



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

**MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD 2014**  
**OPENING ADDRESS**

address by  
**Astrid Thors**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

**Presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award to Spravedlivost**

**[Check against delivery]**

The Hague, the Netherlands – 2 October 2014

Your Royal Highness,  
Dear Minister,  
Dear laureates and jury members,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award. This award is a generous gift of EUR 50,000, provided by the Government of the Netherlands to recognize and reward individuals or organizations that have helped to improve the position of national minorities in the OSCE area.

I extend a special welcome to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Frans Timmermans, whom I would also like to congratulate on his new position in the EU Commission. Minister Timmermans will present the prize to the representatives of Spravedlivost: Ms. Valentina Gritsenko, Director of Spravedlivost, and Mr. Utkir Dzhabbarov, the Senior Lawyer for the organization. I congratulate you and warmly welcome you to The Hague for this special day. I also welcome and thank the members of the jury who have made the decision to recognize the important contribution that Spravedlivost is making to support some of the most vulnerable people in Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan.

It is also a great honour that Her Royal Highness Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands has joined us here today.

This is the sixth Max van der Stoel Award ceremony and it provides us a wonderful opportunity to remember the person Max van der Stoel was and the huge legacy he left. Unfortunately I never had an honour to meet him personally, but I followed his work closely and I paid careful attention to what his advice was on minority issues relating to European Union enlargement

It is also a great source of inspiration that my two predecessors Ambassadors Rolf Ekéus and Knut Vollebaek are with us today.

The five previous Max van der Stoel laureates have continued their important and brave work. We are also happy to see the 2011 winner, Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje, here today. They persevere in their efforts to foster reconciliation and build mutual understanding between communities by working with students, parents and teachers to overcome ethnic divisions in their communities. When I was in Skopje in June, we had such a good meeting with people who work according to your methods. So that we can all be inspired by their achievements, I invite you to watch a short film they have prepared about their work since winning the Max van der Stoel Award three years ago.

*Pause for film*

Many thanks to Mr. Sasho Stojkovski and Mr. Veton Zekoli for your presence today, for sharing this film and, most of all, for your ongoing work to increase trust and interaction between communities.

The OSCE region and the OSCE as an organization, including the HCNM, are today confronted with many challenges: Aggressive nationalism has not faded away; there is more talk of “us and them” and the coexistence of different groups is endangered as a result. This is happening at the same time as we see a retreat from multilateralism. Disrespect for commitments undertaken by the participating States of OSCE is commonplace. Instead of national minorities being seen as bridges between nations, they are used as instruments in a wider international political game. The HCNM as an Institution has a huge legacy to live up to and we are fully aware of it.

Today, we celebrate an organization working in a country where my Institution has been actively engaged for over 20 years. All previous High Commissioners made frequent visits to Kyrgyzstan and closely monitored the situation there, especially in the south. In November 2009, High Commissioner Vollebaek informed the OSCE Chairmanship of an alarming deterioration in inter-ethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan. In May 2010, he addressed the Permanent Council and conveyed his serious concerns about the security situation in the country, the rise in nationalism and the threat to inter-ethnic peace. Unfortunately, the situation continued to spiral downward. Violent clashes broke out in the city of Osh. On 12 June, High Commissioner Vollebaek issued the second formal early warning in the history of the Institution, calling on OSCE participating States to help stabilize the situation in southern

Kyrgyzstan and to assist Uzbekistan in managing the resulting refugee flows. For several more days, violence raged in and around the southern cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, mostly targeted against the ethnic Uzbek minority. The violence killed more than four hundred people and left many more injured and displaced. Following the tragic events, High Commissioner Vollebaek visited Kyrgyzstan eight times, urging the authorities to take measures to promote reconciliation and the integration of society.

Trust between the largest ethnic communities in the south was damaged and fragile. There was an urgent need for fair and impartial investigation of the events and for people of all communities to see that justice was served against those who instigated and participated in the violence. As in other countries in the OSCE region that have experienced inter-ethnic conflict, building conditions for sustaining peace in Kyrgyzstan is a long and difficult process. We recognize Spravedlivost today for its valuable contribution to this process.

According to the Oxford Russian dictionary, *spravedlivost* means Justice. Fairness. Truth. In its 20 years of existence, Spravedlivost, working in the city and region of Jalal-Abad, has earned a strong reputation for its work advocating and defending human rights in southern Kyrgyzstan. It helps to ensure legal and medical support is provided to victims, regardless of their ethnic background. With its commitment to working with vulnerable groups and individuals, Spravedlivost has demonstrated time and again its dedication to the pursuit of justice, fairness and truth. The organization has lived up to its name.

And as one person helped by the organization said: the only thing we have to protect us is Spravedlivost – and the law.

Since the June 2010 events, Spravedlivost's work has assumed even greater relevance, as well as risk. In societies recovering from inter-ethnic conflict, low trust in law-enforcement and judicial bodies – a perception that the police will not protect people from a particular background or that a person's ethnic identity will affect their chances to receive a fair trial – makes it very difficult to talk about real reconciliation or about real security. Rule of law and access to justice are building blocks of stable, integrated societies. The work you do Valentina, Utkir, and all your colleagues to protect citizen's rights before the authorities and the courts is a very important building block in ensuring the rule of law. And certainly, Minister Timmermans – knowing your new responsibility for Fundamental Rights and Rule

of Law, we count on you for a continued dialogue on how to find the best ways to improve the rule of law – because that is a task needed also in the wider OSCE area.

By providing legal assistance across ethnic lines, by advocating for laws, policies and practices that are consistent with human rights principles, Spravedlivost contributes to long-term conflict prevention in Kyrgyzstan. Its staff members are not afraid to speak out when they see something that may hinder inter-ethnic reconciliation and integration, such as developments related to education and language. The courage, the commitment and the motivation shown by Ms. Gritsenko, Mr. Dzhabbarov and their colleagues demonstrates their unwavering commitment to human rights, access to justice and observance of the rule of law. “No peace without justice” is a sometimes overused slogan, but it truly applies to Spravedlivost and its work.

This work is painstaking. It requires strong convictions and a powerful vision of what society should be – a society where the authorities are accountable, where everyone deserves justice and the law applies equally to all. It requires defending clients no other lawyer wants to defend, in a situation where justice remains selective. It requires being willing to face angry families in a courtroom who believe the accused is responsible for hurting their loved ones, even if the evidence shows otherwise. It requires going into places of detention – not usually the nicest places – and talking to people who may have committed crimes but deserve humane treatment. It requires being ready to stand up and challenge policies or actions that may result in someone’s rights being violated because of their ethnic identity or the language they speak.

My wish and belief is that all of us here today will continue to listen to and care for our friends awarded today. If they call for our help, we must be ready to listen. I hope the entire international community will also heed these calls.

Kyrgyzstan was one of the first countries I visited as High Commissioner. The government has begun to take steps to address the root causes of inter-ethnic tensions, but much remains to be done – and I will continue to support these efforts. I am pleased to say that one of our partners is here today: Mira Karabayeva, Head of the Department of Ethnic and Religious Policy and co-operation with civil society in the Presidential Administration of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Kyrgyzstan is a country still struggling with many problems, but it has great potential. Much of my optimism comes from people like Mira and those at Spravedlivost – committed people who want to see their country become a better place, a safe place for all its diverse communities. A place where everyone can ask for and receive *spravedlivost*: Justice. Fairness. Truth. In any language.

Valentina and Utkir, I congratulate you once again. Now I invite everyone to watch a short film about Spravedlivost and its work