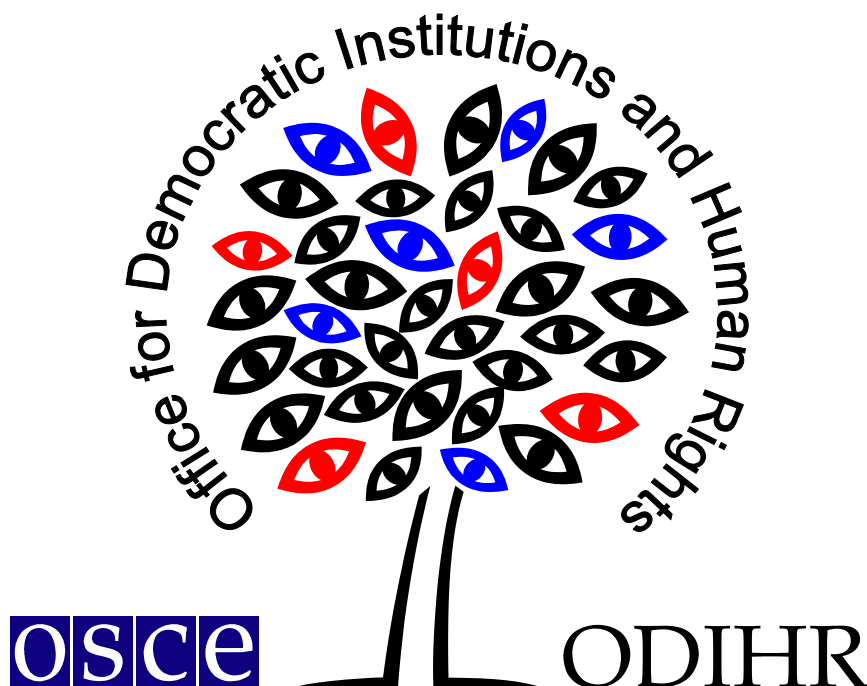


**Migration, Human Rights, and Inclusion:  
Assessing the Role of Civil Society in the OSCE Region**

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**Address by**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Friends,

Welcome. I'm particularly delighted to receive you at ODIHR's beautiful premises today after the long break caused by Covid. Your presence is testimony to the close ties between ODIHR and civil society, and our determination to continue our work together on the most pressing human rights issues facing our societies.

We have invited you here to further strengthen our cooperation. But more than that, we want to give you an opportunity to tell us about your work. This helps you to amplify your voice. And it helps us in our key role of supporting the countries of the OSCE to strengthen respect for human rights and the rule of law.

We also want to hear about the good practices on migration, human rights, and social inclusion you have developed and that others present here today may find useful.

Before I go on to say a few words about the topic of our gathering, I'd like to pay my respects and express my appreciation to you and your organisations, which work so tirelessly in often difficult circumstances to improve the lives of the communities in which you live.

All countries of the OSCE have recognised that civil society plays a vital role in the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

And indeed, civil society has been at the forefront of responding to emergencies linked to the rapid increases in migration and refugee flows, and plays an essential role in monitoring human rights violations at international borders. This is particularly important at present in the area of human trafficking, which has sadly become a major aspect of the war in Ukraine.

I also know that your organisations are helping to improve the long-term integration of migrants and refugees in host countries. And you are working hard to debunk the many negative myths about migration and make the debate more balanced and constructive.

Prejudice and discrimination have been on the rise across the OSCE region for too long, and we all have a role to play in countering that downwards spiral.

Dear friends,

This is the first of what we hope and intend will be an annual event to meet key representatives of civil society. We share so many common goals, and above all the striving for a better future in dignity for every individual, no matter who they are and where they come from.

So why have we chosen the topic of migration, human rights, and inclusion for this first meeting?

Well, the treatment of migrants and refugees has been at or near the top of the policy agenda for at least a decade now. It remains a subject of both debate and controversy across the OSCE region.

