



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

to the

2022 Max van der Stoep Award Ceremony

[Check against delivery]

The Hague, the Netherlands – 24 November 2022

Dear Minister,

Dear Laureates and Jury Members,

Dear family members and friends of the late Max van der Stoel,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to warmly welcome all of you to the tenth ceremony of the Max van der Stoel Award.

Every two years, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Government of the Netherlands organize the Max van der Stoel Award to recognize the extraordinary work of an individual or an institution dedicated to improving the position of national minorities in the OSCE region.

This year is a special year, as we not only celebrate our tenth winner, but we also acknowledge the work and journey of all previous nine winners of the Max van der Stoel Award.

Although many of our past winners could not join us here today, I am glad to see that some have made it to The Hague. We are happy to have you with us and those that were not able to be here with us, I hope are following us online.

In 2022, our distinguished jury unanimously selected the Social Justice Center as the winner of the 2022 Max van der Stoel Award in recognition of their work to protect and promote human rights, including minority rights, in Georgia by supporting and empowering vulnerable groups in society. The Jury Justification this year notes that SJC's work is based on four pillars: equality, solidarity, inclusion and participation. These ideals are also the cornerstones that support the activities of my office.

Next, in our ceremony, I would like to recognize some of our notable guests today. I am honoured to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands Wopke Hoekstra who will present the prize to our winners – the Social Justice Center.

They are represented by Tamta Mikeladze, Director of the Equality Policy Programme; Kamran Mammadli, Researcher; and Salome Achba, Communication Assistant at the organization.

Tamta, Kamran and Salome have travelled from Tbilisi to share their story with us and we are happy to have them with us.

I want to note that the work of our winners was realized through active co-operation and engagement with the authorities of Georgia, which I had the privilege of visiting in April this year. I witnessed Georgia's remarkable progress and extraordinary potential during my visit.

Therefore, I would like to recognize the Government of Georgia for their commitment and support of civil society actors working toward building a cohesive, strong and resilient society.

Taking this opportunity, I welcome the Ambassador of Georgia to the Netherlands, His Excellency David Solomonias, who has joined us today.

Last, but not least, I would also like to extend a very special welcome to a friend of my institution. This person has served the office of the High Commissioner in various capacities over the past decades, starting as an intern and rising to the position of Director.

Therefore, I extend my warmest welcome to the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Netherlands to the OSCE, Ambassador Christophe Kamp, who has travelled from Vienna to be with us today.

Finally, I would like to thank the team of the Peace Palace for being a reliable partner of my institution and graciously hosting our event.

Before we proceed with the official part of the ceremony, I would like to take a moment to express my deep appreciation to my team in the Office that has worked very hard to put this event together. My team includes exceptional individuals, majority whom have served in my office for many years.

Last week, our dear colleague, Theodore Malcom Mercredi, tragically passed away, leaving us with profound grief and sadness.

Therefore, I would like to take a moment to pay a tribute to Theo, whose untimely and sudden demise has stunned us. Theo served as the Senior Administrative Assistant of my office for seven years. We will miss his warm, kind and generous nature.

At this very difficult time, I would like to express my deepest and heartfelt condolences to his family and friends, and honour our dearly departed and deeply treasured friend with a moment of silence. I invite you to rise.

I thank you.

Dear friends,

In 2022, our distinguished jury unanimously selected the Social Justice Center as the winner among the many strong candidates nominated this year. Taking this opportunity, I would like to welcome some of the new members of our jury who are here today. Particularly, Mr. Giorgi Sordia, Associate Professor at the University of Georgia and Executive Director at the Centre for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism; Ms. Irene Käosaar, Former Director of the Estonian Integration Foundation; and Ms. Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark, Associate Professor of International Law and Director at The Åland Islands Peace Institute.

I also would like to thank the members of our jury, who sadly could not join us today: former High Commissioner Lamberto Zannier and Petra Rotter, Professor of International Relations at the University of Ljubljana.

This year has been very challenging with the ongoing war in Ukraine and other conflicts, which have deeply impacted the OSCE participating States and the organization as a whole.

These tragic developments have reaffirmed the importance of minority issues and the need for governments and civil society to work together to build strong and resilient societies from within. This is why it is even more important now to recognize entities that promote diversity, inclusion and integration policies.

Our winner this year has demonstrated exceptional leadership and dedication in their quest to increase opportunities for all, including national minorities.

Since its foundation in 2012, the Social Justice Center has been working towards long-term political and socio-economic transformation in Georgia by giving a voice to minority ethnic and religious groups and supporting their interests.

It does so with a particular emphasis on youth and women, and through programmes such as the Social Policy Programme, the Equality Policy Programme and the Justice and Democracy Programme. This has resulted in community organizations and campaigns to promote minority rights.

The Social Justice Center stands for human, including minority, rights.

It empowers ethnic minority groups and activists, such as the Salam platform, to counter harmful, exclusionist narratives by bringing minority voices to the forefront. It advocates and campaigns for anti-discrimination policies, minority and women's rights, access to justice, participation in socio-economic life, and religious freedoms.

It strives to secure fundamental rights and freedoms for all by advancing their legal status and protection.

It conducts research-based advocacy campaigns on minority issues and provides legal support to people from ethnic and religious minorities.

The Social Justice Center stands for participation. It works to influence the political agenda by co-operating closely with policymakers and minority communities.

By providing a critical voice about the needs and concerns of minority communities, it aims to trigger social and political advances in society.

The Social Justice Center stands for the inclusion of the most vulnerable people in society. It has been actively advocating for the protection of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Georgia and reducing the negative impacts of the pandemic of the past two years.

I would like to commend the Social Justice Center for their activism and amplifying the voices of national minorities.

I extend my sincere congratulations to them for their well-deserved award and wish them much success in their work.

Dear friends,

I thank you for being our guests in The Hague and coming together to celebrate the remarkable journey of our winner this year and those of years past. I hope that you will draw inspiration from their work that has transformed and continues to transform their communities.

I also hope that in the time spent with us, you have gained knowledge and made new friends, while catching up with old. It is good to come together not only to recognize the work of, but also see the value in, working together with entities and individuals that celebrate diversity and inclusion to build cohesive and resilient societies for peace and security of everyone, including national minorities.

I would like to conclude with words of the famous Georgian writer Ilia Chavchavadze, who said that, “The biggest treasure a person has is their identity”. Today, we have an exceptional occasion to celebrate the work of activists that promote and protect the value of our unique identities.

I wish you all a pleasant evening.

I thank you.

Now, I would like to invite Minister of Foreign Affairs of Netherlands, His Excellency Wopke Hoekstra to deliver his remarks and present the 2022 Max van der Stoel Award to our winners.