REPORT

FOR THE GENERAL COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Reinforcing Multilateralism in Times of Global Crisis: A Parliamentary Call for Future Action

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1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has heightened human suffering, undermined the economy, turned the lives of billions of people around the globe upside down, and significantly affected the health, economic, environmental, and social domains. It has also underlined the need for co-ordinated efforts in addressing a multitude of complex, interlinked issues, for which the international community is required to provide strong and credible responses.

Thus, as parliamentarians, **we should seize this opportunity and play a pivotal role in forging the new, post-COVID-19 world order.** An order which will have **to effectively address our civilization's growing development needs while fully safeguarding the planet where we live**.

To find this new, delicate balance is our current mission, and it is what future generations will judge us on. For this, we will need strong political leadership to develop a common sense of responsibility. We will need to put short-sighted, partisan national interests aside for the common good of our planet and for all human beings living on it. Finally, we will need to harness the power of science and technological innovation as the most effective way to achieve lasting change for the future.

In bringing a distinct parliamentary contribution, we strive to complement on-going OSCE efforts. Notably, the OSCE PA has actively co-operated with the OSCE Chairmanship and the Executive Structures of the Organization to extend the reach of its actions, fully in line with the Swedish Chairpersonship's priorities for 2021 - women's economic empowerment, the fight against corruption, and environmental protection. Against this backdrop, we endorse this year's Economic and Environmental Forum focused on *promoting comprehensive security, stability and sustainable development in the OSCE area through women's economic empowerment.*

Moreover, we have particularly appreciated the environmental focus of this year's Economic and Environmental Committee and actively contributed to its debates.[1] The OSCE PA also welcomes the 2021 Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities' Work Plan and the assistance offered to participating States in implementing economic and environmental commitments contributing to security and stability in the OSCE region.

As a strong **parliamentary call for multilateral action**, this report builds upon pertinent policy exchanges, debates, and findings stemming from relevant activities - including Parliamentary Web Dialogues - organized by the Assembly in the period between April 2020 and June 2021.

2. ECONOMIC SECURITY

While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, its social and economic repercussions have severely impacted the lives of millions of citizens. Leaders and experts concur that significant policy, economic, and social adjustments are urgently required to recover from the ongoing emergency and build resilience against similar future shocks.

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[1] As the Rapporteur of this Committee, I have addressed the 12 May 2021 OSCE Economic and Environmental Committee meeting, underlining evolving threats to the environment and sustainable economic development.

On the one hand, negative socio-economic consequences have been visible since the very inception of the pandemic, such as the closure of small and medium businesses, growth in unemployment rates, shocks in financial markets, shortages in supply chains, leaving the most vulnerable particularly exposed. On the other hand, the more systemic, longer-term repercussions, such as rising sovereign debt levels, the need to reconvert full economic lines and reconsider health services, prolonged closure of critical services, education lags, and spikes in unemployment support schemes, are becoming increasingly evident.

The pandemic has also exacerbated existing challenges stemming from wide-spread corruption, money laundering, terrorist financing, and unregulated mass-migratory flows, which, if not addressed responsibly and effectively, will continue to hamper security and development in the OSCE region.

In responding to these interlinked security threats, participating States will need to come together and invest more in innovation and technology, while duly harnessing the opportunities offered by the digitalization process.

2.1. ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The prolonged public health crisis, followed by stringent containment measures, has led to extreme shutdowns, job losses, and severe disruption of travel, mobility and financial activities, pushing both advanced and emerging economies into a recession. Appallingly, the economic impact of the crisis is particularly profound for smaller businesses, low-income workers, undocumented migrants, and the underemployed and self-employed. While our economies shall ultimately rebound, the mobility, tourism, trade, and entertainment sectors will inevitably face longer-term, possibly fatal, repercussions.

Moreover, as widely discussed within the **OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism** led by *Mr. Reinhold Lopatka*, the health and economic crisis has also provided a fertile ground for extremists' networks to spread radical ideas. This further fuels societal divisions and radicalization among the most vulnerable sectors of society, thus representing another security challenge for our democracies.

In response, many participating States have introduced emergency measures to counter the downward turn of their economies and support the most exposed sectors. Notably, our parliaments have also played a key role in passing unprecedented economic aid packages and emergency public health measures. However, the effectiveness of the healthcare and economic measures requires international co-ordination and co-operation between countries as well as multilateral organizations.

