



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Inaugural Remarks at the Permanent Council Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid

Vienna, 21 January 2021

Madam Chairperson,
Ambassadors,
Dear Colleagues,

First of all, a huge thank you for your warm welcome as I take up my new post. I am very sorry that my first address to the Permanent Council has to be delivered virtually, but I look forward to meeting all of you in person over the coming weeks.

I am honored and excited to be working for the OSCE. There is no other security organization in our region which has so much potential to bridge differences through dialogue and cooperation, to rebuild trust, and to help reduce tensions. I have always been a true believer in multilateralism and cooperative security, and over the years during my career I have had lots of contact with the OSCE – starting with the Paris Summit, which I attended as a young diplomat. More recently I have participated in a number of Ministerial Councils, as well as the very important Astana Summit. I have always understood how useful the OSCE is as an inclusive platform for conflict prevention and also for confidence building in our region – but always from an outsider’s perspective.

But now I’m on the inside, and I’m thrilled to be on the OSCE team. In the short time I’ve been here, I have already been deeply impressed by how much good work this Organization does when it comes to promoting peace and security in all three dimensions throughout our region and beyond. One of my priorities as Secretary General will be to make this important work better known.

My top priority, of course, will be to support the Chair, the Troika, and all of you, the participating States, to ensure that our Organization is well equipped to help you to implement your commitments, to pursue dialogue, and to tackle shared security challenges together.

I will work hard to ensure that the Secretariat is responsive to the needs of the entire Organization; that it has the capacity to fulfill those needs; and that rules and procedures are properly followed throughout the Organization.

You can count on me to be transparent, to be straightforward and always accountable. I will take the perspectives and concerns of all participating States into consideration. I am committed to a collaborative approach, and I look forward to working in close partnership with all of you. And let me also say that my door will always be open to you.

I will also do my utmost to promote the principles that the OSCE stands for, across all three dimensions, and to support our shared commitment to solving problems through dialogue and cooperation. I will work hard to advocate and build support for the OSCE's important role in strengthening security and stability in our region, and to raise the OSCE's profile. And in line with the Secretary General's mandate, I will promote closer cooperation with our Asian and Mediterranean Partners, and with relevant international and regional organizations – above all with the United Nations since we have a responsibility to advance the global agenda in our region, including supporting progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. I will also strive to ensure that the OSCE maintains its vibrant engagement with civil society and with young people.

Dear colleagues,

We are living in extraordinary times. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a profound impact on our societies and our economies. It is feeding distrust, it is feeding polarization, it is intensifying inequalities, and it is making our security environment more unstable and unpredictable. The pandemic's impact on communities affected by conflict is particularly hard. It is also complicating efforts to prevent and to manage conflict.

COVID-19 has also shown just how interconnected and interdependent our security is. Especially in this context, the OSCE needs to pull together and act as one team, focusing on our shared commitment to cooperative security. So I am eager to work in partnership with all of you to build a stronger sense of common purpose across the entire OSCE.

The OSCE's experience in addressing the consequences of the pandemic – both for comprehensive security in our region, but also for our own operations – demonstrates our strength as a flexible and innovative organization. But I think it also highlights that the OSCE must be ready to meet new challenges – both those we already see on the horizon, and those we cannot yet imagine. Who could have imagined COVID just a year ago? The next few years provide a timely opportunity to reflect together, under the leadership of our Chairs and with guidance from all of you, about where the OSCE should be when we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2025. We should be ambitious, and work together toward concrete outcomes that will strengthen security for all of us.

Encouraging a flexible and innovative “whole of OSCE” approach through closer cooperation between our field operations, the Secretariat, the Institutions and the Parliamentary Assembly will be one of my priorities – of course with full respect for our different mandates – to increase the impact of the OSCE's efforts. Last week I was pleased to have an early opportunity to meet

with the heads of all OSCE field operations to discuss how their structures contribute to our joint endeavor of bridging differences and increasing security in our region.

Conflict prevention is dear to my heart, and it is even more important now under COVID-19. So as we mark the tenth anniversary of Ministerial Council Decision 3/11 on the conflict cycle, I look forward to exploring together with you how we can get the most out of the OSCE's unique toolbox for preventing and managing conflicts. I am eager to hear your views, particularly on early warning, which I think is crucial.

I will work to strengthen a cross-dimensional approach to conflict prevention and building sustainable peace, recognizing that comprehensive security requires all three dimensions in their own right, and that they are also closely intertwined with each other. We see this in the daily work of our field operations, our Institutions, and also the Secretariat's programmatic departments, which in accordance with their specific mandates, support participating States on issues such as border security, countering corruption, mitigating the effects of environmental and climate change-related challenges, and promoting the rule of law and human rights and fundamental freedoms.

There is also ample evidence that increasing diversity and gender equality is one of the best ways to improve our effectiveness and to strengthen conflict prevention in a very concrete and pragmatic way. So I'm delighted about the Swedish Chair's focus on Women, Peace and Security. By increasing the meaningful inclusion of women in all phases of our conflict prevention and resolution efforts, we will help make peace processes more sustainable. There is empirical evidence for that.

Finally, I think we should be looking more closely at the nexus between technology and security, and how technology can be used to prevent conflict. Our Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has already built up a lot of experience that we can learn from. We should also be looking at how new technologies, including artificial intelligence, can increase the harmful impact of transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime – but can also serve as an important tool for addressing these and other threats. The OSCE is already doing some very good work on this – for example in countering trafficking in human beings, and strengthening border security – and I would like to explore this more.

