

**Welcome Address by the Special Representative
of the German Government for the OSCE Chairmanship
Dr. Gernot Erler
at the High-level meeting on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of**

**“The Hague Recommendations
Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities”**

Dear High Commissioner on National Minorities, dear Astrid Thors,
Excellencies, distinguished guests from all over the OSCE-region,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to be here today to address you at the beginning of this important conference. I would like to thank you, Astrid, and the office of the OSCE’s High Commissioner for the excellent organization.

Today’s event commemorates the 20th anniversary of the first recommendations that were issued by an OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

In these recommendations, Max van der Stoep, the first High Commissioner on National Minorities, together with a group of experts addressed basic, yet absolutely essential rights of national minorities: their rights to education.

Education of national minorities has for a long time been a difficult matter in intra-state and inter-state relations. It can be even a hotly debated issue. We know that all too well from concrete and also current experience.

However, we do have tools and guidelines to deal with it:

The work of the High Commissioner in general and the recommendations which should be a continuous source of inspiration for all of us.

Therefore, I am grateful that Astrid Thors has invited all of us to take stock of the implementation of the recommendations, and discuss how their impact can be enhanced.

Allow me to go back in time for a while:

In 1990, the CSCE participating states affirmed in the “Charter of Paris for a New Europe” “that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected.”

Ever since, the protection and promotion of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities have been key elements of the OSCE’s comprehensive concept of security.

The 1990 Copenhagen Document and the Helsinki Document of 1992, adopted by all CSCE participating States, made clear that national minorities must enjoy their fundamental

freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law. All matters related to national minorities have to be solved in a democratic framework and based on the rule of law and an independent judiciary.

The High Commissioner's main role in ensuring the implementation of these commitments is silent diplomacy – from early warning and conflict prevention to conflict management.

As Max van der Stoep, the first High Commissioner once said:

“When you don't hear about a conflict, then I have done my job right!”

It is crucial that participating States understand the nature of the office and working methods of the High Commissioner and have full confidence in the impartial and neutral activities when the Commissioner visits a country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

the world has changed dramatically since the Hague Recommendations were published in 1996. Some crises and developments that we couldn't have imagined in those days are on the front pages today. New challenges to stability and security have arisen since then.

However, some things remain true: national minorities still face great risks, particularly in times of crisis. Today, we should realize more and more how crucial the right treatment of minorities by ensuring equal rights, tolerance, and cross-border dialogue is for preventing conflicts.

And we should realize and openly state what should be an agreed truth:

National minorities in one state must not be abused and instrumentalized by other states to achieve foreign policy goals!

Ladies and gentlemen,

the answer to the question of how to deal with national questions cannot simply be “peaceful co-existence”.

We should do more: we should focus on the unique and enriching contribution national minorities can make to the societies in which they live, as well as to their kin state.

Valuable lessons can be learnt from the experiences that members of national minorities themselves have about integration and building bridges.

It is this perspective that inspired us, the German Chairmanship of the OSCE, to choose “national minorities” as one of our priorities for 2016 – in reaction to current challenges in the OSCE region, but also to honor the vision of the Hague recommendations and to translate this vision into reality.

As Germans, we can consider ourselves lucky to have such positive experiences with national minorities building bridges, as for example between Germany and Denmark in recent decades.

But of course these relations haven't always been friendly. We had painful experiences. In 1864, we fought a war. It took almost 100 years, until our perspectives on minorities changed. After the crimes and atrocities of the Third Reich, protection of national minorities and their

empowerment only slowly became cornerstones of the post-war international order and reconciliation – also between Denmark and Germany.

It was the double-declaration of Bonn and Kopenhagen in 1955 which initiated this turn. It stated, what seems so obvious for us today:

- that the members of these communities have the same rights as their fellow citizens,
- that they are protected by the constitution and the rule of law,
- that their freedom of expression, of assembly etc. should be in no way restricted and
- that they themselves can decide whether they feel more Danish or German or both of it.

Safeguarded by the guarantees of these documents the relationship between our states transformed and so did the relationship between the national minority and the majority population.

This great achievement and success for peace and stability in Europe rested on a threefold approach:

- the commitment of the nation-states to protect and if necessary promote national minorities within their borders and to refrain from any kind of discrimination;
- the commitment of neighbouring countries to refrain from any kind of political instrumentalization or intrusion into the internal affairs of other states camouflaged as “protection of minorities”;
- the readiness of minority communities themselves to use the possibilities for participation and for preserving their identities given to them to become active and integral parts of the countries they live in.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

we would like to invite other participating States to share their best practices in that respect and look at examples of national minorities in border regions as a model for improvement and enhancement of neighborly relations.

Therefore, I am very happy that the Office of the High Commissioner, in cooperation with researchers from the European Centre for Minority Issues in Flensburg (ECMI), the European Academy (EURAC) in Bozen/Bolzano as well as independent researchers are conducting a study that will aim to highlight good practices of bridge building in the OSCE area.

We are very much looking forward to the first interim results, which will hopefully be presented in Vienna on 7 & 8 July during a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) devoted to national minorities and their bridge-building potential.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

on the 23rd of April, it will be 5 years since Max van der Stoel passed away. His legacy, however, is not forgotten, neither in the OSCE nor outside.

Max van der Stoel shaped the institution of the High Commissioner and laid the foundations of its future work. His successors Rolf Ekéus, Knut Vollebaek, and Astrid Thors have followed in his footsteps.

Especially in these times, when we hear all too much about conflicts and failures and not so much about the silent successes, I want to thank them for their tireless efforts in silent diplomacy!

And I would like to remind all of us that it is up to us, the participating States of the OSCE, to support the work of the High Commissioner and to work jointly towards the fulfillment of the vision of the Charter of Paris, that all “persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.”

This is the path we should follow.

I wish you all a substantial and inspiring conference.

Thank you.