



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

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the 1381st Plenary meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council

[Check against delivery]

Vienna, 7 July 2022

Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here with you today to update you on my work. In these challenging times, I continued to conduct country visits and online meetings, and engage with authorities, minority representatives, and others. We continue to work towards strengthening inter-ethnic relations in diverse societies across the OSCE, while focusing on the effect of the regional military conflicts on national minorities and their potential spill-over to other OSCE participating States.

During the reporting period, I visited, in chronological order: the Russian Federation, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. I continued my consultations with the Permanent Representatives in Vienna, followed up on reactions to my previous statements to the Permanent Council, and worked closely with other international and non-governmental organizations. I continued to benefit from close co-operation with Secretary General Helga Schmid; ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci; the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Teresa Ribeiro; and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and its Secretary General Roberto Montella, as well as with field missions and presences. I am grateful for the strong relationship I have with the Polish Chairmanship, and I commend His Excellency Zbigniew Rau for his strong leadership and dedication in support of my institution. Our meeting in Warsaw last month was a good opportunity to discuss how to address the challenges to European security from the perspective of my mandate.

I express my thanks to the authorities of the participating States that I have visited for their excellent assistance in facilitating my requested meetings, including at the highest levels, and for their openness to discuss matters related to my mandate. I am grateful to the field presences for supporting my visits and sharing their situational knowledge and expertise.

I would now like to present to you my activities and geographic engagements since my last statement to you on 4 November 2021. I will then share with you the thematic work of my institution. However, first, I must turn to the situation in Ukraine, as much of my attention has been, and continues to be, related to the ongoing war on its territory.

In any war and conflict, ordinary, innocent people, including national minorities, are often among those who suffer the most. Therefore, I join the plea of the international community and call for an immediate end to the hostilities and appeal to all sides to return to dialogue. I strongly believe that the solution lies in the field of diplomacy. I have reached out to both Ukraine and the Russian Federation to signal my readiness to facilitate dialogue to negotiate issues related to my mandate, such as language and education, and which would be relevant in support of a peaceful settlement. The sides took note of my offer.

In my last address to the Permanent Council, I shared insights from my first official visit to Ukraine in autumn 2021, where I noted an increased commitment to, and investment in, policies and institutional structures in support of social cohesion and integration. I described a country working to maintain the delicate balance between the interests and rights of all groups in society, including persons belonging to national minorities. Like all OSCE participating States, Ukraine faced challenges in this endeavour. However, in my assessment, Ukraine's efforts to engage in inclusive dialogue and to recognize and value diversity when developing legislation and policies gave me hope that these challenges could be overcome. Since taking up my mandate, I have continued the approach of my predecessors: helping Ukraine improve some of its recent policies in the fields of language and education. I plan to continue these efforts as soon as conditions allow and as part of post-conflict rehabilitation efforts.

We understand that States might have an interest in supporting minorities residing in other countries based on ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, historical or other ties. However, as I have reminded the relevant parties, *The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations* published by my office recommend that any such support must always be extended in good faith and "with due respect for the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and friendly, including good neighbourly, relations." I noted with concern that the Russian Federation featured minority issues in its arguments for its military action.

I have consistently warned participating States against the serious dangers of exploiting minority issues. I again plead with you to take this message back to your capitals. This kind of discourse has the potential to harm reconciliation and recovery efforts in Ukraine, but it also poses serious risks for the stability of the entire OSCE region.

As part of my mandate to identify, assess and warn of threats to peace and security involving national minority issues, I have been analysing the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on national

minorities. Since 24 February, I have been in touch with and have received appeals from the representatives of national minorities about the humanitarian situation on the ground, especially in the areas where minority communities reside. I am also in touch with the representatives of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and ethnic Ukrainians in the Russian Federation.

Based on my observations, I stand with my counterparts in the OSCE and beyond in calling for the immediate protection of civilians and for humanitarian access to all, including national minorities. I would also like to underscore that the Russian Federation is obligated by international law to observe human, including minority, rights in all the territories of Ukraine in which it exercises effective control. Most recently, I have noted reports of Ukrainian communities in these territories experiencing restrictions of their rights; in particular, changes to the education curriculum related to the teaching of the Ukrainian language, literature and history. Representatives of Crimean Tatars have reported a number of threats. At the same time, representatives of ethnic Russians in Ukraine have also told me about their concerns regarding security and their freedom to use their language in public.

