



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

Opening Address

by

Marek Szczygiel

Director and Officer-in-Charge

Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

at the

MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD CEREMONY 2024

[Check against delivery]

The Hague, 6 November 2024

*Your Excellency Paul van den Ijssel, Ambassador for International Organisations at the Netherlands
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Excellencies,
Representatives of the Diplomatic Community,
Guests of honour from Natur og Ungdom,
Honourable Members of the Jury,
Esteemed colleagues,
And distinguished participants.*

It is a great honour and privilege to welcome you to this 11th Max van der Stoel Award Ceremony in my capacity as Director and Officer-in-Charge of the office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

I would like to begin by extending a warm welcome to His Excellency Paul van den Ijssel, Ambassador for International Organisations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and thank him for his presence here today. Indeed, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that established and generously funds this biennial award.

Let me also extend a special greeting to representatives of the Republic of Malta, which currently holds the OSCE Chairpersonship: His Excellency Jeffrey Curmi, Ambassador of Malta to the Netherlands, and Elizabeth Abela Hampel, Chair Liaison at the office of the OSCE Secretary General in Vienna. Welcome, as well, to representatives of two OSCE institutions joining us today, the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

In addition, it is a great pleasure to welcome representatives of the Kingdom of Norway, as the country of today's award recipients. His Excellency Erling Rimestad, Ambassador of Norway to the Netherlands, and Her Excellency Ellen Svendsen, Ambassador of Norway to the OSCE.

To the previous High Commissioners who are in attendance, their Excellencies Knut Vollebæk, Astrid Thors, Lamberto Zannier and Kairat Abdrakhmanov, I welcome you back to The Hague. I would like to express our gratitude for your contributions to the HCNM institution and your support for the promotion of this Award. I also want to acknowledge Ambassador Rolf Ekéus, who is unable to join us today. Additionally, I would like to welcome the members of the Jury of this Award, as well as the members of the Van der Stoel family who honour us with their presence today.

We are fortunate to have three previous recipients of the Max van der Stoel Award with us today, representing the Social Justice Center from Georgia, the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre from Ireland, and the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research from Cyprus. Last but not least, let me extend a warm welcome to our special guests of honour, Gytis Blaževičius and Elisabeth Regine Myrland, who represent Natur og Ungdom, the recipient organization of this year's Award.

The Award that is bestowed today is named in honour of the very first High Commissioner, who served in that capacity from 1992 to 2001. When he assumed those duties, Max van der Stoel had already had an extraordinary and distinguished career as a Dutch politician and international diplomat, in addition to having experienced the horrors of the Second World War. It is thanks to him that the institution of the HCNM developed impactful practices and a well-regarded reputation that continue to be a part of his enduring legacy. His name is not only commemorated by the Award that we confer today, but also by a university library, several parks, a research institute and a foundation, as well as a separate human rights award – all of which bear his name. During his lifetime, he received distinctions and State awards from no fewer than 15 countries, as well as several international recognitions for promoting freedom and peace. As this year marks the 100th anniversary since his birth, I would like to take this opportunity to commemorate his life and his legacy.

In commemorating Max van der Stoel, we must first recognize the essential role of the Netherlands. Not only was the first High Commissioner on National Minorities *from* the Netherlands, but the Government of the Netherlands also spearheaded the creation of the position and, for 30 years, has graciously provided office space here in The Hague. In addition, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has so generously created and funded the Max van der Stoel Award. Ambassador Paul van den Ijssel, I would like to express my gratitude on behalf of the HCNM family and everyone committed to conflict prevention. We thank you and the Government of the Netherlands for your vision and support for the office of the High Commissioner and for this Award.

