



OSCE PA – COVID COMPACT

READAPTING THE OSCE PA TO CHALLENGES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

REPORT BY SECRETARY GENERAL ROBERTO MONTELLA

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1. Impact of COVID-19 and immediate OSCE PA response

Since the very outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Secretariat has been closely monitoring the situation, with the two-fold aim of ensuring the safety and well-being of all staff as well as the continuity of our key mandated operations. This has been conducted in close coordination and consultation with the authorities of our two host countries, Denmark and Austria, as well as with the OSCE executive structures, and in particular their COVID-19 task force then replaced by the OSCE Crisis Management Team.

As of 12 March, both the Copenhagen Headquarters and the Vienna Liaison Office have been temporarily closed and all staff switched to teleworking modality from home, which proved successful and is granting full business continuity to our work. To strengthen our telecommuting capabilities, we have also purchased the WEBEX Software, a professional online platform for business meetings. This has, for instance, ensured effective Bureau and staff videoconferences. Further software, including with language interpretation options, are currently under consideration.

The ongoing spread of the pandemic has forced us to progressively postpone or cancel almost all our planned activities at least until the summer. This included the cancellation of our main 2020 event, the PA Annual Session in Vancouver, as announced in a joint communique by our President and the Head of the Canadian Delegation¹. With the situation rapidly evolving and uncertainty continuing to rule, it is difficult to predict when regular activities will resume. The Secretariat will continue to monitor the situation and hopes to reschedule in the Autumn some of the activities initially planned for the Spring. Instead, the PA Autumn Meeting in San Marino has been unfortunately already called off.

Unfortunately, a heavy global recession with massive effects on the OSCE region has to be expected. The PA stands ready to lend a contribution to addressing the economic hardship which will principally affect the most vulnerable segments of society. Therefore, together with our Treasurer, we have decided to embody the foreseeable combination of economic recession and subsequent austerity policies by Governments and Parliaments by requesting no increases to the 2020/2021 PA budget and additionally using savings of the current 2019/2020 budget as discount for States' contributions.

¹ <https://www.oscepa.org/meetings/annual-sessions/upcoming-annual-session>

2. Readapting: why? Relevance of the OSCE PA

In light of the pandemic outbreak and of the above-mentioned disruption of the regular PA activities, we have deemed important to reconsider our priorities and understand how an international parliamentary platform for more than 320 Parliamentarians from 57 participating States representing more than one billion citizens could contribute to addressing the current unprecedented challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than a health emergency: it will negatively impact on the security of our societies and citizens, which are at the core of the OSCE's focus. Moreover, the foreseeable severe economic recession and growing social discontent will also impact political systems with a prevailing climate of uncertainty affecting domestic policy as well as international relations.

Against this backdrop, international cooperation and coordination at all levels, including the parliamentary one, are a key asset. Global problems require global responses. However, as we are already witnessing, there is a high risk of entering into blame games and mistrust leading to a period of even deeper divisions and a general failure to cooperate. International Organizations are instrumental to keep multilateralism alive and effective, promoting a sense of solidarity, responsibility and joint ownership of efforts among States.

Moreover, in the current context, Parliaments are being significantly marginalized in some countries and democracy and rule of law have seldom been under the severe stress of executive measures. It is key for Parliaments to remain part of the decision-making process, to provide effective oversight and to ensure that the necessary discussions do not destroy the cohesion within societies. Their role is also instrumental in allocating extraordinary emergency budgets and in ensuring that citizens' necessities are well represented, especially during hardship periods. In this regard, the OSCE PA has issued together with the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe (PACE) and of NATO (NATO PA) a *Joint Declaration on the Role of Parliaments in times of Pandemic*².

3. Readapting: how? A New Strategy for Parliamentary Diplomacy

Acknowledging the eagerness of the OSCE PA Members to provide a tangible contribution to the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic by leveraging on the main parliamentary assets, the International Secretariat produced a Non-Paper in March listing a set of possible ideas for action, which was sent to the Bureau and to the Standing Committee for inputs. After careful internal review and feedbacks received, we are considering readapting the work of the Assembly around **three main pillars**: a) continuation of the political dialogue through new formats; b) increase of public messaging; c) exchange of information, best practices and aid requests.

² <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2020/joint-statement-on-the-role-of-parliaments-in-a-time-of-pandemic>

a) Political Dialogue

In the light of the cancellation of the Annual Session and of other activities, Members emphasized the need to maintain the political parliamentary debate alive. While official meetings, taking into consideration logistical and procedural constraints, have to be postponed, the Secretariat is launching a cycle of *Parliamentary Web Dialogues* on the effects and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in areas of particular focus and priority for the Assembly, such as the political and security dimension, the economic dimension and human rights, as well as migration and countering terrorism. The Parliamentary Dialogues are online meetings on the model of a webinar, though giving the opportunity to Members to actively engage, as an alternative to normal committee meetings. They will be organized by the relevant General and ad hoc Committees, and a final report will be produced, outlining key findings and eventual recommendations. While the first webinar, on *the economic fallout of the pandemic*, has already taken place on 22 April, we are calendarizing a number of dialogues for the next months, considering topics in accordance to evolving priorities. The list of upcoming events is available on our website. Our Special Representatives will also be invited to actively contribute, as we do not intend to renounce to their precious inputs during this period.

