



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**“Integrating Diversity: In Everybody’s Interest”**

Speech by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities  
**Max van der Stoep**

at the Seminar  
**“Integrating Diversity in Higher Education: Lessons from Romania”**

**Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania**

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Rector,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking all of you for coming to this seminar on a Saturday morning. I can see that the topic that we will be discussing is of great interest and I look forward to a thought provoking exchange of views.

The purpose of this seminar is to discuss the topic of multi-culturalism generally, but specifically in the context of higher education in Romania. I thought that it would be most appropriate if a seminar on this theme would be held here at Babes-Bolyai University as this institution is steadily strengthening its reputation as an important center of multi-lingual and multi-cultural higher learning. We will hear from the heads of the three lines of study during our programme this morning.

May I take this opportunity to thank you, Professor Marga, for the co-operation that I have enjoyed with you over the past few years, both in your capacity as Rector of Babes-Bolyai University and as Minister of Education. Your dynamism and leadership have been influential in broadening the vision of education in this country and I commend you for all of your hard work and perseverance. I look forward to your presentation this morning on the topic of multi-cultural education in Romania.

I would also like to thank the Research Centre on Inter-Ethnic Relations, particularly Istvan Horvath, for their indispensable assistance in organizing this meeting.

I would like to begin my remarks today by publicly expressing my satisfaction for the decision taken by the Senate last July to amend the University Charter. I think that this was an important step forward in codifying progress that had already been made and in setting objectives for the years ahead. I know that this decision was not considered ideal for many professors of the Hungarian line of study. Nevertheless, I think that changes have been introduced which go a considerable way to meet your concerns. I note, for example, that the amount of autonomy exercised by the various lines of study has been increased. This will allow the linguistic lines to develop and safeguard their respective interests and control decisions that directly affect them. I am also encouraged by the fact that the number of courses in minority languages will be increased, particularly in the faculties of economics and law. I hope that targets will be included in the University's strategic plan to clearly lay out a timetable for expanding the number and range of courses in minority languages. These new opportunities for study should increase the percentage of the student population from minority communities and, down the road, widen the pool of potential young faculty who will be able to teach courses in Hungarian and German.

I would also like to note that commitments have been included in the revised Charter which explicitly refer to the fact that Babes-Bolyai University provides a framework for multi-cultural and multi-lingual contacts and offers equal training opportunities in Romanian, Hungarian and German. I encourage the University to continue on the path that it has taken in the past few years to strengthen all lines of study in order to achieve this goal of co-equality, keeping in mind of course the high academic standards for which this University is renowned.

I stress the importance of academic standards because too often debates about this and other Universities get bogged down in political considerations. Too often people on all sides of the argument lose sight of the main issue, which is education – a quality education. In my work I am sensitive to the desire of minorities to have higher education in their mother tongue and the symbolic importance that is attached to a University. Yet in meeting students in various Universities in a number of countries I have heard again and again that their main priorities are to have qualified teachers, a wide choice of subjects, good learning materials, a pleasant learning environment and facilities like Internet access. Whether this is achieved in a multi-cultural or unilingual environment, a private or a public institution, is a secondary consideration. Therefore, before one kicks around a University like a political football, one should stop and ask what the goal is and who the players are. That consideration should also apply to politics within the University.

With that in mind, I am encouraged by unequivocal language in the Charter that stresses the University's apolitical character. I see that steps have also been taken to seek peer review, and considerable emphasis is given to upholding high standards of education. I hope that curriculum development will also reflect the University's multi-cultural character.

Of course discussions concerning education, especially minority education, are never far removed from politics. Often, part of the problem in such discussions is that "multi-culturalism" means different things to different people. I am aware that there have recently been many discussions concerning multi-culturalism in Romania. But I think that more could be done to look at what issues lie behind this rather vague concept. We will hear a number of presentations today that will shed more light on this theme. We have a number of national and international experts with us here today.

Allow me to begin the discussion by outlining some of my views on multi-culturalism. To me, multi-cultural society is a matter of fact. There are very few ethnically homogenous States, and even those have immigrant communities. The traditional concept of nation-State where a distinct national group corresponds to a compact territorial unit seldom exists. The last century has given us plenty of evidence that efforts to forge mono-ethnic States are conflict ridden and doomed to failure.

One must therefore start from the premise that almost all States in the modern world are multi-ethnic or multi-national, made up of different cultures: therefore multi-cultural. Nevertheless, the myth of the nation-State remains strong and majority cultures often seek to impose their identity. In a multi-ethnic environment the imposition of uniculturalism, through assimilation or otherwise, often comes at the expense of human rights and threatens minority identities. This causes friction. In an effort to avoid marginalization, minorities re-double their efforts to preserve and protect their identities. Positions on both sides harden.

