

Welcoming Remarks by Dr. Hans Jörg Schelling, Minister of Finance, Austria

ENGLISH only

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Austrian Chairperson-in-Office, Sebastian Kurz, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Concluding Meeting of the 25th Economic and Environmental Forum in Prague. Traditionally, the Forum is the highest-level annual meeting of the OSCE dealing with economic and environmental security issues and I am honoured to contribute to it.

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister Lubomír Zaorálek, for hosting us in the beautiful city of Prague. A common history unites Austria and the Czech Republic, and it makes perfect sense to discuss economic matters in this Central European metropolis that has been an economic powerhouse for centuries.

I would also like to thank the OSCE, particularly the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, Ambassador Vuk Zugic, and his able team, for organising this meeting.

I extend my gratitude also to the Mission of Kazakhstan for their cooperation throughout the year. Ambassador Kairat Sarybay, as chairperson of the Economic and Environmental Committee, not only supported the Austrian Chairmanship's efforts in every way, but also went to great lengths to invite us all to Astana for the 2nd Preparatory Meeting of the Economic and Environmental Forum and the opening of the 2017 EXPO in Astana on “Future Energy”.

Last but not least, the Austrian Chairmanship wholeheartedly appreciates the support of the OSCE Troika members Germany and Italy. We are confident our close collaboration has improved coherence, facilitating not only our work, but also consensus-finding within the OSCE. We are pleased that the Italian Chairmanship will also emphasise the role of the Second Dimension in fostering dialogue and overcoming divisions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are here in Prague for the 25th time, to further work on strengthening our States' economic and

environmental security.

Although it was not renamed the “Economic and Environmental Forum” until 2007, the interconnectedness between the economy and the environment was a subject of discussion since the very beginning of this Forum.

To quote the “Chairman’s Summary of the 1st Economic Forum” in 1993:

Economic and environmental policies cannot be made and implemented in isolation, as sustainable economic growth is not possible without environmental considerations [...]

To me, it is this awareness of the bigger picture which has always distinguished the OSCE:

- to work on economic and environmental policies not in isolation,
- but with an understanding of the context in which these policies exist and are implemented,
- as well as the awareness that economic and environmental policies are relevant to security.

Based on its size and the economic clout of its 57 participating States – which together account for 50% of global trade and comprise no less than 1.2 billion people – the OSCE could once again wield the political clout that it did during its early period.

The proper tools are there:

- its comprehensive understanding of the term “security” enables the OSCE to identify the most salient areas to foster dialogue in order to work effectively towards ensuring peace, stability and democracy.

In this light, I want to reiterate the Austrian Chairmanship’s priorities:

1. to make a contribution to defusing existing conflicts;
2. to join forces in combating radicalisation and violent extremism; and
3. to rebuild trust and confidence.

Of course, we work on these priorities in all three dimensions – in the politico-military, the economic and environmental and the human dimension. The Chairperson-in-Office, Sebastian Kurz, during his inaugural statement at the Permanent Council in January, said that (quote) “Conflict and other current challenges are largely transnational. Thus, the responses cannot be national.”

We all experienced the financial crisis of 2007, which laid bare the mutual interdependence of our economies. And we all experience climate change and extreme weather conditions that impact the

livelihoods of an ever-increasing number of people. These threats know no national borders.

It is thus evident that we all have a vested interest in strengthening the resilience of our economic systems and of our shared environment. And we must do so, not by acting unilaterally and in isolation, but by making a concerted effort.

Throughout this year, the Austrian Chairmanship has placed special emphasis on the topics of “economic participation” and “environmental cooperation”. Both topics are highly relevant to all participating States, and are areas where we believe common ground can be reached. At the first-ever Ambassadorial Retreat of the 2nd Dimension, many participating States articulated broad support for addressing both topics within the OSCE. These are areas in which isolated, national solutions will have little effect. However, tackling these challenges together, in the framework of an organisation that is used to addressing challenges in a comprehensive way, can add real value.

Of course, despite often conflicting views within the OSCE, we are far from giving up hope. Quite the opposite, the Austrian Chair, as well as many other participating States, believe that the Economic and Environmental Dimension has the potential to reduce tensions in the OSCE area. This is best reflected by the continuity of priorities among different Chairmanships, which I have mentioned before.

We have continued work on the German Chairmanship’s concept of “connectivity”, based on last year’s Hamburg Ministerial Council Decision. The Austrian Chair has promoted dialogue on and explored ways towards a common economic space from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as a first step to overcome political divides.

I already brought up this idea at the 1st Preparatory Meeting in Vienna in January: in times of security crises, it is important to build partnerships and trust. This is the reason why we need a new vision of economic partnership covering the whole OSCE region.

I am looking forward to a productive debate during the next three days, which reinforces the OSCE as a platform to foster dialogue on comprehensive security matters to address our common challenges.

I would like to close my speech by citing from the 1990 Charter of Paris: (Quote) “We want Europe to be a source of peace, open to dialogue and to co-operation [...] and involved in the search for common responses to the challenges of the future.”

This was as true in 1990 as it is true today.

I wish all of us fruitful sessions and inspiring speakers, but above all, lively discussions to foster dialogue without losing track of the bigger picture.