



MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD 2011 OPENING ADDRESS

by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

**Presentation of
the Max van der Stoel Award
to the Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje**

[Check Against Delivery]

The Hague, the Netherlands – 24 October 2011

Mr. Minister,

Dear laureates and members of the jury,

Excellencies, Members of Max van der Stoel's family,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all here in Het Spaansche Hof to the fifth presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award. A special welcome to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Dr. Uri Rosenthal, who will present the prize of 50,000 Euros to the laureates, Mr. Sasho Stojkovski and Mr. Veton Zekoli from the Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje. It is also my pleasure to welcome here the representatives of the umbrella organization, Nansen Dialogue Network, as well as last year's winners of the Max van der Stoel Award, the Integration and Development Centre for Information and Research from Crimea, Ukraine. Allow me also to welcome my predecessor, Ambassador Rolf Ekéus, who is with us this afternoon.

This year's ceremony is special. In April, Max van der Stoel, who gave his name to this Award, passed away. So this is the first time we are gathered for the Award ceremony without his presence.

It is highly symbolic that the Award this year goes to an organization from a country that was very dear to Max van der Stoel. He travelled to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia more than 50 times, and for good reasons. He worked hard to address interethnic tensions that had been brewing since before the country's independence. The early warning he issued in 1999 was meant to alert the OSCE participating States to the potential for interethnic conflict. Two years later, when fighting erupted, he became one of the architects of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which brought an end to the hostilities. He was also a founding father of the South East European University, an institution that was created to accommodate the educational needs of diverse ethnic communities. Even today, many people fondly refer to it as the "Stoel University". I visited this thriving academic institution again last week, and had the pleasure of addressing a group of students who represented different communities of the nation.

I have built on the work Max van der Stoel started in the field of education by assisting the Government in Skopje in developing a policy of integrated education. I am hopeful that this

policy will bring children of different ethnicities closer together. This should help them understand each other better, learn about each other's culture, language and traditions and facilitate interaction. Targeted training of teachers and elaboration of new textbooks should serve to weaken ethnic stereotypes and prejudices, and strengthen respect for diversity.

This is no doubt a long-term project, but then ours is not a business for the impatient. As Max van der Stoel once observed: "It is not difficult to develop an effective policy of conflict prevention. But more work has to be done to convince governments of the need to give priority to such policy."

Education remains undervalued as a tool in conflict prevention, and as a result, it is not prioritized. I often explain to local authorities what may seem obvious: There can be neither economic development nor prosperity, let alone stability, if measures to address interethnic tensions are not designed and implemented. Only a long-term investment in reconciliation, conflict prevention and peace-building can lay the foundations of stability and prosperity for future generations. In these efforts, the education system is the most readily available tool to bring up tolerant, respectful and multilingual citizens who needed to ensure a cohesive multi-ethnic society.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to reward the laureates from the Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje. In its reasoning, the international jury of the Award points to their "outstanding work to promote integrated education and improve co-operation between different ethnic communities". What are these extraordinary and outstanding achievements so highly acknowledged by the jury?

Conflict prevention work cannot easily be quantified. It is not easy to measure the trust between communities, or the level of tolerance and understanding on the school ground, or the desire to listen to the other side and to co-operate. Still, NDC Skopje has achieved tangible results that can withstand scrutiny. A number of schools in several municipalities, governed by different political parties, now work with their model, whereas the tendency

elsewhere in many other parts of the country, unfortunately, is one towards increased ethnic division in schools.

Through patience, commitment and persistence, NDC Skopje has re-established trust between local ethnic communities separated by the violent events of 2001. During my visit last week, I had the opportunity to attend the opening of a new pilot project in the presence of both Deputy Prime Minister Xhaferi, responsible for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and Minister of Education, Kralev. I also met with representatives of four municipalities that have established similar projects in integrated education. I was struck by the support and enthusiasm for these projects, not only from the local authorities, but also from the parents and students themselves.

NDC Skopje's work is one of patience and confidence building. The laureates did not abandon their hopes when faced with scepticism. They did not despair when they lacked the support of local and central authorities. Nor did they give up when nationalists blocked the road to their schools. At these moments, they moved forward more resolutely than ever. Now we have several good examples and models that we may present to both central and local authorities.

Dear Sasho and Veton,

Today you can take pride in having facilitated space where ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and Roma all study together. It is impressive to witness how you have secured local support for your integrated school model from politicians across the political spectrum. Even more significant is the fact that you have made the parents your strongest partners. You succeeded in demonstrating to them that good education is not about ethnicity or language, but rather about quality, respect and co-operation. You brought forward a model that can help consolidate your country, and contribute to its stability.

The path you have chosen is not an easy one. Reconciliation and integration is not a process you can ever consider accomplished. This is a road with many ups and downs, with rewarding moments, but also times full of frustration. Your strength is in your commitment to reconciliation, your belief in integration and in your longing for a peaceful future for the country that you love and call your home. Max van der Stoel once said: "You should not

expect miracles from this sort of work. You have to arm yourself against disappointments and against what you perceive as unreasonable criticism”.

What has been achieved is not a miracle; it is the result of hard work. Nothing will be achieved if we just wait for things to happen. The future is formed by our actions. I hope that the future of your country will be formed by people like you, Sasho and Veton, and your colleagues from the Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje.

Let me congratulate you once again with this Award and invite everyone to watch a short documentary on the work of the Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje.

Thank you.