

# Opening Remarks by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions  
and Human Rights (ODIHR)

at the

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on  
National Human Rights Institutions  
(ombudsinstitutions, commissions, institutes and other  
mechanisms)



Vienna, 14 April 2011

Excellencies,

It is my pleasure to address and welcome you at this first OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of this year. I would like to start by thanking the Lithuanian Chairmanship for putting the national human rights institutions as the priority for this year, and in this way providing the opportunity to, in different frameworks, discuss their situation and issues they face in different areas of their work.

Let me stress at the outset: the work of NHRIs truly matters. In many countries they play a crucial role in the promotion and protection of human rights. For their work to be effective and meaningful, they need the support and acknowledgement of governments on the one hand and the independence from the government on the other.

It is particularly important that there are representatives of National Human Rights Institutions participating in this meeting, since it is particularly them who are to share experience, exchange best practices and outline challenges they face in exercising their tasks.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

OSCE States have committed themselves to adhere to international human rights standards and to implement OSCE commitments – to prevent torture, to ensure equal treatment of men and women, to protect minority groups and other marginalized groups of society, to name but a few. Many governments of participating States have – in order to be supported in their efforts to comply with the human rights standards – chosen to follow a global trend and to establish a special independent bodies, in many instances mandated to focus solely on guiding and advising on the ways to protect and promote human rights.

ODIHR and the OSCE field operations have, together with other relevant partners from the international community - and many of whom are here today - for years provided technical or legislative assistance to support the establishment of new national human rights institutions, including Ombuds Institutions, or to strengthen the work of existing institutions.

NHRI representatives will surely speak for themselves, also those that met earlier today to prepare for the upcoming sessions. But I wish to share what we in ODIHR usually hear as main concerns when we meet with representatives of NHRIs: 1) they often report to us having insufficient human and financial resources to exercise

their work; and 2) their advice, guidance and recommendations are at times not followed or are even ignored.

What we also often hear is that their independence is put in question. Are they really a proper bridge between the civil society and the government or are they just another tool in the hands of the government to conceal or disregard the human rights violations inside, but present a good facade towards the outside world?

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This SHDM will allow us to look at the current level of engagement between national human rights institutions and their own governments on the one hand, and to review the existing level of cooperation between national human rights institutions and civil society on the other. Civil society actors are ‘the eyes and the ears’ of the people, hearing and understanding their concerns and needs. And they transmit those human rights concerns, also through the national human rights institutions, which bears an ultimate responsibility towards each individual it serves.

Let me conclude by expressing my hope that this SHDM will also allow for OSCE participating States to re-emphasize their commitment towards human rights in general, also by strengthening the work of NHRIs.

With this, I look forward to the fruitful and productive OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting. I hope it will result in concrete recommendations on how to further strengthen the important work that national human rights institutions undertake across the OSCE region.

I have now the honour to give the floor to our keynote speaker Prof. Brian Burdekin, who is one of the best known experts on national human rights institutions and has worked around the world to support their establishment.

Thank you.