Taking note of the findings of the 22 April 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "*Economic Security Fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic,*"[2] parliamentarians should make full use of platforms such as the OSCE PA to share best practices and develop common approaches to speed up recovery and prevent similar future crises. More specifically, we should:

- *Encourage Governments to further stimulate a socio-economic recovery by financing short and long-term mitigation measures and targeted public investments, especially in healthcare and infrastructure.* Supporting the economy in this pressing moment remains essential for safeguarding security: balanced fiscal, monetary, and financial market measures are still needed to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis. Public interventions should target IT, healthcare, manufacturing, and other vital sectors of the economy, starting with those hit hardest by the long lockdowns, such as the mobility, tourism, and entertainment sectors. In the longer run, governments will need to consider the conversion of entire business lines and the creation of new

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[2] For more details, please refer to: Highlights of the 22 April 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "Economic Security Fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic".

jobs. Eventually, the need for a green and digital recovery should trigger a broader economic transition towards a new development model. The 750 billion EUR of the *NextGenerationEU* - a temporary instrument to power the recovery in the EU following the corona virus crisis - represents a case in point.

- *Ensure scrutiny of governmental activity, prevent abuses of power, and promote comprehensive and inclusive recovery measures.* Given the public spending spikes, it is critical to ensure transparency in government decisions and actions, including allocation of resources, which should abide by all principles of good governance to avoid any waste of critical resources. With public trust in democratic institutions declining for years, it is the role of parliamentarians to provide strong oversight and guidance to governments at this critical juncture, thereby ensuring that recovery measures are adopted which take all the needs of different stakeholders into account and are implemented in a consistent manner. Supporting the most vulnerable and exposed groups is a priority that requires well-conceived measures, also to prevent societal divisions and radicalization.

- *Promote co-operation at all levels to prevent the recession from becoming a long-term depression.* Considering the pandemic's extensive reach, as well as globalized economic relations, the need for a coherent international response is clear. OSCE participating States should create "emergency lines of communications" to better co-ordinate during similar future crises, including on a fair allocation of medical equipment and vaccines. International organizations, such as the OSCE, serve as privileged platforms for information sharing and multilateral action at the regional and global levels. Notably, all OSCE countries benefit from working together in advancing economic relations, technology and science. The development of COVID-19 vaccines, for example, would not have been possible at such speed if all countries had not realized the stakes at play, pulling together resources and critical scientific data to find a common solution to a global problem. The same logic should be applied to other global challenges, such as fighting corruption and money laundering, or environmental pollution and global warming. Only by sharing our knowledge and by acting together, can we hope to mitigate and hopefully overcome such threats. Co-operation and co-ordination among all relevant national and local stakeholders are equally critical to ensure, for instance, the fair allocation of aid and medical services - including vaccines - to those in need. In this regard, parliamentarians play a key role in synchronizing policies and building bridges between state authorities and local communities, thus making sure no one is left behind in the process.

2.2. <u>GOOD GOVERNANCE AND ANTI-CORRUPTION</u>

Particularly in times of crisis, fighting corruption shall remain a top priority across the OSCE region as it represents a major security threat that reverberates across international borders, directly impacting participating States' development opportunities and citizens' lives. Thus, co-ordinated responses at both national and international levels are needed to prevent and combat the globalized system of corruption, money laundering and terrorist financing.

In this regard, the 14 October 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue *"Parliamentarians & Journalists: Partners Against Corruption"[3]* underlined the mutually reinforcing roles of journalists and parliamentarians in the fight against corruption, with parliamentarians responsible for creating pertinent anti-corruption legislation and empowering independent institutions, and journalists playing a vital role in fostering transparency and accountability by uncovering malpractices and fighting impunity.

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[3] For more details, please refer to: Highlights of the 14 October 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "Parliamentarians & Journalists: Partners Against Corruption".

The work of our **Special Representative on Fighting Corruption**, *Ms. Irene Charalambides*, to promote a more active engagement of national parliaments and bring political momentum to our good governance work has been remarkable. To further her valiant efforts, we should:

- *Promote strategic partnerships with relevant stakeholders and foster legislative convergence among OSCE participating States to fight corruption, money laundering and terrorist financing.* On the one hand, Governments should develop co-ordinated responses and promote wide good-governance alliances among key actors in this field, including parliaments, experts, civil society, the business community, media, and youth, duly leveraging the strengths of each stakeholder. On the other hand, interparliamentary fora such as the OSCE PA should continue to promote policy convergence on anti-corruption, money laundering, and terrorist financing, and work hard to strengthen political will for the steady implementation of good governance principles and commitments at the national level.[4] Such increased parliamentary engagement has been duly reflected in the 2020 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on *Preventing and Combating Corruption Through Digitalization and Increased Transparency*. This is an area where we should increasingly join forces with the **OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism**, as the financing of terrorism remains a serious threat throughout our region.

