



Statement by the Chairperson-in-Office

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues

First of all, many thanks for this invitation, it's a great honour to address you at the outset of this important conference. Over these two days, you will discuss various aspects of European security. From military to civil; from prevention to response; from operations to capabilities. I am sure there will be many discussions on the current shape of our transatlantic alliance, as well as the EU preparedness.

I would however use this opportunity to speak of a different multilateral organization – one that has been contributing to the peace in Europe for over 40 years now. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe - OSCE.

I have just visited Berlin a little over 2 weeks ago to commemorate the fall of the Berlin wall. Speaking about European security in this city – once an epicentre of the Cold War - is always very symbolic. Berlin knew best the pain of divided Europe – and the joy of its unity. Celebrating 30 years of democratic wave made us all to reflect and look back.

We remembered the perils of bipolar world, when the wall divided Europe in two, and its fate depended on the dominate power. But even in the midst of the deepest divisions – in 1975, those who led in might and power still recognized the importance of cooperative security.

The Helsinki Final Act recognized the inherent dignity and human rights of every person; pronounced the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and set to refrain from the illegal or unjustified use of force across the OSCE region. It was the only cooperative diplomatic forum where the opposing sides of the Cold War approached each other as equals. It channelled power through rules, principles and norms. That's why I am such a fan of the story of Helsinki.

Competing sides establishing rules of coexistence - that is what made the OSCE unique then – and what makes its position extraordinary in 2019. Because today, many draw parallels with the Cold War era. And it's not hard to see why.

Multilateralism is in crises, voices advocating nationalism and egoism are gaining strength. Rules do not necessarily apply to all equally, and the facts and reason often loose arguments to demagogues. And there are even more strong actors in the international arena, there are more than two variables in the equation of the 21st century.

So even though we tore the walls down 30 years ago – today we see many rising again. And I don't mean just those made of bricks. The levels of divisions and polarization within our societies are extremely worrying.

So, I believe that just as we needed OSCE in the era of bipolarity - we will need it even more now, as we are seemingly headed towards the multipolar order. I saw that clearly during the past year, when Slovakia has had the honour to stand at the helm of this Organization.

We are nearing the end of our mandate, which will culminate next week, when the Ministerial Council of the 57 participating states meets in Bratislava. So, let me take this opportunity to say a few words about the value and relevance of this organization in the multipolar world – which I would sum up into 3 simple words.

People. Dialogue. Rules.

So first on People.

The OSCE gathers over a billion people. Not all of them live in peace. Not all of them feel safe. Not all of them can access basic needs.

And the OSCE is here to play the big game and support political processes, by monitoring and helping civilians in the crises in and around Ukraine; supporting confidence building measures in conflict settlement process in Moldova; promoting measures to reduce tensions and maintain an atmosphere conducive to peace in Nagorno-Karabakh; supporting platforms for dialogue in Georgia; working to consolidate peace, stability and democratic institutions in Western Balkans; fostering dialogue and regional cooperation in Central Asia.

But we cannot just wait patiently for progress to happen. Because there are too many people suffering, as we speak. And through OSCE we can find steps, even if short or small – to help them through.

For example, in Ukraine. It is actually quite encouraging to see some new - positive political atmosphere: the Steinmeier formula endorsement by the participants of the TCG; disengagement in Stanytsia Luhanska, Zolote and Petrivske; a restart of demining activities; the long delayed exchange of detainees; the announced meeting of the leaders of the Normandy Format in December.

But the picture for many people living in the midst – is still very dire. To better paint it for you: In the Luhansk region, elderly women and men - on sticks or in wheelchairs - risk their lives every day, to cross the only open entry-exit point: a bridge on the line of contact in Stanytsia Luhanska that has been severely damaged. Over 10 000 people cross daily. They feel hopeless, neglected and abandoned. So, our Chairmanship worked towards the improvement of their humanitarian situation.

We engaged on designed confidence building measures with leadership of both Ukraine and Russia. This included disengagement to allow the reconstruction of the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge. And I am very proud to say that later this week, I will be traveling back to Ukraine to visit Stanytsia Luhanska again – with safe pedestrian by-pass bridge built and reconstruction completed.

In these crises scenarios – every drop in the bucket to make the situation for the people on the ground more bearable – counts. And even a small step can be in fact a huge leap forward on the path towards stability.

But the OSCE is not exceptional only for the people it serves, but also for the people who form it. In the capitals and in the field - in the offices and on the ground.

The Organization has a number of institutions and structures that help it implement its mandate.

