



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

**“Integrating Diversity in a Multi-Ethnic Region: Promoting Peace and
Security in South Eastern Europe”**

Key-note speech by

Max van der Stoel
OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

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Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address this International Conference on Inter-Ethnic Relations and Minorities in South Eastern Europe. I would like to thank our Slovenian hosts for taking up this initiative in the framework of the Task Force on Human Rights and Minorities. It is my firm conviction that minority issues go to the heart of security, co-operation and prosperity in Europe, particularly South Eastern Europe. Failure to deal effectively with inter-ethnic conflict will hold us back on other aspects of our agenda including democracy-building, regional security, and economic development. I therefore welcome the opportunity to participate in this conference in order that we may together look at ways of promoting multi-ethnic society and democratic citizenship in this region of Europe.

I see our role in the Stability Pact as being that of building contractors. We can use this forum as a chance to compare blueprints, examine the various tools, and pool the available resources. In some cases, that work requires solidifying weak foundations. In others, it means building up the superstructure or renovating existing frameworks. Whatever the work to be done, the expectations of reconstruction are great – as is the task that awaits us.

I

In terms of the basic concepts that we are discussing, one of the major challenges lies in changing our perception of the state. The idea of the nation-State protecting the so-called “State-forming nation” is losing its relevance in an increasingly inter-dependent world. Multi-ethnicity is a reality, in this part of the world more than most. Attempts to peacefully or violently create ethnically “pure” nation-states have failed - at a very high price. In rare cases where a nation and state more or less overlap, the majority still usually has to come to terms with a minority or minorities in its midst. Therefore, instead of looking at the situation in South Eastern Europe as one where we have to build multi-ethnic societies, the challenge is to prevent the disintegration of ones that already exist. In cases where groups have been dislocated, we need to persist in our efforts to reintegrate communities.

Ethnic diversity is not something that can be solved in the sense of being eradicated – unless one engages in a never-ending process of war, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and expulsion. Not only are these options morally reprehensible, the twentieth century has clearly demonstrated that they are untenable. Surely we do not need any more evidence of the need for strengthening the foundations of democratic, pluralistic civil society, accommodating and integrating diversity and protecting the rights of persons

belonging to national minorities. Surely it is time to realize that the pursuit of the mono-ethnic state is a dead end street.

The key is to recognize and head off excessive nationalism at an early stage. There is nothing inevitable about inter-ethnic conflict, in the Balkans or anywhere else. It is man-made and can be prevented by mankind. People are not somehow predisposed to fight each other because of differences in language and culture. In that respect, comprehensive post-conflict rehabilitation of the type that we are engaged in can be regarded as a good investment in conflict prevention. At the same time, it should be emphasized that more attention to conflict prevention would mitigate the need for expensive post-conflict rehabilitation.

Another basic concept should be an emphasis on civic rather than ethnic identity. The development of human rights instruments in the last fifty years has strengthened the concept of the state as a community of individuals subject to common rights and privileges rather than as a community united by common descent, language or blood. This civil identity unites individuals regardless of their ethnicity and bases their relationship to the state on a civic contract of rights and obligations.

In multi-ethnic societies, a vital aspect of this social contract is that the state should create an environment in which minorities feel that their identities

are not only protected, but promoted. This requires striking a delicate balance. On the one hand the protection of unique identities should not foster isolation or separation. Minorities must be integrated into the mainstream of society. But at the same time, integration should not be seen as a euphemism for assimilation.

The bottom line is that when integrating groups within society, we must pursue equality, not in terms of sameness, but in terms of human rights protection and meaningful opportunities. By participating in public life, minorities will feel that they have a stake in the system in which they live – and that they are full partners. They will feel that they are stake holders in, and can benefit from, the common wealth. Indeed, they will contribute to the common wealth. Under these conditions it will be easier for them to realize that they have obligations and not just rights. At the same time, members of the majority will come to see them as fellow citizens sharing fully in the responsibilities and benefits of citizenship. This will foster a sense of cohesion and co-operation within the State that will benefit the whole of society and, by extension, will increase regional stability and prosperity. This is in the interest of all citizens, not only minorities.

On a related point, whereas diversity can strengthen the fabric of society, disparity can weaken it because it 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 excesses of inequality within and between states and to allow for the full flourishing of diversity.

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 an important 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.

