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Opening Remarks at the Parliamentary Conference
of the 2014 OSCE PA Autumn Meeting in Geneva

“New Security Challenges: The Role of Parliaments”

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Dear friends,
Colleagues,
Distinguished guests,

It is an honour to stand before you today in my new capacity as President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. I would like to start off by thanking our Swiss hosts for their excellent work organizing this meeting. Your hospitality and dedication to making this meeting a success is highly valued.

I would also like to thank Hannes Germann, Speaker of the Council of States of Switzerland, and Minister Didier Burkhalter, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and President of the Swiss Confederation, for participating today.

Being here in Geneva for this Autumn Meeting to discuss new security challenges, I can't help but reflect on the model of Swiss diplomacy that has kept this nation out of war for hundreds of years.

The famous Swiss policy of neutrality has enabled a lasting peace and security that has contributed to a level of prosperity that is the envy of the world.

Switzerland has also made major contributions to the promotion of international relations and security. The Swiss government's initiatives have given rise to such vital institutions as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the four Geneva Conventions. Switzerland also hosts numerous United Nations' and other international organizations.

Last December, Switzerland hosted a conference including dozens of countries, international organizations, civil society groups and private companies who reiterated their commitment to improving the legal framework for all private military and security companies.

The conference took place five years after the adoption of the Montreux Document, in which governments agreed that international humanitarian law and international human rights law apply to the activities of private military and security companies during armed conflict.

The leadership of the Swiss on this issue coincides with the considerable amount of attention that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has also paid to it. As far back as the 1992 Budapest Declaration, the PA was stating that elected parliaments must have the ultimate authority and responsibility for the activities of military forces.

I recall the 17th Annual Session in Astana, where we again took up the issue of private military and security companies. We urged participating States to ensure that these companies observe all obligations in regard to international humanitarian law and human rights and to ensure that participating States extend parliamentary oversight to private military companies and private security companies.

And at the 23rd Annual Session in Baku this summer, the Assembly called upon OSCE participating States to adhere to fundamental principles and norms of international law, as enshrined in the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security. This document, we said, should serve as the basis for inter-State relations as well as politico-military conduct within States, notably the democratic oversight of armed and security forces.

Unfortunately, despite all this, we still have a long way to go in realizing these ideals. In the Ukraine conflict, in particular, there has been much criticism – including from me – over the apparent funneling of weapons and personnel from Russia into eastern Ukraine, fueling the armed separatist movement there. In my recent meetings in Moscow, I underscored that Russia's stated commitment to diplomacy and peace in Ukraine requires a full accounting of its impact on the crisis as well as constructive action on the ground.

I repeat what I said in Moscow: Any solution to the Ukraine crisis must be predicated on a genuine commitment by Russia to abide by all Helsinki Commitments, including respect for its neighbour's sovereignty and territorial integrity. I am cautiously optimistic at the recent signs of de-escalation.

While Moscow has borne the brunt of our criticism, we must also remember that the rules apply to both sides of the conflict, and Kyiv is equally responsible to ensure that armed militias fighting on its behalf respect the Code of Conduct – particularly its stipulations that all participating States “will at all times provide for and maintain effective guidance to and control of its military, paramilitary and security forces” and that each State “will ensure that its armed forces as such are politically neutral.”

There have been troubling reports that some of these militias are anything but politically neutral, and some indications that they are not operating under appropriate and effective guidance and control.

We have also seen foreign fighters of the far left and the far right flocking to Ukraine from other European countries to take up arms on both of sides of the conflict. Some of these individuals appear to be motivated by sincere – even if misguided – notions of ethnic nationalism or anti-fascism.

Whatever the motivations of these fighters, all governments of the OSCE area must speak out against this trend, and take appropriate measures to ensure that our citizens are not exacerbating a conflict that we are working so hard to defuse.

At the moment, many of our countries are also preoccupied by the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and particularly the rise of ISIS. By some estimates, more than 12,000 foreigners from at least 50 countries have gone to fight with rebels in Syria. About a quarter of these are reportedly coming from Western nations. As returning fighters might be inclined to engage in terrorist attacks, ISIS constitutes a concrete risk for all of us.

With these radicalized individuals not only gaining combat experience and weapons training, but also access to transnational terrorist networks, there is a very real and growing security threat to the OSCE region, and governments are beginning to respond. The United States has mobilized a military coalition for what could be a years-long campaign against ISIS, and some OSCE countries are moving to revoke passports of their citizens who have left to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.

We are also faced with evolving challenges in the economic and environmental dimension, particularly the crisis of climate change. Mass demonstrations were held last month in cities across the world demanding action from world leaders on the climate crisis. As we head towards the Climate Change Conference in Lima, Peru, this December, it is high time that leaders take seriously these calls as they work towards a legally binding and universal agreement next year in Paris.

With all this in mind, as we discuss new security challenges and the role of parliaments over the next few days, I hope that this Assembly lives up to its highest potential as a forum of debate and a facilitator of the exchange of best practices. As security challenges grow by the day, so too does the need for multilateral co-operation rooted in common principles as expressed in the Helsinki Final Act, the Code of Conduct, the Copenhagen Document and other landmark accords of the OSCE.

While we set the agendas for our parliaments, for our nations and for the whole of the OSCE region, we should recall the spirit of Helsinki and the principles outlined in that founding document nearly 40 years ago.

As this anniversary approaches, the Parliamentary Assembly is engaged in a series of seminars known as the Helsinki +40 Project. The first of these was just held at the Russian International Affairs Council in Moscow on the 25th of September, and was a great success.

As the link between the governmental side of the Organization and the people in the OSCE area, the Parliamentary Assembly is in a unique position to foster public debate and build support for strengthening the Organization in the run-up to the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

The Parliamentary Assembly is the OSCE's democratic backbone, bringing not only legitimacy to the Organization, but also the OSCE's values back to our capitals. The role of our Assembly – as well as parliaments – has never been clearer as a way to build trust among those we represent. To build that trust, however, we owe them a high level of discourse, dialogue and debate.

In this spirit, I look forward to exploring the vital issues of the day with you all here in Geneva, and beyond.

Thank you.