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**STATEMENT BY
MR. SERGEY LAVROV, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE TWENTY-SECOND MEETING
OF THE OSCE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

Belgrade, 3 December 2015

Mr. Chairperson,
Secretary General,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I begin, I should like to express my sincere condolences to the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Mr. John Kerry, and through him to the United States of America and the entire American people, in the light of the tragedy in San Bernardino.

Esteemed colleagues,

In the year of the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 25th anniversary of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, we all have to recognize that the OSCE region has failed to measure up to the historic mission that seemed to be assigned to us by fate – that is, to become a model of successful and conflict-free partnership and an example to other regions.

Rather, we have witnessed the opposite – growing mistrust and instability, and a dangerous accumulation of crisis-related variables. As a result, assertions that the course of events in today's Europe evokes associations with the period shortly before the First World War, when politicians lacked the wisdom to deal with the impending disaster, and geopolitical ambitions prevailed, no longer sound exotic. The question is what today's political figures will choose – the continued pursuit of one-sided opportunistic advantages or a decisive change of course towards serious and sincere partnership in the interests of countering common challenges.

I do not think that there is a need to prove to anyone that present-day Europe can no longer allow itself the luxury of becoming immersed in its own troubles and conflicts as if the surrounding world had no significance. At a time of radically increased interdependence this is impossible, if only because Europe is not so much influencing the regions adjacent to it as being exposed to the increasingly powerful effects emanating from those regions, including a migration crisis provoked by gross external interference in the internal affairs of sovereign States and the ensuing chaos and rampant terrorism.

The barbaric attacks in Paris and in the skies over Sinai – as well as in Beirut, Ankara, Baghdad, Kabul, Mali and Cameroon – leave no doubt that the security of the OSCE States cannot be ensured without stepping up concerted efforts to eradicate the terrorist threat on the southern borders of our region. A dangerous and merciless enemy, aiming to destroy modern civilization, has taken root there. Europe will be unable to count on sustainable and successful development unless it deals with this challenge. We believe it necessary to take immediate action in several areas simultaneously.

The first step, as proposed by the President of Russia, Mr. Vladimir Putin, at the United Nations General Assembly, is to form a broad anti-terrorism front involving the OSCE States and the countries of the Middle East to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other terrorist groups. The main priority today is to destroy the ISIL project, the so-called caliphate, which is discrediting Islam – one of the world’s major religions. Everything else must be subordinate to this, just as all secondary issues were put aside in the fight against Nazism.

It is criminal to flirt with extremists in anticipation of using them for political purposes – whether it be removing a regime that some people do not like, deriving profit from illegal trade with criminals or pursuing regional leadership as an end in itself. And, of course, there can be no justification for attempts to wreck the fight against terrorism by providing terrorists with military protection against retribution, as happened in the skies over Syria on 24 November.

The United Nations Security Council has called for an end to any support for terrorists, including their financing, supplying them with weapons, conducting commercial operations with them or providing them with a safe haven. We shall press for these decisions to be rigorously implemented by the OSCE participating States in close co-ordination with our partners in the Middle East and North Africa.

Secondly, it is necessary in parallel to step up efforts to advance a political settlement of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Yemen and other crisis situations. However, I wish to stress that this needs to be done in an honest manner, without faking political action and promoting hidden agendas. As for Syria, there is no point expecting progress without the implementation of the agreements reached in Vienna on ensuring full clarity regarding the list of terrorist groups to be eliminated. It is inadmissible to continue dividing terrorists into “bad” ones and “acceptable” ones. None of them should have a seat at the negotiating table. Delegations representing the Syrian Government and the entire spectrum of patriotic opposition rejecting violence and extremism must come together there. Only in this way will the Syrians themselves be able to reach an agreement on the future of their country.

Thirdly, we must not allow the terrorists to win the battle for people’s minds by using some young people’s discontent with the technocratic primitivism of modern societies, in which the traditional values inherent in all the world religions are being destroyed.

Fanning the flames of interreligious discord – whether it be between Muslims and other denominations or within Islam – is extremely dangerous. Our task is to ensure that all spiritual leaders, politicians, and political and public figures come together for the purpose of unmasking the terrorists as apostates.

The media, which should refuse to play the interreligious conflict card in information wars, have a particular responsibility.

Back in the 1990s, Russia proposed making the fight against terrorism one of the main thrusts of the OSCE's work. At that time, many received this idea without enthusiasm (we shall not go into the reasons but we are aware of them). Nevertheless, at our initiative, the Transnational Threats Department was established within the OSCE Secretariat. It has special responsibility for ensuring the preparations for the OSCE counter-terrorism conference planned for 2016.

