

ODIHR: three decades and ready for the future Democracy, human rights and security

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Address by

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Dear Excellences,

Minister Linde,

State Secretary Szynkowski,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

And dear Friends of ODIHR,

We are back...both in person and online...so I am extremely pleased to welcome you all here today, those in Warsaw as well as those that are connecting from far away, for what is indeed a special occasion – all united in celebrating the 30 years of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR.

I wish to really thank all of you for joining us, as well as the Swedish OSCE Chairpersonship and Poland as the host country of ODIHR, and all the colleagues and partners who have been involved in making this event possible. Given the complex situation we are still facing with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the extremely short timeframe, this is indeed a remarkable occasion.

Your attendance today and tomorrow is a very tangible demonstration of why ODIHR and its work continue to matter – and of how our collective and your personal belief in democracy and human rights has not only not faded, but on the contrary, is as strong and genuine today, as it was 30 years ago. Thank you to each and every one of you for being here with us.

I am especially glad to also welcome the OSCE Secretary General, Helga Schmidt, the Representative for Freedom of the Media, Teresa Ribeiro, the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Margareta Cederfelt, and the High Commissioner for National Minorities, Kairat Abdrakhmanov. Having all of you here today is a powerful reminder of the comprehensive nature of our unique OSCE concept of security. I would also like to express my gratitude for the work done by our OSCE Field Operations, some of which are joining us online today. We at ODIHR are grateful for our lasting partnership and cooperation.

I must admit that I feel a bit emotional, addressing you this morning. ODIHR, the office I have had the honor and privilege to lead since last December, was born out of a unique vision encompassing human dignity, freedom, and pluralism – raising democracy and human rights from the historical and political developments of the last century which in many cases where

tragic - and acknowledging that these are essential elements of peace and sustainable security, as they were initially envisioned in Helsinki in 1975.

Three decades later, we must take a moment to admire that vision for its clarity and the powerful role it has had in shaping our societies and lives. At the same time, we must be clear about the responsibility that came with it and that we all share – which is the commitment to live up to that same vision to build a better future for our region. This work is not yet finished.

The set of documents and commitments that came to form what we call the Human Dimension of the OSCE, and is the mandate of ODIHR, is a lasting and powerful testimony to that vision. All the words that we use in our lives are important, but those that are used in public life commit ourselves, and cannot be ignored. It was in Paris in 1990 that The participating States declared the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms to be irrevocable.

It was in Copenhagen in 1990 that participating States said “We embrace the protection and promotion of human rights as one of the basic purposes of government, and their recognition as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. It was in Moscow in 1991 where they said “We recognise the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as one of the foundation of the international order. And again in Helsinki in 1992 they said we pledge our respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including democracy, the rule of law, and environmental responsibility as our common and immutable aim.”

These binding commitments are filled with meaning – their power is real. And I believe that few other national or international documents contain such a vibrant promise of action.

Therefore I wish that these two days will be not only a celebration of these words, but also an opportunity to seriously reflect on the work that needs to be done to translate them into facts on the ground, and have an opportunity to discuss how to make them become a reality in people’s everyday lives.

It was just as ODIHR was opening its doors 30 years ago, in the spring of 1991 - I was a teenager at the time and I remember this vividly - that parts of the OSCE region, including the country that is hosting us today, were undergoing an extraordinary political and social transformation. In the years that followed, democratic regimes and civil liberties have grown, and genuine elections processes have increasingly marked the political life of our nations, which at the same time moved towards more pluralistic and tolerant societies. At the same time, the need to consolidate the rule of law and further combat discrimination, became

important requisites for OSCE participating States all across our region, reflecting the desires and demands of their people for accountable and transparent institutions.

In this recent history, ODIHR has played an important role in assisting the countries of the region in implementing those words. From promoting the role of women and gender equality to combatting hate crimes, from addressing torture, the death penalty and human trafficking to observing elections, these are only few of the areas in which ODIHR has been assisting OSCE participating States in line with its mandate.

A mandate that not only creates a correlation between human rights, democracy and security, but also offers us a more fundamental truth: that until the human rights of every individual are respected, and their fundamental freedoms guaranteed, our job remains unfinished and our common security fragile.

This is why, I strongly and truly believe ODIHR's mandate and work is as significant today as it was 30 years ago. It is a powerful reminder to all of us that we cannot choose some aspects of democracy while ignoring others, or guarantee certain freedoms while limiting others.

And it is a powerful reminder that nobody's human rights are safe until everyone's human rights are protected. We know that this is not easy, but this is the necessary vision we continue to aspire to, despite the challenges and the obstacles on our way.

