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Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
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at the Opening Session of the
OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
on

'Combating Racism, Intolerance, and Discrimination in Society through Sport'

Hofburg, Vienna
19 April 2012

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on “*Combating Racism, Intolerance, and Discrimination in Society through Sport*” this afternoon.

Over the next two days, we should examine contemporary forms of racism, intolerance and discrimination - including hate crimes - in societies across the OSCE region. More concretely, we should analyze how sport and sporting events can be used to tackle these phenomena and share good practices developed to promote diversity and equality.

These are not new phenomena, but the challenges seem to be on the rise. Let me mention three of them:

- The continued economic crisis that at times results in “scape-goating” of visible minorities;

- The portrayal of migration as a threat to local populations, the rise of right-wing political parties and groups expounding nationalist and xenophobic ideologies;
- And at the same, drastic cuts to public spending, which have particularly affected social awareness programmes.

A robust normative framework has been developed to combat racism and discrimination at both international and regional levels; but the pace of progress has been slow. ODIHR's annual hate crime report shows that intolerance and discrimination remain a significant problem across the OSCE region, undermining personal, neighbourhood and state security, and eroding confidence across and among communities.

People are discriminated against, threatened and injured when they are targeted for no other reason than being perceived as belonging to a specific ethnic, "racial", religious or other group.

A host of initiatives, emanating from government agencies, civil society and international organizations, were presented at the last

SHDM in November 2011 in the area of awareness raising or education. But most participants stressed the need to devise a concerted approach in order to achieve sustainable results.

Sports can certainly be an area where all these actors can make a difference: It brings together millions of people, transcending sex, colour, gender, age, nationality or religion, and has thus the potential to play an important role in creating an inclusive society. Sports activities - ranging from the local to the national and international level, at an amateur and professional level - can support the integration of migrants and persons belonging to minorities into society as whole.

Indeed, it is in the arena of sports where minorities break through the glass ceiling. So sport has the potential to promote inclusion, and I am certain we will hear more on this from our speakers today.

Far from being a marginal activity, sports have favored the emergence of a number of new role models. Millions of people, and not only youth, look up to the top athletes: their behaviour on the

playground, their attitudes in life and their statements have the potential to influence society at large.

But of course sport, as an activity that focuses emotions of societies, is not beyond the challenges that societies themselves face. Racism and intolerance also manifest themselves in sports.

- Athletes and their support teams and sports fans have been the target of attacks based on religious, ethnic, racial, linguistic or other bias.
- Also, national and international sporting events have been used by ultra-nationalist groups to spread racial prejudice and xenophobia.

These events are well reported on and imply a crucial role to be played by law enforcement, sports federations and fan clubs to prevent and respond effectively to manifestations of racism and hate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, two major sporting events are taking place - The Olympic Games in London and the UEFA EURO football championship in Poland and Ukraine. Both events will attract millions of fans.

In this meeting, we will hear about programmes and initiatives developed by governments and civil society organizations which build confidence and promote integration and equality in societies. We all bear a responsibility to support these initiatives and to respond adequately to intolerant and racist acts.

Political leaders especially need to raise their voice and speak out about the dangers and unacceptability of racism and intolerance. So do heads of national leagues and fanclubs. They have an obligation to condemn racist sentiments when they are voiced in political and sports discourse.

Law enforcement and criminal justice agencies also have a crucial role to play - expeditious and robust investigation of incidents and crimes sends out the message that society will not tolerate such acts; and that victim communities will be protected.

It is my hope that the discussions over the next two days will lead to a number of recommendations for participating States, civil society and ODIHR. I hope that these recommendations will shed a new light on how we can be more effective and efficient in our efforts to fight racism, intolerance and discrimination.

Our Office will continue to be at disposal to offer assistance and support to all participating States in this endeavour.

Thank you.