

Dear Chairperson,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to greet you, on behalf of the Republic of Serbia, and wish you successful work at this year's session of the Executive Committee of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

UNHCR is an important partner of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in our efforts to protect all categories of forcibly displaced persons.

The Covid-19 pandemic which the whole world is facing for the second year in a row, has made the mission of helping and protecting displaced persons more difficult. The circumstances have once again emphasized the importance of effective international cooperation between states, international organizations and other international entities in order to overcome common difficulties.

Challenges in achieving the protection of refugees and displaced persons continue to occupy the attention of states and international institutions. The official figures of UNHCR which indicate that there are currently 26.4 million refugees, 48 million internally displaced persons and 4.2 million asylum seekers in the world are very worrying. I also note with regret the information shared by High Commissioner Filippo Grandi that at the end of 2020, a record number of 82.4 million displaced persons was registered globally. Failure to address these complex issues poses a real danger that IDP status will become permanent, which we consider unacceptable from the point of view of people's interests. Progress in this area is a kind of test of our responsibility and commitment to the principles of humanity and solidarity.

The implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees is an important expression of our aspirations for more effective responses to current challenges. Serbia presented concrete measures as our contribution to the realization of the goals from the Global Compact. We hope that the states will use the cooperation in this framework and confirm their practical commitment to the principles of refugee protection and participation in international efforts in this field.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I take this opportunity to reiterate my gratitude to all who helped implement the joint Regional Housing Programme for the provision of durable housing solutions to refugees and displaced persons, and especially UNHCR and the OSCE who made it possible to ensure housing for the most vulnerable refugees. In Serbia, approximately 6,000 families have been provided with housing through the Regional Housing Programme so far.

The example of the Regional Housing Programme demonstrates that the path to a solution can be found if there is a will. This is a very important message, because in addition to refugees from the former SFRY, there are about 200,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija in protracted displacement staying in Serbia, for whom the conditions for sustainable return have not been met even after more than 20 years. The right to return, unhindered enjoyment of property, non-discrimination and access to political, economic and social rights is exercised by a negligible number of persons in Kosovo and Metohija. The right to a lasting solution, whether through return to the place of origin, integration in the place of displacement, or settling in another locality where the conditions are in place for exercising the guaranteed human rights, should also be ensured

for tens of thousands of internally displaced persons who are unable to exercise it without additional support.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija have been waiting far too long for the issues related to their basic existence to be resolved - we remind you that this displacement has been underway for more than two decades, as the longest-lasting internal displacement in Europe. The fact that less than 2% of IDPs have achieved sustainable return to their homes is devastating. They are hostages of unresolved issues, as they have not been enabled a sustainable return to the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija, nor access to the fundamental human rights that they are entitled to. Protection, preservation and restitution of rights have not been provided by those who have undertaken a commitment to do so and which is part of their mandate.

We believe that it is high time to help these people. The experiences as well as models and tools that were developed in order to resolve the prolonged refugee situation within the Regional Housing Programme for refugees could also be applied, with certain modifications, in the case of internally displaced persons in Serbia. In this context, we expect the understanding and support of international partners in resolving the situation of protracted displacement in the region, while acknowledging the good practices and experience of the Regional Housing Programme. I take this opportunity to emphasize that Serbia is ready to provide support to all internally displaced persons in resolving their situation, be it through the implementation of return and integration programmes for IDPs or the

distribution of donor assistance and the implementation of a future programme modelled after the Regional Housing Programme.

In anticipation of concrete initiatives to address the situation of protracted internal displacement in Serbia, allow me, at the end, to thank once again High Commissioner Grandi and UNHCR for their commitment and tireless efforts to help all forcibly displaced persons amid the pandemic, as well as for their engagement concerning the global refugee and migrant crisis.

UNHCR and other international partners can count on cooperation with Serbia in the future as well.

Thank you for your attention.