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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

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Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me to start with expressing my appreciation to all of you and the authorities of the participating States you represent for the open and constructive dialogue and excellent co-operation extended to my Institution in implementing my mandate. I am also grateful for the strong co-operation I have enjoyed with Secretary General Helga Schmid; Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Director Matteo Mecacci; Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) Teresa Ribeiro; and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and its Secretary General Roberto Montella, as well as with the Secretariat and the OSCE field operations. The role of the Polish Chairmanship of the OSCE has been crucial in the face of the security challenges that we have been experiencing this year, and I would like to commend His Excellency Zbigniew Rau for the strong leadership he provided throughout this year. I also would like to take this opportunity to thank Ambassador Adam Hałaciński, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Poland to the OSCE, and the team of the Polish Chairmanship, for their support to the work of my Institution and for the productive collaboration we have had this year.

During the reporting period, I visited, in chronological order: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Slovenia, Kazakhstan, the United States, Serbia, Lithuania and Estonia, and continued my dialogue and constructive consultations with a number of other participating States. I have also had the opportunity to participate in several international forums to hear the views of various interlocutors and share some of my considerations on matters pertaining to my mandate. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude for these productive exchanges and the warm welcome extended to my team and me during these visits.

One point consistently featured in all of these engagements: how can we strengthen social cohesion as a means of preventing conflict regarding matters that involve national minorities? This involved discussions on how to design inclusive legislation, policies and institutions; how to maintain effective consultation mechanisms for national minorities to play a role in addressing matters that affect them; and how to ensure a balanced integration policy and practice. This has been the approach of successive High Commissioners over the last 30 years and has continued to be at the core of my activities in the reporting period. There is no illusion

that these elements are a panacea to prevent all national-minority related tensions or conflicts. But they certainly are the necessary components that can help strengthen social cohesion and avoid the risk of identity-related issues being exploited domestically to strain relations within and between communities, or being instrumentalized in bilateral relations.

The latter observation brings me to the new realities that we have been facing since my last address at the Permanent Council related to the Russian Federation's attempt to illegally annex sovereign territories of Ukraine. Such a move undermines potential future peace negotiations and reconciliation efforts, with irreparable consequences on the people of both countries, including national minorities.

To this end, as part of my conflict prevention mandate, I have been paying close attention to the impact of the ongoing war against Ukraine on national minorities in the country and to the potential effects it may have on national minorities issues in the OSCE area. In this context, I have continued my dialogue with representatives of national minorities in and the authorities of both Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the impact of the war on the lives and identities of ordinary citizens, including national minorities. My office is regularly approached with information on issues regarding the people living in the territories of Ukraine under the effective control of the Russian Federation. Interlocutors have pointed to a number of measures and practices in those regions that are having a negative impact on the lives and physical safety of residents, including their ability to maintain and continue expressing core aspects of their identity, such as in education and culture.

In this context, I would like to recall the HCNM *Ljubljana Guidelines on the Integration of Diverse Societies*, which state: "Identities always must be subject to the primacy of individual choice through the principle of voluntary self-identification." I also stress that any attempts at assimilation against one's will by the State or third parties is prohibited according to international law.

As I highlighted in my previous statement to the Permanent Council, it is equally important to maintain the space for Russian-speaking individuals and communities across the OSCE area to use Russian language and maintain their identity.

My attention was also drawn to specific aspects of the Russian Federation's conscription campaigns on those territories of Ukraine that are under the effective control of the Russian Federation. In this regard, I was alarmed by reports indicating that Crimean Tatars were being disproportionately targeted by the conscription. There have also been similar reports suggesting a potentially disproportionate effect on national minority communities across the Russian Federation.

My engagement on these issues relies on the exchanges of my office with various members of minority communities in Ukraine, including the ethnic Greek minority and Crimean Tatars, as well as with officials from relevant States. My ongoing dialogue with Ukraine's authorities – including with the office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, the office of the Education Ombudsperson, the office of the Human Rights Commissioner, and the State Service for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience – is geared towards gathering information relevant to my mandate and supporting the legislative and institutional framework on minority rights and related issues in Ukraine. This will be important to lay the foundations for post-war recovery. In this regard, I take note of Ukraine's efforts to finalize legislation regulating matters pertaining to national minorities, which my Institution has supported for the last years. I have offered additional assistance in the finalization and operationalization of the draft law to the relevant authorities.

