

Opening Remarks of **President Petros Efthymiou**
11th Winter Meeting
Vienna || 23 February 2011

As prepared for delivery

Madame Speaker,
Members of the Assembly, and
Distinguished guests,

Eleven years ago our Assembly decided to hold this annual meeting here in Vienna to bring the Parliamentary Assembly closer to the governmental side of the OSCE.

We came to the Hofburg then to strengthen our dialogue with ambassadors and increase our co-operation within the larger OSCE family.

We come today for one simple reason: trust.

As the only OSCE Institution comprised of elected officials, we are entrusted to serve the people who duly elected us.

By being here in Vienna, we remind the governmental side that in all 56 participating States – and in partner nations in the Mediterranean and Asia – there parliamentarians who care about the OSCE and its holistic approach to security.

Ours is an organization built on restoring trust, one that created a common secure region among warring nations and divergent ideologies.

As far as we have come since 1975, conflicts still continue and basic human rights for all remain a struggle for some.

Leaders have broken promises so often that today we are meeting at a time when trust in government is at or near an all-time low.

A majority of countries now distrust their government.

According to one study, one of the only places where the public trust in government increased in the last year was Ireland, where trust jumped from 20 to 35 per cent.

Earlier this month I traveled with President Emeritus Soares and Secretary General Oliver to Dublin for a meeting with OSCE Chair-in-Office and Deputy Prime Minister Eamon Gilmore. I expressed support for his creative agenda including protecting internet freedom, combating race in sport, and using the model of peacemaking in Northern Ireland as inspiration for others trying to settle conflicts within the OSCE region.

In many countries, the OSCE is a trusted name in preventing war and tempering tensions, and I expect the Irish will work to further include parliamentarians in this field of work.

Just before I traveled to Dublin, OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier came to Copenhagen, underscoring our growing co-operation with Vienna. His visit – the first official visit of a Secretary General to our Secretariat in Copenhagen – says a lot, and I take the Secretary at his word when he remarked that we are in a ‘new era’ of co-operation.

We mark that new era again today as the chairs of the Permanent Council's three committees participate in this meeting with their respective counterparts, much like Chairman Mecacci did last November appearing before the human rights committee.

That relationship and the trust between the diplomats in Vienna and us, the parliamentarians at home, is at the heart of the OSCE reforms we have voted for year after year.

To build trust depends on accountability and transparency. As governments withdraw their direct funding and participation in OSCE activities, we need to strengthen trust in Vienna.

The Irish, who seem to be a rare country right now in closing the credibility gap between the governed and the government, are well suited to be their chairmanship that puts the OSCE on this new course.

The fact is most people expect government to act with transparent and open practices, but very few people believe we are doing so. And when it comes to the OSCE, they would be right. The Permanent Council needs to come out of the shadows, let in the press, meet in public and, stop letting countries effectively wield vetoes in secret without facing public scrutiny. At least on gross human rights violations, budget and personnel matters, the OSCE must stop using full consensus and move to consensus-minus-one or minus-two to get beyond the gridlock in Vienna that prevents this Organization from moving forward.

To continue to build trust among all our States, we cannot leave an impression we are focusing too much time east or west of Vienna, which is why the Irish chairmanship has been wise to name internet freedom among its top priorities this year – for few issues are as timely and relevant across our entire region than this.

A year ago Mubarak's Egypt completely cut off Internet access during mass protests. In Belarus internet cafes are now required to record which web sites their patrons use.

But who is supplying these regimes sophisticated surveillance technology? Often it is companies based in France, Italy, the United States or United Kingdom.

We all have the responsibility in our home parliaments to advocate for laws that protect freedom of expression wherever that expression is taking place. But rhetoric is not enough anymore. To ensure citizens remain free from government pressure online requires us to take more difficult action. If a publicly-traded company is selling technology that they know is going to be used to restrict internet freedom, they should be required to report it publicly.

This year, millions of people will turn their eyes to the OSCE region for two of the world's largest sporting events. The London Olympic Games and the European Football Championship hosted by Poland and Ukraine are opportunities to showcase the OSCE's spirit of unity in diversity. Our athletes inspire our youth, not because of their race or religion, but for their talent and their character.

Yet, too often, sport is marred by racism. On and off the field, intolerance and discriminations pull us apart. They break down the confidence we place in one another. Violence and hatred must be fought with appropriate judicial answers and prevented through long-term education.

That's why we, as an Assembly with a track record of work aimed at combating racism and anti-Semitism, look forward to supporting the Irish chairmanship and its focus on discrimination in sports. For if the OSCE is going to bridge differences and build trust, we must all work to ensure this year's high profile events in our region are not tarnished by hooligans and haters who do not represent the values we all hold dear.

In matters of security, military co-operation is central to not only building trust, but also to preventing escalations of tension.

We have consistently called for a renewed effort to update the Vienna Document, and we are pleased to see some progress on this at the Vilnius Ministerial. The issuing of a 2011 Vienna Document ended a 12-year deadlock, but more work remains to modernize this agreement.

The advent of new technologies and more nimble military units should lead militaries to share information about exercises involving lower numbers of forces. This would bring the document in line with today's security realities. Without these reforms our confidence- and security- building mechanisms will soon be rendered meaningless, the trust we've worked to build broken.

We will discuss arms control in our special debate tomorrow, and I look forward to how we can jump start the stalled talks in this area.

Comprehensive security also means we are safe from criminals in our midst. When our fellow citizens break the public trust, government is empowered to put them in prison, but governments must use this power responsibly, respecting the rule of law and human rights.

This morning our Third Committee heard some moving stories, that should have us all concerned about the state of prisons within the entire OSCE area, East and West.

How can we expect people to trust their governments if suspects, convicts and prisoners are systematically deprived of even their most basic human rights?

As parliamentarians we should hold our government accountable for these violations. A functioning independent judiciary where those suspected of even the worst crimes are still afforded due process and basic rights is critical to rebuilding people's trust in government.

In short, we all know what we must do as parliamentarians, as governments and as an Organization to succeed in our quest for a safe and secure region stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. May this year be the year that we do it.

-end-