Take the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) - which provides assistance in promoting democracy, rule of law and tolerance. The work of ODIHR is valued far beyond the organizational remit. Its election observation, reviews of legislation and advice are used by participating states and other international bodies alike. This work to sustain democratic institutions is invaluable in building stability in the OSCE area.

Same goes for the work of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

But the true tricks up the OSCE's sleeve - are the 16 field operations. Right now, as we speak, there are people in the OSCE uniforms monitoring ceasefire violations, managing borders, or working on humanitarian efforts.

They are the eyes and ears of the international community. They have local know-how, they work daily side by side with the resident communities and authorities.

Take for example the largest one - SMM in Ukraine. A civilian mission present on the ground 24/7 with 740 international monitors from 44 countries and overall staff of 1300. It observes and reports - in an impartial and objective way - on the situation in Ukraine. This is absolutely key to assessment and dialogue.

I have visited all of these missions in the past year and what I observed in each one of them was quite straightforward - dedication, respect and trust. They work tirelessly, often operating at great risk. But for their work, they enjoy trust of the people they were sent to assist.

The OSCE is seen as a true partner in the field. As a friend. And this trust - allows for progress in turn. This is the true unique niche of the Organization.

Secondly, on dialogue.

Among the 57 participating states around the table today – there are allies and strategic opponents. Peaceful countries and countries in the midst of crises. Countries – as we like to say – from Vancouver to Vladivostok. They are hardly likeminded and not always act in consensus.

So, yes, the dialogue is tough. But consensus means that every actor has ownership and decisions once reached are stronger. The idea to form a common platform during the Cold War was motivated by an effort to avoid miscalculation or miscommunication which could have fatal consequences.

And this does not apply only to resolving conflicts, but also preventing them. There is a clear human case to do all we can to avert anguish and suffering of conflict.

And there is an economic case as well, as conflict destroys basically every element of a life of a country and its people. The United Nations-World Bank study “Pathways for Peace” concluded that prevention would save some \$34 billion in damage in countries that avoid war. These benefits are compounded over time to reach over \$140 billion after 15 years globally.

OSCE, again, has an immense role to play. It provides a platform where everybody gets a stake and where tensions can be deescalated. And here, I would also highlight the role of OSCE mediators, who are daily bringing opposing parties around the table, easing tensions and negotiating for peaceful solutions.

Moreover, the field missions have increased their concentration on conflict analysis – sharpening a focus on preventing conflict escalation or recurrence. But prevention does not always simply mean springing into action once tensions are brewing. We must be active at every step of the conflict cycle.

This means tackling long-term risks of conflict: building strong institutions, stamping out corruption, engaging with marginalized communities, promoting human rights. And all of these are areas where OSCE can step in – foster a dialogue, assist, prevent.

Thirdly, on rules.

I know that lately, we are hearing many voices questioning the value of the multilateral security institutions – the OSCE included. They are promoting national self-interest over multilateralism and advocate that everyone fends for themselves.

Now, chairing the OSCE and after years of multilateral engagement at the UN, EU or NATO. I can confess that yes, the organizations are not always working perfectly. But I would argue that it’s a feature of their design.

They absorb heavy pressures stemming from different, conflicting interests. But it is better to have these pressures absorbed within those organizations, than erupting outside. So, while we complain about the heavy bureaucracy and slow reaction or ineffectiveness, let’s be fair and acknowledge the vast amount of good work these organizations are producing on a daily basis.

I saw it first hand with the OSCE monitors or OSCE mediators, and heard it in dialogues with political leaders but also with youth, civil society or local communities.

The OSCE is a legacy of a hostile powers working together and designing basic rules to conduct their affairs in peace. The crises we are currently experiencing are not a fault of the international system. They stem from the unwillingness of individual actors to abide by the rules and the principles of that system.

But when rules are broken, they need to be enforced, not scratched. And even if the rules don't suit an imminent individual interest, they need to be respected, not rewritten. No cooperative security system can function without rules, respect and compromise. And in this interconnected world – failure of any of our members affects us all.

To build a more secure OSCE area, we need to live up to the responsibilities we signed up for.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

The OSCE region has come a long way, since that conference in Helsinki during the Cold War. But with distressing signs of trembling international order, it's useful to look back at that time of history for lessons. And I think the lesson is clear.

The best tool to advance global peace and security – is coming together under the multilateral umbrella, respecting each other and the rules we created, understanding that in today's security environment, none of us can go alone.

And when it comes to the OSCE 57, there is absolutely no alternative to regional knowledge, field presence, niche expertise and lessons learned from the ground.

When mobilized effectively and pulled together, the results can be historic. So, to utilize its unique potential fully, let us work together.

Thank you.