



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Response to the Report by the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)**

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
May 14, 2020

Madam Director, welcome back to the Permanent Council, even though it is by videolink. We always look forward to hearing your valuable insights on the state of democratic institutions and human rights in the OSCE region. ODIHR's role is more critical than ever, as we confront one of the most daunting challenges to our comprehensive security since the end of World War II.

As you noted, OSCE participating States have responded to the coronavirus crisis by taking a wide range of steps, including emergency measures that impact human rights and fundamental freedoms. Many are merited, and intended to protect human life and health, but some appear to be impinging on human rights and fundamental freedoms. I know you share our view that governments should not use the pandemic to crack down on political opposition, compromise the electoral process, suppress independent media and civil society activity, permanently expanding executive authorities, or legitimizing arbitrary or unlawful use of monitoring technologies, to undermine human rights and fundamental freedoms, on this we agree.

The United States believes the COVID-19-related challenges we face lie squarely within the OSCE's existing responsibilities and competence, as they affect all three dimensions of our security—not least the human dimension. One element of this challenge is to shine a light on the threats to human rights and fundamental freedoms that arise from governments' responses to COVID-19. As the United States has done in the past, during the pandemic we will continue to speak out when we think that OSCE principles are undermined, human rights are at risk, or commitments are not upheld. And we know that we are not alone in this position and these observations.

ODIHR is well positioned to track actions by participating States to meet these challenges; highlight best practices; and identify and document the long-term impact of coronavirus restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms, including of members of ethnic, racial and religious minorities and other vulnerable groups; civil society; media freedom; labor rights; rule of law and democratic institutions and processes. We commend the efforts ODIHR, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and other OSCE bodies have already made to draw attention to human dimension concerns during this pandemic. We look forward to the report that you are compiling in this regard and are pleased to offer assistance to ensure its success. This will not be a one-time effort. We all live with the human and societal costs of this pandemic, and will for years. We need to find ways to rebuild and confirm institutions and structures that make a society diverse, prosperous, and free. Documenting and sharing

ways to respond to the pandemic's impact is the first step in rebuilding a stronger and more resilient society for future generations. So we continue to emphasize this point that you've made as to the impact in realization of the dangers of the response to the coronavirus epidemic.

Allow me to turn to ODIHR's 2019 Annual Report. The priorities you expressed—fostering the rule of law, respect for human rights, independent judiciaries, civil society, and ensuring all in our territory are able to enjoy the protections and freedoms to which we have all committed—are exactly correct. These priorities were rightly emphasized before COVID-19 and should remain so during this time of crisis. The United States values the work in all these areas, as should all participating States.

The United States reiterates our support for ODIHR's unwavering dedication to an essential component of OSCE's support for democracy: election observation. Free and fair elections that genuinely reflect the will of the people are essential for a healthy, functioning democracy. We are encouraged by the efforts made in some OSCE participating States to improve election practices. We look forward to collaborating with ODIHR in the run-up to U.S. general elections in November.

Madam Director, ODIHR's Annual Report illustrates the broad scope of ODIHR's activities and is proof of your institution's value added, expertise, and efficiency, especially given resource constraints. The United States is proud to support your programs, including those that bolster democratic elections; protect human rights defenders; combat anti-Semitism, other forms of intolerance, and hate crimes; fight trafficking in persons; and engage Roma and Sinti youth. We also commend your inclusion of women's rights and gender equality as issues that cut across both geography and dimension and should be integrated into every aspect of our work at OSCE.

The United States supports ODIHR's organizing timely Human Dimension events and activities throughout the year. Given the shrinking space for civil society in a number of participating States, it is critical we oppose measures that would restrict civil society access to or participation in OSCE events, including those in the Human Dimension. COVID-19 presents unique challenges, Madam Director,—both technical and more substantive—to our ability to hold mandated OSCE events. We will need to work together with ODIHR, other OSCE bodies, the Chairmanship, and civil society to meet these challenges.

The United States will continue to support and defend ODIHR's autonomy, mandate, and budget, so that it can continue its important work and take on the mantle of recording the pandemic's impact. We welcome the opportunity to hear your vision for the future and what you seek to achieve in your second term. We look forward to working with you, the Albanian Chairmanship, and other concerned participating States to strengthen ODIHR and thus strengthen our collective security.

Madam Director, my country and I personally thank you for your efforts, and you may look forward to our cooperation with you in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.