- *Increase overall transparency, integrity, and public access to information by leveraging new technologies and digitalization.* Lack of transparency in the work of public entities and widely perceived corruption in public offices continue to hamper citizens' trust in democratic institutions and processes. Making official information available to the public improves government accountability and enhances public participation. In this context, open data initiatives are critical in ensuring free and unhindered access to information on public contracts and tenders. If used properly, open data also supports technological innovation and economic growth. Moreover, experience shows that insofar as the ultimate beneficial owner of private companies interfacing with public institutions or funds is unknown, the door to corruption, money laundering and terrorist financing remains open. Thus, sound ultimate beneficial ownership laws should be developed and duly implemented throughout the OSCE region.

2.3. ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Societies where rights are fully enjoyed by all tend to be more secure, with better prospects for sustainable, resilient and prosperous development. However, today in our region women are disproportionally exposed to economic vulnerabilities and often lack the security that follows from equal participation in economic life. This is especially true in times of crisis.

Moreover, population ageing is a global phenomenon: there were 703 million persons aged 65 years, or over, in the world in 2019 and the number of older persons is projected to double to 1.5 billion by 2050.[5] Against this backdrop, it is critical *to also ensure equal opportunities for older people,* who were hit particularly hard by the health crisis, in order to effectively enjoy their human rights and fully develop their human potential.

Against this backdrop, we welcome the work of our **Special Representative on Gender Issues**, Dr. Hedy Fry, in promoting discussion on gender issues in the region, including by contributing to the First Preparatory Meeting of the 29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum *"Promoting comprehensive security, stability and sustainable development in the OSCE area through women's economic empowerment." Inter alia,* in this context we should:

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[4] For instance, the **FATF Recommendations,** which are recognized as the global anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorist financing (CFT) standard.
[5] UN-World Population Ageing 2019

- *Advance gender mainstreaming efforts through education and open public dialogue, including by upskilling and reskilling vulnerable groups, women, minorities, and youth.* Notably, supporting women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for inclusive and equitable economic recovery, which has a clear connection to security. In this regard, advancing women's participation in decision-making is essential for the democratic functioning of societies.

2.4. MIGRATION MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The health of our societies depends on the health of all its members, including the most marginalized and vulnerable. While borders have closed and countries have gone into isolation, the global COVID-19 pandemic is also a stark reminder of the vital importance of international co-operation in the field of migration management.

Notably, COVID-19 had a significant social and economic impact on migrants and their communities – for instance in Central Asia - where many livelihoods depend on labor mobility both within countries and to neighboring countries. During the pandemic, the economies of several OSCE participating States have been strongly impacted by the drop in migrants' remittances, while destination countries have experienced worsening labor shortages, especially in the healthcare, agricultural, and construction sectors.

With migratory routes constantly shifting and migration dynamics perpetually evolving, we must be better prepared to deal with growing influxes of migrants - including for environmental and climate reasons - by putting into place forward-looking migration and development policies. In this view, we particularly welcome the work of the **OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Migration** led by *Ms. Margareta Cederfelt*. Indeed, we should:

- *Encourage and support our governments to promote effective, humane, and sustainable migration management*, including through co-ordination between countries, exchange of best practices, and support from relevant international organizations to meet the challenges of migration, for instance in South-East Europe. Whenever appropriate, opportunities for legal migration should be duly expanded to fill not only highly qualified, but also lesser-skilled positions.

- *Step up efforts to dismantle human trafficking and smuggling syndicates along migration routes*. The COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuing border closures, presented new opportunities for persons who profit from human misery along the main migratory routes, where thousands of people - including many children - are particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous traffickers and smugglers. Accordingly, OSCE participating States should enhance co-operation and information exchange with a view to prosecute perpetrators of such horrific crimes and boost the identification of potential victims and the provision of targeted assistance.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored how interconnected public security is with both the planet and citizen's health, triggering greater awareness about the fragility of the environment and its importance for human well-being. Environmental challenges affect us in many ways and can constitute a risk to our security even when they do not lead to direct conflict. Effects are wide-ranging and, besides the environment itself, they concern public health, economy, development, infrastructure, and others. Hence, the urgency of preserving natural habitats and endangered ecosystems by revisiting our relationship with nature and by crafting a more environmentally responsible world.

