



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

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE JURY
MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD
2007

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

Presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award
to the European Roma Rights Centre

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Mr Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OSCE's *raison d'être* is, first and foremost, its mission to prevent conflicts between and within its 56 participating States. If we do not succeed in conflict prevention, the damage that conflicts cause to people, economies and the environment can last for decades and create a huge need for post-conflict rehabilitation.

The OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security, in which the political and military dimensions of security cannot be seen in isolation from economic and environmental security and respect for human and minority rights. The dignity of the individual is central to this comprehensive approach: human rights and security are inseparable. Or, as the first High Commissioner Mr. Max van der Stoel so rightly said, “where there is injustice, there is insecurity and this in time gives rise to instability and ultimately threats to peace”. Thus, we should continually remind ourselves of the need to address injustice as well as tensions before they become a conflict.

This applies to the situation of minorities in particular. Of all of Europe's countless minority groups, the Roma and Sinti are often regarded as Europe's largest and most disadvantaged minority. We should not underestimate the internal diversity of the Roma, in terms of language, religion, culture and also social and economic circumstances. One observation is certainly justified: millions of Romani women, men and children throughout the OSCE region face discrimination and exclusion.

This exclusion extends to almost every aspect of their lives. Romani men and women face unemployment, insufficient access to education, bad housing and inadequate health care. Romani communities are often the victims of hostile perceptions of the majority. Worse still, the Roma have been victims of racist violence, direct persecution, pogroms and even extermination. During the Nazi era several hundred thousand Roma were killed. Yet this aspect of the Holocaust – which the Roma call "Porajmos" – has been virtually ignored for decades.

In the last 15 years the Roma have been particularly hard hit by the dramatic changes that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe. While the emergence of new States and their transformation to market economies, and subsequent membership in the EU, have benefited most of their citizens, this has not always been the case for the Roma. These drastic changes

have sometimes actually increased the pressure on the Roma to move away from their places of residence and home countries. And while a European policy on addressing the transnational aspects of the problems of the Roma should be introduced, there should be no doubt that the primary responsibility to respect and ensure the rights of Roma falls to the governments of the individual States. Roma are their citizens as much as anybody else.

Fortunately, there have been important positive developments too. It is encouraging to note that currently the plight of the Roma is much higher on the public and political agenda than it used to be 10 to 15 years ago. The Action Plan to Improve the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area was a clear sign of this as Ministers of OSCE participating States in Maastricht (2003) saw an urgent need to address the deteriorating situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area. At the regional level, other positive initiatives have also emerged. In 2005 nine countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe adopted the Decade for Roma Inclusion, in which they committed themselves to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma within a regional framework in the period 2005-2015.

Equally encouraging is the fact that in the last 10 to 15 years we have seen an increase in the dynamism and involvement of the Romani movement. The consultation with and inclusion and involvement of many different elements of Romani communities in addressing the situation of the Roma is essential not only for the legitimacy but also for the success of all policies. Without Roma participation, without the political will of States or effective mechanisms for translating words into concrete action, countless so-called "Roma-programmes" were bound to fail. At the same time, the active engagement of the Roma in social, economic and political life empowers the Roma and helps to end dependency or passivity.

Let me now turn to the Award itself. Every other year, a Jury, composed of eminent figures such as those I have already mentioned, is tasked with choosing a laureate who has acted in the spirit of Max van der Stoep. The Award is given in recognition of extraordinary and outstanding achievements aimed at improving the situation of national minorities in the OSCE Region. In my function as Chairman of this Jury, I would like to share with you our deliberations.

This year, even though all the organizations and persons that made it onto the shortlist would have been most worthy recipients of the Award, the Jury was unanimous in its decision on

the selection of the laureate. The Jury has decided to grant the Max van der Stoel Award for 2007 to the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) for its long-term commitment to combating discrimination against Roma and its commendable efforts to highlight this pressing problem facing Europe as a whole. The Centre is represented here tonight by Vera Egenberger, Executive Director, and Dzavit Berisa, Research and Publications Officer.

The ERRC, established in 1996, is an international public-interest law organization that has campaigned effectively for the rights of Roma through a wide range of activities at national, regional and international level. While the ERRC has successfully brought the Roma question onto the agenda of international bodies, including the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the United Nations, it is also very active in all countries of Europe where discrimination against Roma is prevalent.

The ERRC has developed an effective and innovative range of instruments to promote and protect the rights of the Roma. They include such diverse elements as the training of Roma activists and public officials, advocacy at national and international political forums, litigation before national and international courts and awareness raising among both the Roma and the general public in many European countries.

It is this combination of international and national advocacy, on the one hand, combined with grass-roots activism, on the other, which so impressed the jury. The ERRC receives the Max van der Stoel Award for its achievements in over a decade of hard work in an area that should neither be overlooked nor forgotten. The question of Roma integration is as crucial and relevant today as it was a decade ago, and will continue to be one of the major challenges facing Europe in the field of protection of rights and integration of national minorities.

Mr. Foreign Minister, it is now my great pleasure to give you the floor to present the Award to the winner on behalf of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.