I would also like to draw attention to the specific needs of the Roma community, including the additional challenges they often face while in displacement due to a lack of documentation.

Going forward, I reiterate my readiness to support dialogue through quiet diplomacy, as per my mandate and in co-ordination with other OSCE offices and the rest of the international community. In this regard, I regret there was no consensus to renew the respective mandates of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission and the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine.

My priority for the region is working to reduce the risk and effects of spill over. I commend the assistance provided to internally displaced people by host communities within Ukraine and by neighbouring countries to respond to the refugee crisis. From the perspective of my mandate, I remind host countries to pay attention to maintaining the social cohesion of their communities when designing responses to assist refugees. I have taken note of reported instances of hate speech directed against national minorities, including Russian-speaking individuals and communities, and call on all participating States to increase their efforts to monitor, prevent and combat such tendencies, and to refrain from policies that may ultimately result in decreasing space for national minorities. I would also like to remind participating States of the mechanisms of bilateral dialogue available to us, which have proven time and again to yield positive, tangible outcomes, including on minority issues, and as such should be used to their full potential.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now I will update you on my recent engagements, in alphabetic order.

I took note of the amendments to the Education Code of the Republic of Belarus that remove the possibility to receive education in a minority language. This represents a departure from Belarus's previous practice of offering inclusive education as recommended by *The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities*, published by my office. I have urged the authorities of Belarus to reconsider the amendments and to return to broad and transparent consultations with persons belonging to national minorities, and to ensure an agreeable approach to national minority language education. I stand ready to support such a process and my dialogue with the authorities of Belarus is ongoing.

I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina in April and welcome the political will to resolve the constitutional and legislative obstacles to equal participation and equal opportunity, as well as a desire to harness the benefits of the country's multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional society.

In my meetings with national minority representatives in the State- and entity-level Councils of National Minorities, I learned that the representatives welcomed the legislation underpinning the creation of the Councils as advisory bodies and the possibility they provided to influence legislation. My interlocutors said they experienced inter-ethnic harmony at an inter-personal level in the country but were concerned about divisive rhetoric in political discourse that encourages alienation and otherization. I emphasized the necessity for everyone, especially public officials who are also role models, to avoid using ethnicity-related rhetoric that can result in hate incidents and the alienation of certain members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's diverse society, including national minorities.

Following meetings with the authorities and representatives of national minorities, I found that there is space for improvement of the legislative and institutional frameworks. There was unanimous agreement on the necessity for election reform because members of national minorities, and others who do not identify as one of the three "Constituent Peoples", continue to be excluded from candidature or election to the upper house of parliament and the

Presidency. I encouraged all those involved with the reform process to find the will and the means to reach agreement on this crucial element of diversity governance. I offered my continued support to the authorities on national minority-related matters and look forward to providing any necessary support on strengthening the cohesion of the country's multi-ethnic society.

In April, I also visited Georgia, where I met high-level representatives from the Government, parliament, civil society, national minorities, and the international community. I expressed support for Georgia's efforts to manage diversity and increase opportunities for national minorities. I offered to share my institution's expertise on diversity governance, including through programmatic and thematic work. In this regard, I reaffirmed the readiness of my office to continue supporting the effective implementation of Georgia's State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration (2021–2030), aimed at increasing socio-economic and political-participation opportunities for national minorities, with a focus on youth and women.

My interlocutors briefed me on the upcoming review of the "1+4 programme", which provides State-language learning opportunities for national minorities to be able to study at university level in Georgia. I look forward to seeing the planned improvements to the programme, initiated in 2010, that will better respond to the current needs of minority students. I also visited a public school in the village of Nakhiduri, Bolnisi municipality, where I had the opportunity to talk about the importance of balancing State-language proficiency and mother-tongue education. This is best achieved through multilingual and multicultural education. I also met key civil society interlocutors in Marneuli city, at the heart of a region with a significant ethnic Azeri population.

