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**Presentation of Slovakia's OSCE Chairmanship priorities
to the U.S. Helsinki Commission**

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Mr. Chair, Members of the Helsinki Commission, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour for me to address you today. It is a very special occasion for me to be here as a Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE in such a symbolic year, marking the 30th anniversary of the extraordinary events of 1989. When the people of Czechoslovakia rose up to peacefully demand their liberty. For so many years, our nation had seen the dreams deferred. But never lost faith. Those students, artists, workers helped usher in the historic wave of freedom that swept across Central and Eastern Europe. Our Federation, with its newly found freedom, even took on chairing the OSCE in 1992, before forming our two independent nations on January 1, 1993.

The democratization road from that point was rocky. I experienced it myself, as a young diplomat at the time. But I am very proud that today, Slovakia sits at the table with nations holding democratic values high, whether at the European Union, the OSCE or NATO. The road to that table was long. But we had a back up.

The OSCE and the Helsinki Commission engaged on this road from the beginning - until today, when we ourselves actively pass on our experience and expertise with democratic transition. And we are ready to do more, to contribute more. That's why we have decided to take on the OSCE Chairmanship this year.

Because we believe in multilateralism. We believe in nations coming together, building foundations of trust and working together to advance security and prosperity. We believe in the story of Helsinki. This story ties together 57 states spanning 3 continents, helping to make security, human rights and rule of law a reality for over a billion people. We in Slovakia are very proud of this story, and we are very excited to stand at the helm of this Organization.

Because 44 years later, we believe the potential to unlock is still incredibly vast. Local know-how. Presence on the ground. Outstanding expertise. We must rediscover the niche value of this Organization. Because there are crises on our doorstep. And what is even more disturbing, we are experiencing challenges not only outside, but also within. The rising tides of isolationism and unilateralism are putting at risk our carefully crafted post-war order. The stakes are high. And they concern the issues that are at the core of this Commission.

So I am very glad to be here with you, to share an overview of the agenda we set for our year, and I am looking forward to hearing your views. Let me now summarize our priorities in three main points.

I. First, I want to talk about preventing and resolving conflicts - and mitigating their impact on people.

And here, let me right away turn to the crisis in and around Ukraine. This Commission has been steadfast in supporting the aspirations of the Ukrainian people for human rights and democracy. We wish to see our biggest neighbor safe and prosperous.

And to come to that, there is no alternative to the Minsk agreements. That is why we strongly support existing formats, in particular the Normandy format and the Trilateral Contact Group, as well as the US engagement through the channels of Kurt Volker.

But we need to be realistic. We cannot simply wait for progress to happen. There are too many people suffering, as we speak. So while we focus on supporting solutions agreed at the negotiating table, we are working on concrete measures aimed at improving lives of people caught up in the midst of crises.

To put it bluntly - retaining focus on the big picture should not blind us to perhaps less grand, yet urgent and real needs of real people. They range from repairing the damaged Stanytsia Luhanska bridge – the entry-exit point on the line of contact; to humanitarian demining. In February, I had the chance to discuss specific proposals of confidence building measures with Ministers Klimkin and Lavrov separately. And I did not hear “no” a single time. I hope we can work together to bring these proposed steps forward in the coming months.

These are of course going to be defined by the results of the presidential elections in Ukraine and the political climate they will bring. The role of OSCE/ODIHR election observation is once again proving crucial. It contributes to consolidation of democracy in the OSCE region. That is why OSCE participating States must do everything possible, to allow these missions to work unimpeded. This Commission has observed virtually every national election in Ukraine since 1990.

Even though the years have passed and crisis hit, your focus has not dimmed. And I look forward to working with the United States in our ongoing efforts with Kyiv and Moscow, to take steps forward. While the crisis in and around Ukraine occupies much of our attention, we are equally engaged in other parts of the OSCE area.

The organization works towards conflict resolution and mediation in Transdniestria, Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh. I have recently visited them all. From Moldova, where we have seen some real momentum in the Transnistrian settlement process we can build on. Then onto Georgia, where our Chairmanship fully backs existing formats and remains committed to the Geneva International Discussions and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms. And again, here as well, we aim to focus on projects that could bring about small - but concrete - results and an improvement

of the situation for people on the ground. And in Nagorno-Karabakh - while there has been some positive developments, we need to see a lot more before talking about real progress. I will visit Central Asia next week and trips around the Western Balkans are on the books - to address the challenges we are facing, right on the spot.

