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PRESS RELEASE

Greater efforts needed to ensure digital technologies empower human rights, OSCE leaders say

VIENNA/WARSAW, 13 July 2021 — Understanding the implications of digital technology is key to the protection and promotion of human rights in the 21st century, OSCE leaders said as a two-day online conference concluded on the opportunities and challenges of the digital age for human rights and democracy.

“Digital technologies have great potential to promote and enhance the enjoyment of human rights, democracy and the rule of law,” said Director-General Elinor Hammar skjöld for the Swedish OSCE Chairpersonship. “But we must ensure that new technologies are not misused to violate or abuse human rights, and that any measures to address security concerns or the pandemic fully respect human rights — online and offline. Unequal access to digital technologies and the internet, including the gender digital divide, threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities.”

Some 350 people representing states, civil society, international organizations and national human rights institutions across the OSCE region registered for the online meeting, organized by the OSCE’s 2021 Swedish Chairpersonship together with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in digitalization, as technological innovations and digital tools have become an essential part of everyday life. Digital technologies have undoubtedly strengthened the enjoyment of human rights, and by bridging geographical divides, they have provided opportunities for democratic engagement, to build networks, and share opinions and ideas.

At the same time, new challenges have arisen as so much of human activity has gone online. Hatred can be spread via digital platforms in a matter of seconds, and tools developed to fight crime or manage

borders are at times being misused by some states to stifle critical voices and violate human rights.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of digitalization of human life, changing the ways in which we interact with each other. While we enjoy the benefits digital innovations have brought to humanity, we must also strengthen our safeguards against damaging effects,” said ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci. “In particular, we must also ensure that the ever increasing use of algorithms and artificial intelligence combats rather than replicates discrimination in our societies.”

ODIHR itself has worked in recent years to leverage digital technologies in order to strengthen human rights protection and democracy across the OSCE region, including through a series of online learning tools to train civil society and human rights defenders on topics such as digital security.

This [Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting](#) (SHDM) was the third to be held this year, following meetings on [media freedom and gender equality](#) and [democratic lawmaking as a cornerstone of democracy](#). SHDMs are a platform for the OSCE’s participating States and OSCE institutions, as well as international organizations and civil society, to exchange views and good practices in order to find common solutions for the challenges facing societies across the OSCE region.

For PDF attachments or links to sources of further information, please visit: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/492730>

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