Dear Ambassadors,

I will take my role as the OSCE's Chief Administrative Officer very seriously, and I will take a hands-on approach in overseeing the administration of the Organization, working closely with the Heads of the other Executive Structures, my Directors and our dedicated staff.

My ambition is to make our Organization more efficient, more effective, more transparent and accountable, more inclusive, and more collaborative.

The pandemic has shown how nimble the OSCE can be in responding to unexpected crises. We are all very grateful for the 2020 Albanian Chair's steady leadership in guiding us through an extraordinarily challenging year. And I know we are in equally capable hands this year with the Swedish Chair.

Throughout the pandemic, the Secretariat has played a key role in ensuring business continuity for the entire Organization – from enabling the decision-making bodies to continue meeting during lockdown, to supporting our field operations and Institutions in continuing to fulfill their mandates while ensuring duty of care for the entire OSCE staff. So I would also like to recognize the leadership of my predecessor, Thomas Greminger, and pay tribute to Ambassador Tuula Yrjölä as Officer in Charge for an excellent job done during a very difficult period.

And of course I would like to thank the Secretariat staff, who have been working extremely hard under challenging circumstances to support the whole Organization throughout the pandemic. I am grateful for their dedication and for their resilience, and I am excited and proud to work with such a committed team.

As the Organization's top manager, I consider taking care of our staff as my main duty.

I am a firm believer in the benefits of diversity, so I am committed to promoting gender parity at all staff levels, and a broader geographic representation among our staff. I am also committed to fostering a safe, inclusive and equitable work environment that is grounded in a culture of mutual respect and accountability. I will work with staff and managers to promote an organizational culture where women and men have equal opportunities to contribute and to succeed. We can all work more effectively if we have a workplace culture that is based on strong ethics and values.

There will be zero tolerance for sexual harassment and any other form of harassment. I aim to build a coordinated, Organization-wide response that enables us to meet international standards of duty of care to our staff. I will continue to improve our policies and practices with a focus on protection and prevention, and to foster a culture where staff feel safe speaking up. And I will set the tone from the top.

During the ongoing pandemic, protecting the health of all OSCE staff is more critical than ever. The Secretariat will continue to provide all necessary advice and support to our Institutions and field operations. At the Secretariat, the traffic light system has proven very effective and will remain in effect. I am in contact with the Austrian authorities, and we will continue to follow their guidance and adhere to their measures.

Let me say a word on vaccinations. As they become more widespread over the course of this year, I am hopeful of course that we will begin to see improvement in the COVID-19 situation and a gradual return to normalcy. I would like to be able to ensure that all OSCE staff who

want the vaccine can get it. (Of course no one will be forced to be vaccinated.) A task force which is led by our new Chief Medical Officer is planning the OSCE approach, taking WHO recommendations into account. The central pillar of our approach will be the inclusion of OSCE staff in the national vaccination programmes of our host countries, in line with the standard prioritization of those programmes. To those of you representing OSCE host countries, I will be enlisting your help. To our other participating States, your help may also be needed for any programme that the OSCE delivers directly itself. We will have lots of contact on this in the coming days and weeks.

I am very well aware that many participating States face economic constraints that have been made worse by the pandemic. To ensure that our Organization can continue to deliver on the mandates you have given us, I am committed to working with all of you to put our Organization on a solid financial footing. Let me assure you that I will do my utmost to ensure efficient and effective operations. You can count on me to be responsive and accountable, with a prudent eye on the bottom line.

I will work very closely with the Chair and with all of you in an open, transparent and consultative manner. When issues of concern arise, I will promptly bring them to your attention. I know this kind of early outreach worked well with the last budget submission, and we will continue this approach in the 2022 budget preparation process.

We need to be clear about what we set out to achieve, so I aim to implement a robust results-based management framework. I also plan to strengthen our evaluation work so that we can better demonstrate the added value and the impact of our work, identify opportunities for improvement, and ensure accountability to you, our participating States.

I see technology as a key administrative and programmatic tool to strengthen our capacities and advance our efforts. The pandemic has highlighted the possibilities, and I think we should build on positive lessons learned from remote working, from online meetings, also online learning, and other adaptations we have made. Although technology comes at a cost, I think we all appreciate the value it brings.

We also need to ensure that our Organization has a viable system for managing its human resources, and attracting and retaining the best people.

Getting better at communicating our successes will be key to building support for our Organization. We need to do more to publicize how our work benefits ordinary people and their communities. After all, everything we do is for the benefit of people. And you, dear ambassadors, can help by promoting the OSCE and our contributions to security also in our capitals.

I am grateful for the Swedish Chair's determined efforts to achieve consensus on this year's Unified Budget as soon as possible. And I would be very pleased if the participating States reached agreement on a budget that put our Organization on a path to better resourcing. I would

like to work with all of you to make progress on reform of our cumbersome annual budget process and to establish a better process for financing capital investment needs.

In closing, let me thank you for the trust and confidence you have placed in me. Let me end with a very personal note. In light of the challenges we are facing today, I believe we need the OSCE more than ever. I think the OSCE's consensus-based decision-making process is a strength because decisions taken by consensus are strong. But it should not be used to weaken our Organization. It is up to us what we make of this Organization – in this we have a collective responsibility.

I look forward to meeting all of you in person, and to working in partnership with you in the months and years ahead to the benefit of our Organization.

Thank you.