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Address by

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address you here in the Permanent Council and present ODIHR's Annual Report. Even though I regularly visit Vienna and the Hofburg, addressing the Permanent Council and having your views and feedback on the work of ODIHR in this setting is something I highly value.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to be frank; I must admit that I find it rather difficult to escape the pessimism that pervades current discussions of global affairs and the challenges to democracy and I am strongly of the opinion that we need to increase our joint efforts to preserve the principles and our commitments in the human dimension.

It is of vital importance for our constituency, the people of the region, that the participating States, in line with the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act, focus on what they have in common, their shared values, instead of what divides them.

The ideals and values constituting the concept of democracy appear under stress. The legitimacy of the parliamentary system of government, principles of rule of law, respect for fundamental freedoms are being challenged, often characterized by grim rhetoric.

We need to work towards improving accountability, not weaken it. Building effective integrity mechanisms, rather than undermining trust in democratic institutions.

This is why in the past year, we have doubled our efforts assisting national parliaments, to allow for more open, inclusive, and informed legislative processes, forging an ever closer cooperation with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

In the year when 15 OSCE participating States celebrated a centenary of women's suffrage rights, we continued working with political

parties to ensure equal participation of women and men in politics and decision-making. We promote the political participation of marginalized groups, including youth, Roma and Sinti, and migrants, together with our Field Operations.

Intolerance and discrimination continues to be a concern across the OSCE region. Too often, what begins with discrimination and intolerant discourse can escalate into violence and wider scale conflict.

We launched a new programme, the Information Against Hate Crimes Toolkit to strengthen government collection and management of this data. We need to see increased efforts by participating States so we have a more reliable overview of the nature and extent of these horrible crimes throughout our region to make us all in a better position to prevent them and address them when they occur. ODIHR also published a toolkit on a comprehensive approach to countering hate crimes.

Our Office has taken steps to ensure that intolerance is addressed before it degenerates into hate crime. From educational policy guidelines on anti-Semitism published with UNESCO to drafting teaching materials to counter intolerance against Muslims, we believe that working with future generations is a way to ensure a deep impact.

We continued to monitor the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti, including regarding safety and security of their communities. Another area of focus included supporting participation of Roma and Sinti, including of women and youth, in public and political life, which was a special focus of our Third Status Report, reviewing participating States' progress.

As I have said on a number of occasions and feel compelled to continue to repeat, in light of very little overall progress on the situation of Roma and Sinti, participating States must do more to implement their OSCE human dimension commitments and improve the situation of their Roma and Sinti communities. Their situation

and the widespread prejudice against them is appalling and the development needs to be reversed. We certainly stand ready to assist and support participating States to do so.

Election observation remains a high-profile activity of ODIHR. Last year we deployed 16 election-related activities.

As always, mission formats were advised by the assessment of what type of activity best meets the needs of the respective participating State. We continue to prioritize women's participation in elections and to ensure high standards for professional working environment in our missions.

Out of 2,937 observers from 53 participating States deployed in 2018, 42 per cent were women. Women were 47 per cent of experts directly recruited by ODIHR and nine of 15 Heads of Missions were women.

ODIHR continues to not only focus on the technical implementation of electoral commitments, but also on respect for fundamental rights that underpins democratic elections. In our observations we have seen greater attention to the issue of inclusion and an increase in the number of states following up on ODIHR recommendations to strengthen their electoral laws and practice.

Unfortunately, on the negative side we continue to see unreasonable restrictions on suffrage rights, unequal treatment of electoral contestants, legal and practical barriers faced by people with disabilities, limitations on citizen observers, and intolerant and xenophobic speech in electoral campaigns, including online.

ODIHR reports and recommendations serve as roadmaps for electoral follow-up. As I already mentioned the number of OSCE participating States that engage in meaningful electoral follow-up continues to increase, but we can do better and I encourage you to engage with us in 2019 and beyond.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We see that long-term democratic developments are challenged. Existing laws, loopholes in legislation and administrative decisions are being used to restrict fundamental rights.

I and my predecessors have mentioned many times, over the years, that space for civil society is shrinking. This very expression: “shrinking space for civil society” has become almost a cliché. Indeed, in some cases this space has been shrinking for so many years, and the environment in which human right defenders are forced to operate is so difficult, that this undermines democracy and human rights at their very core.

ODIHR has also expressed concerns over worrying developments, such as undue interference with judicial institutions or Ombudsman institutions.

The rule of law situation in many parts of the OSCE region continues to deteriorate. Negative developments in the field of rule of law in the OSCE region affected greatly the judicial independence and right to a fair trial.

On the encouraging side we have been engaged in constructive cooperation with judicial authority in some participating States. A positive example was the organization of the Criminal Justice Forum in Central Asia which gathered 130 criminal justice experts from Central Asia and Mongolia. This biannual Forum is an excellent example of how bringing together practitioners from different participating States can be beneficial to both themselves and their societies. ODIHR stands ready to assist and support with the implementation of the recommendations that came out of the Forum.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We see states invoke security concerns as they impose restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms. My office has continued to build capacity and awareness of security sector actors of human rights; often in close cooperation with our colleagues in the Secretariat.

We produced new tools, such as a Guidance Document on the implementation of the revised UN standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners, and Guidelines on addressing the threats and challenges of so-called foreign terrorist fighters within a human rights framework.

Monitoring of human rights issues also continues to be an important element in our toolbox. We have taken new steps to bring the voices of survivors of human rights abuses into our work, including survivors of trafficking in human beings, who have helped us to highlight the gender dimension of trafficking.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

ODIHRs mandate is to contribute to the comprehensive security by supporting participating States to implement their human dimension commitments. This has to remain our common focus.

The once US first lady, diplomat and human rights activist Eleanor Roosevelt once said: "It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

Let me end by highlighting an issue that lies close to my heart, equality between men and women, as tomorrow we celebrate the International Women's day.

I believe it is important to recognize the progress this day symbolizes. We have taken important steps forward on women's rights as reflected in the recognition of and combat against violence against

women and girls, increased participation of women in politics and decision making in the society, and empowerment of women economically, socially and culturally. We have definitely been on the right path.

However, I will not shy away from reality - much more work is needed, participating States are far from implementing commitments in this area and to me, it is troubling that progress is not happening faster, let me just name here staggering figures on violence against women in politics and online harassment. We are doing a lot together but I think we can do more. A lot more.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I feel compelled to mention a few issues that I see characterizing our work in the human dimension and in some ways diverting our ability to focus on carrying out our mandated activities.

First of all, in the current situation where we do not have an approved budget we in ODIHR do our best, with the given resources, to fulfill our mandate. However, with every day that passes, this becomes more challenging. We can adapt our activities to some extent, but some issues are beyond our control, such as elections. They will take place irrespective of the budget but election observation is obviously conditioned on there being financial resources available.

On civil society participation, relating to mandated third dimension events, ODIHR can't solve some of the problems that this organization is faced with but we will continue to listen carefully to your concerns and try to improve the organizational and technical aspects within the mandate and modalities we have been given.

My colleagues and I have been working hard to improve the registration system, and appreciate the leadership of the Italian CiO on this issue, clarify modalities, improving our guidelines as well as the code of conduct – all to ensure that third dimension events, including the HDIM, be conducted as well as possible.

I would like to conclude by expressing my hope that you will have the good fortune to solve the issues I just mentioned to enable us all to focus on the implementation of the human dimension commitments, which in itself is already a challenging task enough.

Thank you.