

The OSCE Secretariat bears no responsibility for the content of this document and circulates it without altering its content. The distribution by OSCE Conference Services of this document is without prejudice to OSCE decisions, as set out in documents agreed by OSCE participating States.

PC.DEL/802/23

9 June 2023

ENGLISH only

Statement by the High Commissioner to the OSCE Permanent Council

OSCE Permanent Council - Vienna, Austria
Statement by Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

8 June 2023

Mr. Chair,
Members of the OSCE Permanent Council,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

I am pleased to be here again and to address you in my current function.

I share the motto of the current chair of the OSCE – our work must be about people. This is the root of the human rights cause and agenda.

We find ourselves in critical times. To move forward in the right direction, we need to look back.

Seventy-five years ago, Member States of the United Nations adopted a visionary agreement. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clarified fundamental values that unite humanity, and it tugged the world away from likely disaster.

After two global wars, genocide, and the economic depression that had preceded it, there was a profound realization that States must be responsible for securing freedom from fear and freedom from want for all.

States have experienced what happens when there is no framework of norms and values.

They saw that international cooperation was essential to secure equitable and sustainable development, and to ensure peace.

To mark 75 years since this transformational agreement, my Office's Human Rights 75 Initiative aims to reinvigorate the spirit and impulse that drove this vision.

In the spirit of never again.

In the interest of inter-generational justice.

I think we all live it every day and are very conscious of it: we face multiple and intersecting crises – against one of the most complex geopolitical backdrops of our lifetimes.

To recover from the massive setbacks to human rights in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To put the Sustainable Development Agenda back on track.

To rescue the imperative of peace.

Now, more than ever, we need to hark back to the conviction that human rights can provide a path out of turmoil.

Human rights are the common language of our shared humanity. They are a unifying force, and they are the best tools we have to address the challenges we face today.

At the heart of human rights lies the recognition of human dignity and the need for respect.

And our institutions exist to build, and to build on, this shared respect for each other's dignity.

The OSCE is one of the institutions that exemplifies this commitment.

We have a longstanding partnership.

Speaking about historical contexts, the original Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe led to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, a critical pact for peace, security and human rights across the Atlantic during the height of the Cold War.

It provided a path out of ideological divisions and towards greater freedoms: freedom of thought, of expression, of peaceful assembly. Freedom of movement and the right to leave and return to one's country.

The Helsinki process eventually gave birth to the OSCE, and in doing so, provided a process to advance human rights in its participating States.

Human rights form the basis of your work, and your comprehensive concept of security which incorporates the 'human dimension,' recognising that there simply cannot be peace and security without human rights.

Based on this shared vision, the cooperation between us has been fruitful. We have had regular thematic meetings, consultations and information exchange on specific situations.

We share profound concerns on a range of issues, from conflict prevention to media freedom, trafficking in people, gender equality, the human rights impacts of the climate crisis, and the human rights of minorities.

Together, we have worked to further transparency and fairness.

I am grateful for the recent exchanges I have had with Secretary-General Helga Maria Schmid and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro. Excellencies,

Looking ahead this year and beyond, the OSCE can play a crucial role in reinvigorating the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by promoting and implementing a 21st century vision of human rights understanding that is transformative; solution-oriented; unifying; and both broader and more meaningful than partisan or ideological divisions.

Just two years ago, it would have been unimaginable to have another full-blown war at the heart of Europe.

Now in its 16th month, the war on Ukraine has caused horrifying suffering and loss of life. Violations of international human rights and humanitarian law are routine.

Since the war began, my Office has documented 8,983 killed and 15,442 injured. Obviously the actual figures are much higher.

These are intolerable figures. This is an intolerable war.

It has torn through the fabric of a nation, and its consequences have reverberated around the world. Prices of food, energy, fertilisers and other essential commodities continue to rise beyond the point of many people's ability to pay, notably in countries in the Global South.

The war also continues to undermine international peace, drawing the world back to blocs and hostile standoffs, at a time when we can least afford it.

Let us not forget what we are up against at the global level. At a time when we must come together to address humanity's biggest challenges. The triple planetary crisis. The potentials and risks of artificial intelligence and in the digital era. The declining civic space. The backlash on gender equality. Rising inequalities within and between countries, not least as a result of the pandemic. And many more.

I believe that the lessons of history can show us the path forward.

The OSCE has a vital role to play. For example, in your work on early warning, conflict resolution, and on peacebuilding.

We share this focus. Let's recall that the human rights agenda is a prevention agenda.

To address grievances, to strengthen governance and the social contract, and foster the peaceful resolution of disputes, all societies and communities need to advance equality; establish independent systems of justice; and uphold people's right to participate in decision-making. We know that we need more creativity and innovation, and this does not come when you repress freedoms. Repression of freedoms is not the future. We need to strengthen our efforts to implement the Sustainable Agenda as a whole. I would like to mention in particular the significance of SDG16.

This is the goal that enables the entire Agenda.

Providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions are pivotal to cultivating relationships built on respect and trust – within nations and between them.

Because trust lies at the core of peace.

Excellencies,

My Office's Human Rights 75 Initiative aims to rebuild trust.

It seeks to help us to change course and to reconstruct more sustainable, just and equal societies based on human rights.

By emphasising our shared values, it gives us an opportunity to surmount our differences through genuine dialogue.

There is no time to lose. I look forward to ever-growing cooperation between my Office and the OSCE as we work together to achieve these goals.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.