

Mr. High Commissioner for Refugees,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to greet you on behalf of the Republic of Serbia and wish you successful deliberations of this year's session. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is an important partner of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in providing protection to forcibly displaced persons. We are grateful to UNHCR and High Commissioner Grandi for their commitment in cooperation with the Republic of Serbia in overcoming the consequences of the conflicts in the Balkans from the 1990s, as well as in caring for persons who found themselves on the territory of the Republic of Serbia in search of safety amid the ongoing conflicts in the world.

We note with deep concern the UNHCR data indicating that there are 27.1 million refugees, 53.2 million internally displaced persons in the world, as well as 4.6 million asylum seekers. This is a tragic consequence of the global challenges that characterize the times we live in.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Serbia is still one of the countries with the largest number of internally displaced persons in Europe and one of the five countries in the world with a protracted displacement crisis. The wars of the 1990s forced more than half a million Serbs to flee or be expelled from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For decades, our country has invested efforts towards their reception and provision of care, but also more importantly in creating conditions for their sustainable return to ancestral homes, an endeavour in which, however, we do not always experience the understanding and readiness of the involved parties for working together and finding a permanent solution.

Internal displacement has been a special problem facing Serbia, in light of the fact that over 200,000 persons were forced to leave their homes in our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija, seeking safety and protection from systemic persecution to which persons of non-Albanian nationality have been constantly exposed.

Serbia has been continuously committed to the provision of care to migrants moving towards European countries along the so-called "Western Balkan migrant route". Since 2015, around 1.5 million migrants have passed through Serbia, and currently there are around 6,000 persons staying in reception centres.

For its part, Serbia is also making a contribution in terms of caring for persons who were forced to leave their homes in Ukraine due to current events. In this context, I would like to underline, among other things, the donation of the Serbian Government in the total amount of 3 million euros for aid to Ukraine, of which 1.5 million was provided to refugees through UNHCR.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank UNHCR once again for the help in implementing the Regional Housing Program for provision of permanent accommodation for refugees and persons displaced after the conflict in the territory of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. As the President of the Commission for the Coordination of the Permanent Refugee Integration of the Government of Serbia, I personally saw the successful housing of families in Smederevska Palanka, Varvarin, Prokuplje, Niš and other cities of Serbia where over six and a half thousand (6,599) families have been accommodated to date.

The successful implementation of the Regional Housing Program is an example of how we can find a way to a solution when there is an understanding and will for it. This should be a message for finding a durable solution for internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija, where even after more than 20 years not only that the conditions for sustainable return have not been created but also the basic human and civil rights of internally displaced persons are not respected.

It is a devastating fact that less than 2% of IDPs managed to achieve a sustainable return to their homes in Kosovo and Metohija.

We expect the Action Agenda of the UN General Assembly on Internal Displacement to create a framework for a new approach to solving the protracted internal displacement in our country. In this regard, we support the three interrelated goals of the Action Agenda of finding a durable solution to internal displacement, prevention through averting the outbreak of crises and providing effective assistance and protection to the displaced.

I also wish to underline that finding a durable solution to forced displacement is closely related to the Sustainable Development Goals. I can proudly say that Serbia is the first country that adapted the principle of Leave No One Behind from Agenda 2030 to its legislative system by adopting the appropriate legal framework in September this year.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that progress in exercising the rights of persons in forced displacement represents a kind of test of our responsibility and commitment to the principles of humanity and solidarity. May I reiterate Serbia's readiness to continue its constructive cooperation with the High Commissioner.

Thank you.