



High Commissioner on National Minorities

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY!

Speech in acceptance of a honorary doctorate at Charles University 3 February 1993, Prague

May I first of all thank the Academic Council of Charles University for awarding me a honorary doctorate of law. I consider this an especially great honour because it is bestowed on me by one of the most ancient universities of Europe, which, through the centuries, has made so many invaluable contributions to the development of the European culture. May I also thank you, Professor Kincl, for your words which I greatly appreciated.

I feel privileged to receive this honorary doctorate in the city of Prague which was, in November 1989, the scene of a historic victory of democratic ideals over the forces of totalitarianism - a victory which was even more significant because it was achieved without violence. A victory which was ensured by the resolute action of hundreds of thousands of citizens marching through the streets. A victory for which the ground was prepared by the sacrifices of the men and women of Charta 77 who kept the flame of freedom burning during the dark years of communist rule.

I am also proud to receive this honour here in Prague because it is the capital of a state which has committed itself unreservedly to promote the cause of freedom, democracy and human rights. I quote the declaration of the Czech Parliament of January 1 :

"In the tradition of the democracies of the world the Czech Republic will, in its internal and foreign policies and within the context of its laws, unconditionally honour the human rights and the basic freedoms of the individual which create the basis for freedom, justice and peace."

How can we secure human rights in the future? Experience shows that, when a people enjoys human rights, there is a strong tendency to consider them as selfevident, as just a part of ordinary daily life. Apparently we only fully realize the true significance of human rights when we have lost them. It then becomes evident to anybody with self respect that human rights are as indispensable as water or air. We have to draw a lesson from this. We must continuously be on our guard to keep our democratic institutions healthy and

strong. It is only in this context that human rights can flourish. Let us never forget the famous saying "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

To ensure respect for human rights is essential because they alone can safeguard values like human dignity, creativity and diversity which are such indispensable ingredients of European culture. But let us also not forget that there is a close link between human rights and the chances of ultimately creating a peaceful world order. Peace and stability can never be ensured when human rights continue to be violated on a massive scale in many parts of the world. Violations of human rights and the resulting injustice cause tensions, which in turn will lead to conflict, often violent conflict. The 1986 Declaration of the member states of the European Community summarizes this in very clear terms : "lasting peace and security are unattainable without universal enjoyment of human rights." And the Charter of Paris, signed in November 1990 by the Heads of State and Government of all European and North American States, said essentially the same by stating that the observance and full exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms are the foundation of freedom, justice and peace.

In the past, dictatorial governments used to argue that questions concerning human rights in their countries were a purely internal matter; the outside world had no right to interfere, or even to protest. Now democratic governments are unanimously of the view that human rights violations are a matter of legitimate international concern. For humanitarian reasons, but also because they have understood that grave, consistent and massive violations of human rights can cause explosions which threaten international peace and security. This in turn leads inevitably to a different interpretation of the primary role which the Charter of the United Nations allots to the Security Council : to ensure that conflicts will not develop into war. More and more the view is gaining ground, that, in order to avoid conflicts, the root causes of the underlying tensions have to be addressed. One of the causes, sometimes even the main cause, is the suppression in various ways of fundamental freedoms and human rights of the population, or part of the population. The respect for human rights and the maintenance of peace and security can no longer be considered as separate items on the world's agenda of crucial questions; they are inextricably linked.

When the CSCE Charter of Paris was signed only slightly more than two years ago , optimism and euphoria prevailed. The defeat of communism had opened the way to overcome the artificial divisions which had kept Western and Eastern Europe separated for so many decades. Europe seemed to be headed for what the Charter called a new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe. Now, two years later, we are confronted with what we have to consider as the worst enemies of human rights : war and violence in former Yugoslavia, in the Caucasus and Central Asia. We are, moreover, faced with alarming new outbursts of xenophobia and racism. And even were there is no violence, there are regions where the road to a stable democracy and full respect for human rights still seems to be a long one. Outside Europe, there are numerous countries where serious violations of human rights are still taking place. In the world as a whole, the number of states which fully

respects human rights, even though it showed an increase after the collapse of communism, still constitutes a clear minority.

