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

at the

2026 Max van der Stoel Award Ceremony

[Check against delivery]

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Your Excellency, Dutch Ambassador for International Organisations Erik Weststrate,
Excellencies, Representatives of the Diplomatic Community,
Guests of honour from Education for the 21st Century,
Honourable Members of the Jury,
Members of the Van der Stoel family,
Esteemed colleagues,
And distinguished guests,

It is my privilege as Chair of the Jury of the 2026 Max van der Stoel Award to welcome you. Allow me to first thank the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs for establishing this award and sponsoring this ceremony. This award serves as an important means of recognizing and supporting outstanding efforts to promote the position of national minorities in the OSCE participating States.

Max van der Stoel served as the High Commissioner on National Minorities for nearly ten years, beginning in 1993, during a period of transition and conflict in the OSCE area. Prior to this position, he had a distinguished career as a Dutch politician and international diplomat with a reputation for boldly defending democratic and human rights principles. He approached his role as High Commissioner with creativity and imagination to prevent conflict and promote sustainable peace, emphasizing the need to engage at the earliest possible stage to address the root causes of tensions.

One of the root causes of tension that Max van der Stoel identified is the way that young people are educated. School curricula and teaching methods can either build societal resilience against conflict or entrench and enflame divisions that increase conflict potential. Furthermore, he interpreted his “earliest possible

stage" mandate as extending to the entirety of a young person's education, making it a generational engagement. In 1996, van der Stoel published this institution's first set of practical recommendations to the OSCE participating States on the topic of the education rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Earlier this year, we supplemented that document with the 11th set of recommendations and guidelines: *The Siena Recommendations on Contested Histories and National Minorities*. These Recommendations cover many issues affected by contestations over memories and interpretations of history, including the use of public spaces to commemorate the past. An entire section is devoted to history education, and the ways in which historical narratives are dealt with in the classroom.

It is, therefore, fitting to Max van der Stoel's legacy that the 2026 Max van der Stoel Award is presented today to Education for the 21st Century from Serbia in recognition of its work to modernize education, providing young people with the skills to better understand the complexities of the local, regional and global contexts in which they live. Education for the 21st Century promotes the teaching of history as a process of critical reflection so that students can appreciate the diverse perspectives and historical narratives that exist in a multicultural society. The international jury noted the way in which Education for the 21st Century raises the visibility of national minorities, promotes inclusive historical narratives, and supports social cohesion across the region. The jury also specifically recognized the efforts of the organization's founder and director, Lidija Županić Šuica.

Excellencies and esteemed colleagues,

The way that young people are educated plays a crucial role in preventing conflict and fostering mutual understanding in the long term. Schools are one of the key

places where relations between majority and minority communities are shaped. They can bring young people together, but they can also reproduce divisions that exist in society. Tolerance and respect are learned skills that enable a society to reconcile from the past and even to overcome the trauma of atrocities. Likewise, fear and hatred are learned traits that perpetuate divisions within and between societies. Education can either build bridges or widen gaps between societies and States. This is especially the case in South-Eastern Europe, where the legacy of war continues to affect both intra- and inter-State relations. Put simply: education can either be a conduit or an obstacle to sustainable peace.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the teaching of history. In societies and regions that have experienced inter-community conflict, competing historical narratives often remain deeply embedded long after violence has ended. These differences in memory are not, in themselves, necessarily a problem. Plural societies and diverse regions will naturally encompass different perspectives of the past. The challenge arises when those perspectives become fixed, mutually exclusive narratives.

This is where educational approaches become relevant to conflict prevention. The question is not only: “what history should we teach?”; it is also: “how should we teach history?” Education for the 21st Century suggests, and I agree, that one of the most important answers to this question is to teach young people how to critically think about, examine and discuss the past.

A student—and a future adult citizen—should have the ability to encounter different accounts of an event and consider what evidence supports each account, who produced it, what perspectives are represented and which are missing; what distinguishes an established fact from an interpretation; and why people who experienced the same events may remember them differently. The crucial skill is

reaching one's own informed conclusions, while respecting the opinions of others.

This is particularly important in societies in which there may have been conflict or tensions. Young people do not enter the classroom as blank pages, but arrive with stories from their families, communities, media and, increasingly, from social media. Those stories may reflect genuine experiences of suffering or injustice, but they may also contain simplifications, omissions or inherited prejudices. Education towards sustainable peace should teach young people to examine the stories that have been passed down to them, to ask questions, to look for evidence, to listen to people whose experiences differ from their own, and, most importantly, to understand that acknowledging another perspective does not require abandoning their own.

At the same time, recognizing the experiences and suffering of others does not require the creation of a false equivalence between all actions and experiences. It is important to recognize that final judgments of international courts and tribunals provide an independent factual determination of atrocities committed by individuals. They are not simply one among many possible interpretations, but findings of fact that protect the dignity of victims from political interests. Recognition that a member of one's own community committed violations is neither collective community guilt nor the diminishing of violations that may have been committed against one's own community. In fact, the process of confronting historical narratives can lead to an understanding of the suffering caused by individual perpetrators and open the door to refraining from glorifying their memory.

Of course, such an educational approach places significant demands on teachers and can only be realized when they are provided with appropriate training and

support. Education for the 21st Century does this through workshops and trainings. It has also built an important network for teachers to share their pedagogic knowledge with each other.

Critical approaches to history also require supportive curricula and teaching materials. Education for the 21st Century has formulated methods based on the experience and practice of its members. In doing so, it has taken significant steps to include national minority contributions and narratives and to promote knowledge that challenges preconceptions about national minorities.

Distinguished colleagues and guests,

We cannot change the past, but we have an obligation to try to teach future generations how to avoid repeating the same mistakes and, in so doing, break the cycle of violence and pave the way for peace.

The members of Education for the 21st Century have dedicated their teaching careers to these endeavours. Lidija Županić Šuica and her colleagues continue to teach young people, to convey to them methods to understand a complex world, and to inspire the next generation. It is for this reason that the work of Education for the 21st Century is recognized with the 2026 Max van der Stoel Award.

We will now watch a short film about the work of Education for the 21st Century.