

Helsinki Commission

Washington, DC, 29 January 2020

Speaking points

Background and approach

- It is an honour to be here and speaking to the Commission that has done so much to promote human rights and democracy throughout the 57 countries of the OSCE.
- This year is the 30th anniversary of the peaceful revolutions that brought down the Berlin Wall, uniting Europe together after so many years of division and bringing the Cold War to an end.
- When we look back, we see that we have travelled a long path over the last 30 years, and not just in Europe. 60% of the world's countries are now democracies of one form or another, compared to only 40% at the beginning of the 1990s. That is an enormous achievement, and one of which we can be proud.
- It was only after one regime after another had toppled in 1989 that it became clear how much work needed to be done to get the political and economic systems on track. The hard work that took place in the following years was only possible because of the positive drive of the people in these countries.
- We therefore need not only to work for change, but to recapture and maintain the optimism of that time. Whenever we bemoan the current state of the world, we need to reflect on what that state has looked like for other people in other periods of human history.

Challenges

Populism and polarisation

- It is impossible to escape the impression that something is not right. Solutions to many of the challenges we face have been developed or already used successfully, but we are no longer using or even talking to each other about them.
- We seem to be gripped by an ever deepening polarisation in which some political leaders and their voters believe that anyone who disagrees with them is an enemy of the people who doesn't deserve even basic respect.
- It may not be news to you that a number of politicians across the OSCE region are fuelling prejudice and hatred for the sake of political gain. They do or should know very well that history has shown us many times how fatal the consequences of polarisation, prejudice, and hatred can be.

Democracy and the rule of law

- As you know, ODIHR was established almost 30 years ago to help countries across the OSCE strengthen their democratic institutions and develop systems to ensure full

respect for human rights. Contributing to the stability of the international human rights standards built up in the decades since the Second World War has always been one of our main aims.

- This was never easy. But it has become more difficult, as we see an increasing number of politicians and even political leaders deliberately dismantling the fundamental pillars of the democratic system, seeking to remove democratic checks and balances, and gradually erode standards. But without political and social pluralism, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, and a thriving civil society, there can be no democracy.

Intolerance and hatred

- According to UN figures, there are now more than 70 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, either refugees seeking international protection abroad or displaced within their own countries. There is scarcely a greater calamity that can befall individuals and their families. And yet we are seeing hatred in word and deed targeting these people, even or particularly in our own countries that are so wealthy.
- ODIHR has an entire department working on issues of intolerance and hatred. In this field it is not so much developments that are striking but how much has stayed the same. Racism and xenophobia are flourishing on the street, online, and, unfortunately, also in police precincts.
- We continue to work on combating the age-old scourge of anti-Semitism. We have also increased our focus on combating intolerance and discrimination, including hate crimes, against Christians, Muslims, and members of other religions as physical attacks as well as hate speech, particularly online, have grown in recent years.
- Our annual update on hate crime throughout the OSCE region means that ODIHR holds the largest hate crime database worldwide and in our most recent update, we published figures from more than 40 countries, both from official and civil society sources.
- In our most recent update, our analysis focused on the lack of implementation of hate crime legislation, with our findings showing that while a total of 53 out of the 57 OSCE nations have hate crime provisions in their criminal codes, far fewer actually make use of these laws. If you're interested in knowing more, my colleagues will be happy to provide you with our infographic and other materials.

Human rights in the digital era

- The online world has made information more easily available and allowed citizens to participate actively in democratic processes.
- However, we are now seeing possibly the biggest outpourings of xenophobia as well as misogyny online. The proliferation of harassment and hate speech on the internet is causing distress to enormous numbers of people.

- Online and social media channels are being misused to incite discrimination and even violence. Individualised channels of information lead to the creation of echo chambers in which people are ever more rarely faced with opinions other than their own, and errors or misinformation spread unchecked.
- Digitalisation and the new realities it has created do not change the legal boundaries: human rights are valid online just as they are offline, and they must be protected in both spheres.

