

# Strictly confidential

*Walter Kemp*<sup>1</sup>

Max van der Stoel was discreet — by nature and by profession. He was often described as a Sphinx, or the Quiet Diplomat. That suited his role as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, since the mandate explicitly states that he ‘will work in confidence’.

Indeed, that was how I met Max. When I was working for the Latvian Foreign Ministry in 1992 (as an advisor), I was sent by the Ministry to take part in a meeting that Max was having with Janis Jurkens, at that time a senior figure in the opposition. I thought he was Hans van den Broek. He thought I worked for Mr. Jurkens.

At one point, as the conversation touched on increasingly sensitive issues, Max turned to Jurkens and said ‘does he work for you?’ ‘No’, said Jurkens.

‘I’m sorry, I’m going to have to ask you to leave’, said his assistant (who was Rob Zaagman whom I was to meet later on and who is now a friend and a co-editor of this journal). ‘The High Commissioner’s meetings are confidential’.

That summer I left Latvia and went to work for what was then the CSCE Secretariat in Prague. One of my tasks was to file the various reports that came in from missions and institutions. Some were classified as ‘CSCE only’, for example reports from short-term missions. They were not for the eyes of the public. And some rare documents were marked ‘Strictly Confidential’. They were from the High Commissioner on National Minorities to the Chairman-in-Office. ‘Handle those with care’, I was told. ‘They are politically sensitive’. I filed them in a safe place — and did not even dare to read them.

Several years later, Max hired me as his Senior Advisor for Central Europe. We travelled extensively together throughout Central and Eastern Europe, dealing mostly with Hungary and Hungarian minorities as well as the situation in Moldova.

Max always wanted to be the first person on the plane (and the first off!). On the way to a country, he would look over his files and receive a briefing on the main issues and actors. On the return leg, after a quick look at the newspaper, he would settle down to write his Strictly Confidential Report. Max was not one for small talk, but one knew that he was certainly not to be disturbed until he had hand-written his first draft of the Strictly Confidential Report. It was usually two pages long, with an annex containing the names and titles of his interlocutors. He would provide the Chairman-in-Office with a candid report of his visit, his observations, and preliminary recommendations. They were usually rather to the

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point, while still being diplomatic.

Since his handwriting was only legible to a few people, his secretaries would type out what he had written, usually with gaps and question marks where they could not read the relevant name or word. The relevant advisor would then fill in the blanks, polish the language slightly, and then give it back to Max (as quickly as possible). One seldom tampered with Max's observations.

Since he wanted to keep his discussions confidential (in order to avoid sensationalizing issues), Max could sometimes be in a country for several days without the press knowing. Being his spokesman was easy in the sense that one simply tried to keep things out of the press, but it was difficult when the press insisted on a comment. I remember once at Babes-Bolyai University (in Cluj-Napoca), the rector wanted to have a press conference although the High Commissioner had made it clear that he did not want to say anything on the record. When a journalist asked him a question on tertiary education in Hungarian, he said nothing. When the journalist repeated the question, Max stood up and simply left the room. Another time Max was meeting the Prime Minister of Romania, Adrian Nastase, and a pack of journalists were waiting outside. 'Shall we go and brief the press?', asked Mr. Nastase. 'No', said Max, 'I would prefer not to discuss the issue publicly'. 'OK', said the Prime Minister. 'Mr. Nastase, Mr. Nastase, can you tell us about the meeting?' asked a journalist. 'There was no meeting' he said, then he smiled and walked away. Meanwhile, Max and I slipped out through a side door. As a result of such cloak and dagger intrigues, we were seldom in the news. But that was the point. A key to the High Commissioner's success was that his work was strictly confidential.

The logic was simple. The High Commissioner wanted to avoid the sensationalization or misinterpretation of sensitive issues. And it helped to build confidence between the High Commissioner and the parties. Since his engagement was long-term, he needed to be trusted by the parties, and to make them feel that they could work discreetly and constructively with him.

That is why it is ridiculous to suggest that the High Commissioner 'securitizes' issues.<sup>2</sup> True, he is neither, strictly speaking, an advocate for the rights of national minorities, nor an ombudsman to investigate the violation of such rights — although human rights standards are the basis of his recommendations. His mandate is to provide early warning and advice regarding potential sources of instability. But it is precisely because Van der Stoel did not want to 'securitize' issues that he worked in confidence. This has become the *modus operandi* of his successors, Rolf Ekeus and Knut Vollebaek.

Max's discretion was also valued by the Dutch royal family. Indeed, he was so discreet that even his advisors, who knew his (almost) every move did not realize — until later — that he was involved in a sensitive issue involving the future wife of the Crown Prince.

Once we were sitting in an airport lounge in Budapest, waiting to catch a

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2 See Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski, *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported?*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 374.

plane to Cluj-Napoca in Transylvania. Max's mobile phone rang. My Dutch is not great, but I could tell that he was speaking to someone important — at least one of his peers, if not someone more senior. It was as if he was receiving instructions.

After he hung up, he was clearly agitated. He picked up the newspaper and put it down again. He got up and walked around the room. He looked at me as if he wanted to tell me something, and then changed his mind.

'Is there something that you want to talk about?' I asked.

'No' he mumbled.

After ten minutes of both of us pretending that nothing special was going on, he looked at me as if he wanted to confide in me.

'Have you ever heard of Maxima?', he said.

'Who?'

'Maxima'.

'No', I replied

He looked at me in disbelief, and also relief.

'Ok, then I can tell you', he said. 'That was the Prime Minister on the phone.'

'Prime Minister of the Netherlands', he said. I was so tuned into what he did as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities that I did not make the connection that he could still have a role in Dutch politics, or affairs of state.

'What does this have to do with our trip to Transylvania?', I asked.

My complete ignorance of the complications surrounding the engagement of Crown Prince Wilhelm-Alexander's to the Argentinian Maxima Zorreguieta put him at ease, and he began to tell me the whole story. 'Her father was part of the junta in Argentina. He cannot attend the royal wedding, it would be a major embarrassment, even a constitutional crisis'.

'And, what's your role in this?'

'I have to convince her father not to come'.

'Wow. That's rough. So the future of the Dutch monarchy is in your hands...not bad for a republican', I joked. He smiled.

'So what are you going to do?'

'I have already met her father once.'

Where, when, and why did any of us not know about this, I wondered?

'How was that?' I enquired

'Awkward'.

'And?'

'Now the Prime Minister wants me to meet him again'.

'How would you feel if you were Maxima's father and couldn't come to your daughter's wedding?'

Max was silent. His personal views were strictly confidential.

I only knew Max van der Stoel as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, and later as a friend. But from what I have heard, and what he told me, he had an exciting and full career. I tried to convince him to write down many of the stories that he told me, such as: listening to news about the

Italian occupation of Abyssinia on a homemade transistor radio; seeing Hitler as a child while hiking in Austria; life in his hometown during the Second World War; making contacts with young socialists in Germany and Czechoslovakia after the War (many of whom would later become senior officials); his role in the Greek Colonels' crisis (and how ordinary Greeks adored him when he later went there on holiday); his involvement in Dutch politics; dealing with hostage-taking incidents at the French and Indonesian embassies in the Netherlands; combating South Mollucan terrorists who had seized a train in the Netherlands; negotiating the Helsinki Final Act; meeting Czechoslovak dissidents in 1977; his involvement in Iraq; and on and on. He had a front-row seat in viewing more than half a century of history, and played his part in shaping history as well.

But most of these stories will never be told. And maybe that is the way that Max wanted it — to remain strictly confidential.