

18th HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

22 September 2013

Warsaw



Opening remarks by

Michael Georg Link

Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and a privilege to welcome you to the opening of the 2014 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw.

Let me start by welcoming our distinguished speakers, thanking them for accepting our invitation and being able to join us this morning. We are now going to hear the following opening remarks:

First of all, Ambassador Thomas Greminger, the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the OSCE and Chair of the OSCE Permanent Council, will speak to us on behalf of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office;

Next, Paweł Wierdak from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is going to address us with some words of welcome from our host country. Let me use this opportunity to assure you that we very much appreciate your support and our excellent partnership.

Ms. Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, will speak to us next.

She will be followed by Ms. Astrid Thors, the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities.

Furthermore, Ambassador Adam Kobieracki, the Director of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre, will speak to us on behalf of the OSCE Secretary General.

Next, we will hear some words from Mr. Mehmet Şevki Kulkuloğlu, the Vice-Chair of the Committee for Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, representing the President of the OSCE PA;

After I have given my own opening remarks, Ms. Elisa Massimino, President of Human Rights First, will conclude today's opening by delivering this year's keynote speech. Thank you very much for being with us. It is an honor and a privilege to welcome you here in Warsaw, and we are all looking forward to what you have to share with us today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would also like to welcome the representatives from the participating States, from OSCE Institutions, from the media, and, very importantly, from Civil Society.

I would furthermore like to welcome all viewers who are with us today through the live stream on the OSCE website. The fact that it is possible to watch this year's HDIM live on the Internet, from any part of the World, is a demonstration of my commitment to modernizing and reforming the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

Before I give the floor to our distinguished speakers, I would like to thank our dedicated ODIHR staff, who have gone to great lengths to make this Human Dimension Implementation Meeting possible. As you well know, this is my first HDIM as ODIHR Director, and I feel proud and humbled for having the opportunity to work with such excellent colleagues.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please now welcome with me Ambassador Thomas Greminger, who will be welcoming us on behalf of the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship.

[Opening Speeches]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am certainly not the first one to start a speech with this very line, and yet, I believe, it holds true this time again: This is a special year.

The events of 2014 are certainly going to be remembered for many years to come; but there are also a number of historical anniversaries that occur in this year. Let's take a look back in history:

The Congress of Vienna, for example, was held almost exactly 200 years ago, in September 1814. While the outcome of the Congress is certainly not positively remembered because of its rather reactionary result of restoration, it is by many historians considered to be the birthplace of modern, multilateral diplomacy.

And, indeed, this multilateral diplomacy lies at the very heart of the OSCE.

While attempts to codify diplomatic immunity at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 failed, it was in the very same city that the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations was negotiated. This highly important international treaty came into effect almost exactly 50 years ago, and to date it regulates the daily work of many of the people gathered here today.

But the year 2014 must also be associated with more tragic dates: It was just a little bit more than a hundred years ago when World War I started with the Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. This war marked the beginning of what the prominent historian Eric Hobsbawm called the "short

Twentieth Century”, from the beginning of World War I until the end of the Cold War; a time that will be remembered for some of the cruelest crimes against humanity ever committed.

World War II, without any doubt the culmination point of these crimes, started almost exactly 75 years ago, with the attack of Nazi Germany on Poland on September 1st 1939.

While some of this may seem very remote, none of these dates will ever lose their relevance. They remain relevant as important turning points in time that influenced the destinies and ended the lives of many millions of people. But they also stand as warning signs for the generations to come.

And while many of the world’s leaders publicly commemorated the victims of these wars in numerous ceremonies filled with words of grief and regret, people all over Europe and, indeed, the whole World are worried that the threat of war in Europe, long thought overcome on this continent, has returned.

Even though we hope that the armed struggle we have all been so concerned about in the recent past is losing its intensity, thanks also to the restless efforts of leading OSCE personalities, a fundamental conflict between the parties concerned remains.

This conflict is, among other reasons, about access to infrastructure and resources, and about strategic interests. But I do believe that at the very heart of this struggle lies, as in all conflicts, a normative battle. A battle for values.

When it is argued by some, as we have heard time and again, that human rights are nothing but a proxy used to destabilize governments; that efforts to improve the livelihood of religious, ethnic or sexual minorities are, in fact, plots orchestrated by foreign powers to bring civil unrest, this only demonstrates that there is a fundamental misunderstanding as to what the values that underlie these efforts are about.

When those who protect others against the abuse of power are labeled unpatriotic and traitors to a greater national good, those who proclaim this succumb to a flawed logic.

The very concept of human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed by numerous OSCE Third Dimension Commitments, such as those agreed in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 or the 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, is - and must be - universally applicable. The idea that human rights could only be valid in one part of the world or could be used by one government against another is therefore based on a flawed premise.