At the administrative boundary line in Odzisi, I saw the hardships facing conflict-affected populations. I discussed with interlocutors in Tbilisi the potential impact of regional conflicts on Georgia. At this very challenging time, I noted good integration-based education initiatives, such as a public school in Tbilisi offering educational, medical and psychological services to children whose families fled Ukraine.

In Central Asia, I am concerned about the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ramifications of the conflict in Ukraine. Lower remittances from labour

migrants, and their potential return from Russia, as well as the secondary effects of sanctions on national economies in the region, are likely to have a negative effect on the socio-economic situation of the public, including national minorities. My office continues to provide targeted assistance to the national authorities of Kyrgyzstan in the implementation of a recently adopted strategy to promote civic identity in the country. Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, my office is assisting the authorities with developing policies and strengthening capacities to provide mother tongue-based multilingual and multicultural education in schools and preschools. In May, my advisers visited Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to assess needs and identify opportunities to enhance my institution's engagement in the areas of multilingual education and political and socio-economic participation. Our objective is to strengthen their respective multi-ethnic communities' resilience to meet the multiple security and social economic challenges they face from within and outside of the region.

In Latvia, I took note of the ongoing debate on legislative initiatives in fields such as education and historical memory that, if confirmed, could restrict the space for minority rights. I have extended my offer to Latvia to assist in the development and implementation of balanced, pragmatic and inclusive policies that are the result of dialogue with all of the relevant stakeholders, including national minorities.

I visited the Republic of Moldova in January, where I appreciated the authorities' openness in discussing a broad spectrum of matters related to my mandate. At the request of the President of Moldova, I provided my conclusions and recommendations to the authorities.

Moldova is a great source of innovative good practices in advancing inter-ethnic relations that I can share with other OSCE participating States. Specialized governmental institutions, such as the Agency for Inter-ethnic Relations and the Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, as well as parliamentary committees, Ministries and civil society actors, form an institutional framework for effective and organic consolidation of Moldova's multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual society.

The success of preschool multilingual education in Gagauzia that allows for the use of the State language, Gagauz and Russian languages from a very early age demonstrates how grassroots initiatives can make a significant difference. I am determined to intensify dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Research, local authorities and other relevant institutions on how to

support and promote multilingual education at schools and introduce innovative methods to make Moldova's multilingualism initiatives exemplary. The Government and the office of the President expressed their determination to maximize the opportunities for non-native speakers of all ages to learn and use the State language. Combined, these educational strategies will support the integration of society and promote the inclusion of national minorities in all aspects of public life, including politics and the economy.

My office also provided assistance to the implementation of Moldova's National Strategy for Consolidating Interethnic Relations 2017–2027 and support to multilingual education in kindergartens and schools with language of instruction other than the State language. My team also continued to facilitate language-policy dialogue at the Parliament of Moldova and explore ways to open additional dialogue platforms on other relevant issues, such as the relationships between Chisinau and the regions. Finally, in close co-ordination with the OSCE Mission to Moldova, I have also been monitoring the situation in Transdnistria, as it pertains to my mandate, including the impact of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine on inter-ethnic relations in this region.

In the first visit of my institution to Montenegro since 2007, undertaken in November last year, I observed that the country has built a strong and comprehensive legislative and policy framework governing its diverse society. In meetings with representatives of national minorities, I learned that there was broad satisfaction with the legal mechanisms for the promotion of national minority interests. I was encouraged by the vibrant discourse among the representatives, who collectively agreed on the benefits of additional attention towards implementation of this strong legal framework. During my visit, I identified several examples of positive practices in diversity governance, including directly elected national minority organizations and a national fund to finance initiatives to preserve and promote national minority cultures.

In my meetings with the authorities, I discussed inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro and the main factors affecting social cohesion. I welcomed assurances that procedural amendments would soon enable National Minority Councils to apply directly to the national fund to seek financing assistance for their programmes. I thank the authorities for their invitation for me to visit again to speak directly with national minorities in the north and south of the country.

