



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

High Commissioner on National Minorities

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Address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

at the
**Reception on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of
the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities**

[Check Against Delivery]

The Hague, the Netherlands – 11 November 2008

Mr. Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A warm welcome to our birthday celebration.

I wish to extend my sincere greetings to Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Verhagen, and allow me also to thank you for your consistent support of the HCNM.

We are proud of our Dutch connection. We are grateful to your country for being such a friendly host.

We very much miss Minister Max van der Stoep here tonight. He is unfortunately sick. I am very grateful to him for paving the way for the activities we are carrying out today. Ambassador Ekéus was with us yesterday. Unfortunately, he could not join us today.

The High Commissioner on National Minorities, or HCNM, is a young institution. We, nevertheless, take pride in our record. Since 1993, the High Commissioner has helped many governments and national minorities find common ground and avoid severe conflicts.

The HCNM has launched itself into the throes of old grievances, historical myths and nation-building and succeeded by standing its ground on one key principle: integration with respect for diversity.

We are passionate about this principle. We believe that if minority students are given the opportunity to master their mother tongue and other languages in school they will excel in professional life. We believe that a country benefits when its legislature, police service and local school board are multi-ethnic. We believe that diversity must be cherished and celebrated, not suppressed.

Our strong belief has helped us convince hardliners. Has helped us win over the hearts and minds of the hesitant, the disenchanted, the pessimistic. Has helped us confront those preaching ethnic hatred and superiority.

Mr. Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

But belief is not enough. The HCNM cannot accomplish its mission without the international community's support, without the support of all OSCE participating States.

National minority issues must not be allowed to slip off our agenda. This is my plea to all of you today.

First of all, international institutions, such as the OSCE and sister institutions like the Council of Europe, must remain strong. For this, we need you on our side. This means, for instance, that the international community must throw its weight behind HCNM recommendations and opinions presented by the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee. We need you on our side. Peer pressure from you, the participating States, is often the only way to correct another State's behaviour.

Second, I urge you to be bold in setting new standards. The CSCE Copenhagen Document, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities are all excellent documents from the early 1990s. We still have a long way to go in making sure these documents are adhered to, and we are working on it.

In the past 15 years, the HCNM alone has come up with innovative guidance on education, languages, participation, broadcasting and policing. Hopefully, these documents can be useful in the different countries, dealing with inter-ethnic relations in different countries.

Finally, we must recommit to multilateralism and refrain from unilateralism. Particularly, when it comes to national minority issues. Unilateral actions in this area would signal our return to the law of the jungle, where tribal allegiances mattered more than universal standards. It would be return to the survival of the fittest.

Vibrant international institutions, such as the HCNM, are our best defence against inter-ethnic tension.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Europe seemed a grim place 15 years ago. War raged in the Balkans. Communal conflict flared up in other parts of our continent. Thousands of people were killed or had to abandon their homes. I saw it with my own eyes as a mediator in the Balkans.

Those events woke us up to the dangers of extreme nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance. They made us want to find ways to prevent such atrocities from happening in the future. "Never again!", we vowed.

But 15 years on, there is still simmering tension over national minority issues. This summer a war broke out. Nevertheless the Europe of 2008 is a better place.

It is a better place because we now have the legal tools to deal with national minority issues and the courts to punish the perpetrators of crimes against minorities. It is a better place because people know that they have everything to lose and nothing to gain from armed conflict. It is a better place because of the work of international institutions and the quiet contribution of the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

We must keep up the good work. We at the HCNM are united behind this goal. Help us, and we can make it happen.

Thank you for your support and your attention.