How can we avoid or overcome such situations?

The foundation is a strong basis of human rights. Democracy, based on the rule of law, is the fundamental framework for protecting human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Sometimes additional legislation is necessary to protect minority concerns. These rights do not privilege persons belonging to minorities, but act to ensure equal respect for their dignity, in particular their identity. They serve to bring all members of society to at least a minimum level of equality in the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Recognition is also vital. People on all sides of the issue have to acknowledge each other, respect the opinion of their counterparts and recognize the equal rights and value of all individuals.

Such recognition is the basis for dialogue. Through dialogue, all participants can form a greater understanding of each other's interests and concerns. Through dialogue, they can find common ground and reconcile possibly conflicting positions.

Closely related to this point is participation. States should not only protect minority rights, but they should also establish specific arrangements for national minorities. Such arrangements enable minorities to maintain their own identity and characteristics while including them in the overall life of the State. It also means that minorities can participate in decisions that directly affect them. In the liberal democratic tradition, the more inclusive a political system, the more representative it is. I think that the participation of the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania within the Government during the past few years is a good example of the mutual benefits of such inclusiveness.

Accommodating minority interests should not be interpreted as political correctness or pandering to special interest groups. Nor should it be diminished through tokenism or short-term concessions. Instead, there should be a genuine commitment to protect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of

national minorities and create conditions for the promotion of that identity. After all, we live in a world of diversity. In order to be representative, democratic government and administration require structures and modes of societal interaction that satisfy the needs of all members of society. Since very few populations are ethnically homogeneous, it is almost inevitable that every State will have at least one minority. Depending on the size and concentration of the minority or minorities, this can affect questions like use of language, education, culture and participation in government. Fair and practical standards to protect minorities are therefore essential. So too are mechanisms to include minorities in public life. This is not only a question of implementing international standards. It is good governance.

The basic logic of integrating diversity is that everybody's opinion matters and that all members of society are equal. All of us define ourselves in different ways. Because we are all unique, we need to be allowed the freedom to express ourselves and to protect and promote our identities.

Another way of looking at it is what happens if we refuse to integrate diversity. Minorities are not going to go away. Governments may try to assimilate them, but this often causes a backlash. It also impoverishes society. In the same way that bio-diversity enriches our environment, cultural diversity strengthens the fibres of society. Minorities can be ignored or marginalized, but



that merely strengthens their sense of isolation and makes them feel as though the State does not represent their interests.

Therefore, the best way to create a harmonious, prosperous and dynamic society is to realize the merits of pluralism and seek to integrate diversity. When integrating groups within society we must pursue equality, not in terms of sameness, but in terms of meaningful opportunities. This requires an attitude of mutual respect on the part of both the majority and minorities. It also requires a rejection of extreme nationalist views and policies. From open minds come open societies.

To summarize, the keywords, as I have already identified them, are human rights, recognition, dialogue, participation, inclusiveness, and equality of opportunity. The goal must be to find ways for people to express and enjoy their uniqueness while being conscious of, and contributing to, a greater collective, common understanding.

This process is not static. Cultures change, societies evolve, demographics shift. As a result, the configuration of a state, and relations within it, are constantly changing. Because society is dynamic, there can be no “model” of multi-culturalism. One does not achieve multi-culturalism; one adapts one’s societal frameworks to accommodate it. Those frameworks allow pluralism to flourish while maintaining the integrity of the State.

This University is a good example. The decision that you have recently made here to amend the Charter and further develop multi-cultural and multi-lingual education shows the ability and willingness of Babes-Bolyai University to evolve. I hope that opportunities for higher education in minority languages can be expanded at other Universities in Romania, especially in subjects not taught at BBU.

To conclude, emerging out of a century marred by exclusion, intolerance, and the fear of “otherness”, it should be clear to all of us all that integrating diversity is a major imperative of our times. Education, because of its role in socializing and teaching the sense of common culture, has a leading role to play. This University, which has been shaped by the tides of history, can play a leading role in demonstrating how that can be done. You stand at the threshold of new opportunities for this country in an age of globalization, closer European integration and a new era for South-Eastern Europe. You are also the embodiment of the multi-cultural character of this country and play an important role in educating its leaders of tomorrow.

In these times of change, we are all expanding our horizons. Although the world is getting smaller, the extent of its diversity is becoming more apparent. Let us celebrate that diversity, internationally and within this country, and let us ensure that it has the freedom to grow. This means extending the

international perspective of the University, while also making it truly representative and reflective of the cultural pluralism of Romania.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our programme today is very short and the issue under discussion is extensive. We will only scratch the surface. But I hope, at least, that we can all form a greater understanding of the merits of integrating diversity. I look forward to the presentations and discussions.

Thank you for your attention.