

# Report to the OSCE Permanent Council

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Address by

**Matteo Mecacci**

**Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address you here in the Permanent Council, and present ODIHR's Annual Report for 2021. Even though I regularly visit Vienna and the Hofburg and engage with as many of you as possible, addressing the Permanent Council in person and having your views and feedback on the work of ODIHR in this setting is something I highly value.

My presentation to you today will cover our main programmatic activities, which span across all 57 participating States, and for which you will find more details in our annual report. However, we are facing today an unprecedented security, human rights and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as a result of the military attack by the Russian Federation, which is affecting the entire OSCE region and the world. And this is something I will return to later in my remarks today.

But first, let me express my thanks to the Polish Chair for the strong support, very good cooperation and open dialogue we have established this year. I would also like to extend a sincere thanks to last year's Swedish Chair, both for the work we did together and the support we received at ODIHR.

2021 proved to be another challenging year for the Human Dimension across our region – a year that was also marked by crises, including

the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the human rights and humanitarian situation that has followed.

In this setting, there is a bigger picture that requires our urgent attention. For years, in the OSCE region and beyond, we have seen a trend by a small, but increasingly vocal number of countries directly challenging the validity of the commitments and legal human rights standards on which the safety and stability of the entire international community are based. Those commitments, made following the tragic lessons learned from the bloodshed of the last century, clearly and unequivocally affirmed that respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights are essential to guarantee security and peace for all humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As one of the most prominent international institutions in this field, we are deeply concerned by these attempts to weaken democratic standards and respect for human rights, both domestically and internationally. And it is certainly no coincidence that the mandate of our institution to assist participating States in implementing their commitments is also being targeted.

But not all is dark at the horizon. As many of you know I always try to see opportunities to reaffirm our common values and solidarity, even during and especially during times of crisis.

I must tell you that I have been inspired by the acts of solidarity shown by citizens all over the world in recent weeks. In all countries, the popular demand for more democracy and more human rights remains strong. Activism and public participation are growing in many places, even when they are restricted and may seem less visible, as are their demands for inclusive and fair societies.

In this complex situation, it is also important to highlight the fact that many participating States have continued their efforts to uphold these principles and put them at the forefront of both their domestic and international agendas. This includes a willingness to work with ODIHR and other institutions to strengthen their democratic and human rights frameworks.

Seizing these opportunities, last year ODIHR engaged with an increasing number of participating States, offering assistance in all areas of our mandate, on the basis of dialogue, positive engagement and constructive criticism – and we will continue to do so. I would like here to express my gratitude for the support and appreciation for ODIHR's work I received last year during my visits to more than 20 OSCE countries – a testimony that human rights and fundamental freedoms remain a defining quality of our democratic societies and of our Organisation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As many of you know, ODIHR marked its 30th anniversary last year. And after three decades working to strengthen democracy and human rights, the 2021 Annual Report illustrates both the breadth of our assistance and the positive impact it is having across the region – in line with the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act, and focusing on our shared common values, instead of what divides us.

In 2021, ODIHR reached a new milestone when it deployed its 400th election observation mission. Despite the difficulties caused by the ongoing pandemic, the Office was able to observe 19 elections in 16 participating States. By closely cooperating with national authorities, we were able to begin deploying short-term observers again, allowing us to systematically gather statistical data on election-day to help countries improve their election processes for the future.

Working towards inclusive societies across all 57 participating States was as ever a key focus for us. Our landmark achievement of 2021 was the publication of ODIHR's 15th annual hate crime report, which remains the largest database on hate crime in the world. That the dominant finding from 2020 was the impact of the COVID pandemic on bias motivated crime was unsurprising, but nonetheless an additional motivation to continue our systematic monitoring of hate crimes and hate incidents, based as always on principles of neutrality and impartiality.

I am also pleased to inform you that ODIHR has now started working on a practical guide on understanding anti-Christian hate crimes and addressing the security needs of Christian communities, following similar security guides relating to anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes.

In 2021, ODIHR received 28 requests for legislative assistance and issued a total of 31 legal opinions, including on new topics such as youth, parliamentary codes of ethics, lobbying and the use of DNA profiling. We have seen increased demand for our legislative assistance across a wider geographical spread of participating States, testifying to the esteem in which ODIHR's legislative expertise is held. We stand ready to receive even more requests in 2022.

Let me also raise the strong mandate we have as ODIHR to assist OSCE participating States in promoting women's political participation and strengthening democratic institutions for advancing gender equality. In 2021, we published a new practical guide titled 'Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament: A Guide for Parliaments in the OSCE Region'.

ODIHR will build on the work accomplished in 2021 to provide further support to national parliaments throughout the OSCE region.

Regrettably and despite all efforts, it was not possible to organize the 2021 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, HDIM. For the second year in a row, therefore, a unique opportunity was missed for participating States and civil society to engage in direct and frank

dialogue on the most urgent human rights issues facing our region today.