In parallel, my co-operation with the rest of the OSCE family, including with the Secretariat and other Institutions, as well as with other international organizations, including the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union, have progressed at a sustained pace, with a view to assisting Ukraine on matters related to my mandate.

I also commend efforts to set up the new donor-funded Support Programme for Ukraine, launched by contributing OSCE participating States, and I hope it will continue to provide much-needed support to the authorities and civil society of Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war and post-war reconstruction, to the extent possible.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me now to update you on my recent engagements, in alphabetic order.

I have followed the implications of the 2022 amendments to the Education Code of the Republic of Belarus that entered into force in September 2022, which removed the possibility for pupils to receive education in a minority language. I am concerned that this may negatively impact their education opportunities. I continue my engagement on this matter with all parties concerned, including with other, interested, OSCE participating States, to find a reasonable compromise that would allow a gradual transition to new language requirements.

I visited Estonia in November to address the conference “Together or Apart: Searching for the Middle Ground”, jointly organized by the Ministry of Culture and my Institution’s longstanding partner, the Integration Foundation. The visit provided an excellent opportunity to meet a number of high-level officials to discuss matters such as education, language, media, statelessness, and broader integration policies and practice. The visit also included engagements in the Ida-Viru County, where I met representatives of national minorities and local institutions. A visit to a gymnasium in Kohtla-Jarve and to the Narva College of the Tartu University gave me an insight into the educational institutions largely catering for children and youth with a minority background.

As you know, on several occasions, successive High Commissioners have referred to some of Estonia’s experiences and practices in the field of integration as a possible source of inspiration to other OSCE participating States. My visit confirmed Estonia’s key contribution in this context. In particular, I was encouraged by the efforts made by the State to come close to minority communities in the Ida-Viru County.

Dialogue with minority communities includes issues related to the education reform. While some national minority representatives shared that prospective changes to the education system may reduce the opportunity to receive education in their mother tongue, I appreciated national and local officials’ openness to discuss this reform, as well as to acknowledge potential challenges. I shared my support for plans for increased investment in teaching the State language, a key to fostering the participation of national minorities in public life. The

authorities confirmed that they would provide opportunities for minorities to receive at least a portion of their education in their mother tongue, with investment in adequate resources and continuous outreach to, and meaningful involvement of, local communities.

In Georgia, my office continues supporting the implementation of Georgia’s State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration (2021–2030) via an aligned programme, together with local partners, to promote multilingual education and participation in political life, with a crosscutting focus on gender, youth and confidence-building measures. A new project aims to improve access to media and information for national minorities, and counter misinformation and hate speech. I also appreciate Georgia hosting a study visit on statelessness for the authorities representing several participating States of Central Asia. On 24 November, I was glad and honoured to host a ceremony at the Peace Palace in The Hague, where the Social Justice Centre of Georgia received the 2022 Max van der Stoel Award.

I visited Kazakhstan to participate in the VII Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. I engaged in discussions with world religious leaders and politicians on increasing their role by providing comprehensive assistance to religious groups and ethnic communities and by advocating for their active involvement in supporting practical solutions for conflict resolution to achieve long-term stability.

While in Kazakhstan, I held meetings with the authorities on the integration of diverse society of Kazakhstan, social cohesion and participation, ongoing reform processes, including as regards the changes to the representation of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan in the Parliament, and ways to strengthen the Assembly’s “ethno-mediation” capacities. During the meetings, I discussed possibilities for strengthening co-operation with my office and sharing good practices accumulated in Kazakhstan with other OSCE participating States.

I conducted a visit to Kyrgyzstan in July and discussed the country’s inter-ethnic policy with representatives of the central government in Bishkek and regional authorities in Osh as well as with civil society, including national minorities. I also met education professionals and members of civil society and national minority communities in Osh. In my dialogue with the authorities, I underscored Kyrgyzstan’s progress in promoting multilingual and multicultural education and encouraged the country’s continued efforts within the HCNM Central Asia

Education Programme. I also emphasized the role that the effective participation of national minorities in social, economic and public life plays in supporting the social cohesion and integration of Kyrgyzstan's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society.

My office continues to provide technical assistance to our main partner in Kyrgyzstan, the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sport and Youth Policy, in its work to implement the 2021–2026 Action Plan for the Concept of Development of Civic Identity Kyrgyz Zharany.

