



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

**Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council**

**26 January 2017**

**Address by amb. Mihnea Constantinescu, IHRA Chair**

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, it is a great honor to be able to address you on the solemn occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. I am grateful to the Austrian Chairmanship in office for their kind invitation to speak at this commemoration.

Let me begin by taking you back to a historic meeting which was held on this day seventeen years ago in Stockholm.

Former Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson had been concerned by a poll conducted in Sweden, which seemed to show that high school children had little knowledge of the Holocaust. Barely half a century after the horror of the Holocaust, Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor were beginning to fade into history. To disappear from collective memory.

Recognizing the crucial need for a coordinated, international effort on Holocaust-related issues, Persson brought together the representatives of 46 states with scholars, educators and survivors to attend the Stockholm Forum in the year 2000. The outcome of this meeting was the Stockholm Declaration and the formation of the unique network, which exists today as the IHRA. We currently have 31 Member Countries and 11 Observer Countries and continue to grow year by year.

Our goal is to unite experts and government representatives to shape and advance Holocaust education, research and remembrance. We establish ourselves not only as a body of historical expertise and commemoration, but as an institution which reflects on the past in order to confront the disturbing challenges of the present.

Certainly representatives of each of your countries were present in Stockholm – and it was and remains unprecedented that such high-level political representation came together to discuss Holocaust issues.

That Forum was a clear signal that Holocaust remembrance should not be limited to Jewish communities and civil society organizations of other persecuted groups.

That signal could not be restated more clearly today as the OSCE, an organization for security and cooperation pauses to mark this event. That we are gathered together today only underlines the importance of states facing up to the tragedy that occurred more than 70 years ago, during the Second World War. Because this tragedy is not only part of the human dimension but, reflecting on the Holocaust and related antisemitism and hate speech, it is of direct relevance to the security and safety of our societies.

For us, it is always a pleasure to concur with our ODIHR colleagues across various programs. One opportunity of this kind is the *Words-in-action* initiative launched last year, under the OSCE German Chairmanship, a project where both ODIHR and IHRA can add significant value to educating young generations in combating antisemitism.

The Holocaust, a watershed event in world history, is also a tragic chapter of Europe's path towards a responsible European community. And none of our countries remained untouched by these events.

Both the inception of the OSCE and the IHRA were closely linked to the realization that stable and institutionalized cooperation between states is fundamental in preventing conflict and genocide. Because from the Holocaust, the world can see what happens when discrimination, persecution and human rights violations are not internationally addressed.

Dear Colleagues,

Today we are here to remember the victims of the Holocaust. We remember as representatives of governments. And as individuals. It need not be explained that remembrance can accomplish many things. It educates the young. It allows us to draw lessons for the future. It aids our efforts to prevent such tragedies occurring again.

But today, on Holocaust Remembrance Day, let us also not forget that respectful remembrance is in and of itself a more significant endeavor.

We remember because we grieve the dead.

We remember because we cherish the survivors.

We remember because we owe a debt to those who stood against such horror.

During Romania's IHRA Chairmanship, on 2<sup>nd</sup> July last year, we lost a great countryman and the world lost a wonderful historian and moral authority. I quote the words of Elie Wiesel who said:

*“Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair.”*

As we remember the past, we are all painfully aware that we again find ourselves today in times of turmoil, where antisemitism, hate and intolerance persist.

Let us not despair. Because we must act, because we are able to act, to prevent and to reject these demons.

I am grateful to you for honoring the historic significance of the 27 January but we should not remember its meaning only once a year. We should meet our duties to fight prejudice, extremism, racism and antisemitism in today's Europe every day.

The tragic events in recent years in Europe with antisemitic grounds indicate how important is to prevent and clearly identify antisemitism early. There must be clarity about what antisemitism actually is and how it can manifest itself, so that ignorance cannot be offered as an excuse for lack of principle and firmness.

This is one major reason for the IHRA Plenary in Bucharest of May last year having adopted by consensus a Working Definition of Antisemitism.

By adopting this definition, the IHRA intends to set an example of responsible conduct to other international fora, and hopes to inspire them to take action in their turn to strengthen the premises for addressing this threat.

But the Romanian IHRA Chairmanship has meant more than this accomplishment. It has been a time for deep reflection in our society and for taking bold decisions.

We have learned that we must persist in telling the younger generation the truth about the dark history of our country, so that they will not lose courage to prevent and fight against such acts in the future. An expression of this is the exhibition that will be inaugurated immediately after this meeting, entitled “Education and Remembrance - Holocaust in Romania”.

I am convinced that we must ensure that the Holocaust does not remain simply a topic of historical research or academic consideration but serve as an active reminder of the dangers of allowing the demons of hate and intolerance to flourish, unimpeded and unchallenged. Absolutely nothing can justify indifference when it is harmful to the life and dignity of other human beings.

I am reminded by the history of the Holocaust that individual acts of courage and responsibility can make the difference between life and death.

We must not allow for the history of the Holocaust to be rewritten in some quarters for serving the goals of aggressive populism.

We cannot fail to protest when we see that sinister ghosts from the history of the Holocaust can be whitewashed and made to appear alluring, to the point of overshadowing our democratic values.

We cannot remain indifferent when history is thrown out from history.

We should act boldly for confronting the new forms of antisemitism, hatred, racism that are spreading in media or social media or for preventing and punishing acts of Roma discrimination and exclusion in our countries.

How else than by responsible action can we tackle the fundamental lack of confidence and mutual trust or the growing radicalization and violent extremism rightly pointed out by Austrian Foreign Minister Kurtz in his first message as OSCE Chair earlier this month?

Some may question why IHRA is so insistent on integrating the definitions it has adopted on antisemitism and on Holocaust denial within the European framework of standards.

Our answer is clear: Because the mission of the IHRA is to bring to the attention of the world not just the memory of the past, but also our duties to the present. We can do this by identifying the roots of hate, discrimination and exclusion that led to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to eradicate them for good, both on our continent and globally.

I am grateful to German Federal Minister Steinmeier and his team for seeking the endorsement by OSCE of this working definition of antisemitism and I would like to warmly thank all participating states throughout the OSCE region which supported this proposal. While I was disappointed that the proposal did not pass, I was pleased that all EU member states took a common position of support.

The IHRA is ready to work with the current Austrian Chairmanship to consolidate support for the adoption of the definition by this body. We are convinced that principled support for such an instrument is proof of credibility in defence of the human democratic values espoused by the OSCE.

Let me express my personal confidence that, reflecting on history, each member of the OSCE family will be able to search deeply in the souls of their nations and their people and will draw from the perennial human value in them.

Closing with the words of our founding document, the Stockholm Declaration: *“Our commitment must be to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.”*

I am confident that we will not grow weary in this endeavor if we continue to believe in the moral dedication and strong will of both IHRA's and OSCE's member countries to better safeguard the dignity and human rights of all our citizens.