is the side of my job which is not really quiet diplomacy. (Laughter.) For recommendations, I need to be noisy. And I need to make sure that people understand what we're talking about, to hear the advice we are giving to them.

TIERSKY: Mr. High Commissioner, before we talk about the specific recommendations that are included in the set that you promulgated, can you tell us again a bit about what informs your recommendations in this area? Is it you and your staff, when you sit down together, or virtually like this, I suppose, and just think through, well, we think this is important or that is important? Or do these come from the experience of the High Commissioner's Office?

ZANNIER: Always the latter. It is the experience. And it's the accumulated experience of the office. Certainly we've never had this kind of pandemic before, so here we really had to sit down internally with the staff and to see how we could adjust the recommendations that are applied for, you know, general use in minority issues to the specifics of this situation. And for that, we relied a lot also on information that we received through multiple sources from minority groups, also from governments, but also from the media.

And in this environment where we cannot travel, we do rely in fact on information that is going around. We take it, of course, with a pinch of salt, because we have seen also on social media that there are views that are not always reliable. But the trends are rather visible here. And so that was enough of a solid basis for us to proceed. And for the rest, it was really an internal work from my team.

TIERSKY: Of course, you haven't had a situation of pandemic before in the experience of the High Commissioner, but minority groups have been in states where there have been states of emergency or other crisis – times of crisis, which I'm sure has also informed your office's reflection.

ZANNIER: Yes, absolutely. One recommendation that we had had to do with the way police operate in a multiethnic environment. And this is one of the areas we've been focusing on, the response – the security, the response to COVID, and looking whether there were instances where the intervention of the police was somehow not entirely, shall we say, balanced.

But some groups seem to be singled out for more robust action. And I can give you the example. In a number of countries, for instance, we are seeing that the Roma community had

been put under pressure in some cases, where we're seeing very robust measures taken to isolate them, building fences, walls around them, monitoring, including through drones and aerial surveillance.

So there was a feeling that some of these communities were unduly targeted, which may have increased the risks of discrimination, hate speech, and all that, as if they were guilty of something. And these measures were not unfortunately, in some of the cases, not accompanied by measures of assistance because by isolating forcibly these communities you also remove their sources, you know, of economic sustainability. And therefore these measures should have been complemented with more visible activities of assistance to the community.

TIERSKY: You've described forcible isolation, targeted enforcement towards one minority group. What are some of the best practices? What are your recommendations in these areas, specifically on law enforcement? How could governments formulate responses that are more likely to lead to social cohesion, to use your own words?

ZANNIER: Yeah. What we always recommend, when it comes to law enforcement activity and policing, is to first of all, to have a dialogue with the communities for the law enforcement actors to understand what are the challenges that they are facing. And secondly, I would like to see police forces, and the whole rule of law area – the whole justice sector – reflect the diversity of the society and also its composition. Sometimes this doesn't happen. And you see the police representing the majority, if you want, in a country. And therefore the reaction from those who are diverse are reactions that are not going the direction of trust and cooperation. And this can exacerbate relationships.

TIERSKY: You mentioned communication and dialogue. And of course that leads to a second basket of recommendations that I know you've put out, which has to do with the language of official communications, the availability of diverse media. Of course, if national minority groups are not able to consume official communications about what they should or should not do, that could lead to challenges in terms of interactions with law enforcement. But talk to us a little bit about the challenges that you see in the issue of language, specifically, and then some of the recommendations your office has put forward.

ZANNIER: Yes. We have a number of recommendations that are relevant in this field. First of all, the ones on education, where we are encouraging countries to ensure that groups, minority groups, that use a different mother tongue than the state language should have access to education in that language. But at the same time, that there is enough investment in teaching them the state language as a key communication tool, and as a key tool for the proper integration of both communities and the society. We're talking integration, not certainly assimilation. That's why we say the mother tongue has to remain there, because we don't want the identity of these groups to be diluted. But we want them integrated.

Then there is diversity also in terms of languages that are understood by the people, and often we see that in the older generations, because there is increasingly an investment in more modern systems of education for the youth. But older generations often are not willing [or able to learn the state language]. And we see especially in countries that have arisen after the end of

the Cold War, we see old generation people don't speak fluently the language of the countries where they live.

So in an emergency like this, it's important that, first of all, the instructions to the people come in languages that they understand, because otherwise parts of the population will not understand exactly what is going on, what they're supposed to do, and all that. There is a network of selected minority organizations here in Europe called FUEN that has run a survey on the languages used in the response of this. And they found out that, for instance, in the case of emergency hotlines in only 21 percent— I'm quoting from their report — that only 21 percent of the cases these emergency hotlines are available in minority language.

TIERSKY: That's remarkable.

ZANNIER: So if someone doesn't understand fluently the state language, or the official language where [live, they don't] have an opportunity to communicate properly with an emergency hotline. And that is — that is a serious problem.

TIERSKY: I know another set of problems that your office has considered very serious, and that we see throughout the OSCE zone, is the disproportionate socioeconomic consequences of the crisis on vulnerable communities. And here we're talking about job loss. We're talking about whole industries closing. We are talking about the difficulty of continuing to work without identity papers. Can you talk to us about the challenges that national minorities and other vulnerable groups might have in this set of issues, and some of the recommendations that you've put out regarding the socioeconomic consequences?

ZANNIER: Yeah. Well, you see, what we noticed is that in many countries — and also here I'm talking about minorities in a general sense—very often people who come from a minority group or minority background tend to be ones that are more exposed to the pandemic. They are often frontline workers. They're people who work in the health care sector, public transport, the retail economy, work in factories or the agricultural sector. So they tend to be more exposed than others. And they have to continue — they have less opportunity, in a way, to protect themselves or to work online compared to others.