At the request of OSCE participating States, over the last three decades we have worked together with civil society to realize this vision, amidst historical changes and political challenges that have made this office very resilient and an exceptional hub of knowledge and expertise. My sincere thanks go to all the governments and national authorities which over these years have reached out to ODIHR and continue to do so, requesting our assistance and contributing to our programmes and activities, engaging in a constructive dialogue with a mutual desire to advance these values and find practical solutions to real problems. Let me be clear – the engagement and assistance you request from us from all over our region, continue to be the best support you can give to ODIHR and its mandate.

I would probably need many hours to list the full achievements of these 30 years, but I will not try your patience for so long. But some numbers can speak for themselves: we have carried out 400 election observation missions; formulated about 450 legal opinions for more than 30 OSCE participating States; published hundreds of tools in more than 10 OSCE languages; led thousands of training and capacity building courses for human rights defenders, police, CSOs,

parliamentarians, and young leaders, to name but a few; held 24 Human Dimension Implementation Meetings that brought together tens of thousands of people; monitored more than 100 assemblies in 33 countries.

These remarkable numbers can only begin to recognize the extent of the positive impact ODIHR has had, and we owe this to the passion and dedication of ODIHR's staff over all these years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I cannot reflect upon ODIHR's work and mandate without acknowledging one of its fundamental pillars: civil society organizations, and their vital role in advancing and protecting people's dignity and freedoms. Civil society actors and groups must continue to play their fundamental role and be protected and valued for the enrichment they can bring.

Allow me to thank and welcome the many civil society representatives joining us today – because this celebration of ODIHR today and tomorrow, is also a celebration of your tireless and immensely valuable work. Our partnership in assisting OSCE participating States makes our work effective, and we are grateful for your help, enthusiasm and courage to achieve these goals.

'When the roots are strong, there is no reason to fear the storm', the Dalai Lama said once. *'But trees cannot grow roots just as the storm appears on the horizon'*. They need time and space. The continuously shrinking space for civil society to operate constitutes a fundamental challenge to our vision of lasting peace and security – and it needs to be addressed constructively.

As the roots of our democracy, it is essential that we protect civil society organizations, hear their voices and learn from their perspectives – always, even when there are disagreements; we can and must agree to disagree in democracies.

Only in this way, we will be able to overcome the storms of today and of tomorrow. Genuine civil society organizations should never be considered a problem. On the contrary, they should be considered part of the solution.

Despite a geopolitical climate where human rights and multilateralism are indeed under growing pressure, and a global World where the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many of ours democratic fragilities, and with an increasing number of voices questioning the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, I still believe that the best answer is in front of our eyes. That answer is that genuine multilateral dialogue is not the best solution to global problems – it is the only solution.

ODIHR continues to engage in honest and constructive dialogue with all stakeholders and, you can be sure that we will be ready to continue our assistance to OSCE participating States – also for the next 30 years and beyond.

Commitments and obligations can be further developed as our societies and their needs change. But this should never come at the expense of the basics: the principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law. We look forward to engaging in an open and genuine discussion with all of you, without losing sight of the extraordinary progress that we all, together, have achieved.

But we must now strengthen the democratic heritage that we have created in our region, both rich and, indeed, surprisingly young and fragile. As we move forward, we must all be willing to reflect on our democratic shortcomings and address human rights challenges as they emerge. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us clearly, no country is perfect. It is seldom that I am moved to quote Winston Churchill, but after the last 18 months it seems kind of justified.

While responding to those who were criticising democracy he replied: “Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried.” Our democracies are not perfect and they will probably never be, but they allow the flexibility and the openness to be worked on and improved for the benefit of every single individual living in them, to the inclusion of everyone and the exclusion of no one. And all of you who are here today, know that you have an important role to play to increase the quality of democracy in your country and beyond.

In conclusion, I would like to use this opportunity to recognize and commend the tireless work of all the women and men who contributed with their passion and knowledge to shape ODIHR over the last three decades. From the few employee hired in 1991 when the office was set up, passing through former Directors, staff, consultants and our administrative colleagues, all the way to the newest of our interns. Their work, their dreams, their energy, day after day, made

possible the positive difference ODIHR has been able to bring. We today, and those that will come after us, stand on their shoulders – and we wish to sincerely thank them.

ODIHR translates into the individuals who made this office their home over the years, and our human dimension commitments therefore ultimately rest on the individuals that live in our OSCE countries, and into the quality of the daily lives of women and men, our children and parents, today and in the future to come.

As we move into the future, we should never forget the power of the human spirit and its desire for freedom, democracy and integrity and how this can make our collective life better.

Thank you, and I wish all of us a wonderful event.