



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

Address by  
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to the  
**Ceremony**  
**on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of**  
**the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities**

**[Check against delivery]**

The Hague, The Netherlands – 9 November 2018

*[Welcome Remarks]*

Excellencies,

Dear friends of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities,

Dear colleagues,

This year the High Commissioner on National Minorities turns 25: a quarter of a century of quiet but successful conflict prevention. Just as I was walking down the lobby, I had a quick chance to scan through the photographic panels on display. I spotted pictures pointing to the tragic events in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in 2010 reminding us of the early warning part of my mandate; I saw photos of universities, schools and kindergartens in the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, as well as polling stations in Ukraine and ethnically mixed police teams in Central Asia, demonstrating our long-term engagement with States for the implementation of structural policies aimed at integrating our diverse societies; I scanned through images of meetings and conferences, highlighting our engagement with partners not only within the OSCE family but also outside. Yet these are just snapshots of a much larger wealth of activities: as you all know, most of the work is done behind closed doors and away from cameras. Still, when you visualize it, this quarter of a century looks like a busy and productive period for the Office.

You may recognize some of the faces on pictures in our first row here today. Thank you Rolf Ekeus, Knut Vollebaek and Astrid Thors for gracing us with your presence; and thank you to the family of the late Max van der Stoel, for joining us today. Despite the passing of time, Max van der Stoel continues being a source of inspiration. It is thanks to his wisdom and the collective wisdom of the High Commissioners that have succeeded him that some early warning signs of inter-ethnic tension and crisis have been picked up and early action taken, that inter-ethnic disputes have often been contained, and that States have been encouraged to put in place long-term policies for diversity management. We can be proud of that.

While these are all reasons for celebration, I would caution against any complacency about reduced threats. While conflicts between States over territory or resources have become the exception rather than the rule, new crises and conflicts increasingly feed on ethnic divisions, often compounded by political or religious differences, or economic disparities. So, the

agenda of the High Commissioner has not become any lighter, nor has the world become a safer and more peaceful place. Societies have become more diverse. Integration processes have often progressed at a slow pace and the protection of rights has often failed, leading to the marginalization of certain social groups and, in some cases, to radicalization. The role of multilateral organizations as a repository of international commitments has been weakened, and minorities are often instrumentalized to serve political and national agendas in the wider geopolitical landscape.

With so many issues on the table, this celebration is therefore also an opportunity for joint reflection. How do we effectively put in practice the lessons learned and shared by five successive High Commissioners? How do we ensure that my function continues being relevant and effective?

It is not a question of mandate. The challenges we face confirm that the principles and values enshrined in the role and mandate of the High Commissioner remain as valid and relevant as ever. If anything - and there seems to be consensus within the international community on this point - conflict prevention efforts need to be scaled up. It is rather a question of working methods and tools, which may need to evolve according to changing circumstances. If we want to prevent conflict, we cannot limit ourselves to early warning alone. This has to be accompanied by early action and support to States for the implementation of structural policies and actions aimed at accommodating and managing diversity.

This is where the thematic work of my office, with its own recommendations and guidelines, plays an increasingly important role. This is why we are now focusing on promoting their use as well as on updating, adjusting and further developing this precious toolbox to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose and that it can continue to serve as a useful instrument to help governments meet today's challenges. A number of events have already been held to take stock of progress and reassess their relevance in today's world, and we plan a number of additional initiatives next year.

With these questions in mind, we have asked the successive High Commissioners to reflect on the challenges they encountered during their time in Office. Their reflections, together with an abridged version of a key speech delivered by Max van der Stoep in 2000 in Bonn, are presented in a small book that has been published with the help of the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the Hamburg University especially for this occasion. I would like to

thank Dr. Wolfgang Zellner, Head of CORE, who has joined us here today, for being the catalyst of this effort. I hope you will find the booklet interesting, and that it will give you a further insight into the work of the High Commissioner.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we not only celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, we also mark another milestone: it is 15 years since the very first Max van der Stoel Award was bestowed upon the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies. Since then, seven commendable and inspiring organizations and individuals from across the OSCE region working in a variety of fields – from education, access to justice, and conflict prevention to integration of societies - have become the recipients of this prestigious award. I congratulate all of the previous winners for their commitment and perseverance, and I am looking forward to welcoming on stage the very deserving students of Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have been selected for this year's award. We will give due space to their story later this afternoon.

In the meantime, let me welcome two very distinguished guest speakers, who will address you shortly: the OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger, whom I would like to thank for joining us from Vienna especially for this event; and Erik de Baedts, General Director of the Carnegie Foundation, which manages the wonderful Peace Palace that is hosting us today. They will be followed by our keynote speaker, First Vice President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, who hardly needs an introduction. Frans, it is an honour to have you with us here today. You were first Advisor to Max van der Stoel, whom last time around you defined as “my political father and my mentor”; you then hosted and supported successive High Commissioners in your capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. And also in your current high function in Brussels you have continued to support us. You have been present at all of the key anniversaries of the High Commissioner, showing your close attachment to the Office, and have followed the evolution of its functions. With your excellent knowledge of what lies behind us, you are best placed to help us look ahead: also for this reason I really look forward to your address.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here to celebrate 25 years of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. The post of High Commissioner is a highly personalized function; that means that the mandate resides with the individual, not with the institution. However, fortunately the High Commissioner is not alone. Let me take this opportunity to thank the HCNM team for providing me and my predecessors with the advice, network and specialized knowledge that the High Commissioner needs to carry out the mandate. This celebration is also for you.

To conclude for now, I hope you will enjoy your time with us here in The Hague. Thank you for coming and for your continued support. Let me now give the floor to Amb. Greminger.

*[Opening of Exhibition]*

Thank you Mr. Timmermans for your kind words.

Let me now give you a chance to view the photo exhibition that we have prepared on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This collection of archive photos, many of which have never been published before, will take you through the HCNM's impressive legacy and diverse activities. They have also been condensed in a brochure that you have found on your seat. Because of the nature of my "quiet diplomacy" mandate, I am not often in a position to publicize our activities. It is therefore very refreshing to have an opportunity to showcase some of the work that has been done, and the people involved in it.

Thank you for your attention so far, and enjoy the exhibition. We will reconvene in 40 minutes for the second part of this celebration.