I welcomed the signing of a protocol between the authorities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which aimed for a de-escalation of the situation on the border, and I hope both sides will duly implement it. From the perspective of my mandate, I continue to pay close attention to the potential implications this border conflict could have on inter-ethnic relations. If both parties so wish, I stand ready to provide expertise and support confidence-building measures, based on my Institution's long-term positive engagement with the authorities of both countries and practical guidance encapsulated in my Institution's thematic Guidelines and Recommendations.

In Latvia, I continued to follow developments relevant to national minorities and listen to the assessment that national minority representatives shared with me and my staff, including in the context of my staff's participation in the ODIHR Election Assessment Mission for the Parliamentary Elections in October 2022. Specifically, my attention has been drawn to the adoption of amendments to the Education Law and General Education Law, which foresee a transition to exclusive instruction in the Latvian language in pre-school and primary education. I acknowledge that the proposed amendments may strengthen knowledge of the State language, which is an important part of supporting national minorities' participation in public life. At the same time, I shared my concerns with the authorities that the proposed amendments would lead to a far-reaching reduction of minority language education.

As I have consistently advised participating States since taking up my mandate, balanced, pragmatic and inclusive policies that are the result of inclusive dialogue with all of the relevant stakeholders, including national minorities, are, in the experience of successive High Commissioners, a precondition for integrated societies, which are resilient to conflict.

I visited Lithuania in November 2022. I commend the Government, the Seimas, local authorities and civil society for their efforts to promote diversity in Lithuania's society, as well as to ensure equality of opportunities for each individual, irrespective of their origin. I noted that the Department on National Minorities under the Government of Lithuania plays a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and co-operation between various national minority communities and the authorities, donors and international organizations.

I also commend that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of Lithuania is putting in place various curriculums and educational formats to ensure that refugee children and youth from Ukraine integrate yet maintain their connection to the Ukrainian language culture, and educational space.

I also visited Pranciskaus Skorinos Gymnasium with Belarusian language of instruction and was pleased to note the efforts made to preserve the Belarusian language and foster multilingualism at the same time.

In Moldova, my office has continued to provide capacity-building support to the Agency on Inter-ethnic Relations and the Ministry of Education and Research, as two key policy making and implementation institutions in the area of national minorities. I commend the determination of the national and local authorities, most notably the Ministry of Education and Research and the Department of Education of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, to promote multilingual education. I salute the openness of the authorities at different levels, including elected officials, to engage in policy dialogue as a means of inclusive policymaking.

My office continues to support the authorities in North Macedonia in their process of reflection on the implementation of the "One Society for All" Strategy, with a forward-looking intent. I am very grateful for the excellent co-operation with the incoming OSCE Chairpersonship of North Macedonia. I intend to build on our close relationship in the next year, as we co-ordinate the events marking the 30th anniversary since the first High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel, assumed his duties in The Hague.

I visited Serbia in October and witnessed once again the positive assessment of my interlocutors, including national minorities, about the comprehensive legal framework on matters that fall under my mandate. I was impressed by a consistent recognition that national

minorities and diversity in Serbia are a national resource and a concerted intent to implement the legislative framework, and to allocate sufficient resources.

The new Government in Serbia continues to include the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, which consolidates Government policy and action on minority issues in a centralized way. The presence of a ministry dedicated to minority issues and human rights is a positive practice that acts as a catalyst toward inclusiveness and consultations with national minorities. Recently, this Ministry completed a Draft Action Plan for the Exercise of the Rights of National Minorities, following extensive consultations with, and participation from, national minorities. Likewise, National Minority Councils in Serbia have been an effective instrument to facilitate the participation of national minorities in matters relating to education, culture, media and official use of languages. A population census has been completed in Serbia and I appreciate that Serbia's authorities and representatives of the ethnic Albanian community have engaged in constructive dialogue toward finding mutually acceptable solutions that have enabled full participation in the census.

In southern Serbia, I met with representatives of the ethnic Albanian community. I welcomed the rejuvenated Seven Points Plan that has facilitated dialogue between the authorities and the ethnic Albanian community. I encouraged all parties to continue their efforts in this process in order to address outstanding matters involving education in the Serbian language, equal employment opportunities, economic development in the region, and transparency in the passivization process.

While in Serbia, I co-hosted the Stakeholders' Meeting of the Bujanovac Department of the Subotica Faculty of Law of the University of Novi Sad, together with the OSCE Mission to Serbia. I am glad that all stakeholders and actors remain actively committed to the Department, which helps to strengthen social cohesion by the provision of quality, bilingual tertiary education. My institution looks forward to further co-operation with the Department and fellow stakeholders in supporting this important initiative.

I visited Slovenia in September for a Conference to mark the 10th Anniversary of *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. While in Ljubljana, I had the opportunity to meet with Government officials and national minority representatives, including the Roma, and gained first-hand knowledge about national minority protection of the "autochthonous national

communities” – the Italian and Hungarian national communities – in line with the country’s constitutional and legal framework. In ethnically mixed areas, persons belonging to these communities enjoy a broad range of individual rights, as well as a degree of autonomy and collective rights exercised through the self-governing communities.

I was particularly encouraged to see the excellent relationship fostered and maintained for the last 20 years between the autochthonous communities and the Director of the Office for National Minorities. I found it particularly encouraging that while the authorities and the autochthonous communities have identified some areas for additional advancement, there is a solid sense of trust and willingness in working towards addressing matters jointly in good faith.

I visited Washington DC, United States, in October. It was an opportunity to reflect on the current security situation in the OSCE area in the post-February 2022 context, and to discuss diversity governance in the US. With regard to the former, my conversations focused on the challenges to security and co-operation in the OSCE area, including the instrumentalization and exploitation of national minority issues, which I unequivocally denounce both here today and in my ongoing quiet diplomacy engagements with all 57 participating States.

As to diversity governance in the US, I valued the openness of my interlocutors in discussing issues related to diversity and social cohesion in the country and the intention to continue the productive exchange. I welcomed Department of Education’s positive efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all students and to address the negative impact of the health pandemic on youth, including racial and ethnic minorities. I was encouraged by the role the Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service plays in facilitating dialogue and fostering social cohesion, as well as approaches to address hate crimes. I particularly appreciated speaking with officials from various federal agencies working on issues pertaining to Native Americans and Alaska Natives. The work of the White House Council on Native American Affairs, for example, presents a strong case for a consultative mechanism to ensure that minority voices are considered when developing policies and legislation. Likewise, it was encouraging to hear about the consultations with Native American communities on the education process, with respect to tribal colleges. I also took note of the encouragement of my interlocutors at the Department of State to place greater emphasis on addressing anti-Black racism, including in the US, which I will endeavour to do. In my meeting with UnidosUS, I discussed efforts aimed

at ensuring that all eligible Latinos, including Afro-Latinos, are registered, informed and engaged in the political process every year.

Over the past six months, my office has continued its constructive policy dialogue and co-operation with the authorities of Uzbekistan at the national and regional levels on issues related to promoting inter-ethnic peace and stability in the country. During my visit to Uzbekistan, in July to August, I met with representatives of national, regional and local authorities, as well as national cultural centres in Tashkent and the Fergana region, and discussed the broad range of issues related inter-ethnic relations and bilateral and multilateral co-operation. I commended the ongoing education reforms in the country aimed at increasing inclusivity and access to education for vulnerable groups, including girls with a minority background. I encouraged the authorities to continue promoting the effective participation of national minorities in the cultural, social, economic and public life of the country, with a particular focus on women and youth. I also underscored the importance of regional co-operation and sharing good practices in diversity management among OSCE participating States in the Central Asian region to promote regional stability, security, sustainable development and economic growth. Additionally, I addressed and expressed my support to the participants of the forum “Dustlik” organised by the Government of Uzbekistan.

In November, as a follow up to this visit, my office – in co-operation with the National Human Rights Centre, the Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations and Friendly Co-operation with Foreign Countries, and the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan – organized two regional roundtables on *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* for representatives of local authorities working in the regions of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorazm and Jizzakh.

More broadly, in the context of my regional engagement in Central Asia, my office continues to support the development and implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education within the framework of my Institution’s Central Asia Education Programme to ensure peace and stability through greater interaction and integration across communities. Central Asia is a good example of the potential role that language can play in building inclusive and resilient diverse societies. The impact of the pandemic on many areas of life is a concern, as schools have been closed for long periods and access to learning languages has been paused, with a potentially adverse effect on interaction and integration.

My Institution is therefore focusing on re-engaging with our network of schools, education practitioners and policymakers. My staff organized several meetings and events, bilateral and regional, at all levels of the education sector to raise awareness. I am pleased that there is a continued interest for multilingual education in Central Asia and my office stands ready to support relevant stakeholders in this respect.

Good co-operation with international and regional organizations on areas related to my mandate helps increase my effectiveness. To this end, I continued productive collaborations with the Council of Europe, including with the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

The UN remains an important partner for my mandate and its overarching goal of conflict prevention, peace and security. With this in mind, I visited New York City, the US, in October to continue my discourse with UN leaders on ways to advance our co-operation. I explored practical avenues to work together on strengthening social cohesion and harnessing the benefits of diversity in my meetings with my counterparts, including the President of the UN General Assembly Csaba Kőrösi, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo, and Director of Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division of UN Women Sarah Hendriks. I also continued consultations with the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas Miroslav Jenča and the UN High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Miguel Ángel Moratinos.

In New York, together with the Permanent Mission of Poland to the United Nations in New York and the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes, I co-organized a side event at the 77th session of the UN General Assembly on “The relevance of the UN Minority Declaration for Conflict Prevention and During Conflict”. This event helped to take stock of the past 30 years since the adoption of UN Minority Declaration and the establishment of my mandate and to rethink ways to increase opportunities for national minorities, tailoring it to the demands of today.

While in the US, I met with Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States to explore avenues of future co-operation based on safeguarding minority rights, strengthening social cohesion and building inclusive societies.

In November, I participated in the first Bahrain Dialogue Forum in Manama, dedicated to the theme of “East & West for Human Co-existence” with participation of His Holiness Pope Francis and other religious leaders. In the margins of this forum, I had an opportunity to meet with the Secretary General of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation Hissein Brahim Taha and discuss strengthening co-operation, including on diversity management with respect to Muslim minorities and communities in the OSCE region. To carry this dialogue forward, I invited representatives of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation to my office in The Hague early next year.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would now like to elaborate on my Institution’s thematic engagement.

On 6 September, I hosted a Conference and Expert Meeting to mark 10 years since my institution published *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*. The Anniversary Conference was organized with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia and held at the Brdo Congress Centre in Slovenia, where the publication was launched in 2012. The Ljubljana Guidelines provide advice and recommendations to participating States on promoting the integration and cohesion of diverse, multi-ethnic societies. They are among the most frequently cited publications by my office. To discuss the Ljubljana Guidelines’ enduring relevance, the Anniversary Conference brought together policymakers, experts and practitioners in the field of minority rights and integration, as well as Ambassadors and representatives of the OSCE participating States. A preparatory Expert Meeting, which was held a day prior, provided an opportunity for a small group of academics and practitioners to discuss in depth the Ljubljana Guidelines’ key principles in the context of current and developing integration challenges involving national minorities across the OSCE region.

Over the years, my office has advised and supported a number of participating States to develop policy frameworks based on the principle of integration with respect to diversity. In some States, there are dedicated institutions or departments dealing with national minority issues or inter-ethnic relations, which are also responsible for developing and monitoring integration policies. They are key partners for my Institution, as they often deal with similar issues and have developed experiences that can be of interest elsewhere. In order to foster an exchange of

experiences and good practices, and to support networking, I invited the heads of a number of such institutions to The Hague in September. This was an opportunity to discuss challenges and best practices in various policy areas, including language, participation, media and education. The discussions also touched on the broader changes in the security and geopolitical architecture in the OSCE area brought about by the war against Ukraine. I offered my Institution's support to identify ways to counter such developments and maximize lesson sharing in order to support long-term social cohesion.

In November, I was invited to deliver a keynote speech to the participants of an international conference on "The consequences of war and their interdependence. Bringing Human Security Back to the Global Political Agenda" in Padova, Italy, where I discussed ways to enhance tolerance and increase the resilience of diverse societies to the threat of internal and external instrumentalization of minority issues, which can lead to conflict and war. While in Italy, I visited Bolzano/Bozen, where I had a fruitful exchange of views with the President of Italy's Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen-South Tyrol, Arno Kompatscher, and discussed the role of autonomy as a conflict prevention tool. I also met researchers at EURAC, where I had the opportunity to express my appreciation for its research contributions to my Institution's activities and discuss future engagements.

