

1267th Meeting of the Permanent Council

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Address by

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the third time I present the annual report to the Permanent Council. This year it's under exceptional circumstances, and somewhat delayed, even if the annual report was circulated on time.

The interaction with the Permanent Council is something I value, and I am happy to be able to address you, be it in this format.

Before presenting our work during last year let me start by reflecting on the last few months.

What we have witnessed is unprecedented. Governments around the OSCE region have introduced extraordinary measures to protect their citizens, to protect the right to life, as stipulated in first paragraph in the European convention on Human Rights.

Many participating States have introduced States of emergency or other national emergencies. Most of these measures have been proportionate and in line with human rights commitments and obligations, while states have derogated from their human rights obligations or introduced measures considered as significant limitations.

As mandated by you, we are following developments carefully. Some of these measures have caused concern and have been addressed by me in statements or letters to the States in question.

Furthermore, my office is working on a report looking into how states have responded to the crisis, identifying trends, good practises, and offering recommendations.

Let me mention some of the developments we have identified: Democratic institutions in many states have come under significant stress. We have witnessed increasingly unclear separation of powers, erosion of the rule of law and the judiciary, attacks on privacy rights, rights of detainees, worsening situation for Roma and Sinti, migrants and the increase of domestic violence, to mention a few, but all these are issues we need to carefully assess and work to improve.

We hear concerns from civil society, on how, or if, they are consulted in decision making but also on escalating pressure from authorities, as well as the ever increasing challenge they face in financially sustaining their activities.

It's important to look at this in the context of the COVID 19 crisis. Few of these concerns are new, but have become more visible and pressing in this crisis.

ODIHR's work continues to be guided by our mandate to support you, the participating States, to implement OSCE's human dimension commitments. Now, when faced with unprecedented

challenges, it is more important than ever that you make use of our expertise and our work. It is there for you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This annual report differs from previous versions. In recent years you have called for more focus on results and the intent with this report is to present the impact of our activities more clearly. I hope we have succeeded in doing so.

Our work in 2019 with participating States and with civil society has aimed at putting human rights at the heart of democratic institutions for greater participation and accountability.

We need to strengthen our efforts to improve accountability, by building effective integrity mechanisms.

This is why in the past year, we increasingly focused on assisting national parliaments, in close co-operation with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Working with political parties to ensure equal participation of women and men in politics and decision-making continues to be a priority. We promote the political participation of marginalized groups, including youth, Roma and Sinti, and migrants, together with our Field Operations.

In 2019 ODIHR published 19 legal reviews, leading to improvements in draft or already adopted legislation. We have embarked on an ambitious initiative to gather international standards and good practices, consolidating these into clear guidelines. This will provide the benchmarks that lawmakers need to make their processes more effective, inclusive, consultative, accountable and transparent.

Our election observation work continues to be our most visible activity. We observed 15 elections and provided comprehensive assessments and recommendations to states on improvements.

One of the new publications ODIHR issued in 2019, was the Handbook for the Observation of Election Dispute Resolution. It provides guidance to ODIHR observers, as well as other international and citizen observer organizations, on essential principles and international good practice related to the handling of electoral disputes.

Intolerance and discrimination continues to be a concern across the OSCE region. Here, civil society has an important role, for example, in identifying and combating hate crime. This is

especially important for states that have not introduced a nationwide system for recording/reporting hate crimes.

Last year we held workshops in 11 participating States with the aim of improving the hate crime recording/reporting. This has resulted in increased reporting but also in significantly improved ability of the states in question to respond to hate crimes.

We support the participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life. An achievement in 2019 was that we organized the first Roma Leadership academy, welcoming 20 young people, all politically active in their communities. This is something I hope we can continue.

We continued to monitor hate crimes against Roma and Sinti, and I am concerned about a steady stream of reports on widespread discrimination and violence against Roma and Sinti, reflected in the 2019 annual report.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Respect for the rule of law and independence of the judiciary is the cornerstone of our societies and regrettably, we continue to see backsliding on these basic principles in some parts of the OSCE. The separation of powers has been and will continue to represent a priority in our work.

In 2019 we witnessed long-term democratic processes being challenged, loopholes in legislation and in administrative procedures are being introduced and used to circumvent democratic processes - and increasingly to restrict fundamental rights.

We have seen states invoke security concerns, which may restrict human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of assembly. ODIHR continues to work closely with the security sector and law enforcement to build capacity and awareness on human rights; in close cooperation with our colleagues in the Secretariat.

I have repeatedly raised the shrinking space for civil society, with continuous and growing challenges to the work of human rights defenders. This includes digital security, safety and human rights online and is something we are increasingly tailoring into our work with civil society and human rights defenders.

ODIHR has undertaken – and continued this in 2019 - a wide range of efforts to support civil society organizations and human rights defenders in efforts to identify, monitor, document and support victims of human rights abuses.

Monitoring of human rights remains a priority. We continue taking steps to bring the voices of survivors of human rights abuses into our work, including survivors of trafficking in human beings.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by highlighting an issue close to my heart, equality between men and women.

We have taken important steps on women's rights. ODIHRs assistance to parliaments has been consistently increasing over the years. A particular focus has been to provide support with adopting gender-sensitive and enacting gender-sensitive legislation. The Gender Action Plans for parliaments are unique in this regard. These strategic documents represent a new era in democratic governance and parliamentary processes, as the first such plans anywhere in the OSCE region. This is something I believe we should continue in the years to come

Last year we organized the human dimension implementation meeting and I was encouraged by the decisions made in that regard, be it at a rather late stage. I can only encourage you to seek ways of adopting decisions as early as possible also this year!

Let me assure you that we work hard to further improve, clarify and streamline processes and modalities based on your feedback and suggestions.

This year the structure of the meeting may have to be different, due to the COVID pandemic. We are working in close cooperation with the CiO and our host country, to see how this can be done. Your thoughts and suggestions on this are most welcomed in these extraordinary times.

The same applies to the issue of civil society participation where I hope participating States will find a way forward that ensures the holding of the mandated human dimension events. It is encouraging that these discussions continue.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our commitments represent a crucial and integral part of the OSCE's concept of comprehensive security.

At the danger of repeating myself, let me say: the main challenge lies in the lack of implementation, not in the commitments.

Last year I was encouraged by an increasing number of participating States reaching out to us to request assistance. I see the high number of requests we are receiving, also in the current situation, as a recognition of the expertise, support and assistance my Office has to offer.

We need to think beyond this crisis, see this as a learning process and a foundation for building stronger, more democratic and human rights based societies.

I have raised our strategic work with you on previous occasions. We have come a long way with this and I believe we should continue these efforts in the years to come.

Our strategic approach is founded in the OSCE commitments and focuses on how we can become more effective and efficient in supporting states with implementation, hand in hand with civil society.

This also increases our ability to apply our established needs-based methodology, with longer-term perspective focused on relevance and results. By doing so we can assess our work and in close dialogue with you, the participating States, improve our ability to consolidate our work as well as respond to emerging challenges.

I look forward to the Programme Outline presentation in a weeks' time where I will offer some further reflections on this.

I appreciate the good cooperation we have had with you. I hope and encourage you to continue in this spirit so that we can, together with you, continue delivering on our mandate.

Thank you.