

Address by H.E. Ann Linde, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office

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Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to Stockholm and the 28th Ministerial Conference of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

I am truly delighted to see all of you in person. I thank you for coming together despite the difficulties and constraints of the pandemic.

It is a clear sign of the importance that we all attach to this organization.

We have gathered here in Stockholm at a time of turbulence and multiple crises across our region, many of which feature high on the OSCE's agenda.

To respond to this situation, we need common solutions.

This is the opportunity that our meeting here in Stockholm is presented with: to rebuild trust and cooperation amongst ourselves, the OSCE participating States. To confirm our support for the institutions and structures of the OSCE.

I hope we can approach our discussions in this spirit.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Sweden's year as OSCE Chair, like the year before, has been marred by a crisis without precedent in our lifetimes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed our vulnerabilities.

It has brought devastating human costs, new strains on international cooperation, vast disruption to daily life and increased inequality around the world. It has exacerbated democratic backsliding.

It has added pressure to an already fragile security situation, in Europe and elsewhere.

Polarisation is growing, between countries and within societies.

It is fuelled by international rivalry and public discontent.

By a decline of trust.

And like the COVID-19 virus itself, distrust is infectious and hard to contain.

We all know that a climate of resentment can turn into a climate of confrontation.

We need to reverse this trend.

Because almost eight years after the outbreak of conflict regarding Ukraine, the European security crisis is widening.

The tension that is currently building between Belarus and neighbouring countries sends us a warning. If we let this crisis in the heart of Europe escalate, the human and international ramifications could be severe.

Colleagues,

I fear that we – the countries and citizens of the OSCE region – are running low on trust just when we need it the most.

Because we are faced with challenges that can only be resolved through resilience and collective action.

Challenges that cut across borders, from climate change and pandemics to new and dangerous security threats.

We all experience this crisis of trust in the day-to-day work of the OSCE.

The breach of unanimously agreed principles and commitments, the abuse of the need for consensus as a weapon in negotiations, confrontation over dialogue.

This, sadly, is one part of our reality.

Yet the OSCE is based on the ideas of pluralism and trust, on the notion that even seemingly irreconcilable agendas can be brought together without confrontation.

That is what the OSCE can achieve in its best moments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sweden assumed the OSCE Chairpersonship with this mindset – to go back to basics. Back to the spirit and ideas that laid the foundation of the OSCE.

First, to the fundamental norms, principles and successful policies on which the OSCE was founded and which still form the bedrock of the European security order.

Because these commonly established rules – underpinned by the UN Charter and international law – are as righteous and powerful today as they were when the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter were signed.

Second, to the comprehensive concept of security that is at the heart of the OSCE.

Because meeting our citizens' legitimate aspirations for rights and freedom is as essential for peace and stability as military security.

And third, to conflict resolution based on international law and commonly agreed norms and principles.

Because accountability and predictability are preconditions for building trust. And distrust is a powerful promoter of instability and conflict.

This is why Sweden's Chairpersonship places emphasis on international law, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

On the pursuit of gender equality, women's economic empowerment and implementation of the women, peace and security agenda.

And on dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society and youth.

We will continue to do so even after our Chairpersonship has come to an end.

Colleagues,

The success of our common efforts is measured by our ability to improve the lives and well-being of people in the most vulnerable situations.

As Chairperson-in-Office, I have met with all OSCE field operations and met with civil society in each of the countries I have visited.

Many of these meetings included first hand accounts of how conflict and human rights abuses affect people in countries afflicted by conflict.

But I also witnessed the positive difference the OSCE makes in those situations. If proof of the OSCE's vitality was ever needed, it is provided every day in the field.

I thank the dedicated women and men who take part in OSCE field operations.

And I commend my personal and special representatives for their tireless efforts to seek solutions through dialogue.

You make a real contribution to peace, justice and dignity across our region.

Colleagues,

No conflict has a more polarising effect on European security than the one regarding Ukraine, including the Crimea. A top priority for Sweden's Chairpersonship, it remains a fundamental challenge to the European security order and continues to claim casualties and cause suffering among the populations on both sides of the line of conflict.

The heightened tensions in and around Ukraine that we have seen during this year are a cause of grave concern. And I am disheartened by the lack of progress towards a sustainable political

solution with full respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and within its internationally recognised borders.

On my two visits to Ukraine, I witnessed first hand how the conflict is taking its toll on the population.

Humanitarian needs must prevail over political considerations, crossing points should be opened on both sides of the contact line to ensure that civilians have access to their rights wherever they reside in Ukraine. International law, including international humanitarian law, must be respected.

The Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine remains an essential factor of stability. I commend the brave women and men in this mission. They must be granted unrestricted and unconditional access throughout Ukraine to impartially monitor the situation.

My two trips to Moldova made clear the central importance that the talks in the 5+2 format and the 'Berlin-plus' package have for regional security. We need to continue the confidence-building measures to improve the lives of people living on both banks.

When our Chairpersonship began, I pledged that we would play an active role in the Geneva International Discussions and the related Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism regarding Georgia.

Together with the EU and the UN, we have revitalised the discussions and helped the participants refocus on an issue-based agenda. This was necessary because the status quo – both political and humanitarian – is not acceptable.

Unresolved issues also remain in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict context, underlined by the renewed violence last month in the region. The OSCE has a vital role to play here, and we all need to lend our full support to the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office at this Ministerial Council and beyond.

I am also convinced of the merits of regional cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The OSCE is ready to facilitate this, and my Special Representative for South Caucasus has prepared the ground should the three countries decide to take steps in that direction.

Colleagues,

The OSCE arms control regime, meant to be a guarantor of security and stability, is running short on predictability and trust.

The Vienna Document and the Treaty on Open Skies remain at the heart of Europe's security architecture. But the lack of compliance

that we have seen over the years is undermining the very trust these instruments were designed to create.

I deeply regret that the deficit of trust has grown so strong that key countries have decided to leave the Treaty on Open Skies. I hope that they will reverse their decisions.

Because we need to find a path back to making arms control and confidence- and security building measures an effective part of our mutual security toolbox.

A first step should be taken by all participating States fully implementing the Vienna Document. And we need to renew efforts to adjust the document to make it relevant for today's security situation with different force structures.

Colleagues,

Trust is created when we live up to our commitments and work together to meet our common threats and challenges.

I have mentioned conflict resolution and confidence building. These are core areas where we need to ensure that the OSCE is equipped to do its job.

Let me point to three other areas that demand our increased attention.

First, we see a worrying trend of democratic backsliding and violations of human rights in our region, despite our strong commitments.

The Human Dimension Implementation Meeting – the largest and most inclusive annual European manifestation of human rights – should have been held this year.

The fact that it was not is one of my more painful experiences at the helm of the OSCE.

But there are also encouraging developments.

The Stockholm Conference on Media Freedom provided important input, and I am confident that it reinforces the essential work of the OSCE in this field.

The Human Dimension Seminar was held for the first time in four years. We also came together to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, together with a broad spectrum of civil society organisations.

The meeting on combating antisemitism in the OSCE region gave impetus to coalition-building, including with civil society, to fight intolerance and discrimination.

And I am impressed by the dedication and effectiveness shown by the new leaders of the autonomous institutions when assuming their duties.

Let me call on all of you, the participating States, to give your full support to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on Freedom of the Media.

These important institutions are there for us. They must be able to fully exercise their mandates.

Second, we need to do more to improve women's empowerment.

At the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum in September, we took an important step forward to follow up on the Vilnius decision from 2011 on promoting equal opportunities for women in the economic sphere.

And I trust that our work to mainstream the women, peace and security agenda will gain further momentum and continue after we have passed the baton on to Poland and successive OSCE Chairs.

Because we also need to keep an eye on the longer term.

When we stimulate the recovery of our societies and economies after the pandemic, we need to build for gender equality.

And we need to do it in ways that have positive and lasting effects on the autonomy, resilience and opportunities of women and girls. This will also lead to more resilient, secure and prosperous societies.

Finally, we need to make better use of the OSCE to counter new threats and challenges.

Recent developments in Afghanistan remind us of our interdependence and the indivisibility of our security.

Some of the challenges – from climate change to cyber – even have the potential to transform the way we live, work and cooperate.

The OSCE does not have an all-inclusive response. But it can make important contributions to our broader efforts.

For instance, through its convening power.

As Chair, we put a text on climate change and security on the negotiation table for this Ministerial Council.

Why not make more use of the OSCE's convening power to inspire and share expertise on issues like climate-related security risks?

The OSCE provides us with an opportunity to explore these and other common challenges together.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

A quote from Swedish statesman Olof Palme captures the basic spirit of the OSCE.

When the Helsinki Final Act was signed, Giscard d'Estaing stated: "Now we can all agree". And Olof Palme replied: "No, now we can begin to disagree."

What Palme had in mind is that Helsinki established the rules of the game.

A framework to manage our differences without resorting to confrontation.

An inclusive space for dealing with the issues that divide us.

And, of course, for seeking compromise.

The OSCE is not a perfect instrument, but it is precious.

I hope that during our two days together here in Stockholm we will engage in real dialogue and seek common ground.

And, wherever possible, find common ways forward.

Thank you.