



Opening remarks by the Chairperson-in-Office

H.E. Miroslav Lajčák

2019 Economic and Environmental Forum: “Promoting economic progress and security in the OSCE area through energy co-operation, new technologies, good governance and connectivity in the digital era”

11 September 2019

Czernin Palace

Prague, Czech Republic

Minister Petříček,

Deputy Minister Xhafaj,

Secretary-General Greminger,

dear colleagues, good afternoon,

Welcome to this year’s Economic and Environmental Forum.

And before I start, I want to thank our hosts, the Czech Republic - it’s always good to be in Prague.

We have a lot to discuss over the coming days. We will address how we cooperate on energy; how we deal with new technologies; how we strive for good governance; and how we can capitalize on connectivity in the digital era.

In opening our Forum, I want to make three main points.

The first is that, as we stand here today, technology is surging ahead – in a way we never expected.

It is bringing everything to us – from taxis, to food –with one click of a smartphone.

It is allowing us to move our money around, without stepping foot in a bank.

And, it means we are almost at a point where we can talk to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

According to International Telecommunication Union, more than half of the world's population is now using the Internet. This amounts to 3.9 billion people.

And, we are adapting to this. Most of us are now so dependent on technology like GPS, that we would be lost – quite literally – without it!

But the fact is, we, as policy makers, experts, diplomats, are not moving fast enough. Because the technological boom has a dark side too. And we are struggling to contain it.

Hate speech is spreading faster. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is sparking concern and anger across sectors. And the infrastructure we need to keep our societies functioning is facing attacks we do not always see coming.

So, this has left us – in many cases – in crisis management. We find ourselves scrambling for solutions when things go wrong – rather than looking to the horizon, and taking early action.

And, I want to point out: this is something we are *all* grappling with.

No one region, no one government, no one country has the secret recipe. None of us has found the elusive balance – the way to harness the benefits of technology, while mitigating and preventing its risks and dangers.

The OSCE does not necessarily have the answer.

But it can provide a platform to finding one – together.

It can allow for the exchange of best practices.

It can create space for dialogue on the way ahead.

And it can act as an incubator for new initiatives – from regulatory frameworks, to activities in the field - which can make a difference on the regional, national and local scale.

As the Chair, we want to explore how this year's Ministerial Council could guide us in our efforts to capitalize on the benefits - and mitigate the risks - of digitalization and new technology.

And, we look forward to hearing your ideas throughout the Forum.

My second point is that this forum is not just about new issues.

Many of the topics on our agenda have roots in the Helsinki Final Act.

And, in some cases, the issues that were relevant back then are relevant today.

Just look at energy.

In this sector, we are still tackling challenges and responding to trends that existed in 1975.

For example:

There is still an insatiable demand for energy. In fact, according to the International Energy Agency, energy demand worldwide grew by 2.3% last year – the fastest pace seen in a decade.

Energy is still closely linked to geopolitical opportunities and risks. This is true for consumer, producer or transit countries alike.

And, as it was the case over four decades ago, energy infrastructure remains a vulnerable target to attacks and disruptions today.

However, at the same time, we are dealing with new and emerging dynamics.

For example, physical protection of energy infrastructure is no longer enough. We now need to contemplate threats, not just from land or sea, but also from cyberspace.

Another new trend is the pressure to move away from carbon-based models. This means a dual challenge: meeting rising energy needs, while transitioning and diversifying.

All of this has changed our everyday life and it has changed our patterns and policies.

Today, we are diversifying the routes and sources of our energy.

We are using new research and technology to reduce our carbon footprint.

We are adapting our governance and regulatory frameworks to enhance energy security.

And, we are trying new ways of working together – and cooperating on this issue.

The OSCE can support this.

It has many traditional tools – tools which were relevant 1975 and can still add value today.

It can also innovate and adapt with us - to develop the tools we need to meet new and emerging needs.

And, it can be a non-judgemental, non-prescriptive platform – which can bring together our own national expertise, and help us to find joint solutions.

As my third point, I want to point out how proximate – how real – the issues are we are addressing today.

Because, they have a tangible impact on the everyday lives of people.

Take good governance, for example. This is a buzz phrase we hear a lot, including it the title of today's event.

But we need to work on it, and we need to be mindful of the inter-links here.

Because in times of insecurity – be it economic, energy, or environmental – people often seek protection in force, rather than in the rule of law.

Our best defense against this kind of deterioration is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems.

In this respect, any movement towards a more just and well governed society – securing fair elections, fighting hate speech, combating inequality, empowering women – is a meaningful action towards economic progress and security.

Connectivity is another example, yet another buzz word included in the title.

But the truth is, it is an entrenched part of our day-to-day activities.

When we buy something from our local grocery, when we buy bitcoins, when we log into our email accounts, we are entering into a vast eco-system that can span continents, sectors, and societies.

Centuries ago, something could happen in one half of the world – without much impact on the other.

This is not the case anymore today.

When it comes to shocks like conflict, famine or trade wars – being thousands of miles away no longer insulates us.

This means participating States are more connected than ever before.

Whether our economies are booming, or struggling, whether our societies are living in peace or in conflict, whether we are big or small – we are facing common challenges.

And, particularly when it comes to economic and environmental challenges, these challenges are affecting the daily lives of people.

So, this should give us even more incentives to work together.

And, we *are* doing it.

We have actually seen that the Economic and Environmental Dimension can bring opposing parties together – around the same table.

We have seen a level of innovation and constructive dialogue that has not always been replicated in other areas.

I urge us to not just continue this spirit through this Forum – but to strengthen it.

And, I hope we can bring different ideas to the table.

From technology exchange, and fostering innovation, to engaging non-traditional actors, like businesses or young entrepreneurs.

There is space for progress here – so let's take advantage of it.

Excellencies,

When thinking of the world's largest regional security organization, economic and environment issues might not immediately jump to mind.

But, the fact is, we no longer live in a world where we can afford to work in silos.

What is going on in our economies and our environment has a direct impact on our security, and, in many cases, our fundamental rights and freedoms.

The topics on our agenda today cut across all areas of the OSCE's work.

We might have different opinions, but there is something we can all agree on: that we cannot afford to ignore them.

So, yes, I hope we can have some interesting discussions over the next three days.

And more than that: I hope we can leave this Forum with new ideas on how to cooperate outside this hall.

I thank you.