



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

**EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY, PLURALISM AND  
CITIZENSHIP**

**ADDRESS**

by

**Knut Vollebaek,**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

**Babeş-Bolyai University**

Check Against Delivery!

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Dear Rector Marga,

Dear professors and students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me a great pleasure to be with you today at Babeş-Bolyai University. My office has quite a long tradition of engagement with this institution. The contact dates back to the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoel, and I am happy to keep this tradition alive.

Babeş-Bolyai to me is an extraordinary meeting place, where different cultures, languages and academic traditions come together. It is also a place where future generations of this country will be socialized in the values of freedom, critical thinking, pluralism and democracy. Let me stress that as the High Commissioner I am tasked with finding sustainable solutions to disputes involving majority and minority communities that are often divided along ethnic, cultural or religious lines. Sustainable solutions require citizens educated in the spirit of tolerance and multiculturalism. This is why I believe that my presence among you is crucial to my mandate. And this is why I have decided to entitle my speech today “Education for Democracy, Pluralism and Citizenship”.

Let me begin by saying a few words about my mandate. The institution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities was created to identify and address tensions involving minority issues, which threaten to develop into a conflict in the OSCE area. It was a response to the developments in the former Yugoslavia which some feared could be repeated elsewhere in Europe, especially among multi-ethnic States in transition to democracy. The mandate of the High Commissioner, therefore, is that of conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage. Prevention in some cases requires active and speedy involvement through mediation or other means of quiet diplomacy. In other cases it requires structural efforts

aimed at establishing the right kind of legal framework and taking crucial policy decisions for the protection and integration of national minorities into wider societies. The long-term sustainability of all conflict prevention measures is contingent upon the establishment of democratic and pluralistic societies where all people, including those belonging to national minorities, have a say and a stake in public life.

In this respect, education is one area that holds the key to the sustainability of all conflict-prevention measures. **It is possible to say that** education is by far the most effective conflict-prevention mechanism, because it happens at the earliest possible stage, ultimately shaping future generations for responsible citizenship. It is only through education that we can expect future generations to learn how to be respectful, tolerant and responsible citizens and who will guarantee that pluralism and democracy in their countries are maintained and further developed.

In today's world, characterized by increasing globalization and interconnectedness, I believe that the health and stability of our societies depends largely on the ability to deal with the growing cultural diversity in a democratic way. This in turn requires citizens who are able to respect each other and work with others who are different from themselves. The smooth functioning of modern democracies depends on active citizens that can question stereotypes, challenge simplistic nationalist discourses and keep authorities in check. These qualities can only be instilled by educational institutions operating in a democratic way and that are committed to educating tolerant and responsible citizens. This is best done not only by teaching the principles of democratic governance, respect for diversity or multiculturalism, but by actually practicing these very principles on a daily basis, and by insisting that students of different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds sit side by side and enrich each other by

learning about their differences as well as their commonalities. The first step in achieving this goal is to recognize and respect different cultures and traditions and allow their perpetuation through mother tongue education. The second step is to bring people of different backgrounds together and encourage active interaction between them. Creating citizens of the 21st century requires the presence in the same classroom of people with diverse ethnocultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

This is why Babeş-Bolyai is such an important example of a front-runner in this endeavour; an institution that teaches multiculturalism by living and practicing it. It is a university with a long history, which has not only reflected the rich cultural diversity and the turbulent past of Transylvania, but also the present-day reality of a dynamic, European region. Through its choice of studies, this university has created an opportunity for national minorities to receive higher education in their mother tongue. Even though the question of mother tongue education at the tertiary level is widely disputed, I believe, quoting the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights from 1996, that "persons belonging to national minorities should have access to tertiary education when they have demonstrated the need for it and when numerical strength justifies it"<sup>1</sup>. Of course there are no clear answers as to how best to give minorities access to higher education: through the inclusion into existing educational structures or through setting up separate institutions. The issue often becomes overly politicized, especially when higher education becomes of great symbolic importance to a national minority. I believe, the multicultural university of Babeş-Bolyai is a good example of a working solution. If we assume that all contemporary societies are multi-ethnic to some degree, then universities should be geared towards preparing students for such an environment. This suggests multiculturalism rather than cultural segregation, expanding

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<sup>1</sup> The Hague Recommendations, para 17 and 18.

educational opportunities for all groups rather than limiting them, integration rather than separate development. This message was at the heart of Max van der Stoel's speech, when he stood here in October 2000. I fully share his vision and I am ready to help you further in strengthening the role of Babeş-Bolyai as a model experience of multilingual and multicultural higher education.

