



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Katherine Brucker
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 14, 2024

Director Mecacci, dear Matteo, welcome back to the Permanent Council. Thank you for your leadership of ODIHR during what you rightly characterize as a profoundly difficult year.

Without question, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine remains the most critical human rights challenge facing our organization. In what is now the third year of Russia's full-scale invasion of the country, and the eleventh year of Russia's purported annexation of Crimea, the people of Ukraine continue to suffer unimaginable hardships.

ODIHR has published four reports detailing Russia's ongoing violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of international human rights law, including cases of the arbitrary detention, transfer, and deportation of Ukrainian civilians. We appreciate ODIHR's assistance with the latest Moscow Mechanism effort to examine this issue. It is worth underscoring that this is the fourth Moscow Mechanism invocation by 45 participating States to document the Russian Federation's human rights abuses and violations in Ukraine since February 2022. ODIHR must continue to monitor, expose, and condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine and the war's detrimental effects on the people of Ukraine.

The Kremlin has also intensified its crackdown on dissent within its own borders, targeting not just opponents of its brutal war against its neighbor but also individuals and organizations that dare to question any aspect of Vladimir Putin's dictatorial rule. Russian authorities continue to imprison political opponents, shut down civil society organizations, and try to silence independent media. In the wake of Aleksey Navalny's death in a penal colony – for which the Kremlin bears full responsibility – ODIHR's calls for Russia to release its unjustly detained political prisoners are more critical than ever.

And the same holds true for Belarus, where the human rights situation has deteriorated significantly since the fraudulent presidential election in 2020. The perpetual persecution of human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens voicing opinions contrary to those of the government demonstrates the Lukashenka regime's complete disregard for OSCE principles and commitments.

Unfortunately, the challenges in the human dimension within the OSCE region extend beyond Russia and Belarus. ODIHR can and should contribute its significant insights and expertise toward protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, advancing democratic principles and the rule of law, promoting tolerance, and ending discrimination in

all participating States. The dramatic global rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attacks and the ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict has exacerbated tensions everywhere. ODIHR's important work on tolerance and nondiscrimination, including in partnership with the Chair's three Personal Representatives, is critical.

ODIHR's election observation missions are renowned for producing impartial, transparent, and comprehensive assessments about the legal framework for, and the conduct of, elections throughout the region. With all of the elections planned for 2024 – including our own in the United States – we urge all participating States to ensure their elections are free and fair and to invite participating States to observe their elections, in line with our commitments.

ODIHR's assessments of legislative processes and draft legislation are important resources, and we encourage all participating States to take advantage of ODIHR's expertise in this area. We are concerned that Hungary's 2023 National Sovereignty Protection Law and Türkiye's 2022 Disinformation Law could be used to restrict the freedoms of association and expression, particularly ahead of key elections. The Kyrgyz Republic's draft Foreign Representatives law, if passed, would severely hamper the ability of NGOs to operate. As ODIHR assessed on February 7, this bill, "remains incompatible with international human rights standards and OSCE commitments."

In closing, Director Mecacci, Madam Chair, it is exactly because participating States throughout the OSCE region fall short of the principles and commitments that we have all voluntarily undertaken that the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting remains so critical: it lets participating States and civil society from across our region come together to take stock of where we have failed to meet our human rights commitments and discuss how we can improve. The United States urges participating States to work toward consensus on holding the HDIM in 2024. That said, we will fully support ODIHR in organizing the conference in whatever form it takes.

I would like to add too, just before I finally close, that I very much share the budget concerns that you have expressed. I know our experts are working hard on this, but we need a budget that adequately funds our activities – all of your activities – and the salaries of our dedicated OSCE personnel.

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