We believe the OSCE is equipped with many tools we need to overcome these challenges. And we dedicate our Chairmanship to develop and make better use of them. But this also means spotting new opportunities, like the inclusion of young people in peace processes, or gender mainstreaming and greater participation of women in the security field. Here, I would take the opportunity to acknowledge your support to the work of my Special Representative on Gender, Ambassador Melanne Verveer.

II. So for our second priority, we will focus on what lies ahead of us to achieve a safer future for all, in particular young people.

Our societies are different to what they were 44 years ago when our organization was founded. Cyber-terrorism, use of technology in organized crime and trafficking in persons – these are issues people could hardly imagine in the mist of the Cold War. But today, we find ourselves confronted with them daily, and they are completely resistant to any unilateral solutions. So we need to lead the dialogue, open up space for emerging themes within the OSCE. To this end, our Chairmanship hosts conferences dealing with issues from terrorism to cyber security - to call attention to new trends and explore potential for collaborative impact. Two conferences already took place in Bratislava.

The first one addressed challenges in promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, and best practices in combating modern-day antisemitism. And here, I want to thank you very much for the US and this Commission's support, especially to you Senator Cardin, and also to the newly appointed US Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Mr. Elan Carr. We were happy to welcome Mr. Carr in Bratislava just a day after his appointment, along with my Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism Rabbi Andrew Baker.

Our second conference, just last week, focused on preventing and countering terrorism as well as violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism. In preparation, we took due note of the briefing on counterterrorism organized by Congressman Hudson in December last year. It was very symbolic that our Conference took place in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the last Daesh stronghold. And, the message from the discussions was very clear: this is not a time to get comfortable. Terrorism and violent extremism pose as grave a threat as ever. And, it continues to evolve.

We need to address the root causes and stay one step ahead. That is why we, at the OSCE, need to continue updating and adapting our toolbox – so the future doesn't catch us unprepared. The role of the Helsinki Commission in bringing new developments and trends to light is invaluable.

You keep us alert to emerging challenges – from human trafficking and shrinking space for critical voices from civil society to protection of national minorities. And here, I would underline our commitment to all mandated Human Dimension events.

Slovakia places high importance on advancing the protection of the safety of journalists, especially after last year's horrendous murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová – which left Slovakia in an absolute shock. Support for the protection of journalists has been expressed through last year's Ministerial Council decision – one of two in the Human Dimension after several years.

But to advance these themes, to advance our security and cooperation, we must band together. And it appears the world has started to forget the value of multilateralism – this fundamental problem-solving and war-preventing tool in international relations, the *raison d'être* of the OSCE.

III. So our third priority is to promote effective multilateralism. Within and outside the OSCE.

Within – because the comparative advantage brought by the representation so broad - that it brings parties with entirely contradicting interests to the same room every week – is immense. And Outside – by promoting OSCE's strategic partnerships with other international bodies.

Just last month, I was in New York to brief the United Nations Security Council and engage on strengthening ties between the OSCE and the UN. I have done the same at the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council, NATO's North Atlantic Council and Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' Deputies. And promoting partnerships also means connecting with non-governmental actors. Think tanks, women's groups, youth networks and other civil society partners. Because while these organizations differ in mandate, membership or functions – it does not play to our disadvantage.

To the contrary – there is a wide space for complementarity of actions – to bring not only enhanced coherence and effectiveness, but also better use of resources. Because while our roles vary in many key aspects, the context of our activities remains the same.

We are here to work for safer and democratic region, where every individual enjoys security and individual rights. In this globalized and inter-connected age, working together on multilateral platforms is not a luxury we can afford to opt out of. It's inevitable, if we want to safeguard peace and prosperity to our people. And the OSCE is the perfect platform to do just that.

Mr Chairman, Excellencies,

I truly welcome this opportunity to engage with you today. And it was very good to meet many congressional delegates at the Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Vienna on 21 February. Because the representatives chosen directly by people are the best link between the Organization and those it was created to serve. You bring the local knowledge. You bring the outlook from

outside the meeting halls. You know best what concerns the people you represent. In that way, you are key in making the OSCE people-responsive.

So I am very much looking forward to our discussion, and I thank you for the attention you have given me today.