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**Round-table event to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of  
the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities  
Strasbourg 25 November 2013**

***Opening speech***

***By***

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Director General of Democracy, Council of Europe**

High Commissioner,  
Ambassadors,  
Dear delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all today.

I am particularly pleased to see among us Astrid Thors, the newly appointed OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, who will address us later this morning. I am also very glad to see so many representatives of the States Party to the Convention present.

Today we will be celebrating the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Let's be honest: 15 years is not a particularly long time for an organisation which looks back at a history of almost 65 years. However, the Framework Convention deals with one of the most sensitive and difficult topics: the rights of national minorities and their protection, which over centuries have been the root causes of countless tensions and conflicts in Europe.

For decades, the extensive body of international human rights instruments developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century lacked a coherent set of rules to deal with minority rights. It was not until 1998 — and only in Europe — that a legally binding instrument aimed at the protection of the specific rights of persons belonging to national minorities entered into force. The Framework Convention is quite special, therefore. These 15 years are already an important milestone.

We will hear today about the uniqueness of the Framework Convention. We will acknowledge the wisdom of the preamble, which places minority protection squarely

into the context of democratic values, of stability and good neighbourly relations, of dialogue and social cohesion.

We will hear about important accomplishments. Legislative frameworks and structures for the protection of national minorities now exist in almost all member States. We will hear about the resolute efforts to solve any lingering tension between ethnic groups, based on the rights and principles set out in the Convention.

And yet, we will also hear about the current challenges to minority protection in Europe. The financial and economic crisis is a major cause for concern, because the resulting austerity policy often makes it much harder to provide special measures helping minorities to preserve their identity. We will discuss new nationalist and extremist ideologies emerging in different parts of Europe, which are jeopardising the implementation of minority rights in everyday life. Education, language, media rights, or the right to effectively participate in public life –all are guaranteed as cornerstones of the Framework Convention, and all are threatened by the rise of anti-democratic ideologies.

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is now entering its fourth monitoring cycle. Beginning in 2014, States Parties will for the fourth time prepare their reports on measures taken to implement the Convention. For the fourth time, the Advisory Committee will visit the member States, will speak to central and local government bodies, and of course to representatives of national minorities. The Opinions adopted by the Committee will contain in-depth findings and concrete recommendations on what should be done in the fourth cycle to enhance the protection and promotion of minority rights.

When reading the Opinions of the Advisory Committee it becomes quickly clear that they address the very essence of democracy. The culture of parliamentary democracy is based on political decision-making by majority vote. However, what is even more crucial in functioning democracies — what in fact defines them — is that minorities have specific and established rights and entitlements, which do not need the authorisation or approval by the majority. Democracy is credible and genuine only if the rights of minorities are protected. And more than that: “The protection of national minorities is an essential element of stability and democratic security in our continent”, as the First Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 1993 formulated it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We cannot be complacent and consider that we have “ticked off” minority protection by signing the Framework Convention or by adopting a law for the protection of national minorities.

Majorities change, and what is established as common ground in one legislative period may become controversial in the next; the implementation of established guarantees may become sporadic or may depend on the political will of local politicians, sometimes with enormous implications for persons belonging to national minorities.

This is why the Framework Convention is such an important tool to promote democratic values in the Council of Europe.

The Framework Convention entered into force 15 years ago, in a particular historic context and as a response to particular challenges. These challenges may have changed their specifics over time, but the ability of the Framework Convention to deal with them has not. The Convention forces us at regular intervals to look at the mechanisms in place for the protection of minority rights, for the promotion of inter-ethnic dialogue and trust, for the advancement of full and effective equality for all. These are the fundamental issues that touch upon the very fabric of democratic societies.

In the current situation we cannot afford to underestimate the serious threats to human dignity, democracy, the rule of law and human rights in our member States. The Council of Europe — the Committee of Ministers, the Secretary General and the Parliamentary Assembly — are all keenly aware of the dangers posed by the re-emergence of nationalism, xenophobia and racism.

As one of the policy responses, the Council of Europe has launched a process to strengthen the impact of our monitoring mechanisms. We must use all available tools — including the important Framework Convention — to observe the situation and to advise our member States, in order to build and maintain peaceful democratic societies in Europe.

I thank you for your attention, and I look forward to a very exciting discussion.