

**HEAD OF PRESENCE'S REMARKS AT WEBINAR
"TOWARD A GREATER INTERCULTURAL, INTERFAITH AND INTERRELIGIOUS
CO-OPERATION IN WESTERN BALKANS"**

3 February 2021

It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to participate in the opening of this webinar, dedicated to an ever-relevant topic for societies everywhere these days: intercultural, interreligious and interfaith cooperation.

Let me start by thanking the Albanian Helsinki Committee (AHC), for the kind invitation, along to those who have supported this initiative: the DRA, Civic Solidarity Platform and Germany.

I am here in my capacity of Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, and with your indulgence, I am here as a human being deeply interested in this very important subject of discussion.

I feel privileged to serve in Albania, to live and work among the people here. Albania is a model of tolerant democracy, where people from different religious beliefs live together in peace, where webinars like today's one, bringing together representatives from different religious communities, could easily take place in presence if it was not for Covid.

On the 27 January, the other day, we commemorated the International Holocaust Memorial Day. A day of memory, and memory translates into life taking over the ticking of time, a well inside our conscience in which to tap into to receive inspiration and bravery. We see so much violence around us in the World that it barely makes the headlines anymore. How many times have we read about the killing of innocent people in the name of intolerance?

Again, Albania testifies for an extraordinary level of tolerance that can serve as an example for many.

Also the OSCE, and I am coming to the core reason for my intervention, has a lot to offer to this debate. Over the years, we have developed a significant body of commitments on religious freedom, part of the broader framework of OSCE principles and provisions in the fight against all forms of intolerance and discrimination, for the promotion of the rule of law and universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. A more just, inclusive and participative society is a stable and secure society, and it is a contributor to peace and security at regional and international level.

The work of the OSCE/ODIHR in the fight against intolerance and hate crimes is widely regarded as a valuable tool available to participating States. From the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 to the OSCE Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990), the obligation of States to respect the freedom of religion and belief has been central. In Astana, twenty years later, we went further and we

adopted the Declaration: Towards a Security Community (2010), in which the OSCE instead of simply asking participating States to respect these principles, invited to take concrete actions, and I quote: “*efforts must be made to promote freedom of religion or belief and to combat intolerance and discrimination.*”

And what about our work here on the ground, in Albania?

The Presence and the Albanian Institutions work together to promote interreligious and interfaith co-operation. Last year, as we commemorated the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the OSCE Albania’s Chairpersonship reaffirmed its commitment to intensify efforts to promote human dignity and confront hate and hate speech, whenever and wherever it occurs.

Moreover, on 4 February 2020, the Albanian CiO organized a high-level conference, where participants called for a co-ordinated effort, incorporating the experiences of targeted communities, to curb the tide of anti-Semitism in the OSCE region.

Actually, since 2017, in line with its efforts in promoting active citizen participation and multicultural dialogue, the OSCE Presence, in co-operation with the Municipality of Tirana, the Regional Youth Co-operation Office (RYCO), has organized the “Youth Trail: Promoting OSCE Values in the Western Balkans”. Every year (except for 2020 due to the pandemic), tens of young people from all over the Balkans participate the Youth Trail to share, network and engage in recreational and learning activities. These activities highlight the enriching potential to strengthen regional co-operation, inter alia, by also engaging with youth and related organizations, such as RYCO. The Youth Trail has given Western Balkans’ youth the opportunity to learn more from each other’s experiences, to associate with one another without prejudice and to foster regional peacebuilding as part of a new generation.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I truly believe that today’s initiative is a very meaningful one. This region has had its historical share of conflict and grief, of religious intolerance, hate and discrimination. This has to end through regional examples, and here Albania has a lot to share with others.

The primacy of individual rights and liberties lies on the principle of equality of rights and of dignity between all people. It presupposes reciprocal tolerance for diversities and inter-cultural dialogue, even between systems of value which are different one the other, provided that those differences do not infringe non-negotiable values.

In fact, I truly believe that we live better if we can live a meaningful and a deep life. And a greater intercultural, interfaith and interreligious co-operation contributes to make our lives richer.

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