Building on the findings of several OSCE PA timely policy exchanges - such as the 22 May 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "*COVID19: A Turning Point for Environmental Protection?*", the 16 September 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "*From the Arctic to Global: The Political Role in Addressing Climate Change,*" the 23 October 2020 *Informative Briefing with SIMA,*[6] and the 25 May 2021 OSCE PA Web Dialogue *"Framing the Environmental Security – Public Health Nexus"*- the General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment grew determined to address environmental security in a more holistic and interdisciplinary way.

Accordingly, **better understanding the environment and its interconnectedness with our daily security should become the compelling and overarching priority of the international community**. This is a critical precondition to protect citizens more effectively from the multifaceted effects of pollution and environmental degradation on both the public and the planet's health. Like two sides of the same coin, the climate and public health crises share similar root causes and are both viewed as looming spoilers to our global security. As such, research, science, technology, and digitalization must be policymakers' potent allies in the pursuit of lasting environmental security.

3.1. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Compelling correlations between environmental degradation and global security have consistently emerged over the decades. Climate change is now widely recognized as a *climate crisis*, defined by the United Nations as one of the overarching emergencies of the 21st century. Similarly, environmental degradation is one of the ten major threats officially cautioned by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change of the United Nations.

Extreme weather events, intense desertification and rapid urbanization processes, land degradation, constantly rising levels of greenhouse emissions, the pervasive impact of pollution on public health, drastic losses in biodiversity and forest cover, ocean acidification and rise of sea levels, climate and pollution-driven migration, and conflicts for access to clean water and other increasingly scarce resources, are some of the main security challenges stemming from the radical degradation of our environment, which includes our climate. This degradation is likely to intensify in the current decade.

People all over the world are directly and increasingly being affected, both individually and as a community. Effects are wide-ranging and, besides the environment itself, they concern public health, economy, infrastructure, energy resources, and so on. Hence, even when not directly causing conflict, environmental degradation acts as a "threat multiplier," converging with other pressures and shocks to significantly jeopardize the stability of states and societies. For instance, the climate change-terrorism-radicalization nexus is increasingly studied as a complex, emergent "whole" formed from a heterogeneous range of interacting geopolitical components.[7]

The accelerated pace of climate change has been evidenced through the increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, globally and in the OSCE area. In 2018, floods continued to affect the largest number of people, more than 35 million.[8] Moreover, the World Meteorological Organization noted that the past six years are likely to be the six hottest years on record,[9] causing, *inter*

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[6] For more details, please refer to: Highlights of the 22 May 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "COVID19: A turning Point for Environmental Protection?", Highlights of the 16 September 2020 OSCE PA Web Dialogue "From the Arctic to Global: The Political Role in Addressing Climate Change", and Findings stemming from the 23 October 2020 Informative Briefing with SIMA.
[7] "A climate terrorism assemblage? Exploring the politics of climate change-terrorism-radicalisation relations", Political Geography, Volume 79, 2020.
[8] WMO Statement on the State of the Global Climate in 2018, World Meteorological Organization, 2019.
[9] WMO Provisional Report on the State of the Global Climate 2020, World Meteorological Organization, 2020.

alia, the global sea level to rise approximately 3.3 millimeters a year.[10] After decades of decline, the recent increase in food insecurity is driven by conflict, economic slowdown, as well as climate variability and extreme weather events. In 2020, 12 out of the 20 most vulnerable countries to climate change were in conflict while weather-related hazards triggered some 24.9 million displacements in 140 countries in 2019.[11]

With the world population growing steadily and the unrestrainable expansion of energetic, alimentary, and industrial consumptions, the need for well-informed, coherent, and stringent environmental mitigation and adaptation strategies and policies is greater than ever before in modern history. In this view, the decision of the new U.S. administration to rejoin the Paris Agreement should provide new momentum to enhance concerted efforts and global responses to effectively fight climate change.

The 26th session of the Conference of Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that will convene in Glasgow, United Kingdom, in November 2021 shall be another milestone for climate action and renewed commitments. In this context, parliamentarians should play an important role in accelerating our climate goals and ensuring that all voices are being heard, including during COP26.