I encourage your university to adopt measures that promote and strengthen contacts across different lines of studies and bring together students and teachers from different ethnic communities. Classes and activities that cut across ethnic and linguistic divides are essential for broadening one's horizons and learning to appreciate the plurality of views and cultures. No solution is forever, and no solution is perfect. There is no universal recipe for establishing a pluralistic, well-functioning society nor for developing a multicultural university. Legislation and attitudes need to be constantly adapted to evolving needs in evolving societies, and what was once workable at a particular point in time may no longer be the best possible model when circumstances change. It is essential, therefore, that dialogue between communities continues and new initiatives are taken in response to changing needs and realities.

Just as with citizenship, education – and higher education in particular – holds the key to the successful development of **pluralistic and democratic** societies. Modern universities are expected to produce competent, mobile and skilful graduates, who first and foremost are critical thinkers. Ignorance breeds extremism, while education and critical reasoning are the foundation upon which pluralist democracies are built. As Amy Gutmann put it, students must learn “not just to behave in accordance to the authority, but to think critically about

authority if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens”.<sup>2</sup>

I would also add that in this era of globalization, universities can and should promote international understanding and embrace plurality of views. This is best achieved through active engagement in international exchange programmes that benefit both students and professors. This is not a new idea, the tradition of academic exchange goes back to the humanist Erasmus in the 16th century, who felt at home in all the universities of Europe. The Erasmus exchange programme and other similar initiatives are very important today as they enable the effective sharing of knowledge, skills, experiences and, last but not least, languages and cultures. The cause of international understanding and co-operation is greatly advanced by transborder teaching and learning, especially if one’s classmates later become government officials in their respective countries and regions. Universities must play their part in creating future leaders who are free from preconceptions and prejudices and who will advance the cause of intercultural dialogue and co-operation.

Political significance aside, the prime responsibility of universities is of course to produce and impart knowledge of the highest quality and to be at the forefront of scientific research. This is what makes contemporary universities competitive and attractive to students both from home and abroad. Universities today are competing more and more in the worldwide marketplace of ideas. To a large extent, universities are now re-achieving the full status of the “universitas” they once had in the past – at the time of Erasmus and even earlier. At present universities survive only if they are open, modern and competitive and can attract the best teachers, researchers and, not least, students. Multiculturalism is one of the keys to more

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<sup>2</sup> Gutmann, Amy (1987), *Democratic Education*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.51

competitiveness. Students with high levels of intellectual curiosity and ambition thrive in an open, diverse and challenging environment. Your university already has a tradition and an added value in this regard. Multiculturalism is not only in the name but also in the day-to-day life of Babeş-Bolyai and I believe this is the place that should take a lead in the research and scholarly debate on this highly relevant as well as hotly contested subject. As a matter of fact, in international and comparative practice Babeş-Bolyai is often referred to as a “model” example of multicultural tertiary education. There is much reason to believe that the multicultural experiment carried out at the Babeş-Bolyai University can ultimately develop into a fully-fledged success story in the area of multicultural and multilingual education.

Both my predecessors have supported the ideal of the integrated, multilingual university as a vital aspect of integrated, multilingual societies. As I have tried to illustrate, this is also my ideal. I believe in universities that teach diversity and multiculturalism not by preaching it but by living it; universities that encourage critical thinking and produce responsible citizens equipped to participate and take a lead in pluralistic democracies; universities that challenge stereotypes and build bridges across communities and States. The long-term success of all conflict prevention efforts within and across multi-ethnic societies rests on the establishment and proliferation of such educational institutions. This is why such institutions are so important to the High Commissioner’s mandate.

Thank you for your attention.