Let me stress once more that the absence of HDIM makes our democracies poorer, our societies weaker, and our human rights aspirations smaller. ODIHR stands ready to support the Polish Chair in its committed efforts to organize HDIM later this year. Indeed, civil society organisations from across the region are calling us to live up to this commitment, and as an Office we will continue to implement our mandate to work with civil society throughout the year with renewed energy.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The lives of citizens across the OSCE have been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only their health but also their fundamental rights and democratic freedoms. As our societies are learning to live with the pandemic and its consequences, we need to remain vigilant about the potential risk that restrictions and emergency measures adopted by governments may be misused or abused.

To ensure we place human rights and democratic standards at the centre of our post-pandemic societies, ODIHR is now developing what we have termed the '*COVID 19 Audit*' – a new assistance tool for

participating States to better assess the impact of the pandemic on the resilience of democratic institutions and enjoyment of human rights. We look forward to working on this with interested participating States in the coming months through research and country visits, to conduct this work and at the same time learn from each other's experiences in order to prepare better for future challenges.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Looking at what lays ahead of us, the obstacles are certainly growing on a global stage where multilateralism is weakened by unilateral actions, trust is running short, and as a result, the human tragedy of armed conflict unfolds. The military attack by the Russian Federation on Ukraine is arguably the most serious security and humanitarian crisis that the OSCE region has faced in decades. It makes painfully evident the horrors brought by military conflict, the widespread suffering of innocent people, and the denial of human rights guarantees for millions of people.

Whenever bombs fall, soon after respect for fundamental freedoms also falls, democratic guarantees become ever more difficult to uphold and are neglected, diversity and coexistence increasingly fall victim to hate and intolerance, and the most vulnerable find themselves even more isolated.

Only two weeks ago, I saw innocent civilians at the Polish border with Ukraine, women and children, traumatized and terrified both by what they had witnessed at home and by the uncertain future that lies in front of them abroad.

Today is exactly a month since the armed conflict began. In this short period, ODIHR has initiated a comprehensive monitoring process of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, in line with our mandate and the enduring cooperation and assistance we have provided to Ukraine over the years. Through research, digital evidence verification and interviews, the monitoring will examine the situation in and around Ukraine, prioritizing the most urgent issues affecting the human rights of civilians and prisoners of war, as well as the millions of civilians fleeing the armed conflict.

In this situation, we will also continue to pay close attention to instances of hate crimes, always exacerbated by conflicts and humanitarian crises, which are pitting not only militaries against each other, but also populations and individuals of all countries involved.

This is another fallout of armed conflicts that leaders who choose weapons as a way to resolve disagreements, instead of diplomacy and compromise, must bear in mind. Our initial monitoring is showing instances of discrimination, hate speech and even hate crimes, targeting Ukrainian refugees themselves – including other third

country nationals who have fled – as well as an increase in anti-Russian rhetoric and attacks.

As you are all aware, the Moscow Mechanism was invoked by 45 participating States, with the support of Ukraine. While ODIHR does not contribute to the substance of this work we do, in line with our mandate, provide support to the three experts nominated by Ukraine in this regard from a technical point of view. I am confident that the final report will serve as an important tool for establishing the facts on the ground.

In 10 days, we will mark the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the siege of Sarajevo – an unsettling anniversary this year more than ever before. As we collect information through our monitoring work, we know that today a number of Ukrainian cities are living through an immense humanitarian crisis. In conflict situations, it is imperative that obligations under both international humanitarian and human rights law are upheld, and protection of civilians is ensured, including through the creation of humanitarian corridors and delivery of medical assistance. Preserving the integrity of democratic institutions and processes is also of utmost importance. These are obligations for all states, and there cannot be any exceptions.

The task at hand is of course demanding but also essential. But I can give you my word that ODIHR, with all the integrity, professionalism, and energy at our disposal, will do its utmost to make sure

accountability for all human rights and international humanitarian law violations is ensured for all parties to this conflict. We count on your support as our work continues.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I end, allow me to turn our attention to our own institution – the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Despite the challenges of the present, I am hopeful that we can live up to this historical challenge and stand up for the principles on which the OSCE was founded with purpose and resolve. In this way, we will continue to shape a future of security based on democracy, human rights, the rule of law, partnership with civil society, and respect for fundamental freedoms, tolerance, equality, and inclusion.

These values are filled with meaning – and their power is real. As I said at the beginning of my remarks today, there cannot be any long lasting security or sustainable peace without them. Peace is not just a lack of conflict between countries or within society. It can only exist when all citizens enjoy the same fundamental rights and democratic institutions work for all according to the rule of law.

More than any other, this crisis must be an opportunity to learn and develop further. It is not enough to denounce – we must all imagine a

path to peace. It is not enough to imagine a path to peace – we must all contribute to create one - today.

We owe it to the people who are suffering and are looking to international organizations and diplomacy to avoid a repetition of the horrors of the past – the very reason the OSCE was originally established.

As proven by the work done in 2021, ODIHR is ready and able to play its part, assisting your efforts and in line with our mandate.

Thank you.