

Speech: Max van der Stoel Award 2024

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Dear excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Today, I am speaking on behalf of the Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is not able to be here today, due to travel abroad. First, I would like to express my appreciation to Mikkel Gaup for the beautiful introduction song during the ceremony, thank you!

We are gathered here to honour the recipients of the 2024 Max van der Stoel Award: Natur og Ungdom, Young Friends of the Earth Norway.

Their work on improving the position of Sàmi youth is extraordinary. Let me start with a meaningful example of their work. It illustrates that co-operation is not always friction free, but if done correctly creates remarkable solutions. The Norwegian Government was planning to construct wind farms in order to generate green energy. However, this was planned in the area of traditional reindeer grazing lands of the Sàmi. Natur og Ungdom organized peaceful actions to call upon the government to honour Sàmi minority rights. The Government in response set up a consultation system with Sàmi youth to find solutions together to the green energy problem while respecting minority rights. The willingness of the Norwegian Government to take responsibility for its actions, and co-operate and find an inclusive solution, should be praised – this is how governments should react when faced with a minority issue. But moreover, this is an example of the effectiveness of collaborative and purpose-driven activism by Natur og Ungdom and how this can bring about meaningful dialogue and change.

Civil society organizations, such as Natur og Ungdom, are instrumental in amplifying voices for the rights of minorities and advocating for change. Although not always easy for governments to accept, civil society fulfils an essential role in advancing human rights and holding authorities accountable for their conduct. The role of civil society is not just useful, it is fundamental to the functioning of respectful societies that uphold human dignity. And when governments and civil society work together in Europe, this has a direct effect on stability and security in the region.

The Netherlands feels strongly about the need to protect the rights of national minorities. As we look around the world today, we see conflicts increasingly defined by questions of identity and belonging. Often, these conflicts are fuelled by the mistreatment or perceived marginalization of minority groups, leading to deep seated tensions that can spiral into violence.

Whether within a nation or between nations, one thing remains clear: the protection of minority rights is not just a moral obligation, it is essential for durable peace. Inclusivity and respect for diversity are the pillars on which conflict prevention and long-term stability rest.

This is where the essential work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities comes into focus. It is a role that seeks to bridge divides, to foster understanding, and to ensure that no group is left behind. By addressing the root causes of societal tensions, particularly those based on ethnicity or cultural identity, the High Commissioner helps to prevent the kind of instability that can lead to conflict on a diplomatic level. This work is not just about preventing war. It is about building societies where all people can live with dignity and respect.

The Max van der Stoel Award is named after the first High Commissioner on National Minorities and our former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs. Van der Stoel made human rights a centrepiece of our foreign policy. As we mark the 100th anniversary of his birth this year, we are reminded of his lifelong commitment to justice, equality and human rights. The younger years of Van der Stoel were formative for his later commitment to human rights, as is the case for many human right defenders. He was struck by societal and economic differences post World War II in his hometown and saw the legacy of the destruction and human suffering by Nazism and Communism in the 20th century. In this context, he was motivated to bring about change in society during his lifelong career. As the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, he was a driver behind the link of protecting the rights of national minorities and conflict prevention. His work laid the groundwork for peace by addressing the tensions that too often divide societies. His legacy is an unwavering commitment to human dignity. To phrase Max van der Stoel: *If we devote our attention only to the wars of today, we will have reasons to mourn again tomorrow.* Therefore, we should take the application of human rights seriously, everywhere and for everyone.

This commitment reflects our strong belief in the essential role that civil society plays in protecting national minorities and supporting human rights. We

recognize that civil society organizations, like Natur og Ungdom, amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard. Their work exemplifies how civil society serves as a cornerstone for inclusivity and justice, standing alongside institutions like the High Commissioner. We honour the role of the High Commissioner in addressing the root causes of ethnic and cultural tensions to prevent conflict and build more resilient societies.

The Netherlands has proudly sponsored the Max van der Stoel Award since 2003. This Award is a powerful reminder of the importance of this mission. It urges us to go beyond mere tolerance and to embrace diversity as a strength. In recognizing those who champion the rights of minorities, the Max van der Stoel Award affirms the vital role that civil society plays in making human rights a lived reality for all.

This brings us back to our esteemed recipients of the 2024 Max van der Stoel Award: Natur og Ungdom. The work of Natur og Ungdom has not only helped safeguard Sámi traditions and culture but has also raised awareness of the vital role the Sámi play in preserving Norway's natural environment. Their advocacy is a reminder that the protection of cultural heritage and environmental stewardship are interconnected. In protecting the rights of minorities, we protect our shared future.

So, it is with great pride and admiration that I congratulate Natur og Ungdom for their tireless efforts and remarkable achievements. Their work stands as an inspiring example of what can be accomplished when we recognize the strength in diversity. This work demands patience and resilience, and I wholeheartedly applaud Natur og Ungdom for it.

Let's no longer wait. I would like to invite the winners of the Max van der Stoel Award on the stage. Please welcome Elisabeth Myrland and Gytis Blaževičius. Let's give them a big hand.

Thank you.