



Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council
Remarks by OSCE PA President George Tsereteli
26 November 2020 | Vienna

As delivered.

Thank you very much, dear Igli, dear Chairman for your kind words. I am very happy to be back at the Permanent Council.

Your Excellencies,

Dear Friends,

You will recall that when I last addressed you back in January, I thought this would be my last appearance before the OSCE Permanent Council as President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

The extraordinary circumstances we all have been facing this year have forced us to decide an unprecedented cancellation of our Annual Session and, as a consequence, a freezing of all Assembly Officers until the Annual Session next year in Bucharest.

This leads me to address you again today, albeit remotely. I am grateful to you all for our great co-operation and interesting discussions over the years.

I am happy to take part in this meeting together with a dear friend of the Parliamentary Assembly, Ambassador Vincenzo del Monaco, with whom we have had the pleasure to work with, while he was in post in Yerevan. I wish him great success in his new and important role as Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania.

I would also like to already take the opportunity to thank all staff, from the OSCE Secretariat and Permanent Missions, for maintaining a high-level of engagement and activities despite these challenging circumstances.

Likewise, despite the cancelation of our statutory meetings, including our Autumn Meeting in San Marino, as well as several important conferences planned by national delegations, we have managed to maintain dialogue by readapting our work and moving our discussions online.

Our Secretariat led by Secretary General Roberto Montella has ably managed the related challenges and made the necessary investments at the PA Secretariat in terms of equipment and software.

The allocution of the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at this time of the year is traditionally the occasion to present the annual Declaration and the recommendations put forth by OSCE parliamentarians as you continue to prepare for the Ministerial Council.

However, having been unable to convene since last February, our regular consultative and deliberative process was halted soon after our Winter Meeting.

Between March and June, we organized eight “Parliamentary Web Dialogues,” which brought together dozens of experts and parliamentarians in a valuable forum to exchange on the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, while keeping focus on core OSCE issues.

These online events also served to continue our excellent co-operation with the OSCE Secretariat and Institutions. I thank in particular Ambassador Hasani and Ambassador Yrjölä for regularly participating in our discussions and inviting OSCE parliamentarians to take part in events organized by the Albanian Chairmanship and the Secretariat.

Despite these unprecedented circumstances, we found it important to continue building synergies and encouraging complementarity in all OSCE efforts. We look forward to working as closely with the Swedish Chairmanship and with Poland as new member of the Troika.

Maintaining all these channels of dialogue within the OSCE – and especially with Field Operations – contributed to receiving up-to-date information and craft coordinated responses to specific concerns that arose throughout this year.

Our comprehensive report, which has already been presented to you following its publication in July, is a useful resource for our Delegations and our national parliaments to exchange experiences, learn about best practices, and together promote wide-ranging responses.

The Web Dialogues demonstrated once again that there is a considerable PA acquis and expertise for many of the challenges that have been made more pervasive by the crisis. I am talking here about issues such as human trafficking, disinformation, corruption, intolerance, or gender inequalities.

We are able to count on the active engagement of OSCE PA Special Representatives for each of these themes.

The work of our Ad Hoc Committees places us well to discuss the plight of refugees and migrants, which has been made worse by the pandemic.

Standing in solidarity with the families of victims of terrorist madness, here in Vienna, in Paris, or Afghanistan, and in too many places across the OSCE, we continue to mobilize our parliamentarians to promote international and co-ordinated responses to prevent, detect, and counter radicalization and violent extremism.

We discussed this together with Ambassador Hasani and representatives of OSCE executive structures just yesterday at our CCT meeting.

I would like to thank participating States for recognizing the efforts of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in promoting international co-operation and engagement in these fields, including by adding references to the work of the PA in draft Ministerial decisions.

The conversations we have had in our Web Dialogues, or more informally, often highlighted that closer international co-operation remained the key to solving specific challenges.

In fact, as we have been experiencing throughout this crisis, there is a dire need for more international concertation.

We need to continue supporting interparliamentary solidarity and activities. We must continue to encourage more dialogue between our countries.

Our online discussions have also highlighted an increased risk for social unrest and an explosive environment for hot armed clashes.

The serious escalation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in July was followed by a full outbreak this autumn.

It has been very painful to see images of military operations, bloodshed, and destruction. I deeply deplore the high number of victims, including among civilians.

As the ceasefire continues to hold, I truly hope it will offer an opportunity for serious negotiations that might finally lead to a long-lasting peace.

In this watershed moment, it remains crucial that the sides commit to allowing the safe return of internally displaced persons and refugees and reaching a long-term and comprehensive settlement.

