



**2020 Albanian OSCE Chairmanship High-Level Conference**  
**“Good Governance and the Fight against Corruption in the Digital Era: Strengthening the Principles of Transparency, Integrity and Accountability”**

Vienna, 6 July 2020

**Opening Address**

OSCE Chairperson-in-Office,  
Prime Minister and Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania  
H.E. Edi Rama

*Checked against delivery*

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Thank you very much.

I address with a lot of pleasure this High-Level Conference, welcoming everyone and regretting that this event is not taking place in Tirana to mark the midpoint of our Chairmanship, but this is, let's say the second-best option.

I look very much forward to welcome everyone to our capital in a not too distant future.

Right from the start, the OSCE has responded quickly and effectively I would say, to the challenges of this pandemic. Discussions in Vienna have continued, two mandated meetings have been conducted via on-line platforms and the Annual Security Review Conference in a blended format. Field operations have kept moving forward with their activities.

Although digital platforms are no substitute for face-to-face meetings, there have been some upsides. Participation at our meetings has opened up to a wider audience, including those with limited resources for international travel. We should reflect on this, and think about how we can maintain and extend wider participation when we finally return to face-to-face meetings.

And COVID is as a matter of fact accelerating digitalization.

We in the OSCE have learned new skills and got used to new ways of conducting our business - diminishing our carbon footprint in the process.

So has our wider society. We are all benefitting from the burgeoning of webinars and information-sharing. And the crisis has also led to a demand for greater transparency, citizen information and accountability which, most likely, will be here to stay in the post-COVID world.

As we are going to hear in the course of this conference, this acceleration of digitalization has important, positive implications for the fight against corruption and for increasing accountability.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Corruption is an issue which touches us all. No person, no public official, no participating State or institution is immune to it. And we are all impacted by the consequences.

The IMF stated in a recent report that reducing corruption across all countries would increase total tax revenues by \$1 trillion, or roughly 1.25 percent of global GDP.

In addition to shrinking tax revenue, corruption distorts markets and empowers organized crime.

But the effects of corruption are not limited to the economic sphere. Corruptive practices undermine rule of law and democracy by eroding the trust of citizens in government and institutions – it corrodes the foundations of our social compact.

The cross-dimensional nature of corruption and the very real risks it poses for the security of our States and of our region are clearly outlined in OSCE commitments.

Our 1999 Charter for European Security recognized that “corruption poses a great threat to the OSCE’s shared values. It generates instability and reaches into many aspects of the security, economic and human dimensions.” In the Charter, participating States pledged “to strengthen their efforts to combat corruption and the conditions that foster it and to promote a framework for good governance and public integrity.”

Since then a series of more detailed commitments have been adopted to operationalise these core principles. As Chair-in-Office, I welcome the proposals of a number of participating States to update these commitments, particularly in light of new technologies, and look forward to our further discussions in the course of this meeting.

But let us be clear and focused: combating corruption is ultimately a question of political will.

We have made important progress in this endeavour, but are still well short of the zero tolerance we aspire to. Instead of necessary comprehensive reform and cultural change to implement commitments, we are all too often opt for stand-alone anti-corruption initiatives: new laws, the establishment of anti-corruption authorities, anti-corruption public information campaigns and so on.

All of these measures are welcome in themselves, but are often little more than box-ticking exercises. On so many fronts, we need to move from political declarations to effective action, from creating brand new institutions and then marginalizing them, to an integrated holistic approach.

I will underline again: the bottom line is the political will.

Twenty years of progress risks stalling if we allow the fight against corruption to be deprioritised–if national anti-corruption systems enjoy only token support from government and law-makers.

But fighting corruption and all corruptive practices is not enough unless we extend our efforts in ensuring full independence of the judiciary.

Good governance cannot prosper where independent institutions and the judiciary are under attack, as is the case in some parts of the OSCE region. If we allow these oversight mechanisms to be weakened, and their impartiality undermined, there is a real risk of back-sliding on our anti-corruption achievements.

Now more than ever, with the pandemic exposing deepening inequalities and serious failures of governance, corruption represents a real threat to security, stability and democracy.

Corruption thrives during times of crisis, when resources and attention are directed elsewhere and governments are less able to respond promptly and effectively. With unprecedented amounts of public funds being pumped into the economy for emergency spending measures, we need to ensure that strong transparency and anti-corruption guarantees are in place and fully operational.

We do well to recall the fall-out from the 2008 economic crisis and the effects of the corrosive perception of double-standards: impunity and bail-outs for those most directly responsible, austerity for everyone else. Our societies have paid – and are still paying – a heavy political price for passing over corruption at high-levels while tax-payers footed the bill.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the strong link between weak rule of law, corruption, and respect for fundamental rights, including social and economic rights of all citizens in our societies. The risk that corruption poses to our social fabric is great.

Now, in the midst of this on-going crisis, we need to redouble our anti-corruption efforts and end impunity. We owe this to the vulnerable in our societies, those economically vulnerable but also women, young people, minorities who are bearing the brunt of this public health and economic crisis. Finally, we must pay more attention to the potential of the young within the OSCE area with regard to the fight against corruption. The young people in our countries are increasingly using digital media and innovative ways to expose corruptive practices. We must stick to engage civil society and the young in particular to the end of strengthening the culture of zero tolerance to corruption in our societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All OSCE participating States have ratified or acceded to the UN Convention against Corruption. Participating States, international organizations and other actors, including the business community, civil society and the media, need to redouble their efforts in inclusive and cooperative responses to corruption.

We need to strive for higher public standards of governance, built on the three pillars of transparency, accountability and oversight.

The OSCE's comprehensive approach to security and our peer-to-peer organizational ethos offers a unique platform for dialogue, exchange of best practices and experiences, and regional cooperation.

Last week we marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the OSCE Copenhagen Document. In 1990, when Albania only had observer status at the OSCE, the participating States expressed the conviction “full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the development of societies based on pluralistic democracy and the rule of law are prerequisites for the peace, security, justice and co-operation that they seek to establish in Europe”.

They also affirmed that “protection and promotion of fundamental rights, human rights and freedoms is one of the basic purposes of governments “and reaffirmed the interdependency of democracy and the rule of law. We must work jointly and relentlessly to uphold the principle in strengthening this document whilst we take new challenges posed to our democracies by the new regional and global realities.

We are all equals in the OSCE. Each participating State has full ownership over how to implement these commitments, reflecting the specific situation of each country. But we can all benefit from each-others experiences and lessons learnt. It is in this context of reciprocal respect that we can build and sustain the political will for zero tolerance.

I hope this conference will provide for a fruitful exchange of experience and that it will lead to strengthened OSCE-wide action against corruption.

And here I conclude by saluting all of you in distance and expressing my regret that we couldn't do it in Tirana but also in the meantime my wish that this experience of having this ongoing activities within the OSCE by adopting ourselves to the new situation will help us to be richer in terms of practices and to have a wider participation in our ongoing operations for years to come.

Thank you all and let me end by sending my very best regards to everyone and especially to our dear Secretary General we see fighting everyday and keeping on track the whole operations.

Thank you very much.