



Report of the Special Representative on Central Asia

Mr. Reinhold Lopatka

to the Plenary Session of the OSCE PA

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Since I last reported to the Standing Committee in February during our 2021 Winter Meeting, I have continued to implement my mandate as Special Representative on Central Asia to the best of my ability, despite the Coronavirus restrictions, along three lines:

1. I have encouraged the active participation by parliamentarians from the five Central Asian participating States and Mongolia in the work of our Assembly;
2. I have liaised with and supported the work of the OSCE field missions in the region, as well as engaged with relevant stakeholders in OSCE institutions, international and regional organizations and diplomatic missions in Vienna;
3. I have promoted parliamentarism and encouraged closer contacts between parliaments in the region with the aim to promote greater cooperation in all three OSCE dimensions.

In May I met again in person with Permanent Representatives to the OSCE in Vienna. The meetings with Ambassador Dzhusupov of **Kyrgyzstan** and Ambassador Kalandar of **Tajikistan** provided an opportunity for me to learn more about the incidents on the border between their two countries at the end of April which regrettably resulted in loss of life on both sides. I emphasized the importance of constructive dialogue and highlighted the need to counter inflammatory and divisive rhetoric and offered my good offices.

I had the opportunity earlier this year to travel to **Kyrgyzstan** to observe the 10 January early presidential election as Head of a strong OSCE PA delegation. While Kyrgyzstan has been considered as a leading example in the region in the area of freedom of expression and for the richness of its civil society, in recent years, we have regrettably witnessed a deterioration in the environment. The absence of a limit to administrative damages which can be imposed in the case of defamation has had a chilling effect on critical reporting. As the final ODIHR report on the election highlights, the broad interpretation of the articles of the Criminal Code that prohibit “incitement of racial, religious or interregional enmity”, have furthermore resulted in the blocking of a number of websites and the detention of bloggers within the past years.

I truly hope that ODIHR's recommendations will be taken into account and that citizens will be able to freely exercise their rights to freedom of expression, especially in advance of the October repeat parliamentary elections. The election of a new parliament is fundamental to the strengthening of the rule of law and the trust of citizens in their institutions.

It has also come to my attention that the *Jogorku Kenesh* (Supreme Council) of Kyrgyzstan recently adopted a bill on additional reporting requirements for non-profit organizations which could serve as a pretext for the state to shut them down if they do not publish detailed data on their assets and salaries or are late in submitting their reports. The President must now consider whether to sign it into law or veto it. While I understand the need to enhance accountability, I strongly encourage the Kyrgyz authorities to facilitate the development of a strong and vibrant civil society rather than to impose restrictions.

Following up on the promise by President Tokayev of **Kazakhstan** to increase transparency of government, I took part in a briefing of the International Council under the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the beginning of June. I welcome this initiative which is part of a series of public hearings for governmental entities and legislative bodies and which reinforces the sharing of international best practices. While it is encouraging to see judicial reforms being implemented with the aim to strengthen independence of the judiciary as well as increase the trust of citizens, I encourage authorities to pursue broader legislative reform to strengthen the foundations for the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms in the country.

The lowering of the threshold for entry into parliament from 7 to 5 per cent is a step towards increasing the inclusiveness of parliament. In this context I would like to reiterate a recommendation of the final OSCE ODIHR report on the 10 January 2021 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan calling for the legislative requirements and onerous administrative procedures for the registration of political parties to be comprehensively revised in order to respect and encourage pluralism and freedom of association.

I also had the opportunity to meet with the newly-appointed Permanent Representative of **Uzbekistan**, Ambassador Fayzullaev, to discuss the continued engagement of parliamentarians from Uzbekistan in the activities of the PA, ongoing reforms, preparations for the presidential election on 24 October as well as the proposal by Uzbekistan to host a PA thematic seminar on a second dimension topic and potentially a statutory meeting.