Civil society

- The OSCE is founded on the concept that the protection and promotion of human rights – which of course includes civil society – is a precondition for security.
- Currently in many places across the OSCE region, a healthy civil society is often seen not as a security partner but as a security risk. The use of overly broad legislation, including on counter-terrorism and anti-extremism legislation to restrict the legitimate activities of NGOs is also having an increasingly negative impact.
- The pressure on civic space takes many forms and targets many people, from legislation restricting the operations of civil society, physical attacks on offices and individuals, politically motivated lawsuits or arrests, cuts in funding, state restrictions on the freedom to hold public gatherings or protests, or negative statements and online smear campaigns.
- Threats often come from the state, but not always. Women activists are particularly vulnerable to pressure and attacks, from public shaming on the internet or social media platforms through to sexual violence.

Solutions

- After listing all these challenges we're facing to democracy and human rights, you may be surprised that I identify myself as an optimist. One reason for this is that we already have so many solutions.

ODIHR itself is one of these solutions:

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- Our annual human rights conference, which is unique in bringing together civil society and policymakers in two weeks of sometimes difficult but always fruitful dialogue. ODIHR thus provides a platform for both frank discussion and deeper reflection, helping those who work in the area of human rights to find effective solutions and, still more importantly, ways of making sure they are implemented.

Networks and partnerships

- ODIHR works with governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organisations, and international partners, to help strengthen judicial independence, fight for gender equality and protect the most vulnerable groups in our societies.

- We develop innovative platforms to reach out to human rights activists who may otherwise remain isolated and sometimes in danger. I have endless respect and admiration for all the grassroots organisations and individual human rights defenders who are tireless in their efforts to build free and democratic societies.

Tools and training

- We develop and train practitioners to use educational tools to break down prejudices and build more tolerant societies.
- One example is our major project aimed at combating anti-Semitism – made possible by the generous funding from the German government as well as from the US and Italian governments – that among other products has developed a 10-part educational toolkit to address anti-Semitism in different ways, such as by overcoming unconscious bias; challenging conspiracy theories; or dealing with online anti-Semitism.

Communications and outreach

- Increasingly, other cultures, languages and traditions are being viewed as a threat to our own. In response to this and to growing doubts in the universality of human rights, we are working to reach out beyond our partners and stakeholders to engage with new audiences and multipliers.

Publications

- We will shortly be launching a major publication that aims to address the security needs of Muslim communities. As with our other publications, this tries to come away from a purely theoretical perspective to offer practical guidance for policymakers, law-enforcement agencies, and civil society working to raise awareness about anti-Muslim hate crime and protect the safety of Muslim communities.

Working with youth

- Of course, there are some areas in which ODIHR still needs to become more active. One of these is working with youth. Only equality between all the groups in society – young and old, women and men, ethnic minorities and the majority, all faith communities as well as non-believers – can bring long-term democratic stability.
- In the course of my career, I have often taken part in meetings and conferences at which the importance of the role of women was discussed – with hardly any women present. Now I take part in meetings and conferences at which I and others of my generation discuss the importance of youth – but no young people have been invited. This must change.
- If we want to overcome the challenges of today to work towards a democratic future, we must involve young people more, both in discussions and in decision making. According to recent UN figures, there are 1.2 billion 15-24 year-olds globally, which means that young people account for one out of every six people worldwide.

- It is only by sitting at the same table that today's youth can also understand that for activism to be effective, it needs to be backed up by a deeper understanding of democratic and human rights systems and followed by analysis. We need platforms that explain issues such as the rule of law to young people so they can act now to protect it now.

Closing

- We need to return to the understanding that democracy is not about friends and foes, winners and losers. It's about respect and trust, an acceptance of differing opinions, an exchange of views, and the willingness to share power and seek compromise.
- Agreement through dialogue is the only solution to our differences, even if we end up agreeing to disagree. Just as we deserve respect, so do those who hold different opinions. Speaking openly and seeking compromise through dialogue is better not only for the people who live in our countries, but also for the future of the countries themselves.
- You are from the most populous country in the entire OSCE, and I am from one of the smallest. But we are united in our concerns for the future of the OSCE region, for its commitment to democracy and to the wellbeing of its peoples. We owe it to them not just to talk about solutions, but to make every effort that they become reality.