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Statement by the Chairperson-in-Office

H.E. Miroslav Lajčák

Opening of the 26th OSCE Ministerial Council

Bratislava, Slovakia

5 December 2019

Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

It is an honour for me to welcome you to Bratislava, for our 26th OSCE Ministerial Council.

To set the scene, I will talk about our work as the outgoing Chair. Through three main points.

I will start with our first priority: supporting the resolution and prevention of conflict, and mitigating its impact on people.

And, here: the crisis in and around Ukraine was at the top of our agenda. Back in January, things looked bleak. We had just seen a spike in tensions. And the path forward was uncertain.

We put our primary focus on people. On finding concrete ways to ease their suffering.

Early in the year, we proposed nine Confidence-Building Measures. They dealt with issues like improving the situation with regard to checkpoints, facilitating the exchange of detainees, boosting humanitarian demining, and, importantly, repairing the damaged bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska.

And, let me be clear here: these measures were not new. Instead, they were simple, tangible steps, which had been discussed many times before. But what we did, as Chair, was put the full political - and operational weight - of the OSCE behind them.

And, we saw progress. In fact, I just returned from Stanytsia Luhanska. After my first trip there, someone told me that it would be a “miracle” if the bridge could be repaired. But that is exactly what happened. Now, people can cross in safety, and with dignity. And, I really want to thank president Zelensky and the government of Ukraine. I also want to thank the Trilateral Contact Group and the Special Monitoring Mission, for helping to make it possible.

At this point, I would like to express my gratitude for the excellent and valuable work of my Special Representative in Ukraine and in the Trilateral Contact Group – Ambassador Martin Sajdik – and also to officially announce the appointment of Ambassador Heidi Grau as his successor.

There has also been progress on the political front. I don't think any of us predicted, last January, that a Normandy Four Summit would be on our calendar this year. Yet, again, that is exactly what will materialize next week in Paris. This is extremely important momentum to keep the Minsk agreement alive. We need to finally start moving on the Minsk Agreements.

Unfortunately, it's not all good news. People are still suffering; people are still dying. And, given the principles and commitments of this Organization, we cannot forget Crimea.

The recent positive steps however showed that we can see results if we master enough political will. They would not have happened without it. And if we want to see real, political progress, we need to lend our support. Both, bilaterally – but, crucially, through the OSCE.

In assessing the past year, we must also look at other areas of crisis and conflict in the OSCE. On this, I have asked myself the question: do things look better now, than they did in January?

Well, in a way, yes. Because dialogue has continued throughout the year. The Geneva International Discussion, the Minsk Group Process, the 5+2 format. Through these platforms, we have tried to build confidence, to de-escalate tensions, and to simply keep the dialogue going.

But, if we look through another lens, the view is less rosy.

When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, there remains a real risk of escalation. In Georgia, people are living with the reality of frequent denials of fundamental freedoms - like the freedom of movement. And, in the Transdniestrian settlement process, without concrete commitments on the way forward, progress seen in recent years is at risk of backsliding.

I have to be frank here: As the outgoing Chair, I don't have any magic formula on how to resolve these crises and conflicts, once and for all. What I do have is the belief – the strong belief - that the OSCE's efforts from de-escalating tensions to opening channels for new dialogue are invaluable. And, that, this Organization will be the first to offer its support for concrete steps towards peace.

For my second point, I want to talk about our priority on providing for a safer future.

Today, the warning signs that our security is at risk can be difficult to detect. We're not just talking about troops on our borders.

For example, a cyber-attack is not followed by a boom or a siren. We cannot always tell when someone has been radicalized towards violence. Anti-Semitism, hate and intolerance can creep up on us, and undermine the safety and security of entire communities.

So, taking a comprehensive approach to security, today, is not easy. But that is exactly what we are here to do.

If we want to prevent and resolve conflict, we need to start at the beginning - from confidence- and security-building measures to conventional arms control. These are not relics of the Cold War. Actually, 44 years after Helsinki, they remain crucial to today's security landscape. We need to make sure they remain relevant through engaging in the Structured Dialogue, through modernizing the Vienna Document, and through investing in this core toolbox.

Something else that was relevant in 1975, and remains so today, is our work around democratic institutions and human rights. The annual Human Dimension Meeting of the OSCE is Europe's largest annual human rights and democracy conference. This sounds impressive on paper. But, the reality is, that it's in trouble. And it has been in trouble for many years.