Against this background, our **Special Representative on Arctic Issues**, *Ms. Torill Eidsheim*, wisely centered her mandate on raising awareness on the direct impact of the climate crisis on the Arctic – where its effects are more visible - and on the overall security of the OSCE region. Over the past 50 years, the Arctic has warmed at a rate three times the global average, mostly due to greenhouse gases' emissions,[12] with harmful effects on the environment, biodiversity, society and infrastructure, as well as on subsistence-based livelihoods of many Arctic communities.[13] The important work of Ms. Eidsheim - just like the activities conducted by this Committee - underscores the need to urgently depoliticize the debate on climate change, prioritize environmental security within the OSCE PA agenda and further operationalize our parliamentary engagement in this context.

Eventually, **environmental degradation represents one of the most urgent and global security threats faced by human civilization**. As such, we should to:

- *Resolutely engage in safeguarding nature, biodiversity, and our climate, including by urging our governments to ratify and implement relevant international agreements.* While the prime responsibility rests with OSCE governments,[14] each parliamentarian and citizen can play an important role in this context. The right to a healthy and sustainable environment, encompassing clean and balanced ecosystems, rich biodiversity, and a stable climate, underscores how critical nature is for a dignified human existence. Parliamentarians should therefore aim at adopting and adapting national legislation and at mobilizing adequate resources to implement commitments included in the COP21 Paris Agreement and other relevant international and regional arrangements, such as the Barcelona Convention,[15] intended to safeguard our planet's ecosystems, reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and slow the rate of increase in average temperature at the global level. Moreover, parliaments have a specific role of scrutiny and oversight on behalf of the

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[10] Sea level rise is caused primarily by two factors related to global warming: the added water from melting ice sheets and glaciers and the expansion of seawater as it warms. Thus, NASA has been investigating the change in sea level since 1993 as observed by satellites.

[11] 2020 Global Report on Internal Displacement, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, April 2020.

[12] IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers.

[13] From statement summarizing the 2021 Arctic Climate Change Update issued by the Arctic Council's Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP) working group.

[14] *Inter alia*, national authorities should regularly analyse the status of the environment and identify the main causes of environmental degradation, as well as their expected impact on our security.

[15] The Barcelona Convention (for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean) and its seven Protocols adopted in the framework of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) constitute the principal regional legally binding Multilateral Environmental Agreement (MEA) in the Mediterranean.

citizens. They must follow up with their governments and ensure that environmental and climate goals are consistently being met.

- *Further co-operation with the OSCE Executive Structures, develop new partnerships with relevant international stakeholders, and promote interdisciplinary knowledge-sharing to better inform our future joint actions.* The Assembly should aim at strengthening existing collaboration with relevant organizations, such as the OSCE, and with all interested stakeholders, including women and youth. Furthermore, the Assembly should establish new partnerships with the scientific community and international entities that share similar agendas, such as the United Nations Environment Programme, to extend the reach of its engagement and promote concerted actions at this critical juncture. In this view, we welcome the expression of interest of the OSCE PA to join the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD) of the Barcelona Convention as of 2022 and the informal collaboration established by this Committee with the Italian Society of Environmental Medicine. As science, research, and innovation play a prominent role in the pursuit of sustainable development, more visibility should be given to the practical implications of different studies for environmental security. Ultimately, we should aim for a beneficial partnership between policymakers and the scientific community, whereby science informs policymaking, and policymakers act following access to comprehensive information and scientific evidence.

- *Promote the exchange of best practices, develop innovative policy guidance, and raise awareness around the political and legislative actions required to shift towards an environmentally friendly society.* The Assembly and its parliamentarians should play a complementary role to the existing efforts of the OSCE and other international bodies by fostering targeted dialogue on the most pressing issues related to environmental degradation in the region. In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and relevant OSCE commitments, the OSCE PA should continue holding targeted initiatives - such as Parliamentary Web Dialogues and Hearings with renowned experts - to better understand the causes of the environmental and health crises, and explore new, forward-looking policies to mitigate climate change, reverse environmental degradation, and promote a more sustainable development approach. Strikingly, the global health crisis is prompting us to renew our 25-year-old commitments and policy efforts in promoting environmental good governance. In line with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the Assembly should become a leading agent of change in linking environmental degradation, climate change, and pollution to public health and global security. Our parliamentarians should harness the opportunity to raise awareness and promote parliamentary convergence around these profound linkages, including through forward-looking resolutions, targeted communication and education campaigns, and greater engagement with the scientific community and civil society.

