



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

OPENING REMARKS

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
Celebratory Ceremony
on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of
the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

[Check against delivery]

The Hague, the Netherlands – 7 March 2013

Your Majesty,
Ministers,

Dear friends of the HCNM,

In May 1999, I got a call from Max van der Stoel. I was Chairman in Office of the OSCE. He was the High Commissioner on National Minorities. I was seized with the situation in Kosovo. Barely two months earlier, talks had failed and military action was initiated. The world focused on Kosovo, and the situation in the wider Balkans quickly faded into the background.

Not for the High Commissioner. He called me, not because of the situation unfolding in Kosovo, but in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, about which he had decided to issue an early warning to the participating States.

While the world was watching the conflict of the day, the HCNM was already grappling with the potential conflict of tomorrow. This exemplifies what is so unique about the HCNM. By the time an issue makes it on to the evening news, our work is largely done. This unique modus operandi, which stems from a strong mandate, embodying the spirit of the OSCE principles and coupled with a strong belief in the merits of international intervention, is what sets the HCNM apart and makes it different from other international instruments.

At the time of the crisis in the Balkans and the call from Max van der Stoel, little did I know that I would be welcoming you here as High Commissioner to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the HCNM.

Much has been achieved in the field of human and minority rights, since 1992, and the HCNM has made a significant contribution to this development. But while the achievements of the past are worthy of attention, the Institution's continued existence can only be justified on its relevance today and potential for the future.

The working methods and thinking employed by the HCNM and his staff have evolved gradually in reaction to the political developments in the participating States of the OSCE.

This evolution will have to continue. In its first years, the development and promotion of minority rights was the key challenge for the Institution. Today, we go beyond merely promoting minority rights. We recognize that minority rights alone are insufficient to ensure lasting peace and stability, because, in the long run, a society divided against itself cannot stand. To promote strong, stable and secure States, we must endeavour to build strong, stable and secure societies. This is a challenge for all the OSCE participating States, and it is a challenge that will not go away.

We have come far in the OSCE, but we still have a long way ahead. Our journey is not complete as long as questions of ethnicity, nationality and race remain a source of grievances and instability. While the manifestations of ethnic tension and conflict may change, inter-ethnic accord can never be achieved once and for all. How we treat these challenges in the years ahead determines the future of many people in OSCE participating States.

This will also be the main focus of our ceremony here today and our expert conference tomorrow. The Chairman in Office of the OSCE, Foreign Minister Kozhara, and the OSCE Secretary General, Lamberto Zannier, will both share their perspectives on the Institution's role within the wider organization. I am also very pleased to welcome as a speaker the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands Frans Timmermans, a former HCNM employee. Another two Foreign Ministers, Carl Bildt of Sweden and Miroslav Lajcak of Slovakia, and a distinguished scholar, Professor Rainer Hofmann, together with the accomplished journalist and political analyst, Edward Lucas, will help us decipher the current political challenges, and look at how the HCNM can handle them. At the end we will share with you some of our experiences from working in Georgia in a short version of a longer documentary from that country.

And you have already heard two of the three excellent, young musicians from the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, who will keep up the celebratory mood.

It is thanks to generous contributions from the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway that we are all here. We are very grateful to the three governments for making it possible for us both to celebrate today and to organize tomorrow's conference.

Your Majesty,
Ministers,

Dear friends,

I hope you will enjoy your time with us here in The Hague. Thank you for coming and for your continued support to the HCNM.