

MC Side Event

*“A year in conflict: joining forces to prevent a human trafficking crisis in
the region”*

Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid

Opening Remarks

Łódź, 1 December 2022, 08:45-09:30 AM

As delivered

Excellencies, distinguished representatives,

Good morning. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this first event of the Ministerial Council. Some of us were at the dinner last night, and it was an excellent discussion. It sent such a strong message of the importance of this Organization. We are truly living in unprecedented times. We face tremendous challenges, particularly since the 24th of February.

The war on Ukraine has a devastating impact particularly on the people of Ukraine as well as on neighboring countries – Moldova and beyond. The work that the OSCE is doing was recognized by so many. And while there will be many discussions today on this work and the range of challenges we face, it is important that we kick-start this conference with a message of unity and action to combat a common threat: trafficking in human beings. There has been an increase in trafficking in recent years with over 27 million victims. Commercial sexual exploitation alone increased by about one-third.

It is more important than ever to demonstrate the political will to address human trafficking as a shared security concern. This is not a given. It requires sustained effort and strong commitment from the top.

In the context of the war against Ukraine, we observed a surge online in toxic demand for sexual access to Ukrainian women and girls, creating a grim financial incentive to exploit their vulnerability. And we have seen persistent attempts by exploiters to recruit Ukrainians, so it really takes extra vigilance by transit and destination countries to discourage the demand as well as proactively assist victims and, very importantly, to hold perpetrators accountable.

This morning you will hear from committed countries around this table who are determined to protect the most vulnerable segments of our populations from exploitation. We can all agree on the urgency for the participating States to come together and act for the people by upholding the principles agreed upon throughout the years and that constitute the foundation of our organization.

I also thank our incoming Chairperson-in-Office, Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani of North Macedonia, for joining us today to reaffirm this topic as a priority. My team stands ready to support you in delivering on your priorities and addressing the most pertinent contemporary challenges, including trafficking in human beings.

Last but not least, I am grateful to the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Val Richey, for gathering us today for this important side event. He and his team continue to make a difference on the ground, by raising the alarm about the most acute issues that undermine the safety and security of our societies and by providing very concrete support to our participating States. I am proud of their relentless efforts and of the work accomplished over the past year to protect vulnerable people from trafficking.

During my visit to Ukraine with our current Chair, I stressed that the OSCE will continue addressing the immediate threats and risks caused by the war as well as the long-term impact of this conflict, such as trafficking in human beings. I consider it not only a duty, as the world's largest regional security organisation, but also a moral responsibility for all of us.