Ultimately, reversing environmental degradation in all its forms and mitigating its detrimental impact on our health and security is a shared priority for all OSCE participating States.

3.2. AIR POLLUTION, PUBLIC HEALTH AND COVID-19

The detrimental effects of environmental pollution on citizens' health have been widely documented over the decades. Air pollution[16] is the largest environmental cause of multiple diseases and premature deaths, especially among children, people with certain medical conditions, and the elderly.[17] World Health Organization data[18] indicates that 9 out of 10 individuals breathe air containing levels of

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[16] Degradation of air quality with negative effects on human health or the natural or built environment due to the introduction, by natural processes or human activity, into the atmosphere of substances (gases, aerosols) that have a direct or indirect harmful effect.
[17] Towards zero pollution in air, water and soil – EU action plan, European Commission, October 2020.
[18] For more information, please refer to the WHO and the World Health Data Platform on Air Pollution.

pollutants able to increase the risk of heart attack, strokes, lung disease or cancer and premature death. Statistically, loss of life expectancy in global terms is ten times larger due to air pollution than due to any kind of violence (including armed conflict or domestic violence).[19] Appallingly, recent evidence[20] shows that exposure to particulate matter from fossil fuel emissions accounted for 18% of total global deaths - almost one in five - in 2018.

In parallel, a UK court ruled in 2020 that air pollution had played a key role in the tragic death of a 9-year-old,[21] thus becoming one of the first persons in the OSCE region to have air pollution listed among the causes of death. Moreover, the Administrative Court of Bordeaux has recently granted the status of ʺsick foreignerʺ to a Bangladeshi asylum-seeker suffering from respiratory disease.[22] In an apparent first, the Court effectively declared that the environment – mainly air pollution in the country of origin - meant it was unsafe to send this man back.

While these are still relatively isolated court rulings, they can be foretelling of what is to come in the next decades. It underscores how, on the one hand, pollution represents a major global and human security threat and, on the other, it profoundly impacts socio-economic dynamics in our societies.

Finally, when addressing pollution, we also address critical and easy to implement solutions to climate change.[23] Although air pollutants include more than just greenhouse gases, there is a big overlap: changes in air pollution levels have immediate effects on climate. For instance, quick action on reducing highly potent, short-lived climate pollutants[24] can significantly decrease the chances of triggering dangerous climate tipping points, such as the irreversible release of carbon dioxide and methane from thawing Arctic permafrost.

Keeping in mind parliamentarians' role in promoting the implementation of relevant international standards and in adopting forward-looking legislation to protect the environment and public health, the OSCE PA should increasingly serve as a platform to share promising practices and act as a catalyst for further efforts in the field. Considering this, as parliamentarians we should:

- *Advocate for tighter environmental regulations, thereby safeguarding public health and saving public funds.* Parliamentarians should redouble efforts to ensure better air quality, notably through the adoption of tighter air standards, greening and electrification of public and private transportation, and the overall decrease of greenhouse gas emissions. In this context, the 2021 European Commission's action plan *"Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil – building a Healthier Planet for Healthier People"*[25] represents an important step in the right direction.[26] Conversely, countries that have been relaxing environmental laws as part of their COVID-19 response will cause long-term environmental damage, which will translate into greater costs in terms of human lives and public spending to treat damage caused by pollution. Even

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[19] It is estimated that air pollution kills approximately 7 million people every year, out of which approximately 4.2 million perish from ambient (outdoor) air pollution alone. However, recent studies estimate a higher mortality burden of 10.2 million premature deaths annually from the fossil-fuel component of fine particulate matter (PM 2.5).

[20] "Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem", Vohra et al, Environmental Research, Volume 195, 2021.

[21] "Air pollution death ruling: What comes next?", BBC News, 17 December 2020.

[22] "French Court Recognizes Country's First Environmentally-Impacted Migrant", Climate Refugees, 15 January 2021.

[23] Although they may seem like two different issues, environmental pollution is profoundly linked to climate change - by reducing air pollution we also protect the climate.

[24] The short-lived climate pollutants black carbon, methane, tropospheric ozone, and hydrofluorocarbons are the most important contributors to the man-made global greenhouse effect after carbon dioxide.

