

**Opening Remarks by Ambassador Renatas Norkus
at the
OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on National
Human Rights Institutions (ombudsinstitutions, commissions,
institutes and other mechanisms)**

ENGLISH only

14 April 2011, 3.00 p.m.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Kindly permit me to officially open the first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of the present year and to welcome you most warmly on behalf of the Lithuanian Chairmanship.

Promoting and strengthening the role and efficiency of National Human Rights Institutions – or NHRIs – is one of the Lithuanian Chairmanship’s human dimension priorities for this year.

Why did we choose to make it a priority?

As the Chairperson-in-Office, Lithuania’s Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis, emphasized in the 2011 OSCE work programme presented in January: “Human rights and fundamental freedoms need constant protection.” In this connection he called on participating States to make “a new effort to examine the role of independent national human rights institutions” in protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms in the OSCE area.

As participating States of the OSCE, we are under an obligation to adhere to international human rights standards and to implement the OSCE’s commitments in this field.

The Chairmanship believes that NHRIs can play a key role in introducing human rights issues to national policy agendas, in keeping them on those agendas, and in supporting their governments in adhering to international human rights standards.

And while we bear the responsibility in our own countries for creating an environment that promotes the enjoyment of human rights by all people, we can be given invaluable support in this sometimes challenging task by other actors: most notably the international community with its special expertise, civil society with its knowledge of the concern and needs of the people – and NHRIs.

Though NHRIs are independent in nature, they are state-established institutions legitimized by our parliaments and as such are mandated to assist the OSCE participating States in implementing the OSCE's commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While the history of National Human Rights Institutions goes back as far as 1806, and in more recent history to 1946, it was only in the 1990s that the concept of NHRIs became internationally known and was developed further.

In the 1990 Copenhagen Document, the participating States resolved to "facilitate the establishment and strengthening of independent national institutions in the area of human rights and the rule of law."

Much has been done since 1990: at the present time there are NHRIs existing at state level in no fewer than 41 OSCE participating States.

Most recently, in Turkey discussions are in process on adoption of an ombudsman law and in the Netherlands respectively – on a draft law to establish an NHRI.

But let me turn to my own country, Lithuania. Even though there is great understanding in Lithuania of the usefulness of having a National Human Rights Institution corresponding to the UN Paris Principles and there is a Copenhagen commitment to establish one, we have to admit that in spite of intense discussions among government institutions, parliament and civil society in the years 2006 to 2008, no NHRI has yet been established.

In our defence, if I may say so, it should be noted that we have four different specialized ombudsinstitutions, all of which are operating well.

I am particularly pleased that Lithuania's Children's Rights Ombudswoman Ms. Edita Žiobiene is present with us today. I know that she was actively engaged in efforts to establish an NHRI in Lithuania. I am sure she will be ready to tell us about aspects of the Lithuanian experience at the present meeting.

At this meeting today and tomorrow Lithuania will be among those looking to learn from the experience of other OSCE participating States and to hear how their performance in establishing and implementing human rights policies has improved after the establishment of an NHRI.

I am also pleased to inform you that later this year we are planning to host an OSCE conference in Vilnius on “Strengthening the Effectiveness and Efficiency of National Human Rights Institutions.”, which we hope will raise the awareness on the value of NHRIs in my country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recognizing the important role NHRIs play in enforcing respect for human rights at the national level, I believe that this meeting will give us an excellent opportunity to exchange experience on the different models of NHRI and on their relationships with government and civil society.

I am confident that this SHDM, as intended, will help us to assess what further support these institutions require to enable them to effectively and efficiently perform their role of assisting governments in the task of adhering to international human rights standards and OSCE commitments.

I would like to wish you all an interesting and productive series of discussions. I am looking forward to the outcome and, possibly, to the meeting bearing fruit in a set of recommendations.

If your discussions show that there is a need to strengthen the political commitment of the OSCE participating States with regard to NHRIs, the Chairmanship will be happy to initiate a follow-up process by asking the Human Dimension Committee, chaired by Ambassador Thomas Greminger of Switzerland, to look into the matter.

Finally, let me thank Ambassador Lenarcic and the ODIHR for their invaluable input and for the work they have done in preparing the event.

Before closing, I would like to emphasize that the ODIHR and the OSCE field operations play a crucial role in providing assistance to participating States in establishing National Human Rights Institutions and, once they have been established, in helping the NHRIs to flourish and constantly enhance their operations.

Thank you