In the interests of achieving maximum practical benefit, the OSCE should work more closely with its partners in the southern Mediterranean, helping the countries of origin of migrants to resolve the conflicts that are fuelling this new displacement of peoples. In that connection, it is necessary to clearly see the root causes of such conflicts. They are largely due to gross external interference in the complex processes of the internal development of the countries of the region. We hope that the appointment of the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Mediterranean will not be a formality and will help to draw the right lessons from the past, including from the events during the so-called Arab Spring.

It is also important to step up efforts to facilitate the resumption of negotiations on a comprehensive settlement for the Middle East. According to many experts, the fact that the Palestinian problem has remained unresolved for many decades is one of the key factors enabling extremists to recruit ever more supporters to their ranks.

Any conflict, whether to the south of our common zone of responsibility or directly within the OSCE area, calls for solidarity, a pooling of efforts, and respect for the consensus culture and mediation formats. Only in this way can we create the necessary conditions to impel the conflicting parties to explicitly seek mutually acceptable outcomes. It is this that guides us in our approach to the settlement of the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Cyprus and Ukraine. The OSCE values leave no room for unilateral action, which undermines the spirit and the letter of the Helsinki Final Act.

NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia in 1999 – and this is something that cannot be disputed – was a Pandora's box for Europe. It is very unfortunate that our Western partners did not draw the proper conclusions from the Kosovo tragedy and continued to follow bloc-based logic, seeking to expand the geopolitical area under their control contrary to the goal proclaimed by the all the leaders of the OSCE countries – that is, building an equal and indivisible security community. As a result, systemic conflicts that came to light once again during the Ukrainian crisis continued to accumulate. We see growing understanding for the real causes of the conflict in Ukraine. We are convinced that there is a real prospect of a peaceful settlement and, what is more, that there is no alternative to this. What this requires is the implementation of all aspects of the Minsk Package of Measures in good faith through direct dialogue among the Ukrainian parties and the rejection of attempts at getting out of one's commitments, laying the blame on others and intensifying hawkish rhetoric to provoke violations of the ceasefire. The immediate lifting of the economic blockade of Donbas, which cannot be justified by any means, is an absolute priority. Collective efforts within the Normandy quartet, the Trilateral Contact Group and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, whose work we value highly, should be focused on achieving all these goals.

Overcoming the Ukrainian crisis on a basis agreed upon by the parties would be an important indicator of the ability of the OSCE participating States to return to the fundamental values of our Organization, including respect for the sovereignty of States and non-interference in their internal affairs. The Minsk agreements provide such a basis. The increasing attempts to revise the outcome of the Second World War, glorify Nazis and place them on a par with those who liberated Europe from the “brown plague” are also deeply worrying. Conniving with those who desecrate and destroy memorials to the victors over fascism is unacceptable.

The 40th anniversary of the Helsinki process was a good opportunity for serious dialogue on the fate of the OSCE. As the results of the work of the Panel of Eminent Persons have shown, we are only at the very beginning of this path. The eminent persons identified many real problems in the area of European security that had been completely ignored in the past. They were, however, unable to draw up recommendations on collective and generally acceptable approaches for solving these problems. We believe it necessary to continue the search for a common denominator on the basis of the key principle of consensus, without attempting to impose unilateral assessments and positions.

If the Organization wants to adapt to today’s and tomorrow’s needs, it has to have a solid legal foundation in the form of an OSCE charter. Reforms must ensure complete transparency in its working methods, including the budget, extrabudgetary projects and the activities of its field presences. It is necessary to depoliticize the human dimension, regulate election observation methods, and take an impartial attitude to freedom of the media, the protection of national minorities and the elimination of the shameful phenomenon of statelessness. There should be absolutely no unauthorized use of OSCE instruments by some countries against others, such as the recent unsanctioned scandalous report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the High Commissioner on National Minorities regarding Crimea.

The OSCE participating States have common interests in all three security dimensions. We hope that these interests will be properly reflected in our meeting’s decisions.

We commend Serbia’s efforts to draw up a balanced and busy OSCE agenda this year. Now the baton is being handed to Germany. We wish our German colleagues success in the difficult but very important work on the “captain’s bridge” in 2016. We believe the motto of the incoming German Chairmanship – dialogue, trust and security – is fully in line with the policy of strengthening the role of the OSCE. Now it is important to translate this slogan into the language of practical action. We are ready for such joint work.