[25] On 12 May 2021, the European Commission adopted the EU Action Plan *"Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil – building a Healthier Planet for Healthier People"* and set out an integrated vision for 2050: a world where pollution is reduced to levels that are no longer harmful to human health and natural ecosystems.

[26] "European Green Deal as social vaccine to overcome COVID-19 health & economic crisis", Becchetti, L., Piscitelli, P., Distante, A., Miani, A., & Uricchio, A. F., The Lancet Regional Health-Europe, Volume 2, 2021.

before the COVID-19 outbreak, studies[27] showed that 1.4 million lives in the USA could be saved over the next 20 years by introducing better environmental policies. There are also significant economic benefits from improved air quality because of fewer air pollution-related illnesses, which results in less public money spent on medical treatments and reduced impact on work productivity.[28] The economic welfare benefits of cleaner air have been demonstrated to outweigh the costs by at least 30-to-1 in the case of the US, while they could be at least 14-to-1 in the case of Europe under tighter regulations.[29]

In the meantime, research efforts continue to shed light also on **plausible environmental factors that impact transmission and fatality rates of the new coronavirus**, linking the high levels of air pollution with adverse health outcomes from COVID-19. A positive correlation between exposure to significant levels of air pollution and higher fatality rates has been signalled by various scientific efforts around the globe.[30] For instance, a recent international research effort found that at least 15% of worldwide COVID-19 deaths can be traced back to long-term exposure to atmospheric particulate matter (PM) 2.5.[31] Considering how particulate matter serves as "carriers" for several chemical and biological pollutants, including viruses, there is also growing evidence that the airborne route transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is exacerbated by air pollution, thus confirming that particulate matter should be regarded as a contributing factor to COVID-19 infections, both in terms of airborne diffusion and health outcomes.[32]

Particularly critical conditions are experienced when the particulate matter exceedances are repeated over time with frequencies beyond three consecutive days. This is a typical situation in many big cities in the OSCE region during winter, when the presence of emissions is high due to fossil or biomass combustion caused by vehicular traffic and domestic heating.[33]

To prevent the diffusion of the coronavirus under heavy air pollution conditions, it appears critical to reduce the levels of particulate matter by:

- In the short-term: ***Temporarily halting vehicular traffic and reducing heating combustion in cities experiencing more than two consecutive days of particulate matter exceedances***.

- In the mid-term: ***Progressively reducing the use of fossil fuels and biomass combustion while favouring the transition to renewable energy sources and e-mobility.***

SARS-COV-2 can also rapidly diffuse in any indoor environment (e.g., schools, offices, or restaurants) in the presence of one or more infected people, but different technologies can be useful in reducing the risk of virus diffusion to near zero. For instance, doubling the air exchange flow rate inside a closed room, which is usually accomplished by opening a window, significantly reduces the concentration of contaminated particles. The use of air purification, or mechanical ventilation, should also be actively implemented to enhance safety in any indoor environment.

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[27] For example, see: "Air pollution is much worse than we thought", D. Roberts, VOX, 12 August 2020.

[28] In the USA, the avoided deaths are valued at more than $37 trillion, the avoided health care spending due to reduced hospitalizations and emergency room visits exceeds $37 billion, and the increased labor productivity is valued at more than $75 billion.

[29] Environmental Health and strengthening resilience to pandemics, OECD Policy Responses to COVID-19, 21 April 2020.

[30] For instance, a recent nationwide study from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that a 1 unit increase in long-term average exposure to PM2.5 is associated with an 8% increase in the COVID-19 mortality rate in the USA.

[31] The study "Regional and global contributions of air pollution to risk of death from COVID-19" estimates that the proportion of pollution-related COVID-19 deaths is around 19% in Europe, 17% in North America, and 27% in East Asia.

[32] "Evaluation of the potential relationship between PM pollution and COVID-19 infection spread in Italy ", SIMA, 16 March 2020.

[33] Notably, while one person can normally infect two individuals, in this "super-spread scenario," one person may infect up to five individuals. Such super-spread events are generally observed also for the seasonal flu, resulting in high healthcare-related costs each year.

Consequently, and especially in the presence of prolonged particulate matter exceedances, it is pivotal to increase the interpersonal safety distance beyond two meters and make the use of FFP2 face masks compulsory, both indoors and outdoors. Encouraging steps in this direction have already been taken by several OSCE participating States.

4. TOWARDS A MORE BALANCED AND TRULY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Summing up, addressing global issues such as environmental degradation, climate change and pollution - as well as their detrimental impact on our health, wealth, and security - has become pivotal as countries seek to rebuild their economies, respond to growing development needs and enhance resilience against future shocks.

