

**Intervention by Kari Henriksen, OSCE PA Vice-President and Rapporteur of the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions**

OSCE Human Dimension Committee, December 2020 15, 10 – 13 hrs  
Commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Charter of Paris for a New Europe

*Check against delivery.*

Ambassador Sramek,  
Ambassador Fages,  
Colleagues and friends,

Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this discussion. It may seem odd to refer to a thirty-year commemoration as “timely”, but I actually believe this to be true. I find it very important that we take time to consider some of the principles and systems that have been at the basis of our interactions during this past generation.

I'd like to start by telling you a story: I met an old lady at an election observation in country X. When I asked her why she went to vote, she responded: “I don't think it matters in this election, but I hope it will matter for my children and grandchildren”. She added that the election observers gave her hope that her country would become a democracy one day. I think that her call for international cooperation and election observation (by the OSCE and others) is an important reminder that if her country is to become a real democracy that lives up to her expectations, the Paris Charter has to be adhered to more. This is also really what it is all about: giving hope to living peoples.

We should be clear about how impressive the achievements of thirty years ago really were. The Charter of Paris resounds with a feeling of both hope and ambition, most notably in its reference to “a new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe”. The optimism in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is a stark contrast to today's more pessimistic outlook.

Judged by today's geopolitical situation the principles and structures committed to in the Paris Charter seem not only hopeful, but almost unbelievably progressive and advanced. I doubt that any of us believe that the Charter of Paris could be agreed were we to gather OSCE Heads of State today.

This feeling that yesterday's achievements are out of our reach today make commemoration of the Paris Charter, and other similar OSCE milestones, especially important. We should not be fooled into thinking that human progress is linear.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Since its founding in the early 1970s, the OSCE has always taken a holistic approach to security. This has been a constant strength of the organization, with a broad set of principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act. But I think it is noteworthy that while in Helsinki the human dimension was usually known to be the ‘third basket’, in the Charter of Paris these

issues very much came first in prominence and chronology. The OSCE's Human Dimension, which is the daily work of your committee, owes a great deal to the Paris Charter.

We are meeting to commemorate and honour the Paris Charter, but of course the best way to honour it is to help implement it. Let us not pretend that we have all been doing so. The failures to uphold key principles such as the freedom of expression, of assembly, and of conscience are virtually a daily occurrence in some parts of the OSCE.

But for our discussion today I do not want to dwell on our inability to fulfil the hopes of Paris during the past thirty years. I would rather take a forward-looking approach and would propose four areas of focus to help us move towards implementation: Confidence, Inclusion, Protection, and Legislation.

First, it is critical that we rebuild confidence in institutions. We all have responsibilities on this, first and foremost I and my colleagues in parliaments. But those of you working on behalf of your governments also have great responsibilities and opportunities to have an impact. This year, as the world has battled a health pandemic, people have experienced loneliness and fear, but there has also been an unprecedented focus on science and data and people have looked to key institutions like no other time in recent memory. I hope that we can build on this to deliver results and ultimately rebuild greater confidence in institutions.

But lying behind this ability to build confidence is an ability to deliver on expectations particularly in the field of protection of human rights. Implicit in the Paris Charter is that protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is the first responsibility of government. This starts in each of our countries, and no country can claim that it has not violated key human rights. We must be honest and acknowledge that this happens all over the world, in every country. But there are key differences we must also recognize. Many countries benefit from an open political system that allows such violations to be detected, reviewed and, hopefully, rectified. In other countries, however, politicians and the state actively conceal, hide and excuse human rights abuses. Countries without effective remedies simply cannot expect to build confidence among their populations.

This concept of confidence in institutions is perhaps the heart of the Paris Charter, as our governments took on commitments and fully expected to deliver on them.

Secondly, I would propose that inclusion will be critical to our success in delivering on our commitments of thirty years ago. To put it simply, every government must protect every human being from violation of human rights. Most prominently here, I would point to the need to address the continued under-representation of women in decision-making structures and structural inequalities for women and girls. My colleague Hedy Fry from Canada has presented some excellent and forward-looking proposals to address inequalities of among men and women made worse by COVID-19, and I would encourage your attention to these.

Minority groups should be adequately represented so that they have an equal and independent voice in every society. Many of our processes are based on majority rule, and in a democratic process, this is natural, but majority rule is invalid if it results in a disregard for minorities. A failure to promote the rights of minorities is a failure to protect human rights, and when parliaments and institutions do not effectively reflect the people they represent, confidence is diminished and societies become less stable and democracy fails.

We also often hear that the space for civil society to act is growing smaller. The voice and expertise of engaged citizens is vital. Administrative obstacles and the demonization of independent or opposing voices is a concerning trend in a number of OSCE countries that we must do our utmost to counter. This is fundamentally a question of equal treatment and inclusion.

We also cannot accept restrictions to freedom of speech online any more than we would in person. At the same time, governments are obliged to protect its people from hate-speech and harassment also on web based communication. The imprisonment and intimidation of journalists is a serious problem. To secure their freedom it demands serious political attention and actions.

Thirdly, we have a special duty of protection particularly for those in conflict areas. Every day children and adults suffer from a lack of access to basic humanitarian needs, lacking health care, education and even food. I say again: governments must protect every human being from violation of human rights. In conflict zones this commitment is often forgotten. Women and children are most vulnerable in these situations, and the right to have access to fundamental reproductive health services and vaccines must be made a reality for them.

Finally, as a Member of Parliament, I of course need to recognise the critical importance of legislation for protecting and promoting human rights. The responsibility of protection lies on every single government. And not just any legislation will do. Countries must not be allowed to hide behind legalities. Violations of human rights are still violations even if parliaments authorise them through legislation. Simply put: bad legislation cannot replace good principles, and we as an organization must remain active in ensuring that fulfilment of commitments and principles remain the focus. Our work is two headed: raise discussions and make good legislation.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

History teaches us that technologies and cultural developments can be forgotten. If we don't take time commemorate important achievements like the Paris Charter we risk becoming the metaphorical person in the European Middle Ages, staring up at a Roman-built aqueduct in astonishment and wondering how something like this could possibly be constructed.

I don't pretend that rebuilding trust and returning to the Paris principles will be easy, but we all have a common responsibility to do so and make it alive within our time. COVID has enlarged differences and injustice in and between countries. COVID has also shown the need for collective action. In the build-up and recovery after COVID, the Paris Charter should be our vision for common action.

Thank you for your time.