



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Remarks of the OSCE Secretary General
On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of
The High Commissioner on National Minorities

The Hague, 7 March 2013

Your Majesty,
Dear Knut,
Dear Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here in The Hague today to celebrate a treasured part of our Organization and a unique institution in its own right.

Let me point out at the very start that the OSCE is defined by the support and political engagement of its participating States. The Netherlands has been exemplary in this regard. In 1992 it was a Dutch proposal that led to the creation of the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. We have for the past twenty years experienced Dutch generosity and hospitality by hosting the High Commissioner here in The Hague. The premises that have been provided are not only representative, but enabling, by their very atmosphere, to form that team spirit a small but effective institution like this needs. I would like to sincerely thank our Dutch friends for their steadfast support. And I may add that it was the

former Dutch Foreign Minister, the late Max van der Stoel, who through his ground-breaking work and steadfast determination laid the foundation and set the bar high for the continued success of this institution. His legacy to this office is tremendous. Few offices, such as this one, are so profoundly defined by the personality of the leader. And the OSCE has been fortunate to have exceptionally strong High Commissioners. I am glad to see here today my good friend Rolf Ekens, together with Knut Vollebaek.

Marking the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities is also a good opportunity to reflect on the concept of preventive diplomacy as a core function of maintaining peace and security.

The work of the High Commissioners has provided, since the creation of the Office, a great contribution to the OSCE efforts in preventive diplomacy: the constant engagement in the Baltic region, the great attention to inter-ethnic education in South Eastern Europe, the work on minorities in the South Caucasus and inter-ethnic disputes in Central Asia, are examples of initiatives essential in their own right and an important complement to the activities of our field operations.

As has often been cited, the work of the High Commissioner is not that of “CNN-type” Diplomacy. The many successes are rarely brought to the attention of the media or the public at large. But this is the nature of conflict prevention, which often relies on quiet, discrete diplomacy. This is key to working effectively in areas of tremendous political sensitivity.

Timing, political judgment and courage of convictions are key in this regard. The High Commissioner is tasked to preview inter-ethnic tensions from developing into conflicts at the earliest possible stage. He is mandated to provide early warning when he concludes that there is a prima facie risk of potential conflict. In the end, it is up to him to judge where and how he should engage. This independence, and the trust that the participating States have placed in this Institution, is what allows the High Commissioner to be truly effective.

I think the recipe used by the three successive High Commissioners – impartiality, confidentiality and co-operation – will remain a recipe for success also for the future. I have seen for myself that this work makes a difference in the lives of real people.

These considerations bring a special significance to our gathering today. As we celebrate the work of the Office, we must also acknowledge the key contribution by all those OSCE staff who have dedicated their professional endeavours here during the past 20 years.

The OSCE in general and the HCNM in particular has turned limited resources into tangible results. As we take our Organization forward to meet the challenges of tomorrow, we must protect what makes us unique. The journey of the OSCE has taken us far, but we can come much farther still, if we value and protect those key institutions that can, still today, make a difference.