



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

## **OPENING REMARKS**

address by  
**Astrid Thors**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the  
**High-level meeting on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of The Hague  
Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities**

**[Check against delivery]**

The Hague, the Netherlands – 20 April 2016

Dear Ministers,

Dear Special Representative of the German Chairmanship of the OSCE,

Your Excellencies,

Dear participants and friends of the HCNM,

Today, Europe faces yet another test to preserve the stability of its ethnically diverse societies. Every day, men, women and children are trying to escape the violence of conflicts with the hope of living a dignified life. The humanitarian challenges we now face are huge. And the spectre of renewed nationalism and xenophobia looms larger every day.

Sadly, European history has been marred by conflicts. They have invariably provoked mass migration, population displacements and the redrawing of borders. They have shaped our continent. They have also, in part, brought us the diverse, complex but also rich mosaic of ethnicities that characterizes the OSCE participating States.

With the recent refugee crisis we are also reminded that, in our inter-dependent world, States cannot consider themselves immune from the instability affecting other regions.

If conflicts are part of our history, how do we make sure that they do not blight our future? In creating the institution of the HCNM in 1992, the OSCE participating States did not intend to merely pose that question as a reaction to the ongoing crises of that time. They wanted to move away from countless discussions about the virtue of conflict prevention to actually carrying out operational conflict prevention.

Today and tomorrow, we will speak concretely about the role of education in conflict prevention. Education is in many ways the space where issues of equality, national identity and the concept of nationhood are being negotiated. Often, we see that the competing demands placed on our education system have generated tensions. Tensions that are frequently a reflection of the widespread societal debates about the place of national minorities in society as a whole.

If governments and Ministries of Education analyse and anticipate the risk of such tensions in their own country, through careful planning and consultation with all ethnic communities, then education can indeed play an important role in preventing conflict and supporting peace-

building efforts. Preparing coming generations to define their country's future in an atmosphere of peace and stability is a common challenge in the field of education for all participating States. It is for this reason, that the Ministry of Education, more than any other ministry, is the Ministry of the future.

The present discussions on migration, on fighting terrorism and on combatting extremism pose a new, very real challenge. More and more countries are putting great emphasis on the need for newcomers to learn the dominant language of the state. Meanwhile, when we listen to researchers, we learn that in many contexts the attitude of the teacher, which often simply reflects the attitudes of society, is clearly evident in the classroom. This can lead to the dominant language being given a higher status whereby speakers of other languages feel inferior and see their language being marginalized. This type of attitude does not help the children of minorities to advance through education. Conversely, countries and regions that embrace multilingualism tend to have better learning achievements, perhaps reflecting a more accepting attitude to other languages. In short: when managing diversity in education, multilingualism matters.

As far back as the 1990s, the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoep, started working on these issues: *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, now 20 years old, is a reflection of the unflinching attention that has been given to tensions arising in the field of education. At that time, the attention of the HCNM was very much focused on addressing linguistic dilemmas in education. Successive High Commissioners have continued to address these issues through a balanced and progressive approach which combines tuition in the mother tongue with the acquisition of the State language through a gradual learning process.

During their 20 years of existence we have witnessed the challenge of actually implementing *The Hague Recommendations* in practice. At the same time we know there is no definitive one-size-fits-all solution for inter-ethnic accommodation that can be applied once and for all. It is a recurring theme, though each case is different. Year after year, my institution has been tackling the structural problems of diversity in education and has faced the persistent challenge of moving beyond short-term interventions and sometimes hastily adopted education measures where there was no proper consultation with any of the ethnic communities concerned. Against this background, we can only conclude that the gap

between adopted international human rights standards, including minority rights and the dynamics of power, has not been reduced.

This event today is also the occasion to pay tribute to Max van der Stoel who left us five years ago. His wise words still resonate with us: “Capital invested in conflict prevention is capital well spent’. Stoel did not spare any effort to ensure that education got the attention it deserved. Unfortunately, with a handful of notable exceptions, budgets tend to be more reactive than pro-active: as my predecessor, Max van der Stoel, often said “If even one tenth of one per cent of what is annually spent on defence by OSCE States would be used on projects aiming at removing the causes of conflicts, this would considerably improve the chances of avoiding them. Once crises lead to violence, they cost a thousand times more than a preventive project.”