II

Bearing that in mind, an important starting point in promoting multi-ethnic society and democratic citizenship in South Eastern Europe is for states to accept and implement international standards, especially as regards the protection of persons belonging to national minorities. In the past ten years, a number of significant instruments have been designed to protect the rights of

persons belonging to national minorities. Particularly noteworthy are the OSCE's Copenhagen and Moscow documents and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities.

We do not need new commitments or institutions, rather we have to apply the existing ones. I would like to take this opportunity to urge states that have not already done so, to ratify the Framework Convention – and without reservations that would reduce the impact of the legal obligations contained therein. It should also be borne in mind that ratification is not the final step. It is incumbent upon governments to harmonize existing legislation and structures accordingly - including constitutional provisions where necessary.

A number of recommendations drawn up by international experts, under my auspices, can be helpful in this process. The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities and the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities are designed to assist governments in applying international standards in these fields. Similarly the so-called Lund Recommendations provide useful guidelines for promoting the effective participation of national minorities in public life. These recommendations should be considered in the context of our discussions on “good practices” and “good processes”.

Before moving on to policy measures, I would like to focus on another issue for which I have recently drawn up recommendations, namely the situation of the Roma. The comprehensive report that my office will soon release looks at many aspects of the situation of Roma including racial violence and discrimination, education, living conditions and political participation. One of my main observations is that it is unwise to make general conclusions. The extraordinary complexity of challenges confronting Romani communities is manifest, as is the rich diversity among Roma within the OSCE area. However, I can say without equivocation that discrimination and exclusion are fundamental features of the Roma experience.

Exclusion is particularly manifest in education. But Roma also face profound challenges in virtually every sphere of social life: rates of unemployment, poverty, and illness are staggeringly high among Roma. In a classic downward spiral, each of these problems exacerbates the others in a self-perpetuating cycle. Overcoming these problems will require a number of inter-related approaches. Firstly, steps must be taken to ensure adequate legal protection for Roma who are all too often the subjects of racial discrimination and racially-motivated violence. Secondly, proper mechanisms must be established to encourage meaningful dialogue on these issues and the active participation of Roma. Finally, tackling specific issues concerning education, health, housing, discrimination and racism will be greatly facilitated if Roma

are actively engaged in the planning and implementation of programs meant to benefit them.

I must say that even within the one year period during which the Roma report was prepared, positive steps have been taken by some OSCE states in trying to address these issues. I have also been impressed by signs of the emergence of a vibrant Roma movement. This bodes well for Roma communities to more effectively promote their own interests. Still, we have a long way to go in addressing what is, to my mind, one of Europe's most pressing minority-related issues.

III

I would like to use my remaining time to share with you some general ideas on “good practices” and “good processes” based on my seven year experience as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

In its most basic form, promoting multi-ethnic society and democratic citizenship means creating a level playing field. This involves combating discrimination and racism, reducing socio-economic cleavages and lowering real and psychological barriers between groups.

The next level 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. States should ensure that opportunities exist for minorities to have an effective voice at the level of the central government, including through special arrangements as necessary. This also applies to regional and local levels of government. The electoral system should facilitate minority representation and influence. States should establish advisory or consultative bodies within appropriate institutional frameworks to serve as channels for dialogue between governmental authorities and minorities. These bodies should be able to raise issues with decision-makers, prepare recommendations, formulate legislative and other proposals, monitor developments and provide views on proposed governmental decisions that affect minorities. Government authorities and minorities should pursue an inclusive, transparent and accountable process of consultation in order to maintain a climate of confidence. Ombudsmen institutions can play a useful role as a type of human rights internal auditor to ensure that nobody falls through the cracks.

Effectively integrating minorities into public life may require allowing for an appropriate level of self-administration in issues where minorities are best suited to govern their own affairs. Local problems are usually best served

by local solutions. The Szeged process has already demonstrated the possibilities for facilitating democratic municipal governance. I think that there is considerable scope for devolution and decentralization in many countries of South Eastern Europe in order to strengthen regional and local governments. This will give minorities opportunities to exercise authority over matters affecting them, while still maintaining the cohesion and territorial integrity of the state. The Lund Recommendations provide food for thought on this sometimes contentious issue of “internal self-determination”.

Language issues are often a source of inter-ethnic conflict. Majorities feel that too much protection for minority languages will create a Tower of Babel in their midst, while minorities fear that strengthening the state language will lead to linguistic assimilation. Compromises can be reached. Paragraph 34 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document makes clear that OSCE participating States will endeavor to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities, notwithstanding the need to learn the official language or languages of the State concerned, have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue, as well as, wherever possible and necessary, for its use before public authorities, in conformity with applicable national legislation.