I have taken note of the creation of a dedicated Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, following the recent change of Government in the country. I trust that the authorities will continue the planned development of a new five-year strategy on national minorities, for which I have offered to provide expertise and facilitate an exchange of best practices from the OSCE region on similar national minority-related approaches.

I encourage the authorities to continue their efforts towards meaningful and effective consultations with national minorities on issues that affect them. I reaffirm my readiness to support the authorities, including on the implementation of the population census in a manner that encompasses the wide diversity of multi-identities in the country.

In January, I visited North Macedonia to deepen my familiarity with the dynamics of the multi-ethnic society, to learn more about the priorities of the Government and representatives of national minorities, and to offer my institution's continued support on matters related to my mandate. My visit also presented an opportunity to connect with the authorities in North Macedonia that will be taking over the Chairmanship of the OSCE next year. I look forward to supporting North Macedonia's authorities in that role. North Macedonia is a positive example of peaceful inter-ethnic relations and I note that the country has made significant progress, particularly over the last few years in this regard.

My office continues to provide support towards addressing issues related to integration and social cohesion in North Macedonia by providing technical assistance to the implementation of the three-year (2020–2022) National Strategy on One Society and Interculturalism. The country's ongoing efforts towards implementing One Society for All serves as an effective framework to help improve social cohesion. My office will continue to support the Government in the evaluation of the strategy's implementation.

Upon request of the authorities, my office has provided policy guidance related to the enjoyment of rights by members of different communities, as part of the authorities' ongoing efforts to strengthen social cohesion in the country.

During my visit, I met with my institution's traditional interlocutors, including members of the government, parliament and national minority communities in Skopje and in Tetovo. I am

encouraged by the commendable efforts to enhance policies that may affect communities. I identified several examples of best practices, which can potentially be disseminated across the OSCE region, including in the South East European University where the legacy of the first High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel, continues to serve as a model for multiculturalism. I also recommend highlighting this academic institution during North Macedonia's forthcoming Chairmanship of our organization in efforts to promote similar endeavours that aim to bring different communities together and strengthen cohesion in the OSCE region.

On 23 June, I launched the expanded version of the first-ever Macedonian-Albanian-Turkish-Serbian digitalized phrasebook, called Frazza, in Skopje. This initiative is part of my office's ongoing support to encourage multilingualism and help facilitate communication between individuals in diverse societies.

I remain committed to supporting initiatives that promote integration policies and linguistic pluralism and it is most evident in my ongoing support for the Bachelor of Arts in Balkanistics study programme at the University of Pristina. My office remains engaged with international institutions and local authorities in resolving the issue of diploma recognition, which would unlock the full potential of the programme. Overcoming this issue will create the necessary conditions for the continued relevance of the programme in bringing communities closer together. It would also enable the authorities in Pristina to demonstrate their commitment to their language obligations, which are a fundamental element in fostering the integration of society.

In November, I visited **the** Russian Federation to participate in the Third Moscow International Conference on combatting xenophobia, antisemitism and racism "Protecting the Future". Noting that incidents of discrimination and violence motivated by hate on ethnic and religious grounds are rising across the OSCE area, I drew the participants' attention to our common responsibility to take concrete action against all forms of discrimination, including on religious grounds, and to ensure space for inter-religious dialogue. I also took the opportunity to meet with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the parliament to discuss ongoing legislative developments in the field of inter-ethnic relations.

In Serbia, I continue to support the successful multi-ethnic and bilingual Bujanovac Department of the Subotica Faculty of Economics of the University of Novi Sad. This unique institution is one of my office's examples of a best practice: a truly bilingual and multi-ethnic higher education establishment. The Department enjoys continued commitment from all stakeholders, including the new academic direction and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. This means that the Department can maintain its vital role in education and contribute to socio-economic development and social cohesion in this diverse region. I look forward to reaffirming my commitment to the Department at the next Stakeholders' Committee meeting later this year.

