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15th OSCE PA Winter Meeting

Remarks to open the special debate on

*“The migrant and refugee crisis in the OSCE area:
strengthening the collective response”*

Vienna, Austria

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Dear colleagues,

Distinguished guests,

The past year has seen the refugee crisis dominate the headlines. There has been a worrying trend to scapegoat refugees, close borders and react with fear. The unjustified linking of refugees with terrorism is of grave concern. The increasing reluctance to protect those fleeing violence is of grave concern. And the suspicion these people are met with when all they want to do is seek shelter from war should be of grave concern to us all.

Never has there been a greater need for tolerance, compassion and solidarity with people who have lost everything.

Dear colleagues,

For the past year a number of colleagues and I have worked on this topic and have produced a report on the migration crisis in the OSCE area with. It contains clear proposals for greater OSCE engagement. This has been distributed to you all. This report has been the product of hard work by myself and my colleagues. I would like to extend my thanks to Ivana Dobesova, Gordana Comic and our Special Representative on OSCE Border Issues, Ignacio Sanchez Amor, as well as our

parliamentary colleagues in the countries we have visited and the staff that supported our work.

The ideas, observations and recommendations are the result of trips to refugee centers in Turkey, Italy, Serbia and the Czech Republic, meetings with senior officials from OSCE field missions, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, the Red Cross and the EU, as well as NGOs and civil society. The insight of our friend, Christos Stylianides, was particularly important and appreciated.

Needless to say, we have also had extensive conversations with refugees themselves, and our work is informed by their experiences.

The report identifies some real opportunities. Our recommendations, whether directed to this Assembly, to the OSCE, or to national parliaments and governments, all have one clear purpose: to help improve the current situation.

I would like to share just a few findings from our report:

Firstly, it is clear that the Parliamentary Assembly has an important role to play. I fully agree with the creation of an ad hoc group decided yesterday in the Standing Committee and I think it should be done in the Third Committee. As parliamentarians representing the values of the OSCE, we have a responsibility to lead by example in our home parliaments. We must promote anti-discrimination legislation and tolerance. It is also critical that when communicating on this topic, we reflect this tolerant approach.

Secondly, our activity over the past year has pointed to some clear ways the OSCE can act to help with the refugee crisis. The creation of a high-level co-ordinating position within the OSCE on migration would be a positive step, to be supplemented with focal points throughout the Organization. It is encouraging that field missions are engaging to the degree possible, and that ODIHR is working on issues related to incidents targeting migrants, but there needs to be a better understanding of how to best use our multi-faceted toolbox. As the various OSCE bodies increase their work and projects in this field, it is critically important that OSCE countries support and engage in this work. This is also the case with the Field Missions, which are an under-used resource in this field.

Finally, a request: OSCE participating States must increase funding to humanitarian organizations as well as the number of refugees they are willing to

accept. We can't leave it up to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to absorb refugees so the rest of us can pretend the problem doesn't exist. Projects run by the UN Refugee Agency, the IOM and the Red Cross are all doing a magnificent job in responding to the crisis, but they are underfunded. We must do more.

When talking to people who are directly affected by this support from international organizations and their many acronyms, you quickly realize that what people really want is quick translation of these acronyms into real solutions. Without effective intervention and a focus on real problems, organizations can easily lose direction.

The failure to prevent and resolve the multiple conflicts resulting in these refugees, and the lack of an effective and consistent response to the migrant and refugee crisis, is a serious test for international organizations. Within the OSCE, we face this on several fronts. Yes, thousands of refugees are coming from outside our region, but we must not forget the mass displacement resulting from the situation in Ukraine and other protracted conflicts within the OSCE region.

Dear colleagues,

We have in our hands these days the opportunity to write chapters in the history books of the future. I look forward to this timely debate on the migrant and refugee crisis and to hearing your constructive opinions and suggestions. I am sure our Assembly will continue doing more. But as we address this crisis, we must remember the words of Gerald Ford when signing the Helsinki Final Act: History will judge us not by what we say here today, but by what we do tomorrow -- not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep.

Thank you.