



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

address by

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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

2020 Max van der Stoep Award Ceremony

[Check against delivery]

The Hague, the Netherlands – 19 November 2021

Dear Minister,

Dear Laureates and Jury Members,

Dear family members and friends of the late Max van der Stoel

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to warmly welcome all of you to the ninth biennial Max van der Stoel Award. Every two years, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Government of the Netherlands organize the Max van der Stoel Award ceremony, in recognition of the extraordinary work of an individual or an institution dedicated to improving the position of national minorities in the OSCE region.

I am honoured to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands His Excellency Ben Knapen, who will present the prize to the 2020 winner, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre from Dublin, Ireland, represented here today by Dr. Anastasia Crickley and Mr. Martin Collins. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to the Government of The Netherlands for funding the prize as well as our ceremony today. The winners of the 2020 Max van der Stoel Award have travelled from Ireland to accept the Award and share their story with us. And of course the impact of the work of our winners would not be possible without the excellent co-operation of the Irish Government. Therefore, I would like to especially commend the Government of Ireland for their commitment and support to building a cohesive, strong and resilient society. I want to also acknowledge the presence of four former High Commissioners at our ceremony today, the distinguished Rolf Ekeus, Knut Vollebaek, Astrid Thors and Lamberto Zannier. Finally, I would like to thank the team of the Peace Palace for hosting our event despite the ongoing pandemic-related limitations that continue to impact our daily lives and activities.

In 2020, our distinguished jury, composed of eminent persons in the field of national minority rights and conflict prevention, and chaired by former High Commissioner Lamberto Zannier, unanimously selected Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre as the winner of the 2020 Max van der Stoel Award. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to four outgoing members of our jury, in particular Barbara Oomen, Alexander Verkhovsky, Daniel Serwer and Rainer Hofmann, who have served for three terms. At the same time, I want to welcome our new jury member Petra Roter and reiterate that I look forward to working with her in the years to come.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Pavee Point, with its unique grassroots efforts, systemic work and tailored approach to the needs of their community, stood out among the nominees. I believe the winner's method of work embodies what my eminent predecessor and the first High Commissioner on National Minorities Max van der Stoel valued as a most effective way to improving the position of national minorities, which is to allow them to empower themselves so they take ownership of actions that bring about change. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre serves as an outstanding example of an organization that has done exactly this: empower national minorities so that they themselves can become the driving force for positive change.

Pavee Point has displayed continuous commitment to integration with respect for diversity and has furthered the interests of Traveller and Roma communities, showing that unity and solidarity can triumph over division and discrimination. Roma and Traveller communities have experienced a long history of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This has led to further inequalities, exclusion and cycles of poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath could have further exacerbated the already existing vulnerabilities of Roma and Traveller communities. At the height of the pandemic, Pavee Point worked in partnership with a range of government agencies and departments, the national police service, and other Traveller organizations on projects to ensure that support and protection was provided to the Roma and Traveller communities. During the pandemic, their efforts yielded key achievements: Travellers and Roma were named as vulnerable groups, identified as priority groups for COVID-19 testing and vaccination, were protected under a national ban on Traveller evictions during lockdown, received culturally appropriate COVID-19 health education materials and support from healthcare workers from their communities, and much more.

To understand what has made this organization so effective and unique, we must look into its past and its founding principles. Since its inception in 1985, the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has been working toward building a bridge between Roma and Irish Traveller communities and the rest of Irish society. This organization has been celebrating the cultures and traditions of both communities and advocating for their empowerment and participation in society at the regional, national and international levels. The organization's success lies in empowering Traveller and Roma communities and focusing integration initiatives on two important areas: education and healthcare.

Pavee Point successfully lobbied the authorities of Ireland to extend official legal recognition for the Traveller community as a minority ethnic group in March 2017. I think this speaks volumes, not only to the effectiveness of the organization, but also to the will of the Irish authorities to recognize the value of multiculturalism.

It is also not the first time that a grassroots Roma organization has won this Award. Fourteen years ago, in 2007, the Max van der Stoep Award was presented to the European Roma Rights Centre from Hungary. The rights of Travellers, and Roma and Sinti will continue to remain a priority for the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and, indeed, for the international community as a whole.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, in an increasingly divided world, we seek wisdom in words and actions directing us to build unity, spearhead community building and spread cohesion among all members of society, including minorities. Over 100 years ago, poet and philosopher from Kazakhstan Abai Kunanbaiuly said: “Адамзаттың бәрін сүй бауырым деп,” which means, “Love all of humanity like your own kin.” For me, these words reflect Pavee Point’s efforts to, first and foremost, recognize our common humanity and kinship with Roma and Travellers. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre makes concentrated efforts towards unifying Irish society and has laid the foundations for the peaceful coexistence of people in a stable and secure environment for years to come.

I hope that you — distinguished participants — your nations and international and civic organizations, much like the international jury of the 2020 Max van der Stoep Award, will draw inspiration from the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre. I thank all of you for gathering here today to recognize and celebrate their remarkable achievement.

I would like to conclude my statement with an old Irish blessing:

“May the roof above us never fall in.
And may the friends gathered below it never fall out.”

Thank you.