Uzbekistan is pursuing reforms at an impressive pace while continuing to be extremely active at the international level. Just two weeks ago I was in the beautiful city of Bukhara to take part in an international forum on Interparliamentary Global Cooperation in the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). My remarks focused on the PA's efforts to promote democratic, accountable and inclusive institutions and the importance of strengthening **parliamentary oversight**. This is an important area in which the PA has been involved and which Uzbekistan and other participating States of the OSCE can benefit from. Indeed, effective parliamentary oversight is necessary for democratic consolidation and in order to reinforce the trust of citizens in institutions.

I also stressed the importance of engaging **youth** in the implementation of the SDGs. Indeed, if we want the solutions that we develop to be sustainable, we must ensure that the next generation is at the decision-making table already today.

The participation of **women** in public life, too, is increasing. Following the December 2019 elections, the number of women in the parliament has doubled to 32 per cent. I trust that increased representation of women and youth will translate into a more effective say in shaping the path of the country.

Let me also use this opportunity to welcome the steps taken by Uzbekistan to promote the **effective participation of persons with disabilities** in public life, including through ratification on 31 May of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

These are all important steps and will strengthen Uzbekistan's bid to be elected to the UN Human Rights Council. This ambition should motivate further reforms notably in the area of **freedom of expression**. The March 2021 amendments to Uzbekistan's criminal code have introduced some improvements, for example in the area of distribution of religious materials, However, some other provisions such as the criminalization of insult and defamation of the President, as well as calls for mass unrest and public disorder, are problematic. A number of bloggers have also recently been arrested and charged under the provisions related to defamation and insult, indicating a possible deterioration of media freedom in the country.

Uzbekistan has yet to adopt a **comprehensive anti-discrimination law** that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as a protected ground.

Expectations are high. In light of the presidential election to be held on 24 October, I encourage the relevant authorities to ensure that the legal framework is fully compliant with Uzbekistan's international commitments and in line with the reforms announced by President Mirziyoyev and to draw upon the expertise of the OSCE ODIHR in legal reform.

I would like to learn more about the impact of the transition to a bicameral parliament (*Milli Gengesh*) in **Turkmenistan** following the creation of an upper chamber, the *Khalk Maslakhaty*, which held its inaugural session on 14 April 2021. We continue to enjoy good relations with colleagues from the *Mejlis* (lower chamber of Parliament) of Turkmenistan who have furthermore participated in some of our online events.

Ashgabat will be host to the **consultative meeting of Central Asian Heads of State** later this year. Due to be held last October, it will be the third such meeting since 2018 and is a testimony to the political will at the highest level to strengthen regional cooperation. A draft document on friendship, good neighbourliness and co-operation for the development of Central Asia in the 21st century is also due to be signed at this important event.

Increased regional cooperation is visible in the economic and social spheres as well as within the field of security where Central Asian states are engaging in the development of a common security agenda, especially in relation to the situation in Afghanistan. I welcome these efforts which will no doubt also benefit citizens throughout Central Asia. These are

difficult times for all of the countries of Central Asia, especially those who rely to a large degree on remittances from labour migrants.

I hope to have the opportunity to meet in the near future with the newly-appointed **EU Special Representative for Central Asia**, Ms. Terhi Hakala (Finland) and to identify areas for joint action on common objectives such as strengthening regional cooperation and promoting resilience. Ms. Hakala knows the OSCE well, having served as Head of Mission in Georgia, amongst others.

As mentioned earlier, my mandate also includes **Mongolia**. I very much regret that this year again, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we were not able to deploy an election observation mission for the 9 June presidential election. I look forward to engaging online with colleagues from the State Great Hural, including the Head of Delegation Mr. Damdin Tsogtbaatar, until we can meet in person.

This is an important year for the countries of Central Asia as they mark thirty years of independence. I congratulate you on this important anniversary and wish you prosperous years to come.