Plus, minority communities have their own also features. In some cases the culture on the ground is such that they tend to have families that are stuck together, communities that stick together more. So the social distancing sometimes becomes more difficult. And these difficulties need to be understood and factored into the policies. And a special effort needs to be made to reach out to them and explain what the problems could be.

So we have a sense that there is a stronger exposure of these people to the pandemic, but also to the economic impact of that. These people often are people with jobs that can easily disappear, so that job security is not entirely there. And they might be the first to suffer. They might be people who don't have, how can I say, the pot of money that allows them to survive through the crisis. And they need this kind of special attention or special assistance.

In the case of also concentrated and more traditional minorities that tend to be located close to borders, we also noticed that the closure of borders affected the cross-border trade, which was one of the main economic activities in which these minorities were engaged. And so reopening border-crossing points with, of course, the adequate controls, et cetera, would be an important step in trying also to give – to promote a little bit more of economic development for these communities whose economy now is largely shut down.

And so there are concerns that these social groups already marginalized, are the ones who will suffer the most from the crisis. But this is only the beginning of it.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Mr. High Commissioner, the cross-border implications that you've raised I think are particularly interesting as they're quite – they should be quite tangible to our listeners as linking what you've talked about in terms of the challenges particular to national minorities and inter-state conflict. Do you see that as one of the potential flashpoints that comes out of this pandemic?

ZANNIER: Well, it could well be. "Kin states" tend to assist their minorities abroad. And what they perceive are their minorities abroad, even if they are citizens of another country. In moments of tension it tends to come out as an additional problem.

And so we need to recognize that there is a problem and start acting to address it. Because otherwise tensions will accumulate around various sets of issues. I was mentioning, for instance, earlier the question of education. Now education has been moved online – to online platforms.

In some cases, these minorities do not get enough, or at all, education in their mother tongue. So they start complaining that they are forced to study only in the state language, et cetera, with the risk of becoming assimilated more and not investing in their own – in education that is also in line with their own culture and ethnic identity. So these are – they're all issues that are in a way adding to the pressure, if you want. And we don't want them to reach a tipping point.

TIERSKY: Mr. High Commissioner, you've encapsulated very well for us this concept of comprehensive security that is really at the heart of what the OSCE does, which is these issues of human rights, and transparency, and military affairs, inter-state conflict, they're linked to each other and they must be addressed from a comprehensive perspective.

I'd like to come back to a prior part of our conversation, where we talked a little bit about who these recommendations are for. And you mentioned in particular the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, also the subject of a previous episode of this podcast. And you've mentioned their upcoming, and in fact there have already been some conversations on this and related issues. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that our Commission's ranking Senate Democrat, Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland, also served as the Assembly's special representative on anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance. He's been very active in this space. He's delivered remarks on these issues as recently as the end of April. Listeners can find those on our website.

That leads me to ask you, High Commissioner, is there a particular role for parliaments to play in ensuring that responses to this pandemic are in line with your recommendations and OSCE commitments writ large?

ZANNIER: I would like to see parliaments everywhere try to develop strategies that stretch beyond party lines and in a way aim at promoting policies that are inclusive and look in a way into the problem of addressing the impact of a pandemic in a global manner. Sometimes what I've seen, working with participating States, is I work with the ministries developing pieces of legislation that then reach parliament, and then they get turned upside down. And then we get pieces of legislation out of parliaments that are creating problems for us.

The political debate should not have a negative impact on the effectiveness of policies that should, how can I say, promoting social cohesion while addressing the difficult security aspect raised by this crisis. The parliamentary dimension I think is increasingly important. And this is why I'm very keen to engage with parliaments and with the structures of the OSCE connected with national power.

TIERSKY: Mr. High Commissioner, as we near the end of our conversation I wanted to bring in a particularly powerful statement, maybe even I'd call it a warning, included in your set of recommendations on the pandemic. You state, quote, "The decisions that authorities take now may have long-term implications for the resilience and stability of diverse societies in the future." I thought that was a tremendously powerful warning and call to action. And I wanted to offer you a chance to offer us any final words you perhaps would like to close to our listeners.

ZANNIER: Absolutely. And maybe I should use this quote to point out how important it is not to address these issues behind closed borders and in isolation. This is the moment where international organizations should be used to develop strategies that allow us, as an international community, to act together to address these issues. As within societies you need to bring everybody and to address everybody's problem, and to make sure that you're inclusive in your policies, and avoid discrimination, but also at the broader level I think it's important to use the tools that we ourselves, as countries, have created over the years to better manage the challenges that we face.

And at this moment we are facing the pandemic. This can be win-win for everybody if we work together and develop these inclusive policies. But it can be a lose-lose for everybody if we hide behind our borders and miss the opportunity to cooperate, and don't use the tools that we have set up ourselves for that.

TIERSKY: Well, with that, Mr. High Commissioner, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today, and especially for the absolutely vital work that you do. Before we let you go, Ambassador Zannier, I'd love for you to tell our listeners how they can track your important work. I know you're very active on social media. I believe you have a presence on the OSCE website.

ZANNIER: Yes, of course. You can find me on the website [<https://www.osce.org/hcnm>]. You will keep track of most things. But if you want to see also

little movies about the things I do, and we produce short videos that we post on Twitter, and on LinkedIn, and on my Facebook page, and on the page of the office. You can also have, with a lighter touch, a better sense of how we engage, the people we talk to, and where we are, and what we do.

TIERSKY: Ambassador Lamberto Zannier is the OSCE High Commissioner on national minorities. Sir, thank you again for joining us today.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. As you know, we're always interested in hearing back from you. Get in touch via our website. CSCE.org, our Facebook page, or on Twitter. Thanks again for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)