



## High Commissioner on National Minorities

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**"The price of freedom and democracy"  
Address by Max van der Stoel, CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities  
Strasbourg, 21 October 1994**

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fifty years ago, the defeat of national socialism meant the restoration of freedom and democracy in Western Europe. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe had to wait for almost a half-century before communism collapsed and they, too, could embark on the same road. Freedom and democracy now seem to reign in all of Europe.

However, we should recognise that freedom is not self-evident and that it is dangerous to view it with complacency as a quiet possession. On the contrary, I would say: It needs to be won again every day, exacting its daily price from us, who have the duty to give form and substance to freedom and to protect and develop it.

History teaches us that freedom is often threatened, and if we look around us we can see that even today it is a scarce item. The number of truly democratic states is distressingly small; the number of states in which repression and violations of human rights a daily phenomenon is worryingly great.

According to an old proverb, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. However, which substance do we give to the term 'vigilance'? It is certainly a wider term than the armed preparedness with which we aim to defend our

independence and freedom in times of external threats. Continuous vigilance is also called for in order to keep our democratic institutions healthy and maintain the rule of law in our states. Moreover, this vigilance also requires the recognition that even a firmly rooted democratic system may be endangered when authoritarian tendencies elsewhere in Europe gain the upper hand. In other words: in an ever-more interdependent world, the triumph of democracy elsewhere is an additional defence of democracy in our own countries. Conversely, every success of authoritarian forces it is not just a loss to the citizens of the state concerned but will have its negative consequences for the rest of us as well.

Bitter experience shows that authoritarian regimes are always a threat to peace and security. A regime that does not obey the rule of law with regard to its own population will not obey the international norms on non-aggression and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Conversely, governments of democratic states as a rule do feel themselves bound by rules of law, national and international, and are much more inclined to look for compromises rather than coercion and violence. This unmistakable link between safeguarding democratic freedoms on the one hand and the maintenance of peace and security on the other is at the heart of the work being done by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the CSCE.

Mr. Chairman,

Pluralist democracy is the essential foundation on which our societies are built and which provides the basic values and guidelines with which to order our relations, both at the national and the international levels. However, this foundation is being eroded by developments all over Europe.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the euphoric expectations which reigned only a few years ago after communism had collapsed have disappeared in the face of a grim reality. Efforts to introduce concurrently both incisive economic reforms and the foundations for a democratic system are confronted with great difficulties. In some instances, the resulting disappointment threatens to turn into growing doubts about the value of democracy itself. Social cleavages become more apparent, and groups tend to perceive other groups as alien and sometimes as threats.

An accompanying, even more worrisome phenomenon is the growth of a virulent and dangerous kind of nationalism in many places in Europe, a nationalism which is characterised by intolerance and a misplaced sense of superiority over others. It poses a deadly challenge to democracy and the internal peace within countries and to international peace in

Europe.

Discrimination of members of weak groups becomes a regular phenomenon, sometimes taking extreme and even xenophobic forms. Migrant workers, Roma and -- once again -- Jews are most often at the receiving end of such actions. I feel I must highlight the particularly grave issue of the increasing number of attacks against foreigners, often racially motivated. Such attacks cause direct, physical harm -- and sometimes even death to the victims.

I would stress that it is not only in the formerly communist countries that we witness such phenomena. In the democracies of Western Europe, too, discrimination, xenophobia and anti-foreigner violence are on the rise.

Under such circumstances, governments are called upon to do their utmost to counter such tendencies. At its meeting in Rome in December 1993, the CSCE Council of Ministers declared that aggressive nationalism, racism, chauvinism, xenophobia and anti-semitism create tensions within and between states. In the framework of the United Nations as well as that of the CSCE, states have adopted binding commitments which oblige them to insure individuals adequate protection against discrimination on racial, ethnic and religious grounds, including against acts of violence.

Mr. Chairman,

This problem is not purely a legal one. Certainly a proper legal framework is necessary for protecting persons against discrimination and racially motivated attacks. There must, however, also be clear political will -- from the highest to the lowest levels of the state structure -- to combat these phenomena. Backed by an unequivocal public commitment from officials at all levels, such an approach involves a combination of measures. In its policies, the state itself should scrupulously observe non-discrimination. In all sectors of society, efforts should be made to promote greater mutual understanding and acceptance between different groups through education and other means. Police and local authorities must be given proper training for dealing with situations of discrimination and racially motivated violence. Lawyers, prosecutors, and court officials must be given full support in investigating and trying cases against suspected assailants promptly and fairly.

Preventing racially motivated violence is of course far better than responding to its aftermath. Allow me to stress, however, that in cases when prevention was not possible, the only remedy for such violence is a prompt and thorough investigation of the causes of the attack and a prompt and fair trial of suspected wrongdoers. This course of action will

bring justice to the victims and help restore popular and international confidence in the public authorities.

Obviously, the burden of implementing the measures described before is first and foremost the responsibility of each individual government itself. Nevertheless, some governments may not be in a position to solve such issues on their own, especially in the light of the economic difficulties facing them. Other states and international organisations must then be prepared to give concrete support. One should of course not underestimate the burden of such a task. However, such investments are well worth making. After all, the struggle for democracy and freedom is indivisible.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman