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Hearing on anti-Semitism and other concerning trends in anti-minority and xenophobic sentiments in Europe

Chairman Keating,
Distinguished Subcommittee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in today's hearing. My name is Christie Edwards, and I am Acting Head of the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department in the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). ODIHR provides support, assistance and expertise to participating States and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination.

OSCE participating States recognize that manifestations of discrimination and intolerance such as anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and hate crime threaten the security of individuals, communities and societies and may give rise to wider scale conflict and violence that undermine international stability and security.

For this reason, OSCE participating States strongly condemn racial and ethnic hatred, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and discrimination, as well as persecution on religious or belief grounds, and have committed to combat these phenomena in all their forms.¹

The past years have evidenced a trend away from a global culture for the respect of human rights. Anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia continue to be a concern across the OSCE region. Some minority communities – including people of African descent, Roma and Sinti, and persons with a migrant background (including refugees and asylum seekers) – are disproportionately targeted by security policies that include racial and ethnic profiling. Additionally, numerous hate crimes against members of these and other minority communities can be seen across the OSCE region, as contributions to the ODIHR annual hate crime report show.

¹ Copenhagen Document 1990. Since 2003, OSCE participating States have established a normative framework of legislation and Ministerial Council decisions to reflect their commitments to address these phenomena and to promote mutual understanding (e.g. Ministerial Council Decision 4/03 on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, and subsequent Ministerial Council Decisions 12/04, 10/05, 13/06, 10/07 and 9/09).

While this has resulted in a broader and more visible dialogue on the existence and impact of hate crimes throughout the OSCE region, it also threatens to reorient the focus of ODIHR's work from proactive to reactive.

Occupying the vast area in fulfilling human rights left open by government, civil society has globally been put on the defensive in this work. The OSCE region has unfortunately not been spared this challenge, as groups active in the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination and the identification of hate crimes are often branded as agitators and accused of destabilizing societies. The subsequent withdrawal of many groups from the regional discourse has resulted in a lack of transparency and given license to the persecution of vulnerable groups.

Additionally, human rights defenders from civil society addressing anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia are also often themselves victims of hate crime, by association. In some participating States, they also report that the rise in intolerance lead to an increasingly hostile environment for their work, cuts in government funding, and other ways of impeding their work.

There is also a trend of merging anti-migrant feelings with racism, directed at a range of minority groups, accompanied the intersectional nature of many hate crimes. We also note that increasingly technically sophisticated tools are needed to understand, analyze and help combat hate crimes, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

To address this, ODIHR has developed a collection of resources and programmes to raise awareness about discrimination, hate crimes, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. Through advising on policy and the training of law enforcement personnel and educators, ODIHR works to build the capacity of governments in preventing and responding to this problem.

Civil society working to address anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia, especially organizations led by activists from the affected communities, report need for further support, including capacity building. ODIHR builds the capacity of civil society organizations to monitor hate crimes, including specialized training.²

ODIHR convenes OSCE human dimension meetings, including those that focus, inter alia, on combatting racism and xenophobia and promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding. Addressing racism and xenophobia frequently features on the agenda of OSCE's annual Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, Europe's largest annual human rights conference.

² Raising awareness of intolerance and discrimination is also necessary. ODIHR produced a series of factsheets on hate crime against different groups, available in print and on our website in English, Russian and Spanish.

There is a need tap further into the potential of dialogue between governments, faith groups and civil society, and in this light ODIHR convened a number of international events to address intolerance and discrimination.

In all of these activities, ODIHR takes a comprehensive approach, and brings stakeholders from different sectors, and different communities, to work together on a wide range of tolerance and non-discrimination issues. OSCE participating States have committed to take steps to prevent and address intolerance and discrimination, while applying a “common approach” to address all acts and manifestations of hate, while acknowledging the “uniqueness of the manifestations and historical background of each form.”³ Different types of intolerance have their own unambiguous etymologies and rationale, yet in order to address the underlying biases and “othering” that underpins many forms of discrimination, we need to be aware of their similarities, their interconnected developments, and their constant intersection.

At ODIHR, in line with the comprehensive nature of our work, we also believe in the power of building coalitions to address intolerance and discrimination, and have built a set of tools for civil society and communities willing to engage together. Also, ODIHR’s comprehensive, holistic training approach is premised upon principles identified through data gathered through focus groups with victims and targeted communities of hate crimes and other forms of intolerance, to ensure that state representatives appreciate the impact of these phenomena on victims, their communities, and society as a whole and to ensure that they treat the incidents with the importance and severity they demand.

ODIHR remains at the disposal of OSCE participating States, civil society and other actors in supporting the implementation of their commitments to counter intolerance and discrimination.

Thank you.

³ Ministerial Council Decision 13/06.