

Opening Remarks by
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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

It is an honor and great pleasure for me to welcome you here today for the opening of the 13th Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. For ODIHR, it has always been the single most significant event of the year, and since assuming my function this past summer I have been looking forward to sharing discussions, consultations and informal get-togethers with you over the upcoming two-week period.

Let me first welcome our special guests today: H.E. *Teija Tiilikainen*, Political State Secretary of Finland representing our Chairman-in-Office; Minister *Przemyslaw Grudzinski*, Under-Secretary of State of Poland, our host country; the OSCE Secretary-General, Ambassador *Marc Perrin de Brichambaut*; and the heads of the other OSCE institutions, Ambassador *Knut Vollebaek*, High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media *Miklos Haraszti*.

I will give them the floor shortly, but let me first share a few thoughts with you. Since assuming this interesting but challenging post, I have received great comfort in realizing that there is one single action that both simplifies and clarifies almost all issues: putting the commitments into the centre of all our activities. We do not have to invent anything new; that work has already been done. The commitments will not change in the middle of our activities – although we might get more of them, which will give us possibilities to do even more.

The commitments are the same for all participating States; they do not play favours with anyone or discriminate against anyone else. Furthermore, all participating States have voluntarily pledged to implement them. We never have to look for exceptions by checking

ratification tables or comparing possible reservations before launching into activities. They provide the common – and the only – baseline from which our Office can conduct our activities, and of course, a common baseline from which to all of us can discuss implementation here at this Meeting.

Having these common commitments as a baseline for our work is not only a blessing for the ODIHR, it also gives the participating States a great advantage: it makes ODIHR accountable and answerable to all the 56. And the commitments continue to be as relevant today as they were back in 1975 and over the next 33 years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me say a few words about our Meeting starting today, which is again over-flowing with topics to cover in the next two weeks.

Apart from 11 regular sessions, we have three specifically selected topics. Education and awareness-raising in the promotion of human rights will be discussed on Friday this week. During the year when we are celebrating the 60th anniversary of UDHR, what could be more topical than discussing how to learn about human rights? Implementation without knowledge is impossible. This is an area where all of us, and all participating States, can improve.

The second specifically selected topic, Freedom of religion or belief, will be discussed on Tuesday next week. This is one of the most central and longstanding of the OSCE human dimension commitments, dating back to 1975. It has not received special attention since 2003, so we are glad that you have chosen to focus on it this year.

And finally the third topic, which is called Focus on identification, assistance and access to justice for the victims of trafficking, will be dealt with on Wednesday next week. Anti-trafficking does receive special

attention more frequently - the last special day being in 2006 - but this year's discussion of compensation as a crucial aspect of access to justice is brand new and we hope something that States will take home with them and promote further.

But even within our regular 11 sessions we have plenty to discuss. Hopefully at the end of it we will have a better understanding of the degree of compliance and some clear suggestions of the way forward. I would like to contribute already today with a basis for discussion for two of our sessions: our Office has prepared input for the discussions on Roma and Sinti and on hate crimes in the OSCE region. Our *Status Report on Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation on Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area* has just been finalized and can be found outside on the tables. Unfortunately it paints a bleak picture. The situation has not improved as much as hoped and expected after the adoption of the Action Plan in 2003. There are still major steps to be taken to reach an acceptable level of implementation in our region.

Our second Report, *Hate Crimes in the OSCE Region: Incidents and Responses. Annual Report for 2007*, will be available on our website on 6 October. This is another area where the trend seems to be negative and where hate-motivated incidents in 2007 (including racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, and homophobic attacks) continued to involve extraordinary violence and were characterized by extreme brutality, frequently resulting in serious injury or death. The report will be discussed on Monday during working session 10 as well at the side event after the session where the report will be officially launched.

Apart from the regular sessions, I will have to highlight the importance of the side events, which are an important tool to present experiences in closer detail. We have 43 side events scheduled for the next two weeks.

All our 19 sessions and 43 side events would not happen without the active participation from all of you. It is, as we like to remind you, Europe's largest human rights and democracy Conference and there will be more than 1,000 of us present in total.

What makes this and other human dimension events in our Organization unique, is the participation of representatives of civil society, including NGOs, and the possibility for them to exchange views with Governments on an equal footing. And this makes perfect sense. The vision of OSCE commitments is not one where action taken by States alone is sufficient to achieve democratic government under the rule of law. The commitments recognize as matters of international concern precisely those that civil society actors should engage in to influence government policy and protect democracy: full respect for human rights, including the freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression and, of course, a free media.

Dear Friends,

The OSCE's approach to promoting democracy has never been a one-way street. The OSCE is not about one-way value transfer or imposition of values. Moving opposing positions closer through dialogue and exchange has always been the approach chosen by this organization – sometimes in incremental steps but nevertheless in an ongoing process. The key word has always been “co-operation” rather than “confrontation.”

To keep this dialogue going, it is therefore appropriate to argue that we need to re-create a Helsinki momentum. I advocate that we return to an understanding in which we use the OSCE as a political forum for peer review, in which its members hold *each other* accountable on the basis of *equality* and avail themselves of the assistance and advice of missions and institutions such as the ODIHR, which were set up precisely for this purpose.

However, in order to show true leadership on human rights one must start at home. As I have already highlighted, the norms against which

each State's actions are measured are the same for all OSCE participating States. It is on the basis of our own country's performance within the 'human dimension' that we should be developing our stance vis-à-vis our international partners.

There can be no double standards in this work. But at the same time, we have to recognize that democracies develop at different speeds and from different starting points. Democracy is not a prize or a trophy that once won can be passed on from generation to generation; it is unfinished business everywhere. The Helsinki Final Act and the following commitments from Copenhagen, Paris and Moscow have set the goal, but we should not be discouraged by reversals and setbacks but instead refocus our efforts on the task at hand.

It is also in this vein that I propose that we shed the labels of 'young', 'new', and 'old' democracies, as well as 'East' and 'West' of Vienna. Stereotypes serve no purpose and distract us from the genuine dialogue needed.

And, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dialogue is what is needed. Let us start that today. The Finnish Chairmanship announced at the beginning of the year that one of the priorities for 2008 would be implementation of commitments. And indeed, in the Chairmanship programme, the word "implementation" is mentioned approximately 20 times. About 15 of those times, the word is used in connection to the human dimension. This focus is appropriate, as implementation has always had a specific link to Finland.

Already in 1975 the participating States introduced the element of "*a thorough exchange of views (...) on the implementation of the provisions*" of the Helsinki Final Act.

And it was again in Helsinki 1992 where the participating States set up the specific system of reviewing the implementation of commitments,

which was to be “*of co-operative nature, comprehensive in scope and at the same time able to address specific issues*” and which has developed into our annual Human Dimension Implementation Meetings. The participating States were “*invited to offer contributions on their implementation experience, with particular reference to difficulties encountered, and to provide their views of implementation throughout the OSCE area.*”

And that is of course exactly what we are still doing today. I hope that this year’s Meeting will contribute further to this joint endeavour. So let’s start our discussions today, in the Helsinki spirit of co-operation, equality and dialogue.

Thank you.