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Universal Peace Federation - International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace

Perspectives for Sustainable Peace in Europe:  
The UN Vision, the Role of Parliamentarians and Civil Society

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*Check against delivery.*

Fellow parliamentarians, distinguished guests,

It is an honour and a privilege to represent the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at this timely meeting of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace. As a strong believer in the power of dialogue to build trust and resolve conflicts, I welcome this new initiative and wish you – and us all – success.

As we look around the world, it is painfully clear that there are too many conflicts and crises that require urgent attention. By some counts, there are as many as 30 active conflicts raging across the planet, of which several are considered "major conflicts" with more than 10,000 casualties. These include Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, all of which are contributing to the worst refugee crisis that Europe has seen since the Second World War.

Other conflicts are even closer to home, including in the Donbas region of Ukraine, a conflict that has claimed more than 10,000 lives and displaced some 1.6 million people. Although the conflict has largely faded from the headlines of our newspapers, shelling and skirmishes still occur regularly and the ceasefire is routinely violated by both sides.

In the South Caucasus region, there is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For many years this was called a "frozen conflict," but far from being frozen, it is better understood as a protracted conflict. The renewed hostilities there remind us that unresolved conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh can escalate at any time. All it takes is a provocation from one side and a reaction on the other side, and the cycle of violence begins. These protracted conflicts can erupt into full-blown wars far too easily.

And indeed, some observers warn that Armenia and Azerbaijan are closer to war than at any point since the 1994 ceasefire.

I was actually just in Azerbaijan last week, where I met with leaders including the President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister. In my meetings, I stressed that resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must be a priority for both the international community and local leaders alike, which is a message I also plan to deliver to leaders in Yerevan in the coming months.

While in Baku, I stressed the value of intercultural and interreligious exchanges as confidence-building measures in conflict resolution. I am convinced that increased contact between civil society actors is a powerful way to reduce tensions and promote co-operation. As parliamentarians, we can help make these contacts happen, by building bridges where others only see walls.

These cultural exchanges can reinforce the work of national political and military leaders, as well as international civil servants facilitating high-level discussions. Indeed, peace-building is most effective when pursuing various tracks of diplomacy together. These include official discussions involving high-level leaders, unofficial dialogue involving influential civil society actors, and what is called track three diplomacy: people-to-people contact to promote understanding between hostile communities.

In the OSCE, most conflicts are addressed by track one diplomacy, through high-level interventions and political dialogue processes. But despite progress in mediating conflicts, we see the limitations of this diplomacy on a daily basis. The periodic outbreak of violence around the OSCE region makes clear that a holistic approach to transforming complex conflict scenarios is needed. This means multiple forms of engagement that connect and integrate all levels of society.

The OSCE has long utilized this approach in the Balkans where the organization's biggest field missions are located and where its deep commitment can be seen through the support of innovative projects throughout the region. The OSCE Mission to Skopje for example has worked for many years in advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations and supporting anti-discrimination, education, decentralization, and the use of minority languages.

In the Balkans we can see tangible results of promoting cultural exchanges in terms of long-term peace-building. Through projects like the Balkan Theater Networks, the Building Bridges Fund, Children's Puppet Theatre, and Confidence-Building Youth Workshops, trust has been developed between diverse ethnic communities such as Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and Roma.

Beyond these unique cultural exchange programmes, another example of outside-of-the-box thinking in conflict resolution was the OSCE's efforts in establishing a multi-ethnic police force in southern Serbia. In 2001, the OSCE Mission to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Serbian Ministry of Interior began jointly training multi-ethnic police forces, which proved to be an important step in stabilizing the situation in southern Serbia.

The joint Serb-Albanian participation in the police training was a clear sign that co-existence of different ethnic communities is possible. Beyond that, it demonstrated to all parties that every ethnic group shares a common responsibility for security and peace. The patrols carried out jointly by Serb and Albanian police officers – some of whom had previously been fighting each other – contributed in a direct way to the restoration of confidence among the people.

This is the often overlooked but vital work of conflict prevention and peace-building. It may not get the attention of a high-profile diplomatic breakthrough with a historic peace treaty signing in Paris or Vienna, but in the long run it may be more important in terms of building long-term peace.

This task is not always glamorous. It is often thankless and is one in which we must use the tools available, not necessarily the tools we want. This means utilizing all local and national capacities in creative ways to overcome the cycle of violence.

Indeed, building peace can sometimes be seen like constructing a house using toothpicks, glue and rubber bands, rather than preferred materials like timber and cement. While we prefer having sturdier foundations for peace, realistically we must use the materials at hand. The reality is that the basis for peace is often very shaky, and so what we must do is constantly work to strengthen the foundations.

This is done through trust-building and searching for common ground, which is where parliamentarians can play an important role. As elected representatives who serve as the most direct link between governments and the people, we have a special role to play in facilitating people-to-people contact as well as enabling informal dialogue to take place between policymakers.

In the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, we see this type of dialogue take place all the time. While hostile leaders of conflicting parties might find it politically difficult to sit down for talks in a formal setting, OSCE PA meetings often provide informal opportunities for more relaxed conversations.

What we have seen is that all tracks of diplomacy are essential for building trust and securing co-operation, and wearing our diplomatic hats, parliamentarians can help make this a reality.

I look forward to working with the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace in our common endeavours, and I thank you once again for having me here today.