There have been many challenges to human mobility and the freedom of movement over the past decade. It is probably no news to many of you that according to UN figures, a record 100 million people worldwide are now forcibly displaced.

Some 12 million people have been displaced by the Ukraine conflict alone, with around 5 million having fled the country and another 7 million remaining as IDPs within Ukraine. Developments in Afghanistan last year also contributed further to the already large numbers of those seeking refuge in the OSCE region.

And aside from the many conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on our ability to travel, whether as visitors, migrants, or refugees, as national migration management systems across the world restricted the movement of people across borders.

It is easy to criticise states for their shortcomings over migration, both in policy and practice. But as states across our region struggle with the increased demands on their migration management systems, we see that the response has been mixed.

We have seen heartwarming examples of generosity, of efficient assistance and innovative integration. But we have also seen attempts to further securitise borders and to step up efforts to prevent irregular movement across them, often at the expense of human rights. This includes reports of pushbacks taking place in OSCE countries, as well as of migrants and refugees being stranded in border areas without access to asylum or even basic humanitarian assistance.

In recent months, we have seen an impressive show of solidarity in responding to the needs of people fleeing Ukraine. In particular, the European Union has taken the unprecedented step of introducing temporary protection for those leaving Ukraine. National authorities have been flexible in helping people move across borders and within the EU and granting access to a range of rights, services and benefits.

But as you all well know, refugee movements of this scale come with enormous challenges, and a coordinated approach is needed to secure sustainable, longer-term support to ensure the social inclusion of refugees, whether or not they eventually return home.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All OSCE countries have committed to ensuring that any individual crossing borders will be treated with dignity and in line with international law. But we are unfortunately seeing different approaches to different groups of people in need of international protection, depending on their countries of origin, skin colour, or religious belief. I'd like to emphasise the need for respect without discrimination for the human rights of all migrants and refugees across the OSCE region and beyond.

For some time now, we have also been seeing a rise in intolerance towards migrants and refugees, and ODIHR's annual hate crime data shows that bias crimes targeting migrants and refugees remain a serious issue across the OSCE. We also see that when they occur, hate attacks against migrants are particularly violent and frequently include more than one victim.

At the same time, hostility and intolerance against Roma and Sinti in a number of OSCE countries is another worrying trend that is adding to other persistent obstacles faced by stateless Roma, who in some places are unable to benefit from the most basic of rights.

Such prejudice and hatred are unacceptable, and ODIHR continues to work with national authorities, with civil society, and with affected communities to combat intolerance and hate crime across our region.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

States have the right and obligation to control their borders in order to identify security threats and crimes, including smuggling and human trafficking. But we must also remember that OSCE countries have adopted a comprehensive concept of security, which includes respect for human rights as one of its core elements. Therefore, any security policies introduced must include respect for *non-refoulement*, the right to life, to seek asylum, to non-discrimination, to be free from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, and the right to defend the human rights of oneself and others.

The criminalisation of humanitarian assistance to migrants in a number of states has made in some cases the work of organisations, including some of your own, more difficult and even dangerous. This has emerged as one of the most worrying trends in migration management, and I hope to hear more about your own opinions and experiences in this regard.

At the same time, I would like to remind you that it is ODIHR's core task to support OSCE countries in strengthening respect for human rights. I assure you that we are working with many of them to improve their migrant integration strategies and safeguard the human rights of migrants.

In closing, let me say how much all of us at ODIHR appreciate the fact that throughout the last few difficult years, you and your organisations have stood up for the most vulnerable in our societies – the refugees who have suffered so much in the search for safety and a better future for themselves and their families.

In the course of your work, you may also have faced intolerance and discrimination yourself, including threats and even violence. I respect your courage and your tenacity in continuing your work in the face of these challenges.

Over the next two days, we will be able to talk and listen to each other to help us identify the opportunities as well as the many challenges. In this way, and working together, I'm sure that we can do more to uphold security in the OSCE region, which means also respecting the rights of refugees, protecting civil society and human rights defenders, improving the lives of migrants, and at the same time enriching our societies.

Thank you.