For human rights are rights serving to protect the individual against any government, or any other entity infringing upon the individual's fundamental

freedoms. They are rooted in values that are inherent to every human being, defending the individual from any abuse of power, no matter where and when.

The real struggle, therefore, is not between East and West, between North and South, but between those who abuse their power and those who exercise restraint in order to protect the individual's human rights. This is what the Human Dimension is very much about.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

ODIHR has, from its very beginnings, strived to protect and to serve these rights of the individual.

It is our daily work to support those who are threatened in their right to exercise their fundamental right to live free from discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religious, political or other opinion, as well as to foster respect for rule of law, democratic values, human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion or belief;

We have, furthermore, with the 1994 Budapest Document and the 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration, committed ourselves to protect and support those who risk their safety and their very lives to defend and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms of others: Human Rights Defenders.

These are people who deserve our greatest respect: Individuals who face harassment, threats and intimidation for devoting their time and energy to the promotion and protection of human rights.

The Human Rights Defenders Guidelines, developed and published under the auspices of my esteemed predecessor, Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, are an invaluable tool to support their laudable, yet dangerous work. It is a privilege for me to continue his work as Director of ODIHR with the translation and distribution of the Guidelines, hopefully throughout the participating States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The development of new technologies is rapidly changing the circumstances under which we all live, but also under which Human Rights Defenders operate.

On the one hand, the digital age offers incredible possibilities when it comes to the documentation of human rights violations. With smartphones and wireless Internet access becoming increasingly ubiquitous, everything can be photographed, recorded and published for a worldwide audience to see within minutes. It has never been easier to spread the word about any abuse of power; access to any kind of media and impartial information has never been more widespread.

But the abusers of power, those who put the validity of human rights in question, can also make use of these new possibilities. With new technologies allowing to track all movements, to easily gather compromising information and to infiltrate the spheres that are most intimate for each individual, we must step up our measures to protect ourselves and those who engage in protecting other people's rights. But in order to prevent this from becoming a digital arms race where only the stronger party will prevail, all participants must adhere to those basic rules we call human rights.

For the right to privacy is as much of a human right as any other. And in an age where information becomes one of the most valuable commodities, where entire companies turn over billions purely based on their knowledge of people's consumer preferences or health records, we must be extremely vigilant as to how we treat and process these data.

On the other hand, the rights of those who use these new technologies as a means to exercise their right of freedom of expression or association must also be protected. A blogger, for example, writing about the misconduct of a local administration, deserves the same protection as a journalist working for a conventional media outlet. Given that an opinion expressed in written and disseminated on the Internet may easily reach a larger audience, those who express their opinion online deserve the same amount of protection as those who do it offline.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Freedom of expression is of the utmost importance for our concept of fundamental freedoms. But sometimes the thin line between the expression of an opinion and hate speech is crossed.

One of the areas where this may lead to particularly emotional outbursts is where it touches on questions faith. And indeed we are, despite growing secularization, experiencing a surge of conflicts rooted in religion.

This does not only concern the aspect of freedom of belief, but also applies to situations where Religion is used as a vehicle to exercise power over others or as a pretext to infringe on other people's rights.

The longstanding commitments of the OSCE community on freedom of belief are still very far from being met. Too many religious communities all over the OSCE area still face restrictions with regard to their right to gather, worship or register their legitimate activities.

Our message in this respect is clear: We stand ready to protect those who want to believe and want to exercise their right to freedom of religion. But we are also ready to guarantee the right to have any belief, including those who have no spiritual belief at all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do know that some of the things I have said today were abstract, but also somewhat controversial. But controversy makes life more interesting. I hope that we will have many more controversial debates over the next two weeks, debates where every voice can be heard and everybody can participate on an equal footing.

In the following days we will be able to discuss these and many other issues in 18 Working Sessions covering the entire spectrum of OSCE human dimension commitments. There will furthermore be more than 80 side events, along with many other opportunities to have informal discussions with participants from the whole OSCE area.

The goal of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, as it has been since our first meeting more than 20 years ago, is to conduct a peer-review of the implementation of commitments among the participating States, to listen to the concerns and proposals from Civil Society and to discuss the assessment of this implementation by ODIHR and other OSCE Institutions, as well as Field Operations, whose role is to monitor, assist and report to participating States according to their respective mandates.

ODIHR has been very active in monitoring the implementation of human dimension commitments in a number of areas covered by our mandate, from elections to fair trial rights and to freedom of peaceful assembly. I appreciate that

most participating States have been open to our monitoring and have facilitated the work of our observers on the ground. I would like to thank them for this and strongly encourage all participating States to use the opportunity and take further advantage of ODIHR's monitoring work.

Because only if we engage in an open dialogue with each other, applying equal standards all over the OSCE area, can we find effective means to translate our commitments into meaningful realities for the individuals in the participating States, guaranteeing a life for each and every one of them, based on the protection of their human rights, their freedom and their human dignity.

Thank you very much for your attention.