I continue to follow developments relevant to national minorities and listen to the observations that national minority representatives share with me and my staff, including during their participation in the International Electoral Observation Mission for the Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in April 2022. I understand that several concerns expressed by national minorities have been channelled through consultations held by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, aimed at drafting a new action plan on national minorities. I will continue to encourage national minority representatives to use existing channels and instruments, including National Minority Councils, to voice their needs and demands.

I have also been following the recent escalation of the situation in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (GBAO) of Tajikistan. I wrote to Chairperson-in-Office Zbigniew Rau and to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, Sirojiddin Muhriddin, offering my good offices and providing suggestions aimed at a peaceful resolution of the situation in GBAO, including via dialogue and mediation, taking into account the views of the autonomous region's diverse civil society, including minority representatives. My team could assist by providing policy advice to Tajikistan based on my institution's thematic recommendations and prior country engagement. We remain in dialogue with the authorities of Tajikistan.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would now like to turn to my institution's thematic engagements.

On 5 November 2021, I hosted a hybrid conference in Vienna marking 15 years since my institution published *The Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies*. The event, which I organized in co-operation with the OSCE Transnational Threats Department Strategic Police Matters Unit, provided an opportunity for representatives from the delegations and relevant authorities of OSCE participating States, and representatives of the various OSCE structures and other international organizations, to exchange good practices and lessons learned with a number of experts and practitioners in this field. Speakers from Bulgaria, Canada, Hungary, Ireland, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, and the United States shared examples of best practices in the field of policing in diverse societies. They covered issues related to recruitment, representation and continuous training to ensure police services reflect the diversity of societies and thereby strengthen the cohesion of society. The speakers stressed the importance of building and maintaining trust and communication between communities and the police. One of the four conference panels reviewed issues related to mainstreaming gender in policing and the intersectionality between gender and national minorities. The participants called for increased collaboration with civil society and academia, particularly to ensure that emerging challenges are addressed in the best manner.

On 12 November 2021 in Geneva, I co-organized an event on the “Effective participation of national minorities in economic life as a strategy for conflict prevention”. The other co-organizers were the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Ms. Tatiana Valovaya; the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet; and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Mr. Fernand de Varennes. The event highlighted the link between peace and stability and the effective inclusion of minorities in public and economic life, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants also discussed how to promote inclusive social and economic recovery policies in the aftermath of COVID-19 that take the social and economic vulnerabilities of minorities into consideration. It was also an opportunity to enhance OSCE–UN collaboration on minority issues.

On 19 November 2021, we held an in-person ceremony to honour the winner of the 2020 Max van der Stoep Award at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Mr. Knapen, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, presented the award to the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre from Ireland. The Award recognizes Pavee Point’s courageous efforts to celebrate the

cultures and traditions of both communities in an inclusive manner by advocating for participation, social justice and genuine equality at the regional, national and international levels. I was honoured to welcome the heads of all OSCE institutions and the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti. I was also particularly grateful for the presence of the former High Commissioners Rolf Ekéus, Knut Vollebæk, Astrid Thors and Lamberto Zannier. This occasion allowed us to come together in support of the OSCE's efforts to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti throughout the region. Representatives of the Irish Government attended the award ceremony and Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth of Ireland Roderic O'Gorman delivered congratulatory remarks through a recorded speech.

More recently, I participated in an event organized by the European Commission entitled "Promoting positive narratives and raising awareness about the Romani language". As set forth in *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* published by my office, language is one of the most fundamental components of human identity. Hence, respect for a person's dignity is connected with respect for their language.

Overall, the effective participation of national minorities in socio-economic life as a key element of integration, peace and stability remains one of my main priorities for 2022 and the coming years. Promoting the active participation of national minorities in the social-economic life of their country supports and sustains social cohesion through integration. The principle of non-discrimination on grounds such as ethnicity, religion, language and national minority status a foundation supporting effective participation in society. My office is working with experts on consolidating policy advice on the socio-economic participation of national minorities, which will be the basis for a set of thematic recommendations that we hope to publish in the near future.

As part of my office's research into the intersectionality of gender and national minorities, my office organized an online expert discussion in February with OSCE structures to examine the key and multiple challenges that women with a minority background face in the OSCE region. The participants compared best practices that can support the full and equal involvement of national minority women in all aspects of public life, including their access to economic and social rights and their role in peace and security.