Education features prominently in the Sustainable Development Goals: the new set of commitments that were adopted and will be implemented by all countries in the UN. The SDG Goal number four emphasizes inclusive, equitable quality education for all. This goal is actually a very good benchmark for all of us who recognize the importance of developing society through education. Let us therefore make use of the new SDGs to promote an inclusive society.

Since the very first days of existence of the office of HCNM we have been required to think more comprehensively about the tensions between respect for one’s own identity on the one hand and the need for social cohesion on the other. How do we avoid minority schools becoming ghettoized? And how can we ensure that the children at minority schools receive updated textbooks adapted to the new curricula?

Dear friends

As you can also see from the programme for the experts, we see new questions arising when working with participating States on education. How does education reform reflect on minorities? How can we prevent history, civic education and other culturally sensitive subjects being taught in a way that further polarizes minority groups and communities in society rather than integrating them further?

Such questions have, at times, been the subject of heated debates in various OSCE participating States. A useful tool, in this respect, is *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* issued in 2012 by my predecessor Knut Vollebaek. These guidelines aimed to provide some policy guidance on managing diversity, including in the field of education, through integration policies.

Even though I believe that during this event our experts will find many cases where the principles of *The Hague Recommendations* are not being implemented to the extent one would wish; I think it is time to reflect. Do we need to deepen and enlarge our discussion and guidance to include the dimensions of how diversity can be promoted, managed and valued in education systems? Should we not develop, together with other organizations, a comprehensive handbook on how to manage diversity in the education system? I hope the expert meetings we have ahead will help us to answer this question.

When we were preparing for this event our aim was to bring people together who are specialised in questions concerning minorities *and* education. We are therefore honoured and privileged to be in the company of so many individuals and organizations here today who can share their knowledge about this issue. Bringing all of you together to shine the spotlight on how the education sector can also help to build bridges with and between ethnic communities is a positive first step. Let me say once more that I sincerely hope that the Sustainable Development Goals will be an eye-opener, and that other international organizations working with development, equality, financing and children's rights will see the merit of going more in depth into questions of diversity. At HCNM, we are ready to continue to be a platform for these discussions.

Dear friends

The OSCE is the organization that is embracing the comprehensive concept of security. And the aim of the work of my institution is to ensure that education is a tool for conflict prevention; based on human rights and inclusivity.

But how often is it the case that education is forgotten in peace agreements, and instead societies and countries in post-conflict situations struggle with new divisions, with divisive narratives and with rules that sometimes create more obstacles for integration.

We understand that in the hectic times before finally reaching a ceasefire and peace agreements, there was perhaps not enough time to think these questions through carefully. Nevertheless, the HCNM has often been working with societies that struggle because of this omission following a peace agreement. We are therefore delighted that the Chairmanship is investing a lot in implementing the conflict cycle decision of the Ministerial council from 2011, including arranging a Round Table and a conference on mediation. I hope that there is a possibility to discuss whether and how education can be addressed in mediation processes.

Today we are pleased to see so many participants from within the OSCE area joining us to discuss issues of education and conflict prevention. Your presence sends us a positive signal as my mandate could not be fulfilled if I were not able to rely on the co-operation of the participating States and the involvement of civil society. Today, we will be exchanging experiences and expertise. To this end, we are delighted to welcome Srđan Verbić, Minister of Education of Serbia and Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, First Deputy State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia. They will debate together with Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark from the Åland Islands Peace Institute and Jan de Groof, Professor at the College of Europe, about the role of education in building stable multi-ethnic societies. Before that, distinguished scholar Fernand de Vareennes, whose expertise has informed the work of this Institution since the outset, will help to place the OSCE HCNM's work on education over time in perspective.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank the German Chairmanship of the OSCE through its distinguished representative Mr. Erler. We are thankful for your continuous support as well as for the generous contribution that you made which has made it possible for all of us to be present here today and engage in a dialogue on issues relating to education and conflict prevention. I would also like to extend a special word of thanks to Mayor van Aartsen, who will join us later, for his generosity in hosting tonight's reception and for giving us yet another opportunity to continue our discussions in the elegant surroundings of the Koninklijke Schouwburg.

I hope that you will enjoy many fruitful discussions here in The Hague. Thank you for joining us and for your continued interest in the work of the HCNM.