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**STATEMENT BY  
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EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF AUSTRIA, AT THE 982nd MEETING OF THE OSCE  
PERMANENT COUNCIL**

30 January 2014

Mr. Chairperson, Ambassador Greminger,  
Distinguished members and observers of the Permanent Council,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me today to address the Permanent Council of the OSCE for the first time. I do not know how familiar you are with Austrian domestic politics, but I can assure you that not all the ministers in the Federal Government are my age.

Vice-Chancellor Spindelegger asked me almost five weeks ago to assume the post of Austrian Foreign Minister. Before that, I had been a member of the Austrian Federal Government for two and a half years and was responsible for integration issues. I am aware of the responsibility of this position.

Mr. Chairperson,

I thank you for the friendly words of welcome and sincerely wish you and the Swiss Chairperson-in-Office, Federal President Burkharter, a successful year at the helm of this Organization. I can assure you that Austria will do all it can to support you in this responsible mission.

We have much in common with the country that currently holds the Chairmanship Switzerland. The decisive point here is not so much the fact that we are neighbours at the heart of Europe or that we are of comparable size, but rather that we share the same values. With this in mind, I am not simply paying lip service when I say that the effective operation of institutions such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE is especially close to our hearts.

Both organizations are communities of shared values, which have a common interest in and commitment to political stability, democracy and human rights in Europe. They make an invaluable contribution so that people throughout the region can live in a space in which democracy, human rights and the rule of law are realized.

I emphasize this in particular as a member of a younger generation who have been privileged to grow up in an ever larger and more open Europe enjoying freedom, peace and

the rule of law within a democratic system – and that not least thanks to the work of the OSCE.

This freedom of my generation in Austria is, however, unfortunately still not an enduring reality for all people in Europe and beyond.

A brief look at the newspapers proves this: the latest reports of the violent “dispersal” of peaceful demonstrations, of threats and attacks against journalists, of arrests of election critics, to give just a few examples, should sadden but not discourage us. Incidents of this kind occurred in OSCE countries in recent weeks.

The anniversary year of 2014, in which we remember the disasters of the twentieth century, should provide an opportunity not only to look back, but also to come to terms with the past. There is a quotation that makes the point perfectly: “History has much to teach but no one wants to learn.”

What the Council of Europe and the OSCE – along with the European Union – embody in terms of values, commitments and vision is not something that has been achieved and guaranteed, but is rather something that we must continue striving for together every day anew.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What both the Council of Europe and the OSCE embody is an area of freedom for the individual to safeguard peace and security. This may sound obvious and familiar, but, as we all know, it is complex and current.

The situation in Ukraine in particular has demonstrated this over the last few days. One thing seems clear to me: the crisis in Ukraine can only be solved by democratic and peaceful means and by respecting human rights, especially the right to freedom of expression and assembly. I therefore welcome the fact that the Parliament has revoked some of the controversial laws of 16 January.

Both the OSCE and the Council of Europe have a role to play here. The young pro-European generation in particular deserves to have us take notice rather than look away.

In addition to current political crises we must also tackle the many other challenges that directly affect the people in our countries. We must find effective answers in combating trafficking in human beings, in shaping the Internet and combating cybercrime, in arms control and transparency in military matters, in fighting corruption, or in fighting restrictions of fundamental freedoms in the name of stability and security.

In this connection I should like to highlight three points:

1. The right to freedom of expression and the protection of journalists;
2. Rights on the Internet;
3. The fight against trafficking in human beings.

## **1. The right to freedom of expression**

There can be no democracy without freedom of expression – the right to receive and share information, opinions and ideas without interference by the authorities and regardless of national borders is a prerequisite for our society. Without this right there can be no civil society, which is indispensable in maintaining our democracies. We are therefore concerned at the tendencies in some participating States to limit freedom of expression.

Journalists in particular have a key role when it comes to providing the public with information. They are guardians of democracy. These guardians need special protection and functioning working conditions.

## **2. Rights on the Internet**

Our second focus concerns the future-oriented field of rights on the Internet. Precisely in this area are there strong synergies between the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

Our everyday life, especially in the case of young people, is dominated by the Internet. Everyone uses it on a day-to-day basis and it enables us to participate in democratic decision-making. The Internet is an open space with many freedoms, in which human rights and basic democratic principles must also be safeguarded.

The right to privacy – and people being able to trust that this right is respected – is of central importance in this context. Security and privacy are key issues here. The Internet is a space of freedom, but it is not lawless.

No country or enterprise should, without a clear legal basis and without security measures or limits, collect data from Internet users and evaluate it without their knowledge. Recent events have shown that we must take concrete steps to protect these rights, online and offline.

There will be an extensive exchange of views in this regard at an expert conference on 13 and 14 March in Graz on “Shaping the digital environment – ensuring our rights on the Internet”, with the aim of creating a common toolkit.

## **3. The fight against trafficking in human beings**

Trafficking in human beings, which is rightly described as a “modern form of slavery”, is a disgrace to our societies. We shall use our chairmanship to encourage more countries to work together to combat trafficking in human beings. Particularly in my previous position as State Secretary for Integration, I became acquainted with the dramatic fates of these people.

Already in February there will be a conference here in Vienna on combating trafficking in human beings, which we shall organize together with the Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE.

Mr. Chairperson,

Co-operation between the Council of Europe and the OSCE is of key importance. A strong and capable OSCE remains for us the central forum for comprehensive dialogue on European security. I can assure you that we shall in the future continue to actively support the OSCE in its central task as a stabilizing force and bridge-builder in Europe and its neighbourhood.

In conclusion, I should like assure you, Mr. Chairperson, and your team once again of my full support and wish you a successful and productive Chairmanship year.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to your statements with great interest.