



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Address by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities,

Max van der Stoep

At the International Conference on Human Rights
of the Visegrad 4 Countries

Bratislava, 10 December 1999

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are three weeks away from the turn of the millenium. Three weeks away from the end of one of the most dynamic yet destructive centuries in the history of mankind.

It is perhaps too early to look back at the last one hundred years with measured objectivity. But I think that it is fair to say that one of the defining characteristics of the 20th century was the impact of excessive nationalism and the clash between the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. Wars have been fought in defence of these principles; states have been created and broken up in their name; ideologies have been driven by them; and millions of people have been expelled or killed either fighting for, or being victimized by, nationalistic or ethnically-based ideals .

These events have had a disproportionate impact on Central Europe. A century that began with most of this region as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was ravaged by two world wars, experienced the rise and fall of Communism, was defined by the creation and break-up of states, and now ends with closer integration into Western Europe. Many of these events stemmed from the multi-ethnic nature of the region.

But there is nothing inevitable about inter-ethnic conflict. It is man-made and can be prevented by mankind. Nationalism may have primordial elements but people are not somehow predisposed to fight each other because of differences in language and culture. The idea of the nation-State protecting the so-called “State-forming nation” is losing its relevance in an increasingly inter-dependent world. We still see spasms of nationalistic excess in Europe from people who promote or defend an ethnic rather than a civic view of the state. This is dangerous for, as we have seen too often in this century, appeals to ethnic nationalism come at the expense of the equals rights of individuals, especially those in the minority. The negative impact of malign nationalism and the inability to satisfy the aspirations of minorities without violently breaking up States will be with us well into the next century unless we come up with new ways of accommodating and integrating diversity within the political

order of the State and developing more effective means of protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

This turbulent century has therefore demonstrated the importance of protecting human rights at the national and international level. It has shown that if human rights, including those of persons belonging to national minorities, are protected and promoted then all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, will have the equal right and opportunity to freely express and pursue their legitimate interests and aspirations. Conversely, violation of these rights can lead to insecurity, not only on the part of the individual or groups concerned but ultimately for all of us. Human rights are universal. None of us can be secure or confident to pursue our own interests and development unless we can rely upon a rational regime, consistently applied, which ensures a minimum of equal respect for everyone. Respect for human rights, including minority rights, is therefore in all of our interests.

Internationally, this is done through developing a culture of human rights that protects the rights of individuals and stresses that when it comes to human rights abuses no state is an island. It has also meant the elaboration of specific human rights standards for the protection of

persons belonging to national minorities. We have come a long way in both respects, most notably through the Charter of the United Nations and more recently through the OSCE Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Nationally, the onus is on the state to create an environment where all citizens can enjoy their identity and reach their full potential. As few modern societies are ethnically homogeneous, this means integrating minorities into society. Integration can not occur if whole groups of persons remain excluded from being a legitimate and recognized part of the community in which they live, and on which they must depend for the enjoyment of their rights.

The need for integrating diversity should therefore be one of the main lessons that we take from the 20th century. Attempts to peacefully or violently create ethnically "pure" nation-states have largely failed. In cases where a nation and state are virtually congruent, the majority still usually has to come to terms with minorities in their midst. In short, multi-ethnic society is a reality which one can not "solve". Diversity and pluralism must be accepted and seen as potential sources of strength

rather than as weaknesses or threats. Diversity is a fact and can enrich collective human experience. Pluralism offers a conceptual framework through which to understand and accommodate diversity.

When considering diversity there are two important points to keep in mind. The first is that integrating diversity is not the same thing as assimilation. When integrating groups within society we must pursue equality, not in terms of sameness, but in terms of meaningful opportunities.

Secondly, whereas diversity can strengthen the fabric of society, disparity can weaken it. Unlike diversity, disparity puts one or another group in a disadvantageous position. Inequality – whether it be in terms of human rights, economic prosperity, access to education or employment and so on – can cause flash points that make “difference” look like threat. This can lead to conflict. A key to avoiding conflict is therefore to combat the worst excesses of inequality within and between states and to allow for the full flourishing of diversity.

In its most basic form, this means the creation of a level playing field. This involves combating discrimination and racism, reducing

socio-economic cleavages and lowering real and psychological barriers between groups. I am thinking in particular of the Roma population and the work that is only just beginning in terms of addressing their disadvantaged position in society.

At the next level, integrating diversity involves recognizing, protecting and promoting the identity of minorities, creating the possibility for dialogue between the minority and majority communities, allowing for effective participation in decision-making processes and bodies, and being sensitive and responsive to the linguistic, educational and cultural needs of minorities.

Some may argue that giving special focus to minority issues at a time when the majority of the population faces daunting socio-economic challenges is a disproportionate response. To such critics I would point out that another lesson of the 20th century is that the way we treat minorities is a barometer of our approach to human rights standards and a measure of the overall civility of our societies. Furthermore, the way one handles one's internal relations has a strong bearing on how one can be expected to act in inter-state relations. For both of these reasons, the

protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities is part of the European Union's criteria of admission for new members.

Experience has also shown that allowing unresolved minority-related issues to slip down the agenda usually results in minority issues setting their own agenda – and compounding problems which, if dealt with at an early stage, would usually not blow up into emotive issues of national identity that, at a later stage, are much more difficult to deal with.

With that in mind, I would like to reiterate the importance of creating conditions where persons belonging to minorities are an equal and integral part of society. We must keep faith in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ideal. These characteristics are defining features of Central and Eastern Europe and can be a source of strength. The key is to weave the ethnic fibres together to strengthen the fabric of society and to prevent the existing threads from unraveling. That is one of the biggest challenges to this region, and indeed to all of Europe, for the next century. Let us continue to work together to learn from the lessons of the past in order to create a more harmonious vision for the future.

Thank you for your attention.

