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**OPENING STATEMENT BY THE
OSCE CHAIRPERSON-IN-OFFICE AND FEDERAL MINISTER FOR
EUROPE, INTEGRATION AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF AUSTRIA,
MR. SEBASTIAN KURZ, AT THE OPENING SESSION
OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH MEETING OF THE
OSCE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

Vienna, 7 December 2017

Dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to be able to welcome you to Vienna today.

At our meeting in Mauerbach in July, we were able to hold fruitful talks at the midway point of this year.

The decision that we took there to fill the four leading positions in the OSCE was very important for the functioning of our Organization. I am especially pleased therefore to be able to welcome among us today our Secretary General, Thomas Greminger, our Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Ingibjörg Gísladóttir, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir, and our High Commissioner on National Minorities, Lamberto Zannier.

Dear colleagues,

We set ourselves three special priorities this year:

- To improve the situation of the local population in conflicts;
- To counter the danger of radicalization together;
- To rebuild trust among the participating States.

As far as the military conflicts are concerned, we are still confronted every day by fatalities, victims of military operations and violence. In the crisis in and around Ukraine alone, 3.8 million people on both sides of the line of contact are dependent on humanitarian support. We have therefore placed our focus on the fate of the civilian population. The OSCE can make a tangible contribution here; and it must do so. I am pleased that we – with all the States around this table here – have been able to achieve something together. Owing to time constraints, I will give only three examples:

- In Ukraine we were able to enlarge the mandate and budget of the OSCE Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM). During my visit to the line of contact I was able to ascertain that the population there would like more patrols. Now – at least in theory – round-the-clock monitoring by the SMM is possible with the latest technology. Monitoring along the entire line of contact, however, requires a general improvement in the security situation.
- In the Republic of Moldova we were able to achieve tangible progress for the local population: for example, the opening of a bridge that had been closed for 25 years and the recognition of university qualifications. This will make people's lives considerably easier.
- In Georgia we dealt with current environmental questions across the contact lines and promoted dialogue.

These are all small measures, but they make life easier for the local population. I am pleased that we have been able to help in these various places.

In addition to the armed conflicts in the OSCE area, we have been greatly concerned about the threat posed by radicalization and terrorism, from which none of our countries are safe – as the attacks this year have made all too tragically clear. It was a concern of mine that we work together in that regard. There are movements attempting to promote fear and unrest so as to disrupt and even destroy life together in our societies. They come from many different directions – Islamic radicalization, particularly in our countries, terrorist organizations, but also both right- and left-wing political extremism willing to resort to violence.

The report by Professor Neumann, with its recommendations as to how we as States can combat radicalization effectively and make better use of the OSCE as a networking hub, was an important contribution. We should now engage in the necessary follow-up.

In order to help here and strengthen the role of the OSCE in the long term, I have decided to provide the Organization – more specifically the OSCE Secretariat's Action against Terrorism Unit – with support amounting to one quarter of a million euros. In this way, the experience can be collated in a manual on prevention, providing States with expertise to help with their implementation.

The crisis of confidence between our countries continues. We must work against this trend. Greater security can only be achieved with greater trust. We have therefore deliberately chosen topics that affect all States and require common solutions; arranged meetings in such a way that the special concerns and wishes of the participating States are taken into account as far as possible; and lastly organized this Ministerial Council meeting in such a way that we can make the best possible use of the OSCE as a platform for dialogue.

In this way, building on our decision in Hamburg last year, we were able this year to begin the Structured Dialogue on challenges and risks in the OSCE area; to successfully hold the "5+2" talks in Vienna two weeks ago; and to organize numerous meetings on the margins of this Ministerial Council on different topics, for example very specific talks on the security situation in Ukraine.

Dear colleagues,

The OSCE is more indispensable than ever today for security in Europe. With all its instruments and events in the three dimensions, with all its field missions and projects, the OSCE is a unique forum that we should use more.

The economic and environmental dimension helps to overcome economic and political dividing lines. This year we were able to give impetus to greater economic participation, better governance, more connectivity and closer co-operation in the environmental field.

Capacity-building and increased co-operation in the areas of Internet security, border management and policing are also important components of our work in the OSCE.

Our dialogue on human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law is often controversial, but also indispensable. This also includes the important aspect of the involvement of civil society in OSCE events. As the holder of the Chairmanship, we have heard the concerns of some delegations on this question and take these concerns very seriously. We have therefore begun an informal process of reflection and hope that we can soon come to a common understanding.

In an organization with 57 participating States not everyone can be satisfied all the time. Allow me, however, to remind you that our co-operation is based on rules that we have all accepted by consensus. It is therefore also important that we all abide by these rules. We can only solve challenges through consensus. And trust, dialogue and a willingness to compromise are needed to achieve this consensus.

I am therefore following the discussions about the reform of the participating States' contributions to the OSCE budget with increasing concern. We need a solution here so as not to jeopardize a stable basis for the financing of the Organization.

I hope I can count on you to enable us to achieve results at this Ministerial Council that reflect our determination to give the citizens in the OSCE area more security.

I am looking forward to your participation and the opportunity for exchange within the plenary session that will follow, but also during our lunch together and the various meetings and discussions on the margins of our conference.