



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

Address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
2018 Max van der Stoep Award Ceremony

[Check against delivery]

The Hague, The Netherlands – 9 November 2018

[*Welcome speech*]

Dear Minister,

Dear Laureates and Jury Members,

Dear family members and friends of Max van der Stoel,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to now shift to this year's Max van der Stoel Award ceremony. This well-established Award commemorates the legacy of the distinguished Dutch statesman and diplomat, Max van der Stoel, the first High Commissioner on National Minorities from 1993 to 2001. The Award is given every two years by the Government of the Netherlands to an individual, or organization, in recognition of their exceptional work in improving the position of national minorities in the OSCE region.

I am honoured to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands Stef Blok, who will shortly present the prize to this year's winners - the high school students of Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina, represented here today by the Student Council of Jajce Secondary Vocational School. They have travelled from Bosnia and Herzegovina to accept the Award and to share their story with us: I extend a warm welcome to all of you. Equally, I would like to warmly welcome the recipients of the 2016 award- the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) from Cyprus.

I am particularly pleased with the opportunity today's occasion presents: because of the nature of our work, we are all too often confronted with the negative fall-out of inter-ethnic conflicts. It is therefore very refreshing to have a chance to highlight constructive initiatives and positive messages in the OSCE region.

While very different in nature, the activities of the last three winners of the Max van der Stoel Award, including this year's, fall under the overarching theme of education. Promoting an educational system that encourages diversity, multi-perspectivity and tolerance continues to be one of the key priorities of the High Commissioner. I am pleased, through the Max van der Stoel Award process, to have come across so many individuals and organizations that share the same goal. As the first High Commissioner Max van der Stoel once said: "In the medium

and long term, it is education that can defuse inter-ethnic tension”. This is as valid today as it was during his time in office.

Looking back at the initiatives of other past laureates, we can see the degree to which the Award - which consists of a generous donation of 50,000 euros - has provided a source of additional legitimacy and support. All thanks go to Max van der Stoel’s legacy, which further boosts their operational capability to contribute to conflict prevention and build and maintain peace.

In this regard, I would like to invite all of you to watch a short movie about the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR), showing how the Award has helped them to carry on their innovative and inspiring work.

[Second part/ statement on behalf on the jury]

Let me now turn to this year’s Award. Every other year, a jury, composed of eminent figures in the field of national minority rights and conflict prevention, is tasked with choosing a laureate who represents the spirit of Max van der Stoel. The Award is given in recognition of extraordinary and outstanding achievements aimed at reducing the potential for inter-ethnic conflict and increasing the integration of diverse societies.

As in previous years, the international jury had a difficult choice to make, given the large number of worthy nominees from across the OSCE region. However, one non-formal group, consisting of young people from Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina, stood out amongst all the contenders, and was unanimously selected. These high school students from Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrated great tenacity in their belief in an education system that promotes diversity for current and future generations. In 2016, they campaigned against a decision by the education authorities to separate students based on ethno-centric curricula. Instead of sitting idly, the students advocated for an approach that takes into account the differences and sensitivities surrounding curricula, while rejecting classroom segregation. Their clarity of purpose and perseverance in sticking to their ideals, despite significant peer and community pressure, sends a clear signal of hope for an inclusive future. Moreover, they acted in the absence of any support or funding, which is all the more worthy of special recognition in the eyes of the jury.

To give you some context of the circumstances in which these courageous high school students acted, let me give you some background details about their home country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and its education system.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, practices that persistently reinforce ethnic divisions are rooted in the structural legacies of the armed conflict of 1992 to 1995 and the subsequent constitutional framework laid out in the Dayton Peace Agreement. While, in the immediate post-war period, specific measures were a necessary compromise to avoid a relapse into conflict, this is no longer warranted 22 years later. Today, the country, including its government structure, is still based on an entrenched and segregated system, which cements divisions based on ethnicity to the detriment of a broader societal integration based on State belonging. A number of external actors also played a role in perpetuating these trends. As a result, there is still a need to tackle the root causes of conflict, which is essential to achieve the goal of a just, inclusive and sustainable future.

You will all agree with me that education is one of the most important tools to bridge the distance between communities and foster social cohesion. However, it is also prone to divisive discourses and policies and, over the past quarter of a century, education has remained sensitive and controversial in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As for other sectors of society, the country's education system is largely divided according to curricula developed for each of its constituent peoples. This in turn results in the practice of segregation based on ethnicity, whereby pupils from different ethnic groups, while attending classes in the same school building, have no contact with one another. This sense of isolation creates and feeds on the concept of "them-versus-us", building space for mistrust and creating rifts in a society that has not yet healed the wounds of the recent conflict.

It is this segregation that Azra, Tarik, Ajla, Nikolas and Ivica (who could not be here with us) resented. In speaking out against it, they and their fellow high school students faced opposition at home and from their peers, and were ostracized, patronized and ridiculed for holding onto their idea that a middle ground is possible. A middle ground that would allow for their right to learn their own language, culture and history without being separated from their fellow pupils of different ethnicities. Despite the pressure, and against the prevailing

political dogma, they persisted because they believed in their idea of unity. In doing so, they inspired many across the country to do the same.

Such stories are heart-warming. Despite the challenges to integration and peaceful coexistence that we witness in many diverse societies of the OSCE region, there is a wealth of committed and inspiring individuals, both in minority and majority communities and especially among the youth, whose voices need to be echoed louder and whose role needs to be capitalized on to create peaceful societies. I hope that the example set by these students in Jajce may serve as an inspiration to all of us, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad. This decision is not only symbolic. It is a sign of the investment the international community should be making in the new generation. This prize is, in the larger scheme of things, a small contribution. I hope others will follow suit.

And to you, Azra, Tarik, Ajla, Nikolas and Ivica, my warmest congratulations. I could not agree more with your slogan “Segregation is a bad investment!”, and will continue to echo it in my engagements with States and communities.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Max van der Stoel Award Jury, which I chaired this year, is pleased to honour these students, represented by the Student Council of the Secondary Vocational School Jajce, with this year’s Award.

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.

Thank you.