Let me conclude by expression my appreciation, on behalf of the whole Assembly, for the work done by **OSCE colleagues on the ground** to promote the values of the OSCE. We have new Heads of Mission in four out of five field presences, including both familiar as well as new faces. Our excellent cooperation is also reinforced by a growing network of former OSCE PA Research Assistants while the OSCE PA Vienna Liaison Office will be welcoming a graduate of the **OSCE Academy in Bishkek** as part of our ongoing cooperation.

Thank you for attention.

ANNEX I

Mandate of the OSCE PA Special Representative on Central Asia

- Encourage active participation by parliamentarians from Central Asian OSCE participating States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and Mongolia in the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to strengthen parliamentarism in the region;
- Liaise and support the work of the OSCE field missions in the region, as well as relevant OSCE institutions, international and regional organizations and diplomatic missions;
- Encourage closer contacts between the parliaments in the region to promote greater intra-regional cooperation in all three OSCE dimensions;
- Report to the President of the Assembly on developments in the region, including opportunities for enhanced parliamentary dialogue and further inter-parliamentary co-operation among the Central Asian OSCE participating States and Mongolia.

ANNEX II

Overview of Past Activities (8 December 2020-30 June 2021)

- 17 December (Vienna) – Meeting with representatives of Permanent Missions to the OSCE:
 - Kazakhstan: Ambassador Kairat UMAROV
 - Kyrgyz Republic: Ambassador Bakyt DZHUSUPOV
 - Tajikistan: Ambassador Idibek KALANDAR
 - Turkmenistan: Ambassador Silapberdi NURBERDIEV
 - Uzbekistan: Counsellor Kodirjon MUKHAMMADIEV
- January: Head of the OSCE PA Delegation to the Special Limited Election Observation Mission (SLEOM) to the Kyrgyz Republic, 10 January 2021 Early Presidential Election
- 10 January (Bishkek) – Visit to the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek and meeting with the Head of the Programme Office Amb. Pierre VON ARX
- 13 January (Vienna) – Meeting with the Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the OSCE Amb. Battungalag GANKHUURAI
- 15 January (online): Meeting with the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre’s Central Asian Desk
- 24 February (Vienna): Report to the Standing Committee, 20th OSCE PA Winter Meeting
- May (Vienna) – Meeting with representatives of Permanent Missions to the OSCE:
 - Kazakhstan: Ambassador Kairat UMAROV (5 May)
 - Kyrgyz Republic: Ambassador Bakyt DZHUSUPOV (5 May)
 - Tajikistan: Ambassador Idibek KALANDAR (19 May)
 - Uzbekistan: Ambassador Abat FAYZULLAEV (20 May)
- 18 May 2021 (online) – Briefing for the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism on the prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families,
 - Mr. Kairat Sarzhanov, Director of the International Security Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
 - Mr. Bauyrzhan Bakirov, Deputy Chair of the Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
 - Ms. Yulia Ovechkina, Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Protection of Children’s Rights at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
 - Ms. Bibigul Munaitpasova, Head of the Department of the Committee of the Penitentiary System at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- 4 June 2021 (online) – Participation in the meeting of the International Council under the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- 22-25 June 2021 (Bukhara): Visit to Uzbekistan
 - Presentation on “Peace, Justice and Inclusive Institutions – The Work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly” at the International Forum on ***“Interparliamentary Global Cooperation in the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals”***.
 - Bilateral meetings with Mr. Ravshanbek Alimov, Acting Head of the Delegation on Uzbekistan to the OSCE PA and Chairman of the Committee on International Relations, Foreign Economic Relations, Foreign Investments and Tourism of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan; Ms. Dilorom Fayzieva, Member of the Delegation on Uzbekistan to the OSCE PA, Chair of the Committee on International Affairs and Inter-parliamentary Relations; Mr. Sodiq Safoev, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan; and Mr. Mathieu Lemoine, Acting OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan.