

Concluding report
of the Special Representative on the South Caucasus, Mr. Kristian Vigenin
February 2018

On 8 February 2016 OSCE PA President Ilkka Kanerva appointed me as Special Representative of the OSCE PA President on the South Caucasus with the following mandate:

- Follow the overall political situation in the region and seek to promote dialogue in all segments of society, in particular at the parliamentary level, in order to encourage reconciliation and rehabilitation with regard to the protracted conflicts in the region.
- Consider ways in which confidence-building measures could be introduced in order to create more favourable conditions, conducive to the identification and implementation of political solutions based on the principles and values of OSCE commitments and international law.
- Work closely with the OSCE, the OSCE Office in Yerevan, the Minsk Group, its Co-chairmanship as well as the Chairman-in-Office's Personal Representative on the Conflict Dealt with by the Minsk Group, and follow the developments in the Geneva International Discussions.
- Maintain close contact with and serve as a focal point for the Assembly's work in the region, provide advice and report back to the President and the Assembly regularly.

The appointment followed a visit by a delegation of the OSCE PA leadership to the region, in which I was invited to take part. My appointment and mandate were reconfirmed by the new President, elected in July 2016, Christine Muttonen and continued under the current President George Tsereteli. I express my gratitude for their full support during this turbulent period.

I. Visits to the region

In addition to the visit prior to my appointment of 25-27 January in Baku and Tbilisi (Yerevan was canceled due to bad weather conditions), during the mandate I have made two visits to the region in the capacity of SR on the South Caucasus: in May 2016 (23-24 Yerevan, 25-26 Tbilisi, 27 Baku) and in September 2017 (25-26 Baku, 27-28 Tbilisi, 29-30

Yerevan). During these visits I've been granted full access at the highest political levels, including meeting with Presidents, Speakers of Parliament, Prime Ministers, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, etc. I used the opportunity to meet also a number of other local interlocutors including journalists, civil society activists, students, representatives of other institutions based in the region and Ambassadors of OSCE countries. My second visit was focused primarily on bringing attention to the human price of the conflicts, so in each of the three countries I met also people directly affected by the wars and hostilities, including IDPs. In all visits I followed strictly my mandate and the established approaches of the OSCE. In order to further strengthen the coordination between the OSCE and the OSCE PA, in my second visit I was accompanied by senior staff dealing with the South Caucasus from both secretariats. I was able to reiterate tirelessly to all interlocutors our message advocating for peace and in favour of substantive negotiations through the agreed formats.

II. Cooperation with the OSCE PA Delegations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

During my mandate I have maintained close contact with the OSCE PA Delegations of the three South Caucasus countries. We have coordinated positions, messages, and possible steps forward. I have enjoyed their full cooperation, which continued despite personal changes in the composition and the leadership of the delegations, following elections in their respective countries. I had regular meetings during the OSCE PA sessions at bilateral level but also in joint meetings where all three delegations were represented. At the same time the opposing views on most of the issues, especially when it comes to Nagorno Karabakh, have dominated the whole process. The most difficult part of my work was to balance between those opposing views of the sides, the pressure on them from their executive branches and my determination to make even a small step beyond the current stalemate. Finally, I could not achieve tangible results. My assumption that parliamentarians are more flexible and more free to embrace new options and ideas was wrong in this setting - when it comes to issues of high sensitivity, related to national security and core national interests, Parliaments inevitably respect and follow strictly the general line established by Presidents and governments. In most cases the main focus of Parliaments' representatives was to defend the respective national point of view. I was not successful in my attempts to change the focus on what can be achieved together, and on how reconciliation can be facilitated and promoted within the societies. This conclusion is not a criticism or self-criticism, it is just a fact that has to be taken into account in the future work in the region.

III. Coordination with other OSCE bodies

I have invested a lot of efforts to increase the role of OSCE PA in the South Caucasus by strengthening the coordination and cooperation with other relevant players like the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the South Caucasus and especially

the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on the conflict dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference as well as the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group. The three Co-Chairs (from France, Russia and the United States) have declined several invitations to inform the OSCE PA on their work, even in informal formats. I could only achieve a meeting with them, when I was able to share my views on the issue and explain the possible added value of stronger involvement of parliamentarians in the process. We agreed to further exchange information about our activities but this could not lead to stronger engagement. Their work remains very closed, with rare press releases for the public which contain no substantive information. While I cannot encourage this closed approach, I understand much better now than at the beginning of my mandate that it results from very significant constraints imposed by the parties to the conflict. I should add that in these two years I had direct access to the OSCE Secretary General and enjoyed his full support.

IV. Information and publicity

During my mandate I have informed regularly the President and the OSCE PA bodies on my activity and have taken into account the opinions and proposals made by other members of the OSCE PA with knowledge and interest in the region of the South Caucasus. I have issued regularly press releases about visits and activities as well as on positions taken on events in the region. A number of interviews were given for media outlets in the region and the media coverage of my visits was especially high in the respective countries. There were cases however when my words were either intentionally miscommunicated or just misinterpreted, which made me extremely cautious and at a later stage I have limited my interaction with local media. My ambition to stimulate a broader debate on the conflicts and possible solutions and compromises in the society could not be achieved due to the media environment, the sensitivity of the topic and the extreme cautiousness of the political and state leaders. All issues related to Nagorno Karabakh remain closed within a very limited circle of people, which is understandable but does not contribute to the preparation of societies to accept any compromise solutions.

V. Conclusions

Following two years of intensive work, I have achieved visibility for the OSCE PA in the South Caucasus and also more information sharing on the region within the OSCE PA. However, no breakthrough was possible on any important issue. We have to admit also that no other body or institution has achieved anything significant in the region in the past two years. It is true that at least a relative peace was maintained. But I have the impression that especially on Nagorno Karabakh the international community has switched its ambition from achieving a comprehensive solution and long lasting peace to simply avoiding war.

That is not sustainable and has to be reversed. The OSCE PA can play a role but only when conditions for that are created, especially in the capitals of the countries concerned.

Feasible confidence building measures with a focus on Armenia and Azerbaijan, identified in a number of talks, and where the OSCE PA can play a main or supporting role, include:

1. Interparliamentary/interinstitutional dialogue:

- regular bilateral and multilateral meetings between the OSCE PA delegations of the South Caucasus countries and possible broader involvement of the Minsk Group member countries' delegations;
- initiation of regular meetings on neutral ground between the Foreign Affairs Committees of Armenia and Azerbaijan on mutually agreed topics;
- regular dialogue on specific issues like climate, water issues, environment, agriculture and others between sectoral parliamentary committees, which would broaden the contacts at parliamentary level;
- creation of conditions for communication and joint solutions between municipalities/local authorities of the two countries.

2. Dialogue between NGOs, people to people contacts:

- establishing an independent civil society forum for exchange of ideas and implementation of joint projects, especially in the area of education and democracy building;
- strengthened communication between journalists and media, including the possibility to establish independent common bilingual news outlets in Tbilisi with the aim to report objectively on the developments in both countries and thereby counteract misinformation being the basis for public opinion on the other country;
- joint initiatives, preferably at students' level, on identifying and verifying the conditions of the cultural and religious heritage sites (UNESCO Club Bulgaria has already prepared the initial framework project);
- establishment of bilateral cooperation between universities and encouragement of contacts between students in international relations and diplomacy.

VI. Recommendations to the OSCE PA

With regard to the future work of OSCE PA and its President in the South Caucasus, I would make two main recommendations:

1. The position of Special Representative on the South Caucasus in the current conditions will remain purely ceremonial. His/Her activity and achievements would remain very limited in scope at this stage due to the following reasons:

- the situation on the ground does not provide an opening for broader dialogue and initiatives which reach beyond the well known zone of comfort for the players;
- all relevant players would prefer to see someone less vocal, less inventive, and less active and an OSCE PA which avoids dealing with sensitive issues;
- there is no – and will not be – freedom and full access to contacts and traveling in the conflict areas;
- there is no financial support for his/her work and all activities remain fully dependent on the support of the national parliament of the SR.

Therefore I would propose that at this stage the position of SR on the South Caucasus remains in the past and that these responsibilities are transferred to an OSCE PA Vice President, who would deal in broader terms with protracted conflicts in the OSCE area.

2. Dealing with all three countries under the same umbrella "South Caucasus" is not productive any more for the OSCE PA. The whole knot of problems and issues in and around Nagorno Karabakh, respectively Armenia and Azerbaijan, are very different from the situation with Georgia. The three countries are also very different in their approach and goals. Of course there are also common challenges but in order to be efficient, the OSCE PA should recognize the differences, discontinue the current approach and target the conflicts individually.

I remain ready to use within the OSCE PA the experience gained in the past two years, to support the work of those who will be in charge in the future and share more detailed information about the countries individually and the region as whole.

With a letter to President Tsereteli I announced that I withdraw from the position of Special Representative as of 12:00 on 22.02.2018 in order to concentrate on my work as Rapporteur in the Political Affairs and Security Committee.