Because we are seeing the procedural issue of modalities used as a political ploy. If we use matters of procedure as political tools, there is no capacity left to deal with the real policy issues.

Spending weeks discussing modalities does not advance security, human rights or prosperity. And it sure does not help people on the ground.

This year, as Chair, we worked tirelessly to create some positive momentum in this area, through our work on civil society participation. But, the fact is: the chairmanship alone, cannot secure the future of HDIM. This is a task for all 57. And one that needs urgent attention.

While we need to invest in the core toolbox, we also need to innovate and expand. I want to mention a few steps we could take in this area, to contribute to a safer future:

- First, to advance the 16 cyber confidence-building measures.

- Second, to look more closely at energy and digitalization. And, how they play into our broader security landscape.
- Third, to invite more young people to the table.
- Fourth, to support longer-term prevention, like Security Sector Governance and Reform. And enhanced cooperation to prevent violent extremism and terrorism.
- And fifth, to seriously accelerate the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the OSCE space.

I also want to look at our third and final priority on effective multilateralism.

Multilateralism is a bit of a buzz word these days. But the meaning behind it goes back centuries. It is the idea that we can gain more working together than alone. That cooperation and dialogue can prevent conflict, and create opportunity. That joint solutions are more likely to stick.

The OSCE is multilateralism in action. But it is not a lone wolf. In fact, it is operating in quite a crowded landscape. This year we worked to support complementary partnerships within this landscape - from regional organizations, like the European Union, to the United Nations.

Next week, we will finalize a joint statement with the UN Secretary General on the framework of cooperation between our two organizations. And on this note: I believe that we should start a serious dialogue on opening an OSCE presence in New York. It would be a major step in ensuring complementary. And to align our regional dialogue with international trends.

Lately, we have heard more and more voices speaking up, in support of multilateralism. This is really positive. But, our words, alone, will do nothing. They will not protect our multilateral systems from the risks facing them. So, those of us who believe in this system – of cooperation, of dialogue, of joint solutions – need to show our support in the way we conduct our affairs. Daily.

- Politicizing procedural matters is not multilateralism.
- Flooding international platforms with bilateral spats is not multilateralism.
- Blaming the organization for individual failures is not multilateralism.

Multilateralism requires commitment and compromise. And in the case of the OSCE, it is built on consensus.

It is a very noble idea that every country – no matter their size, no matter which side of the iron curtain they were on – should have an equal say.

But consensus should not be seen as a way to force through our own priorities.

It is not a weapon to be used, to hold processes hostage to unrelated issues.

It is not meant to allow us to stand still, expecting 56 states to come towards us – rather than meeting in the middle.

This kind of behaviour creates a divide. Not just between us – the 57 participating States. But also, between what we do in Vienna, and what is happening in the field.

In our daily work, we should stand up - and speak loudly- in support of our principles and commitments. And, we should condemn actions which violate or undermine them.

But, if we cannot start each year with a new budget or agree to agendas for our events, what chance do we have at realizing the full vision of the Helsinki Final Act?

Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

During the year as a Chair, I saw the vast potential the OSCE holds.

I visited 15 field missions in the first six months of my Chairmanship. I saw field teams working side-by-side with local civil society, governments, young people. I saw that they were treated as partners; as friends.

I truly believe the field missions are one of the greatest assets this Organization has.

And, on behalf of our Chairmanship, I want to thank the men and women working under the OSCE's banner.

In the field or in headquarters. Advancing dialogue in Hofburg or monitoring elections around the world. Helping to protect borders or working on humanitarian efforts.

They are the hands of this Organization. But at its heart – are the participating states.

And as for any organism to stay vital – the heart must keep beating. For the OSCE to remain relevant – the participating states must keep their fingers on the pulse of the Helsinki commitments.

After talking to many of you this year – through our series of Chair's Dialogues or through our Informal Ministerial Gathering - it was clear to me:

- You still believe in this Organization.
- You still believe in the principles it stands for.
- You still believe that we owe it to the people on the ground to find compromise on the way forward.

This all might seem impossible at times. Particularly amid complex security threats and a shifting multilateral landscape.

But we achieved the unthinkable many times before. And we can do it again.

Thank you.