The Max van der Stoel Award does not simply look to the past in commemorating the individual, but also looks toward the future by actively continuing his legacy. This Award carries on Van der Stoel's commitment to recognizing, and standing up for, those who contribute to protecting human and minority rights. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, he attended the 1975 inter-governmental conference at which the Helsinki Final Act was agreed and he took very seriously the human dimension commitments contained in that document. A prominent example of his principled approach was when, as a Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1977, he visited Czechoslovakia. While in Prague, he chose to also meet with one of the leaders of Charter 77, a dissident movement that had called upon the communist

regime to implement the human rights obligations of the Helsinki Decalogue. Van der Stoel was the first Western diplomat to meet with the movement and to provide moral support in the face of severe repression. As a result, the authorities cancelled all meetings with Van der Stoel, but his recognition and support has been cited by Charter 77 participants as a boost of morale in carrying forward their activities, which 12 years later culminated in a peaceful transition as part of the democratic wave that spread throughout Europe.

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Esteemed colleagues,

Van der Stoel carried this boldness and conviction into his position as High Commissioner. Through his quiet diplomacy, he never shied away from his principled approach as a path toward preventing conflicts and establishing sustainable peace. He observed a link between the enjoyment of human rights and the prevention of conflict.¹ Violations of human rights, he said, and the resulting injustice cause tensions, which in turn lead to conflict. On the other hand, he continued, universal enjoyment of human rights enables lasting freedom, justice and peace.² His application of these OSCE values of human rights, democracy and rule of law – and insistence that they are indivisible, non-negotiable and universal – did not always make him friends. However, rather than following the path of political correctness, Van der Stoel was resolute that he would not be performing his role as High Commissioner properly if no one objected to his activities.³

This Award in Van der Stoel's name carries on his legacy of elevating and supporting independent voices and movements, even when their activities may be politically contentious. The selection of Award recipients is carried out by an independent jury of distinguished experts. I would therefore like to thank and recognize the dedication of each past and present Jury member towards this Award and the role that they have played in perpetuating the legacy of Max van der Stoel.

The Award is presented for “outstanding achievement in improving the position of national minorities” and each Jury decision has fulfilled this mandate in its own way, based on a thorough evaluation of the particular activities and effect of the Award nominees. These decisions have echoed the approach of Max van der Stoel by addressing complex issues at an early stage. For example, in 2005 the recipient

¹ Democracy and Human Rights: On the Work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the OSCE (Speech at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, 17 March 1997).

² We Only Fully Realize the Full Significance of Human Rights When We Have Lost Them (Speech in Prague, Czech Republic, 3 February 1993).

³ Speech to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (Stockholm, Sweden, 5 July 1996).

was International Memorial from the Russian Federation for its work to bravely raise awareness of injustice and violations of human rights and to build trust between different ethnic groups. Nearly two decades later, following its forced dissolution and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the same organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Another example was the 2018 award to the high school students from Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina for resisting a decision by the municipal authorities to establish an ethnically segregated school. When receiving the Award, one of the students emphasized that the "moral satisfaction of every student" was bolstered by the Jury's recognition. These and other Award decisions by the Jury have not only raised awareness about the important work carried out by the recipients, but have provided moral support and inspiration to the individuals involved.

Our Award recipient today, Natur og Ungdom, is another broad-minded selection by the Jury. It is not a national minority organization, as such, but an environmental and youth organization. However, it has become a unifying bridge between majority and minority communities on a matter of local, domestic and global importance. It has harnessed solidarity among youth to address climate change and other environmental matters. I wholeheartedly congratulate all members of Natur og Ungdom and hope that it can be an inspiration to others.

Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues and guests,

Let me conclude by saying that this event provides us with an opportunity to commemorate Max van der Stoel, the great statesman, diplomat, peacemaker, advocate and humanitarian. May this Award Ceremony in his name inspire each of us to strengthen our efforts to achieve the goals which he relentlessly worked toward his entire life. We can promote the legacy of Max van der Stoel by making our own to a sustainable and just peace in our communities, in our States, and in the world.

Once again, welcome to this 2024 Max van der Stoel Award Ceremony!

Thank you.