The democratic states have to show maximum solidarity with those who struggle against oppression. They deserve our support because the struggle for freedom and human rights is indivisible. In our increasingly interdependent world, a victory for democracy anywhere, can promote the cause of those who are struggling for freedom elsewhere. But the opposite is also true - a dictator who needs no internal or external resistance when he tries to impose his will on a country, can encourage other - anti- democratic forces elsewhere to follow his example and his methods. But we must also show solidarity because we cannot allow ourselves to forget that those who oppose dictatorship could have stayed out of trouble if they had chosen to obey autocratic rule instead of sticking their necks out. They have recognized, like your great philosopher Jean Patocka did, that the cause of freedom is a cause worth suffering for. It is of course not enough to show our support by words alone; the least the democratic states can do to help them is to try to work out a well coordinated strategy to undermine the dictatorship. Only then our solidarity can have real significance.

Since the old order in Europe broke down a few years ago, we have been frequently confronted with conflicts, even violent conflicts, caused by the problem of national minorities. It is not feasible, even if there would be the political will to do so, to solve this problem by simply allowing even the smallest peoples to create their own independent and sovereign states. On the territory of the Russian Federation alone, some 150 new states would have to be created, many of which would not have any viability. Moreover, we have to realize that, because many peoples do not live in a clearly delimited geographical area, it is simply impossible to redraw the borders of our continent in such a way that state borders and ethnic borders would coincide. Inevitably, many states would continue to have national minorities living on their territory. Against this background it becomes even more important to oppose strongly any form of nationalism that does not respect the rights of minorities and, moreover, to use our all our ingenuity to ensure that, to quote the CSCE Charter of Paris "the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop that identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law." The only way to reduce tensions and to avoid conflicts concerning national minorities is to make them realize that they are free to develop fully their identity and that, even if they give up trying to create their own state, ways are open for them to fulfill many of their aspirations.

No stable European order is possible without solving the problems of minorities and excessive nationalism. But let us also not forget for a moment the dangers threatening the newly emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, dangers which are caused because they have to carry such excessively heavy burdens. In order to ensure their future prosperity they have to change from a commando economy to a market- oriented economy - a process which is about as easy as changing the wheels under a moving

train. While doing this, they have at the same time to confront the disastrous economic, social, environmental, and, last not least, moral consequences of decades of communist mismanagement. If they fail in this immense task, they are in danger of being engulfed by disintegration and chaos, and this in turn will provide new chances for political adventurers and anti-democratic forces. It is necessary that we demonstrate our solidarity with the victims of dictatorship. But that is not enough. Solidarity between democratic forces in the world also requires that the more prosperous states offer a helping hand when the new democracies are in danger of being overwhelmed by the problems they are facing. The United States understood this after the Second World War when it started the Marshall plan which offered Western Europe indispensable aid to ensure its recovery. So far, Western Europe and the United States, even though offering various forms of aid, have failed to make an effort on a similar scale to help the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. No one disputes that the methods to be used ought not to be similar to those employed in implementing the Marshall plan. The problems which these states have to overcome are different. But the basic aim would be the same : to help ensure that democratic governments are successful in meeting the challenges they are facing, and in this way to help to build stable democratic systems.

We frequently say to each other that the world is constantly getting smaller and more interdependent. But we must also draw the logical conclusion from this : the problems of others are increasingly becoming our problems.

What we need most of all in these years of revolutionary change is solidarity. Let us not forget the lessons from the thirties. Lack of solidarity led to the collapse of one democratic state after the other. As we approach the end of this century the threats of nazism and communism have disappeared. But now we are facing dangers of a quite different nature : chaos and disintegration spreading over Europe. It is my firm conviction that there is only one way to cope with these threats : the democratic states of Europe have to practise solidarity to a far greater degree than has been the case so far. Only then can we lay the foundations of the peaceful, stable democratic and united Europe we are all dreaming of.

Max van der Stoel

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