Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

intervention by
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Thank you, Chair

Thank you for inviting me to the General Committee on Political Affairs and Security. I am honoured to address you. Your role as democratically elected representatives of citizens in your respective States is crucial in formulating and adopting legal instruments that significantly affect entire communities, including national minorities. I believe that dialogue with parliamentarians is essential for my institution's ongoing efforts to assist participating States in developing and implementing policies and legislative frameworks that foster cohesive, stable and resilient societies.

I was honoured to be appointed as the High Commissioner on National Minorities at the Valletta Ministerial Council two and a half months ago. As you know, the High Commissioner is tasked with providing early warning and early action to prevent ethnic tensions from escalating into conflict.

In diverse societies, promoting policies that facilitate integration is one of the most effective strategies for preventing conflicts. How States manage inter-ethnic relations can significantly influence the strength and resilience of their societies in the face of internal and external challenges. The security of each participating State is inextricably linked to the security of every individual living there, and vice versa.

As we see in numerous peaceful and prosperous countries with diverse societies, conflicts involving national minority issues are far from inevitable. We see that societal tensions typically stem from inadequate or ineffective integration processes, and are exacerbated by political choices. As we see nationalism and divisive rhetoric rising year-on-year, it is increasingly important for political leaders to protect ethnic and linguistic diversity and avoid instrumentalization of these issues for short-term political goals. It is important to remind ourselves that in the Paris Charter we agreed to "reaffirm our deep conviction that friendly relations among our peoples, as well as peace, justice, stability and democracy, require that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities be protected and conditions for the promotion of that identity be created."

Also, the office of the High Commissioner has developed Recommendations and Guidelines, based on international law and on the successive High Commissioners' extensive experience, on how States can support persons belonging to national minorities residing in other countries in ways that do not strain bilateral relations. These Recommendations underline the dual responsibility of States, which is to protect and promote the rights of persons belonging to national minorities under their jurisdiction and act as responsible members of the international community with respect to minorities under the jurisdiction of another State.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, we have a collective responsibility to reflect on and reinforce the principles and commitments that united us half a century ago.

In four days from now, we will mark three years since the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, a war which causes immense human suffering. My institution has paid close attention to the implications of the war on identity and national minority-related matters. We know that post-war Ukraine will be as diverse, multi-ethnic and multilingual as it has always been. It is in my mandate to strengthen the resilience of participating States, including Ukraine, to any attempts to instrumentalize national minority issues or efforts to use minorities as an element for external political influencing. Our office is working with Ukraine's institutions to help strengthen its legislative framework and build capacity to deal with national minority issues.

An important characteristic of performing my mandate calls for "quiet diplomacy", whereby I work in confidence and act independently, within and between participating States. My office also implements targeted programmes in a number of participating States. In my work, I aim to combine short-term actions to reduce existing tensions with legal and policy advice to promote the sustainable integration of diverse societies.

This advice is based on the Recommendations and Guidelines published by the successive High Commissioners over the past three decades. These documents cover a range of topics related to national minority issues, from integration to inter-State relations. They focus on specific policy areas, such as education, language, political and socio-economic participation, media,

policing, and access to justice. This is our thematic approach that can be adapted and applied to different contexts across the OSCE area, and I encourage you to make the best use of it.

Following the approach of my predecessors, I continue to prioritize the situation of girls and women from national minority communities. We actively promote the Women, Peace and Security agenda and work closely with the OSCE structures and international partners to advance the situation of girls and women. For some years, my office has been examining the intersectionality of gender and national minorities, and the situation of minority women within the context of conflict prevention. My institution intends to translate the findings from several research projects and ongoing expert consultations in this field into practical policy guidance that could help participating States that are looking for concrete ways to contribute to improving the situation of national minority women in their States.

Today, environmental issues also dominate discussions with the OSCE participating States. Environmental challenges and access to natural resources, such as water, pose serious risks to peace and security. From the position of my mandate, I see that we need to protect national minorities and majority-minority relations from disproportionate impacts of environmental issues.

In line with the most recent set of Recommendations published by my office, the *Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Social and Economic Life*, I plan to continue to address barriers that national minorities face to economic inclusion. We do this by advocating for equitable access to resources and involving minorities in decision-making processes. This includes supporting policies that enhance their economic resilience in the face of environmental and technological challenges.

For the past 30 years, the successive High Commissioners have encountered a number of persistent issues that can lead to tensions in society. These issues are often linked to rights which are only accessible to those with a nationality. Rights that stateless people simply do not have access to due to their legal invisibility. This can leave them marginalized and vulnerable. The office of the HCNM has been working on preventing and addressing statelessness as it pertains to national minorities, including through membership in the Global Alliance to End Statelessness recently initiated by the UNHCR.

I also continue the work of my predecessors to observe the impact of contested historical legacies, and approaches seeking to address them, on diverse societies. In line with *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, we continue to build expertise in this field. This will enable us to develop specific advice that can help participating States to deal with history and its representation in a responsible way. A way that fosters unity rather than division.

Involving and empowering minority youth is also an important part of our work. Our core message is clear: minority youth hold immense potential to build strong, inclusive societies, thereby reducing the risk of conflict.

Last, but not least, my office continues to promote identity-related data collection, analysis, and use among participating States to ensure that all data activities are designed to minimize potential tensions and instead support the integration of our diverse societies.

Let me conclude by highlighting the crucial role that civil society organizations play in ensuring accountability within our societies, which helps to sustain our democratic systems. From this perspective, we are mindful of the increasing trend in the OSCE area of adopting legislation that limits the space of civil society, including organizations advocating for minority rights. Such legislation can undermine trust and contribute to societal divisions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To achieve comprehensive security and prevent conflicts, it is essential to unite all sectors of society, including minority groups, while acknowledging their roles and responsibilities. I view parliamentarians as crucial allies in implementing my conflict prevention mandate. I look forward to engaging in a trusting and open discussion with you in the years to come.

Thank you for your attention.