Despite the widespread economic suffering, the pandemic has increased public consciousness of the fragility of the environment and its importance for human well-being. We should therefore leverage on this momentum and, with the critical support of science and technology, shift towards more environmentally and socially sound policies to promote sustainable development and tangible growth across the OSCE region. Ultimately, **what is needed is a more balanced and forward-looking development strategy in response to growing economic and environmental concerns**, as well as to the security expectations of current and future generations.

In this context, the new EU's long-term budget, coupled with *Next Generation EU*, represents a solid opportunity to build a greener, more digital, and resilient Europe. As parliamentarians, we should encourage such initiatives and redirect efforts towards shaping a truly sustainable development model in which economic, social, environmental, and public health factors are duly balanced and given equal attention.[34]

In doing so, we should strive to leave no one behind, as we will only be as strong as the weakest link in the chain. We have only one environment, and all humans and nations need it to survive and prosper. Therefore, I firmly believe we should:

- *Support the low-carbon energy transition and endorse projects that prioritize investment in green technologies and clean transport.* Notably, the transition from fossil fuel to green energy[35] is generally recognized as the single most relevant step towards cleaner air and the mitigation of climate change. We should therefore harness its full potential, unambiguously cease all public subsidies to fossil fuels and invest in technological innovation while ensuring that all views are duly listened to and considered. In particular, it is critical to mobilize resources towards the greening of our production and heating processes, the rapid electrification of our transportation networks and the overall decrease of greenhouse gas emissions. For instance, *e-mobility* seems very promising to achieve climate neutrality, mainstream cleaner mobility, and protect public health. As each citizen and institution play their part in promoting the green transition, we welcome the initiative of our International Secretariat to provide the staff of the Vienna Liaison Office with an alternative, greener commuting solution through the purchase of two e-bikes, thus setting an important example within the local international community.

- *Promote "green finance" and a more responsible economy that considers the environmental impact and enhances environmental sustainability.* It is critical to increase the level of financial flows from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors to sustainable development

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[34] The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has recently published an interesting blueprint for a more sustainable world - *Making Peace with Nature* draws a pathway for a shift to circular economies and fairer societies that tackles climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.
[35] The IMF estimates that transitioning to a low-carbon world requires $2.3 trillion in clean energy investment each year.

priorities. Notably, well-regulated "green finance" channels funds towards those economic initiatives that better manage environmental and social risks. By doing so, we can ensure opportunities that bring both a decent rate of return and an environmental benefit while delivering greater accountability. Moreover, we should promote standardized tools to measure the final production value of companies throughout the OSCE region, including their environmental impact (i.e., the full range of costs it generates for taxpayers by polluting the environment). Clearly, businesses less prone to abide by all environmental standards experience a financial advantage while transferring the "environmental burden" over to the general population (i.e., to cure those affected and clean the environment). This trend should be reversed: companies polluting more should compensate for the damage caused (thus becoming less profitable), while companies polluting less should be rewarded (thus becoming more profitable).

- *Harness the opportunities offered by the digital revolution and technological innovations to support the green transition and ensure justice and inclusiveness.* Science and technology are already playing a major role in the pursuit of a new development approach, for example, in energy production and use. Notably, technological innovation can improve energy efficiency, thereby leading to a reduction in energy consumption. We should, therefore, recognize and foster the critical contribution of digitalization, new technologies, and science in solving environmental problems and facilitating the implementation of the SDGs, as also stressed in our 2019 Luxembourg declaration. In other words, science and technology should be considered as potent allies to achieve a more secure, healthy and fair society. Finally, nobody should be denied the benefits of economic growth and industrialization, as long as they are striving to fully respect the environment and the planet. For instance, international support should be provided to those countries which cannot currently put into place ecologically sound measures.

5. <u>CONCLUSION</u>

While the international community has failed to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic, it should learn from this experience to handle future similar crises and adequately protect the planet and the people living on it through more responsible, balanced, healthy, and secure development and environmental policies. National and international parliamentary bodies should play a critical role in making sure that this is the case.

This is our parliamentary call for action. After all, our goal at the OSCE PA is precisely to strengthen security and stability in the OSCE region by promoting multilateralism and international co-operation on critical economic and environmental issues.

We are facing a landmark moment in modern history, and **we should be up to the job**.