In May, together with Ambassador Astrid Harz of the Republic of Austria to the Netherlands, I organized a panel discussion with students of Leiden University on the implementation of the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda and its relevance to national minorities. I am keen to increase the scope of my engagement with young people on issues related to peace and security.

This year marks 10 years since the publication of *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, which is my institution's most comprehensive thematic publication. Its relevance throughout the OSCE region has only increased over the past decade. Published in 2012, the Ljubljana Guidelines are the result of 20 years of my office's accumulated knowledge and experience in promoting integration and inclusion. Much of my institution's overarching strategy for the sustainable prevention of conflicts comes back to a key message in these Guidelines: it is society as a whole, not just a specific group, that benefits from diversity and integration policies. This anniversary falls at a pivotal time, as we witness the impact of the war in Ukraine on social cohesion and the integration of diverse societies across the OSCE region. I look forward to sharing our plans for an event that will address these challenges while marking the Ljubljana Guidelines' anniversary on 6 September in Ljubljana.

Later this year, we will hold the tenth Max van der Stoel Award ceremony. I am pleased that we will be able to announce the winner of the 2022 Award in the coming weeks. I welcome you all to join me at the presentation ceremony in November in The Hague.

I believe that international co-operation with multilateral organizations can enhance the work of my institution. I have focused on strengthening my co-operation with UN offices that are directly relevant to my mandate and with European organizations, such as the Council of Europe and especially its Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. I was invited to address the 129th plenary session of the Venice Commission, where I reiterated my commitment to support justice, equality and cohesion in diverse societies. I also appreciated an exchange of views on issues of mutual interest with the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, during her visit to The Hague earlier this year. Recently, I addressed the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Stockholm and earlier this year, I addressed the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's General Committee on Political Affairs and Security Meeting in Vienna. In both forums, I emphasized the important role parliamentarians play in strengthening inter-ethnic relations in their countries, including

by supporting inclusive consultations with minority representatives when drafting or reviewing legislative proposals.

I also took part in the Europe and Central Asia Regional Forum on Minority Issues organized by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues. I have also held online consultations with the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Alice Wairimu Nderitu and Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery Tomoya Obokata.

I have continued my regular consultations with the European External Action Service and the European Commission and held productive exchanges earlier this year with the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Mr. Olivér Várhelyi; EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Mr. Miroslav Lajčák; EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ms. Terhi Hakala, as well as with EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore. Additionally, I appreciated the opportunity to discuss a number of priority areas of mutual interest with members of the EU Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

I plan to build on my co-operation with the UN in New York and Geneva, and with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, by organizing joint events marking our important milestones. It has been 30 years since my mandate was established in Helsinki in 1992 and next year we will mark the 30th anniversary since the first High Commissioner, Max van der Stoep, took up office in The Hague. It is also 30 years since the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, and next year is the 30th anniversary of the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. These milestones present us with an opportunity to increase our synergies and seek tangible and meaningful avenues of collaboration to increase opportunities for national minorities.

I also note that I have had positive meetings with the leadership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and UNESCO and look forward to working with them on areas of mutual interest. I am also looking forward to my participation in the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in September in Kazakhstan. I believe that fostering dialogue between religious leaders is a necessity at this time in history.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the participating States that support my programmatic work. I am grateful for the generous contributions of Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As representatives of the OSCE and the OSCE participating States it is incumbent upon us to recall that we are an organization that stands for security and co-operation in Europe. Despite our differences and our diversity, we have a shared future. This is why we must come together and commit to dialogue, as we did 12 years ago for the Astana Commemorative Declaration. We have to commit, together, to uphold our vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals.

The mandate of the HCNM is to act as an instrument of conflict prevention with regard to tensions involving national minority issues. I am convinced that the work of my institution in these challenging times remains as important as ever. The values and principles enshrined in the mandate of the High Commissioner are timeless, and the institution continues to play an essential role in facilitating positive developments in legislative and political frameworks. In doing so, I rely on your support, and I look forward to continuing my close collaboration with you.

Thank you.