As we have offered on multiple occasions in the past, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly remains at the disposal of the sides and the Minsk Group to deploy its mediation capabilities and contribute to restoring dialogue between Yerevan and Baku.

This is an emotionally loaded environment. But even if the terms of the agreement are painful for those directly affected, democratic government is crucial to guide their country and nation in these challenging times.

In light of the inexcusable assault on the President of the National Assembly of Armenia, it is important to maintain confidence in democratically-elected institutions.

I deeply regret that despite diplomatic efforts, including by the OSCE, war could not be prevented. I share the call made by many participating States for an enhanced involvement of the OSCE and its tools in the follow-up to the latest tri-partite agreement.

The hot war we have just witnessed between these two OSCE members should not distract our attention from other conflicts which are so deeply divisive and have reduced the trust within the organization to an all-time low.

In Ukraine and in Georgia, we need to see a continuation of serious negotiations, including of discussions at the highest level to facilitate peaceful breakthroughs that can alleviate the suffering of civilians trapped in the conflict zone.

What is going on in my own country is unacceptable.

Failure to implement the August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, through continued military occupation, intensified borderization, and the division of local communities continues to endanger the health and lives of populations affected by the conflict.

I am also deeply concerned by the Russian Federation's acceleration of social-economic cooperation with the breakaway regions, which are internationally recognized as Georgian territory.

Despite the relative calm we have observed in Eastern Ukraine over several months, we have not seen a full implementation of the Normandy Four agreements there.

I also repeat our condemnation of the many obstructions of the work of the SMM, mostly by the irregular armed formations in the occupied territories.

And I refer again to our calls to fully restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

Dear Colleagues,

As the COVID-19 crisis extended into the spring and the summer, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly identified the importance of resuming some in-person activities and putting boots on the ground whenever possible.

Despite all the limitations, including complicated travel itineraries and self-isolation obligations, we have strived to deploy robust delegations to fulfil our important mission to support democratic development and uphold OSCE commitments throughout our region.

This was certainly made more pressing given post-election events in Belarus.

We have expressed great concerns over the disturbing developments since election day, including the excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, along with mass arrests and credible allegations of torture.

I am deeply troubled at the intensifying violence, with reports of several deaths, despite the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the demonstrations in the past 100 days.

I urge the Belarusian authorities to investigate these abuses and take action to ensure that human right violators are held accountable.

It is the legitimate responsibility of all OSCE participating States, and the international community writ-large, to raise concerns over the human rights of Belarusian citizens.

I would have welcomed Minsk's full use of the Moscow Mechanism – established by consensus and in good faith by all participating States precisely for such situations – to bring more transparency to the situation.

Openness with the fact-finding mission could have also served as a precious opportunity to build some trust with the opposition.

Even though Minsk chose not to engage, the report presented earlier this month provides a clear roadmap to find a way out of this crisis.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has consistently supported the offer made by the Albanian Chairmanship and the incoming Swedish Chairmanship to visit Minsk.

Any international involvement that does not seek to impose outside solutions to the Belarusian people, but that helps create the conditions for a meaningful national dialogue between the authorities and genuine and legitimate representatives of the political opposition and civil society could contribute to a de-escalation of the present turmoil in the country.

This offer remains on the table, as well as our own offer to assist in facilitating dialogue.

We are privileged to be able to count on good relationships with the Parliament of Belarus and its Delegation to the PA, which in 2017 hosted our annual meeting. This has certainly made it easier to be frank and direct when exchanging views on the events in Belarus.

Our good relations have also afforded us the opportunity to confront these views thanks to the participation of the Head of the Delegation of Belarus, Mr. Savinykh, and Ms. Tikhanovskaya in a discussion with Members of the OSCE PA Bureau.

Dear Colleagues,

Given the new reality forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to rethink our approach and revise plans for what would have been a busy election observation season.

We have also had to factor in difficulties for parliamentarians to travel on behalf of the OSCE as their own parliaments and governments impose restrictions on businesses, meetings, and travel for ordinary citizens.

In this context, we decided to focus efforts on Montenegro at the end of August, as a test-run for election observation in times of pandemic, a mission led by Margareta Cederfelt from Sweden, and then the elections in Georgia and the United States a few weeks ago.

I would like to commend excellent co-operation with the ODIHR and the inviting governments and parliaments. I also want to thank OSCE PA staff for ensuring the continued safety of our observers. This certainly helped our parliamentarians work in the best possible conditions given the current circumstances.

Being myself a candidate in the parliamentary elections in Georgia, I will avoid going into detail and refer you once more to the statement of preliminary findings and conclusions regarding the elections there, and a number of other relevant assessments.

Just to inform you that the situation remains complicated, in light of the refusal of all opposition parties to accept the results and enter parliament. Active mediation by the EU and the U.S. ambassadors is now ongoing and I hope this crisis can be solved as soon as possible.

In light of the tense political context and domestic and international scrutiny, our mission to the United States may have been among the most important we have ever undertaken.

Let me take this opportunity to salute the leadership displayed by Special Coordinator Michael Link and the leaders of the ODIHR mission, Ambassador Urszula Gacek, and our delegation, Kari Henriksen.

Here again, let me refer you to the robust statement which was issued, and underline that election observation in the United States further demonstrates that even an experienced and competitive democracy can profit from exchanges on best practices to improve and refine its electoral system where needed.

Once the country returns to calm water, I am sure that we will continue our excellent co-operation with Members of Congress, administration officials, and the U.S. Delegation in Vienna.

Because the pandemic forced us to prioritize these two elections this autumn, we were unfortunately unable to observe other elections, for example in Kyrgyzstan or in Moldova.

Nonetheless, I have closely followed developments in Bishkek. I believe it is crucial that the international community continue to show full support for the country's parliamentary democracy. We have therefore begun preparations to observe the presidential election on 10 January 2021.

Likewise, we expect to deploy observers in some capacity for the parliamentary election in Kazakhstan that same day.

The readiness of our parliamentarians to actively take part in these missions is yet another reminder of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's dedication to help Governments live up to their human rights commitments.

I am, however, increasingly worried by growing unrest following elections, which further signals the erosion of trust in governments and institutions. We need to pay much more attention to this and determine how we may be able to support democratic processes more actively.

Your Excellencies,

As my address has outlined, Europe today remains plagued by confrontation and division – over territories, over elections, or over the interpretation of human right commitments.

It has now been thirty years since our governments came together in Paris to declare the end of “the era of confrontation and division of Europe” and promote relations “founded on respect and co-operation.”

As we scan all around the OSCE region, despite the good work that the organization has done on the ground, in particular in the field presences, but also in the politico-military dimension, it seems that several participating States have largely failed to live up to their pledge.

Yet, the hopes and aspirations of citizens in each of our 57 participating States remains the same as when the Paris Charter was signed.

They want to live in peace, they want to provide a better future for their children, and they yearn for democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Having been actively involved in the OSCE for over a decade, I am convinced that this Organization can deliver this promise.

As a matter of fact, the OSCE has a long history of strengthening security and promoting stability.

Today, it remains widely recognized as a precious tool in times of crisis.

This was most recently demonstrated by calls to exploit our Organization's mediation capabilities in Belarus and for a strong involvement of the OSCE in the aftermath of the latest war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Beyond these flash points, we need to make full use of the OSCE's potential to help build a safer and more stable future for every citizen in our region from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

While an increasing number of transnational and global threats are confronting the OSCE community and threatening our common security, we must empower the organization with the resources and political support it urgently needs to address old and new challenges.

Yet, as politicians who dedicate a significant amount of our time to OSCE affairs, my colleagues and I are troubled to see only limited political-level engagement in favour of the work and mission of the OSCE.

Despite the vigorous commitment of successive Chairmanships, this general lack of political attention has created today's leadership vacuum in the executive structures, which I hope will finally be resolved by the time of the Ministerial Council meeting.

Given the multiplicity of challenges the OSCE has been entrusted with, it is urgent that Foreign Ministers come together and provide decisive leadership to fully enable our Organization to accomplish its mission.

As I will call for next week at the Ministerial Council meeting, I believe that more regular informal discussions among Ministers can also go a long way towards keeping governments accountable, preventing obstruction, and assisting the OSCE's men and women to do their job.

In this context, I have continued to urge our over 300 Members to work together to maintain the OSCE at the top of domestic and international agendas in our home parliaments, in conversations with governments and foreign ministries, and in our exchanges with the international community.

And, in that spirit, the online event we organized last week to mark the 30th anniversary of the Charter of Paris generated reflections that will help us stimulate the work of the OSCE, and

help reinvigorate our Organization in these challenging times. I appreciate the active participation of the Albanian Chairmanship, incoming Chairperson-in-Office Ann Linde from Sweden, and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

As I conclude this address, you can rest assured, Your Excellencies, of the unwavering support of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and its Members for our shared principles, our shared commitments, and our common goals.

I look forward to continuing this important work for the next few weeks in my capacity as President of this Assembly and as a Member of the Georgian parliament, and in the coming years as a politician and citizen.

Thank you for your attention and patience, and I look forward to your comments.