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Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

Address by
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to the
**European Regional Forum on Minority Issues on
"Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities"**

[Check against delivery]

21 September 2020

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues,

Please allow me to thank the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, and the other organizers of the European Regional Forum on Minority Issues for providing an important and much needed platform to discuss and propose concrete recommendations to concerns related to minority rights and interethnic relations.

As you may know, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) is an instrument of conflict prevention mandated to assist the OSCE participating States in their efforts to avoid interethnic tensions from turning into conflict. In addition to providing early warning at the first sign of conflict, the High Commissioner provides legal and policy advice to promote sustainable integration of diverse societies. The office also implements targeted programmes and disseminates a rich compilation of thematic Recommendations and Guidelines on national minority issues related to, among others, education rights, language rights, participation in public life, multi-ethnic policing, media, and inter-State relations.

The focus of this year's European Regional Forum on Minority Issues is on hate speech and the role that social media plays in this. The role of social media in diverse societies is a matter to which my office has devoted significant attention in the past few years. In February 2019, then High Commissioner Lamberto Zannier launched *The Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age*. These Guidelines advise States on how to use the media, and in particular digital media, as a tool for conflict prevention and societal integration. They are based on the premise that States need to honour their international commitments to ensure that there is a favourable environment for freedom of expression and participation in public debate for everyone, that everyone can participate in that debate in an equitable and fair way, and that they can do so freely, safely and without fear. As such, they articulate a series of concrete recommendations on how to shape a media landscape that promotes multilingualism, participation and representation of all groups in society, including minorities.

Based on this experience, I am happy to share some observations and thoughts.

Fundamental transformations have taken place in the media landscape in the last decade. New technologies have enriched the media, with a proliferation of new platforms, alongside the more traditional outlets. That has meant enhanced opportunities to generate and access an abundance of diverse content, and increased tools for individualized and interactive participation in public debate. While such changes have affected the lives of everyone, they have affected diverse societies in specific ways.

The increased ability of the new media to disseminate information, and reach and connect people, has offered all groups in society, including minorities, opportunities to shape distinct identities, and present and explore different viewpoints. The existence of multiple, often freely accessible, platforms can boost empowerment, participation and representation of individuals belonging to minority communities. New media also provide the tools to support and promote multilingualism. As the media increasingly transcends national borders, minorities and other diverse groups can easily form and rely on transnational information networks.

At the same time, however, these developments also pose risks for peace and stability. Transnational media networks have the potential to interfere in bilateral relations and, sometimes, in integration processes. As we are seeing, social media platforms can be used to exploit or fuel interethnic divisions. And this brings me to the core of this discussion: social media provides a tremendously efficient vehicle for spreading, echoing and amplifying the inflammatory, xenophobic and racist language that is increasingly permeating political discourse globally. In that sense, social media can be seen not only as a mirror of society, but also as a magnifier of some of its worst traits.

Minorities and other vulnerable groups are an easy target, often instrumentalized to serve specific political agendas or scapegoated as enemies of the nation, often conceived and presented as a homogeneous, exclusive, mono-ethnic entity. Unfortunately, it can be just a few short steps from expressions of discrimination and hatred on social media to actual violence in the real world, and thence to atrocity crimes. As we know, crises, including conflict and political instability, humanitarian emergencies or economic recessions, can exacerbate discrimination and hatred and divide already fragile societies even further. In the past years, successive immigration waves into Europe have spurred strong anti-immigrant and, often, anti-Muslim sentiments. Anti-Semitism is also on the rise. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for discrimination against vulnerable groups. Especially in the first

phase of the pandemic, there were many reported cases of members of national minorities being accused of spreading the virus. This is one of the factors that motivated Ambassador Zannier to issue a set of recommendations on how States could ensure that their responses to COVID-19 would take the needs of everyone in society into account. As part of those recommendations, Zannier urged authorities "to be especially vigilant in monitoring and combatting instances of intolerance and xenophobia and other forms of "otherization" based on identity, ethnicity, language, religion or culture." Specifically on the media, he recommended that they "invest in shared media spaces for minorities and majorities to provide trustworthy sources of information". Such approaches would help turn a crisis that carries the risk of fragmentation into an opportunity to foster social cohesion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The issue of discrimination and hate speech does not start nor end with social media. The response should therefore also take a much broader approach that attempts to tackle the root causes of interethnic tensions and foster social integration. With its Recommendations and Guidelines, covering a number of policy areas relevant to minority rights and interethnic relations, the office of the HCNM has a wealth of experience in designing and promoting such approaches, and assisting the OSCE participating States in adapting them to local contexts.

Social media can and should help us recognize and identify early warning signs of interethnic tensions and atrocity crimes, such as instances of hate speech. Monitoring trends in hate speech and hate crime is a first step to addressing the issue. Negative narratives and stereotypes can be challenged on social media. Political and religious leaders have an important role to play in sharing positive messages. Efforts should be directed at creating inclusive media spaces, an ingredient of any democratic and inclusive society.

However, we should not forget that conflict and human rights abuses are the result of creeping longer-term processes, and of the conditions that help them thrive. Looking at society as a whole, and taking a multi-faceted and long-term approach that protects minority rights and promotes inclusion in a number of spheres of public life, is, in the experience of successive High Commissioners, the best recipe for peace and stability.

Thank you for your attention, and I am looking forward to the discussion.