I am confident that States can organize themselves around, and protect, an official state language (which is typically that of the majority) while at the same time respecting the linguistic rights of minorities. This is important not

only to ensure opportunities for the maintenance and development of cultural identities, but also to ensure the free space and openness which is necessary for a well-functioning market economy.

Education is a vital element in the preservation and development of the identity of persons belonging to national minorities. It is a central means of forming and transmitting identity within a cultural group, particularly as regards language, history, and culture. That is why I encourage states to actively implement minority education rights to the maximum of their available resources, and through economic assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical. I am encouraged by the work that is going on in the “Graz Process”. I see education as a key to the future development of informed and tolerant societies. This concerns all minorities, not only ethnic ones. To my mind, perceptions of “difference” are learned. They are not primordial. Therefore they can also be unlearned. Indeed, the very process of learning can encourage a more multi-cultural perspective. Open minds can lead to open societies. I think that projects that support integration in the field of education deserve our special attention.

The media is another important tool for fostering inter-ethnic understanding. In many cases, issues of nationalism and identity are fuelled by perceptions and symbolism. We have all seen how often facts and images can be manipulated through the media, exacerbating insecurities and perpetuating

negative stereotyping. Conversely, the media can play an important public education role and can be a useful confidence-building tool. I think this deserves closer attention and I support the work of the Media Task Force.

Sensitivity training on inter-ethnic issues is vital for public officials, particularly police, so that they can better cope with potential conflictual situations rather than being considered part of the problem. Public officials should also be better trained in human rights law concerning racial and ethnic discrimination. At the same time, affirmative recruitment of minorities into the public service would make state institutions more representative.

Representative government also relates to gender. Increased involvement of women in decision-making is essential for achieving accountable government in South Eastern Europe. I think that there is much work to be done to develop equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory machinery, both within majority and minority communities.

In all of these various issues, government and minority representatives should be involved. Failure to involve minorities in discussions and decisions that concern them usually reinforces the very divisions which Governments may be seeking to address by their policies.

But government and minority representatives are not the only players. Non-governmental organizations can play a key role in tackling some of the root causes of inter-ethnic conflict and in facilitating better understanding and co-operation between communities.

Certainly there is also a role for the international community. This conference is evidence of that. One way that the international community should be more involved is to help with specific projects designed to promote inter-ethnic society and democratic citizenship. For example, in Romania there is an ongoing debate between the Government and the Hungarian and German minorities about how to accommodate the wishes of these minorities to have higher education in their mother tongue. I am trying to explore ways to find ways of making this possible, and I am not without hope that, with goodwill on all sides, a solution can be found. However, in order to see the project through to fruition, it is clear that more money will be needed than the government can currently afford. Here, financial support from outside would be a meaningful investment in promoting inter-ethnic harmony and higher education in Romania.

The same can be said about the situation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia where the Albanian minority has sought the creation of a higher learning institution to provide university education in the mother

tongue. Ways are currently being discussed for developing an Albanian Language Institute of Higher Learning.

As an international community, we must do more to give expertise and financial support to such projects. Compared with the enormous financial and human costs of destabilization and conflict, the resources needed are extremely modest indeed. In terms of fostering inter-ethnic harmony and regional security, the return on our investment can be very high.

IV

In conclusion, I would like to repeat that the blueprints for integrating diversity are now quite clear. International standards have been drawn up and have proved to be a sound basis for the protection of persons belonging to national minorities. The tools for preventing inter-ethnic conflict are becoming more finely tuned. As various instruments and mechanisms at the national and international levels become more tried and tested, the methods for preventing and managing inter-ethnic relations are improving. If this trend continues, inter-ethnic issues will become predominantly subjects of discussion rather than conflict.

Where we sometimes fall short is when it comes to the political and financial capital to put our good intentions into practice. Standards are the foundation of enduring inter-ethnic harmony. Agreements and conventions provide the framework. There are also architects and carpenters aplenty. But to complete the analogy, we need more bricks and mortar.

The Stability Pact offers a rare opportunity to address issues that have failed to make their way on to other agendas. It also offers an opportunity to network and share experiences. I think that our priority now should be to pool our resources and get down to the business of putting our projects into practice. In this way we can accelerate construction of our common European home.

Thank you for your attention.