



**OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President  
George Tsereteli (MP, Georgia)**

**Parliamentary Oversight – What role for Parliaments in XXI century  
democratic societies?**

Tbilisi, 6 June 2019 | Keynote address

*Check against delivery.*

Chairman Kobakhidze,

Director Gisladdottir,

Your Excellencies,

Fellow parliamentarians,

Let me first thank our friends from ODIHR for organizing this very important conference.

I am glad that the Parliament of Georgia was able to host you this week, and I hope that you make the most of your visit to Tbilisi to experience Georgian hospitality!

Before we open a plenary debate on the role of parliaments in 21st century democratic societies, I would like to offer here some remarks that will help frame our discussion.

As you know, I speak to you today both as a Member of the Georgian Parliament and as the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

I thus have the privilege of wearing two hats.

First, I am here to promote the excellent work of our Organization, of the ODIHR, and of our Parliamentary Assembly, in supporting participating States to follow through on their OSCE commitments.

Every year, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopts a Final Declaration at its Annual Session, which often will include recommendations on how to improve parliamentary oversight in a number of areas.

I would highlight, in particular, calls that we have made over the years to strengthen parliamentary oversight in the fields of combating crime and corruption and implementing the OSCE's Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security.

At our Annual Session last year in Berlin, we reiterated that full implementation of OSCE commitments requires the engagement of national parliaments to ensure security sector oversight, the ratification of relevant international treaties, and harmonized and effective legal frameworks.

We in the OSCE PA have also recently launched an initiative through the Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism aimed at strengthening the implementation of commitments on border security and information sharing, especially those on Advance Passenger Information, passenger name record data and biometrics contained in UN Security Council Resolution 2396.

Additional tools for oversight have also been created in the context of the OSCE PA, for example related to issues in the OSCE's second dimension on economic co-operation through the Silk Road support group.

This is an important initiative in which the OSCE PA is actively trying to ensure that parliaments increase their oversight capacity in a tangible and measurable way.

But we also must be realistic about the diverse array of political systems within the OSCE area and the varying degrees of effective oversight mechanisms that may be in place.

You will recall that in the 1990 Charter of Paris and subsequent OSCE documents, all OSCE countries pledged to "build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of their nations."

Let's consider for a moment what the OSCE looked like in November 1990, when this commitment was made: the Soviet Union was still months away from totally crumbling, uprisings were breaking out across many OSCE countries in the OSCE area, and the German reunification meant bringing an authoritarian communist state under the rule of law.

This was the extent of the challenges facing us twenty-nine years ago.

Overcoming them has required a sustained effort to uphold democratic principles in an increasing number of participating States.

After all, while the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris had 35 signatories, let's also bear in mind that our Organization now counts 57 participating States – or 57 different systems of government with their own peculiarities.

But regardless of these challenges, we see today – and this conference is a prime example of this – that our Organization has done tremendous work to consolidate democratic institutions and increase government transparency and accountability in all our countries.

Times are changing, and we now live in the modern era of 'fake news' in which any malicious actor with an internet connection can publicize unverified material.

Under these circumstances it is doubly important for parliaments to be seen as sources for thorough and reliable information.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My second hat today is that of a Member of the Georgian Parliament.

I must therefore also highlight here the central role that national parliaments and MPs must play in modern democratic societies to hold governments to account on behalf of the people.

As a matter of fact, as an elected representative of the people, my highest obligation should be to remain accountable to my fellow citizens.

After all, they are the ones who choose whether or not I should continue to represent them when they go to the ballot box.

I have been a member of this parliament for close to twenty years now.

I can personally attest to the incredible transformation that has taken place in this country – not only in terms of overhauling our political system, liberalizing the economy, and opening to the world – but, more specifically for this conference, on ways we have enhanced parliamentary oversight and continuously work to boost the role of parliament.

The breadth of countries represented here today necessarily means that we have different national stories and experiences, and our parliaments also have varying levels of authority in our own institutional systems.

But as we will discuss over the next two days, we all agree that parliamentary oversight is necessary to guide government policy and action, and that parliaments must have the capacity to fulfill this role

Parliament is the steadying hand that makes sure that state actions are efficient and that they respond to the needs of the public.

It cannot be the rubber stamp of the executive.

Parliaments have the duty of protecting the rights and liberties of citizens, for example by detecting abuse or illegal conduct on part of the government and public agencies.

Investigative committees or scrutiny commissions have a special role to play in oversight. It's true that majority parties may not be in favour of creating such tools, fearing political misuse by the opposition. However, I think a recent case here in Georgia has proven the usefulness of such special tools. These should not only be considered exceptional cases, but should be considered important tools in the future.

With the best interest of our citizens at heart, parliamentarians also have a role to play in detecting wasteful spending of taxpayer money and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government work.

In the end, our parliaments must ensure that policies are debated and delivered to enhance overall trust in public institutions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is of course an inherent contradiction in our parliamentary oversight work.

As I have said, oversight is intended to strengthen trust in our institutions, but the practice of oversight will often uncover wrongdoing within these institutions.

I suspect that all of us in this room can recall a situation in which public attention to misconduct in a government or parliamentary institution has weakened confidence.

But such situations must strengthen our resolve for robust processes, to ensure that while trust may falter for those holding office now, the public trust in institutions will remain strong and grow.

This is further complicated by the fact that parliamentary oversight is a fundamentally political process.

Even if oversight is embedded in law, the political will to drive the process forward remains a key requirement for effectively implementing this. Finding the political will to hold governments to account can be hard to find – especially if they are your political friends.

It is often said that parliament serves three core tasks: lawmaking, representation, and oversight.

Firstly: we pass laws to implement the policies we believe will improve the lives of our fellow citizens.

Second: we represent our constituents to ensure that all citizens can have a voice at the table of parliament.

Taking into account the critical importance of these two roles, it is not surprising that the third role, oversight, is sometimes deprioritized in parliamentarians' activities.

We are all busy, with multiple demands on our time. Robust efforts at holding institutions accountable are unlikely to yield political friends, and the benefits of this work are usually hard to identify and may only take effect years later.

But prioritizing oversight may nonetheless be the most important long-term contribution that a parliamentarian can make to democracy and good governance in their country.

Oversight powers and effectiveness are part of a never-ending dynamic requiring constant attention by parliamentarians if we are to maintain this vital activity of holding governments to account.

For example, even in the United States which is famed for robust oversight of the executive by Congress, just last month the Secretary of the Treasury declined to comply with a congressional subpoena requesting information citing the absence of a "legitimate legislative purpose" as his reason.

This example is of course not intended to be an excuse for anybody. This includes our own government here in Georgia, where we have noted steps forward in overall enhancement of oversight recently, based on new rules. I mention this example to note that governments must make themselves available to all relevant committee hearings, political faction meetings, and not only appear for strictly regulated parliamentary plenary sessions.

I hope that we can discuss some of these political challenges to oversight today and tomorrow, in addition to considering other challenges such as legal restrictions, limitations placed by human and financial resources, and problems parliamentarians face related to access to information. We should also consider that some sensitive topics, such as investigating corruption issues, may even require providing security to parliamentarians who are conducting their legitimate oversight work.

Your Excellencies,

I am glad to see today representatives from Central Asian countries, where considerable efforts are being undertaken to reinforce the role of legislatures and parliamentarians. I look forward to hearing your insights throughout our conference.

We will have the opportunity to discuss the work of our own parliaments, whether it is through plenary sessions when we can question ministers and clarify government policy, or through more specific committee hearings.

Some of us may also have experience from deploying on-site visits in different parts of our countries or abroad to dig down into the details of a concern.

We will also discuss the role of political parties, and the various mechanisms at our disposal to ensure that parliaments retain their ability to control the executive regardless of their composition.

We will necessarily see that, in order to better uphold our democratic commitments, it is vital that we reinforce the representative nature of our national parliaments, so that they reflect the diversity of our societies.

This means including both men and women, minorities and disadvantaged groups, as well as people holding a different political opinion from our majority, all chosen through free and fair elections.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I am sure we will further discuss during this conference, in order for parliamentary oversight to be complete, it must cover all fields of government work and obligations.

Take for example the protection of human rights – what the OSCE more broadly calls our “human dimension commitments”.

Too often, we hear complaints over the fact that these commitments seem to amount to only text on paper. As Members of Parliament, this motivates us to translate them into palpable realities for our citizens.

We can for example ensure that international human rights provisions are incorporated into national law, or that our parliaments effectively communicate with human rights institutions and ombudspersons.

In the field of human rights in particular, we are called to monitor not only the work of our governments, but the progress of every single country in meeting its international obligations and political commitments.

Too often, human rights are used as a rhetorical weapon on the global stage. Double standards are all too common.

But within multilateral organizations such as the OSCE, our mandate is to hold each of our countries to the same standards and apply the same principles equally. Violations should have consequences.

In doing so, let's remember that we have no agenda other than to uphold the principles to which we have all agreed.

Fellow parliamentarians,

It is also worth noting that we have gradually seen that the security sector is no longer a taboo area for our parliaments.

I am proud that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has been at the forefront of efforts to promote discussions relevant to the governance and reform of the security sector.

I would refer to you in particular to several resolutions which have acknowledged the need to effectively regulate private military and security companies and to establish effective parliamentary oversight.

This is also a priority of Slovakia's Chairmanship of the OSCE this year. By working hand in hand with the executive structures I have good hope that we can this year take further tangible steps towards developing a common understanding of a parliamentary oversight in this area.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To put it simply: oversight improves government.

Parliament's work in holding governments to account may be an irritant in the short-term for those in power, but undoubtedly serves the long-term interests of our citizens and public institutions.

As we all consider how best to implement this, I would briefly like to suggest a few questions for further exploration in the coming discussions:

First: How can parliament best complement other oversight bodies that may exist, such as national audit offices or ombudsperson institutions?

Second: The questioning nature of oversight can make it seem adversarial and at times partisan. How can we best avoid political misuse of oversight?

Third: In countries where the legal regime for parliament's ability to hold government to account may not be particularly robust, what are the most effective tools to ensure effective oversight?

Fourth: With countless treaties and international agreements that our governments have signed on to, how can we empower parliamentarians to ensure that international commitments are upheld?

And finally: We all face elections. Are there techniques to make robust oversight a better tool in the electoral process. This might help parliamentarians to more easily prioritize this critical part of their work?

Before I conclude, let me underline that today's gathering is a great opportunity to create or reinforce working links between parliamentarians and the international partners represented here.

This conference echoes the regular work of our Parliamentary Assembly, which over the years has established itself as a unique platform for dialogue and the exchange of best practices.

It is my hope that through our continued engagement with all our Members, by listening to every voice, and by considering every perspective, we can continue to foster a spirit of co-operation, which makes it possible to reinforce parliamentary oversight throughout the OSCE region.

Thank you.