In line with the pledge made at the 2019 UNHCR High Level Segment on statelessness, my Institution continues to emphasize the importance of preventing statelessness in the OSCE area as a relevant factor in conflict prevention. Last month, my advisers participated in a joint UNHCR-OSCE study visit to Georgia on Statelessness for Central Asian States. The goal of this exercise was to exchange good practices aimed at preventing childhood statelessness, as well as to learn from Georgia's experiences after its accession to the two UN conventions on statelessness. I am pleased that Government officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan participated in this important endeavour. I look forward to working with UNHCR and ODIHR next year on further events, including a potential conference on this important topic.

The effective participation of national minorities in socio-economic life remains one of my priorities. I encourage the participating States to invest in the active participation of national minorities in social-economic development, as this supports and sustains integration and the stability of society. My office continues to work with experts on outlining the underlying

principles necessary for achieving the effective participation of national minorities in social and economic life, with an aim to develop a new set of recommendations.

My approach to conflict prevention aims at long-term solutions and my work is continuously evolving in response to current realities. As such, the sustained commitment to mainstreaming gender within the daily work of my office has been paramount in the past year. With the ongoing research into the intersectionality of gender and national minorities, my office aims to provide a baseline for more systematic and evidence-based policymaking. The current phase of the research is a joint effort between my Institution and the Secretariat's Programme for Gender Issues, and reflects how the protection of minority rights and long-term stability can be further strengthened by ensuring that women's rights, especially women coming from national minorities, are protected and promoted, and their full participation in society encouraged.

Every other year my office has the privilege of overseeing the selection and awarding of the Max van der Stoel Award on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. On 24 November, I hosted the 2022 Max van der Stoel Award Ceremony to present this prestigious distinction and prize of €50,000 to the Social Justice Center of Georgia in recognition of their skilled and tireless work advocating for equality for all social groups in Georgia, including national minorities, and protecting and promoting human rights. The ceremony was held at the Peace Palace in The Hague and attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, His Excellency Wopke Hoekstra, who presented the award to the winners. I am grateful to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands for honouring the legacy of Max van der Stoel, the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, through this Award that recognizes extraordinary and outstanding achievements in improving the position of national minorities in the OSCE participating States. I am also grateful to all of the OSCE delegations and structures that participated in this and previous Max van der Stoel Award selections and ceremonies. My office will, next year, start preparations for the 2024 Max van der Stoel Award. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the Delegations to take note of any remarkable organizations that are committed to advancing the position of national minorities, and consider them for both engagement and nomination.

Next year will mark 30 years since the office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities opened its doors in The Hague and the first High Commissioner Max van der Stoel assumed his duties. This is a significant milestone. My office will dedicate a number of

activities to this anniversary throughout 2023, all of which will lead to a high-level event in The Hague in the autumn. These activities will firstly allow us to look back and reflect on the work carried out by successive High Commissioners and take stock of the main outcomes of their dedication to conflict prevention. Secondly, the Anniversary will present an opportunity to discuss the ongoing relevance of the Institution's approach to strengthening social cohesion through integration, with specific attention paid to the value of my Institution's thematic Guidelines and Recommendations. Lastly, these activities – which will involve the OSCE participating States, national minority communities, civil society, international organizations, practitioners and academia – will also offer a framework to reflect on the role of the High Commissioner in the contemporary security landscape with a view to extrapolate lessons learned from the past and the present into the future work of the Institution.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been two years since I assumed my mandate. Over this period, on every country visit, in every conversation with national minority communities, with central and regional authorities, with civil society, experts and international actors, I am continuously reassured of the key importance of the mandate of the Institution in conflict prevention. It is my intention to continue implementing my mandate to the best of my capacity and I thank you for the support you have been extending to my team and me.

The work of my office and the implementation of numerous projects outlined in my statement would not have been possible without the generous financial support of Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity and wish a productive 2023 to the Chairpersonship of North Macedonia, including to His Excellency Bujar Osmani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia; my dear colleague and friend, Ambassador Igor Djundev, Permanent Representative of the Republic of North Macedonia to the OSCE, as well as to the strong and capable team of the incoming Chairpersonship.

I thank you for your attention.