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EUROPEAN AFFAIRS AND FOREIGN TRADE AND THE FEDERAL CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS OF BELGIUM, AT THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MEETING OF THE
OSCE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

Brussels/Tirana, 3 and 4 December 2020 (via video teleconference)

Mr. Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address you today from Brussels. I should like in particular to thank my colleague Edi Rama for the professional manner, the patience and the flexibility with which the Albanian Chairmanship has organized this OSCE Ministerial Council meeting.

I should also like to congratulate the Chairperson-in-Office and his team on their hard work and perseverance aimed at achieving consensus on the appointment of the new leadership, which the Organization needs to go forward – by focusing on the balance necessary to reach our decision by consensus but also by avoiding a sequencing of decisions that would risk delaying a decision on one of the key functions of the Organization.

The year 2020 will remain in our memories as a difficult one. The COVID-19 pandemic took us by surprise, and all of us are now confronted by an unprecedented crisis. However, in these special circumstances, Belgium continues to recognize the value of the OSCE as a vital forum for dialogue. Taking account of the current health and security challenges, the OSCE's relevance is undeniable.

I should like to address three points.

First, the need for constructive dialogue on our common security architecture.

Belgium had the honour of chairing the Open Skies Review Conference in early October. For three days we examined the potential and challenges of the Treaty on Open Skies in frank and constructive discussions among the States Parties. The adoption of the final document was a clear indication of our shared willingness to look to the future and our joint commitment to continue implementing the Treaty, which is a cornerstone of the European security architecture.

We thank the Spanish Chairmanship of the Informal Working Group on Structured Dialogue for its efforts this past year. The Structured Dialogue remains as relevant as it was in 2016 and continues to serve as a forum for useful discussion at both the political and the expert level on subjects of mutual interest connected with security.

My second point concerns the important role played by the OSCE in the various ongoing conflicts – ideally to prevent them and if necessary to actively assist in finding concrete approaches to their resolution.

Belgium welcomes the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. We nevertheless remain concerned at the humanitarian impact of the recent violence. A lasting settlement must now follow, including on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Belgium confirms its support for the Minsk Group and hopes that it can resume its important work.

Belgium welcomes the initiatives of the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to foster dialogue with the Russian Federation. We are fully aware of the fact that there are still numerous challenges, but there have also been some successes. The ceasefire in the Donbas region has now been observed for over 100 days. The full implementation of the Minsk agreements remains a priority, and it is crucial for all parties to maintain this commitment. Belgium reiterates its full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.

Belgium continues to fully support the hard work of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine – not only in words but also in deeds – through the provision of personnel and additional funding. For it to complete its work, the Mission must have safe, secure, unconditional and unrestricted access to the entire territory of Ukraine, including the illegally annexed Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol and the border between Ukraine and Russia. The various attempts to hinder the Mission's work are extremely regrettable, and the perpetrators of these acts must be called to account.

Third, it is our shared responsibility to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Belgium remains particularly committed to the OSCE's work in the human dimension. We regret that the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in September had to be cancelled but we are looking forward to an even more productive meeting next year. We must assume our responsibility to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and it is imperative for us to maintain and step up regular dialogue with civil society organizations and human rights defenders.

I should also like to reiterate our support for the three autonomous institutions, which help us to fulfil our commitments, and to pay tribute to the efforts of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for continuing to observe elections in OSCE participating States in spite of the multiple challenges posed by the pandemic.

As co-activator of the Moscow Mechanism with regard to Belarus, Belgium welcomes the recent report by Professor Benedek, which confirms the serious violations of human rights by the Belarusian authorities following the presidential election of 9 August 2020.

Professor Benedek's report offers a valuable set of recommendations. I urge the Belarusian authorities to reconsider their approach, to implement these recommendations and to embark on constructive and inclusive dialogue with a view to finding peaceful solutions with account taken of the demands of the Belarusian people.

Allow me to conclude by congratulating my Albanian colleague, Edi Rama, on the diplomatic qualities he has shown as Chairperson-in-Office and by assuring my colleague Ann Linde that Sweden can count on our full support for its Chairmanship in 2021.

Thank you.