

**Speech by Ivan Mrkić,  
Advisor to the President of Serbia**

**Berne, 10 June 2014**

President Burkhalter,

Ambassador Lenarčić

Mr. Lambrinidis,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure and, indeed, I am honored, to join you today on behalf of Serbia, the future OSCE Chairmanship. Allow me at the outset to commend Swiss Chairmanship-in-Office and ODIHR for organizing this event devoted to human rights defenders.

Effective implementation of internationally recognized human rights standards and commitments is a necessary precondition for strengthening the rule of law and further democratization of our societies. Protection of human rights defenders is an integral part of this effort.

When the notion of human rights defenders was introduced for the first time in the United Nations in the 80's of the last century, it took quite some time to adopt in 1998 the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms broadly known as UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Placing human rights at the core of its activities, it is not surprising that the OSCE was among the first regional organizations which supported the UN initiative and at the Budapest Summit emphasized the need for protection of human rights defenders. It is worth noting that a number of principles and commitments adopted in the context of CSCE and OSCE were eventually embodied in the UN Declaration.

Speaking about the past – specifically regarding Serbia and the Western Balkans, we cannot but recognize that we made significant progress in the last two decades in the field of human rights and development of civil society. Nowadays, civil society organizations in Serbia and in the region are numerous and actively engaged in variety of areas of social and political life. For example, regional network of NGOs in SEE is the main driving force in the still extremely important reconciliation processes in Western Balkans.

Today we have very diversified and vibrant civil society in Serbia. You will have the opportunity to hear more about it from Ms. Cirkovic, Director of the Government Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, but also from NGOs from Serbia present at this conference. Let me just emphasize at this point that inclusion of civil society in all aspects of the government activities is growing every day. Today, state institutions conduct a dialogue with civil society in Parliament, through public debates and in various formats engaged jointly in drafting laws, action plans and strategies. To come to this level of mutual respect and understanding in two decades was not an easy process. At this path, both the state institutions and civil society had a continued support and assistance from the OSCE Mission to Serbia and OSCE institutions. Prominent human right defenders - here I wish to emphasize that majority of them are women - played a crucial role. Further improvements are possible and needed, and we can achieve them only by working together hand in hand.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

Against this background, my predecessor Mr. Jeremić, I and my successor, current Foreign Minister Mr. Dačić have engaged in a joint action with our Swiss colleagues and counterparts in advancing the role of civil society and in promoting its participation in the work of the OSCE. When one reads the Principles of Cooperation and the Joint Work Plan of our two consecutive Chairmanships, it can be concluded without any doubt that civil society has and will have a prominent role in our joint activities.

Moreover, being aware that the role of Chairmanship bears special responsibilities, and of the motto “lead by good example”, we also developed a concept of self-

evaluation of our two countries. This concept presupposes that first Switzerland and then Serbia in 2015 will create an opportunity for civil society to be engaged together with independent national institutions for human rights in evaluation of our compliance with commitments and standards of the OSCE.

We agreed also that we should carefully listen to the messages from young generation. They represent the most sincere and vibrant part of our societies. They are our future and we should support them in expressing their views, ideas, requirements, concerns, and respond to them in an appropriate manner. Our intention to develop the OSCE Youth Action Plan in 2015 should enable the young generation to articulate their objectives and address challenges and problems they are facing. In this context, we are looking forward to hosting a Youth meeting next month in Belgrade.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

Prevention of tensions and turbulences caused by violations of all sorts of human rights is the first step to achieve peace and security for everybody in the OSCE area. Our Organization is well suited to achieve this goal and has appropriate tools to do so. For example, it can assist in adoption of sound non-discriminatory legislation and establishment of fully democratic national institutions, as well as to monitor and report on their proper functioning. Secondly, mandates and activities of the OSCE independent institutions should be strengthened and supported. Serbia as incoming Chair-in-Office will continue to work with all participating States with the aim of further building trust in our institutions.

Today's conference is another step in this direction. We welcome the issuance of OSCE/ODIHR Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and their presentation by outgoing Director of ODIHR Ambassador Lenarčić whose tireless work and uncompromised attitude laid solid ground for his successors. Let me use this opportunity to thank him for exceptional cooperation that Serbia has had with ODIHR and for assistance that his Office was providing to us.

Finally, allow me to commend President Burkhalter for organizing this event. Being friend of Serbia, I would like to assure you that you and your team can count on our

full support in all future endeavors. As we supported Switzerland in organizing this conference, we will support it's follow up, as well.

I wish you all good work and we are looking forward to the outcomes of this Conference.