



Deutschland 2016

Warsaw, 19 April 2016

**Speech by Foreign Minister and Chairperson-in-Office  
Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at his visit to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights  
(ODIHR) on the occasion of its 25th anniversary**

-- check against delivery --

Director Link,  
Witold Waszczykowski,  
Staff members of ODIHR,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you here today in my capacity as Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE. And I am particularly pleased to be here for the celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Twenty-five years ago, in 1990, when the participating States established the Office for Free Elections in the Charter of Paris, they chose Warsaw as its seat.

That was no coincidence.

Like many of you here, I vividly remember the summer of 1989 when the first democratic elections were held in Poland. That groundbreaking vote took place at a time when other countries of the former Warsaw Pact were still ruled with an iron fist.

In Poland, the elections were a landslide victory for Solidarność and a defeat of the ruling Communist Party. Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist Polish Prime Minister since 1947 – and Europe held its breath.

It was the start of great change in Europe, change that also affected the dynamics of what was then the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The new Polish Government had been at the forefront of these changes on our continent and so it was Warsaw that managed to attract the CSCE's first institution – the Office for Free Elections. Today, ODIHR has become the largest autonomous institution within the OSCE.

To many, ODIHR is best known for its election observation missions in OSCE participating States. These missions have indeed become a real trademark of the entire organisation.

Over the past 25 years, more than 300 successful observation missions have been conducted - using ODIHR's recognised and well-tested methodology.

I would like to compliment all those involved in this outstanding work! Thank you. I am well aware that you have a demanding year ahead of you.

I would also like to highlight ODIHR's outstanding work in its other crucial areas: In helping governments and civil society to strengthen democratic institutions and to promote respect for human rights, tolerance and nondiscrimination, and the rule of law. We all know that this is anything but easy!

Of course, the commitments made by OSCE States in the many documents since the Charter of Paris are all clearly laid out on paper. However, their meaning is all too often called into question and their implementation unsatisfactory.

This is where ODIHR comes in.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is where you come in. You are the chief promoters of the OSCE's principles and commitments and also their chief defenders. It is your job to convince all participating States that implementing our principles can enhance our security in the long run.

I want to assure you that I understand the difficulty of your task – especially in these uncertain times. It is a task requiring high-end diplomacy!

To succeed in your important work, you need the support of all OSCE States. You need a reliable budget. And I saw for myself at the end of last year just how difficult that can be.

But there is something else that is crucial to ODIHR's success: its people. Here in Warsaw, 150 staff from 34 OSCE States form a diverse and dedicated team. I am delighted that almost 60 percent of the ODIHR team are women; three out of five departments are headed by women.

And I have been told that there are at least three people here in this room today who can remember their very first day at the Office for Free Elections 25 years ago! I am impressed! That certainly speaks for ODIHR as a reliable employer. But it also speaks for you as dedicated staff.

Let me assure you that Germany will continue to support you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Throughout its history, ODIHR has been at the forefront when it comes to dealing with crucial human rights issues. I would like to highlight just one of them here.

More than 20 years ago, in 1992, the first ever Human Dimension Seminar on tolerance and non-discrimination took place. Today, the importance of these topics could not be greater. I say this also with a view to the current migration and refugee flows that will have a lasting effect on our societies. That is exactly why we put tolerance and non-discrimination so high up on our Chairmanship agenda. I look forward to a series of events on these questions – including a conference in Berlin in October.

Director Link,  
staff members of ODIHR,

let me compliment you and thank you once again for your crucial work. You were a great support when we were drawing up our Chairmanship agenda.

And we are very grateful to have such a strong team here at ODIHR today to help us implement it!

You can be sure that you have Germany's support in 2016 and beyond.

Thank you.