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Dear parliamentarians,

Ambassadors,

Distinguished guests,

It is my privilege to welcome you to the 15th Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Let me first express my gratitude to the Austrian Parliament and the OSCE for their hospitality and commitment to the values of parliamentary democracy.

We are gathered here to share ideas and to promote problem-solving on some of today's most critical issues and none more critical than the crisis of migrants and refugees, the threat of terrorism and the situation in and around Ukraine.

I listened with great interest last month when Foreign Minister Steinmeier outlined the German Chairmanship's priorities for 2016.

It is clear that there is much overlap between these priorities and the OSCE PA's agenda, and I look forward to close and productive co-operation throughout the year with the Chairmanship and the OSCE's other Institutions.

I want to quote one particular passage from Chairperson Steinmeier's address to the Permanent Council. He said, "What will help us move forward are not just acknowledgements of the value of dialogue, but an actual dialogue, sincere and engaged, that does not hesitate to identify breaches of OSCE principles."

This is precisely what we at the PA strive for.

All of our problem-solving skills are needed in the face of the crisis of migrants and refugees, the topic at the top of our agenda at this year's meeting. I believe that the OSCE and the PA are extremely well-suited to address this crisis because of our unique, comprehensive approach to security that this critical situation requires.

I believe the OSCE can and should do more to help deal with the situation at hand on the country level and on the international policy-making level. Our Third Committee officers will present a special report at our meeting this week on that very matter and I certainly look forward to that.

Our First Committee will also consider efforts to combat terrorism. Terrorism is surely one of the ugliest forms of human activity – and in this time of geopolitical divisions, this is something we can all agree on.

Let me again express my condolences to the people and government of Turkey regarding last week's attack in Ankara and last month's attack in Istanbul. We also recently marked the one-year anniversaries of terrorist attacks in Paris and in Copenhagen. What can we, as parliamentarians from across three continents, do together in the face of this horror from which no country is immune?

I believe that better co-ordination and better collaboration are surely needed, and again, the OSCE is a prime platform for making this kind of progress.

Let me turn to the crisis in and around Ukraine.

I must say that I am seriously concerned and frustrated, as many of us are, that the one-year anniversary of Minsk II has come and gone and the international community is still calling for: a real ceasefire; the withdrawal of foreign fighters and weapons; legitimate local elections in the east of Ukraine; the restoration of Ukrainian control over its eastern border; and needed constitutional reforms in Ukraine.

It is clear to me that unmet 2015 deadlines must be replaced by new, specific dates. I urge all sides, and particularly the Russian-backed illegal separatists, to stop delaying and start fulfilling the mutually agreed steps right now.

What goes hand-in-hand with that is letting the OSCE fully do its job on the ground. All sides must finally allow full, unfettered access for OSCE monitors on the ground – and in particular, the illegal separatists must immediately allow access to the entirety of Ukraine’s eastern border. They must allow full access for aid groups. As I saw first-hand during my visit to Donetsk oblast in November, the human suffering continues there.

While the OSCE will remain the leading international organization at work on the conflict, I still believe that an international peacekeeping operation, under the auspices of the UN or the OSCE, is worth seriously considering. Doing so could give the Minsk Agreements a needed boost. I don’t see why any side which truly wants peace in Ukraine would oppose such an idea.

I also have to condemn the recent announcement by the self-styled “Luhansk People’s Republic” that they intend to hold illegitimate, so-called local elections in late April.

I am also quite troubled by internal developments in Ukraine. The resignation of the economy minister and other reform-minded officials is a very worrying sign. There is now a real political crisis in Ukraine and the stakes could not be higher.

Kyiv simply must find the political will and the political maturity to launch an all-out effort against corruption, putting aside old loyalties and political infighting. Let us all remember that this was the primary aim of Maidan, and what a tragedy it would be if that aim were to go unfulfilled.

And so, on several levels, the year 2016 could be a “make or break” time for Ukraine.

Dear colleagues,

With all these challenges in front of us, there are also some encouraging signs in the air. I’m referring to recent meetings and diplomacy between the leaders and high officials of East and West. I’m also cautiously optimistic about the next meeting of the Normandy Four in Paris next week. It would indeed be high time for some specific progress to be recorded.

While it is clear that Russia, for example, is involved from Syria to the Arctic, it is equally clear that we need everybody around the table to be able to understand each other. In order to move from confrontation into building bridges we also need a strong trans-Atlantic component in Europe. It is our duty as parliamentarians of

this Organization to do our part to enhance mutually agreed security structures in Europe, not to question the future of them.

The progress we all want to see will be predicated on increased dialogue and this is where the PA comes in, front and center. We have facilitated some of the only interaction between Russian and Ukrainian parliamentarians since the crisis began and we will continue to try to make it more constructive and results-orientated. In this context I renew my call for the readiness of the PA leadership to facilitate a fact-finding mission to eastern Ukraine, at a minimum to include Ukrainian and Russian parliamentarians.

Finally, let me remind you that 3 April will mark the 25 anniversary of the creation of the OSCE PA. It is something special for us. And we are taking a new step and there is new era in our activities with the new Secretary General. I can tell you we have had a very good start with him. He has done excellent work in the office and in the field and I am very happy and confident with his work.

Now, dear colleagues like to give the floor to Mr. Gernot Erler, Member of the Bundestag and the Special Representative of the Federal Government of Germany for the 2016 Chairmanship.

Thank you all. I wish you much success over the next two days.