The focus of the web discussions on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic does not intend to replace, but rather to complement, the continuous attention of our Members on usual topics of PA work, including conflicts, human rights, etc. On conflicts, the PA has fully endorsed the United Nations Secretary General's appeal for a global ceasefire³.

Furthermore, the PA Bureau will continue to meet regularly – in an informal fashion in addition to its official meeting - to provide general guidelines and leadership to the whole Assembly, both on political and procedural issues. We also intend to continue the practice of inviting relevant guests, asking them for some thought provoking inputs to trigger effective debates. We already hosted Attilio Fontana, Governor of Lombardy – the most COVID-affected region of Europe, and Vincenzo Amendola, Minister for European Affairs of Italy. Moreover, the Bureau meeting of 27 April was officially addressed by Edi Rama, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Albanian Prime Minister, and Janez Lenarcic, EU Commissioner for Crisis Management. Several other high-level speakers will introduce discussions in the upcoming parliamentary web dialogues.

b) Public messaging and media

The Secretariat and its Media Department will continue to work hard to give voice to our Members on important topics of concern during these challenging times. In addition to usual press releases and statements by our leadership on critical events in the OSCE area, we are seeking to promote op-eds by Parliamentarians on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the region and its citizens, from different angles and perspectives of society. For instance, some of the articles already published touch upon topics such as the role of Parliaments in emergency circumstances, the future of multilateralism, the impact of the pandemic on migrants and refugees, data protection, human rights in conflict affected areas, the economic

³ <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2020/osce-parliamentarians-endorse-un-sg-s-global-ceasefire-call-discuss-european-response-to-covid-19-pandemic-and-plan-pa-activities>

consequences of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, the increase in domestic violence, and many others. Other tools for public messaging, including video interviews or the registration of podcasts, can be further explored.

We also intend to use our social media platforms to broadcast the previously mentioned parliamentary web dialogues to the wider public. Furthermore, we have also launched the #WeAreOSCEPA campaign on social media inviting Parliamentarians to send messages of support to their constituents and people of the OSCE area. Finally, we integrated in the OSCE PA website a live section, which will constantly be updated, on COVID-19 and our related work.

c) Exchange of information, best practices and aid requests

One of the greatest assets of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is its network and its capacity to connect authorities and legislators – and ultimately the 1 billion people - of 57 participating States. The International Secretariat has already started to prepare and regularly update an overview of the main measures taken by OSCE participating States in response to the pandemic. In this regard, a master table and several infographics are available on our website and are regularly sent out to Members, tentatively once per week. Hopefully, they can serve as an exchange of best practices, together with the informal communication channels we have opened among the Bureau and the Standing Committee, where our Members are tirelessly sharing experiences from their countries.

Collecting information and successful experiences from all over the OSCE region can enable Members of Parliament to make more informed decisions, replicate positive measures, and facilitate the sharing of vital information to the people they represent in their constituencies. This is a great value of the PA's unique infrastructure, as it allows a swift two-way linkage between the international and the local levels of decision making.

The analytical exercise from the Secretariat could expand in the future and address specific areas more in detail, as for instance new procedures being implemented by Parliaments, such as remote voting, consultation processes, social distancing options. Current circumstances will almost certainly also have a significant impact on how elections are run; as countries adapt their procedures for campaigning and voting to accommodate social distancing, the Secretariat's Election Department will of course continue to study developments and adapt our work accordingly. The Department is also analyzing ways to ensure effective election observation should elections take place in the coming months but with significant restrictions to the deployment of a fully-fledged EOM.

The PA network is proving useful also in terms of facilitating cross-border requests for aid. For instance, the call for urgent delivery of medical equipment by Lombardy's President during the informal Bureau Meeting on 25 March activated a series of contacts between our Members, the Secretariat and Kazakh authorities and led, in very short time, to the delivery of the needed equipment from a Pharmaceutical company in Kazakhstan to Lombardy. Our Members are very active both through official and informal channels in this regard, and such a capacity could be further boosted as a way to facilitate concrete help to citizens in need.

4. Cooperation

Especially in a period of crisis it is key for international organizations to cooperate closely, avoiding duplication and investing in each other's added values. In fact, it is the international community as a whole – of which the OSCE PA is part – that must prove that only effective multilateralism will bring about concrete solutions to the current pandemic. For our Assembly, there are two main avenues of external cooperation.

The first is within the OSCE family, as it is key for us to lend the parliamentary perspective to the organization as a whole, and make its action stronger and wider. Cooperation with OSCE executive structures continues to be excellent and is conducted throughout regular contacts and close coordination at all working levels. In this regard, the OSCE family, composed of the 2020 Albanian Chairmanship, the Secretariat, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) and the Parliamentary Assembly issued on 23 April, ahead of the *International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace*, a joint statement on the "*Comprehensive security approach needed for global response to COVID-19*"⁴, positioning the Organization and its unique toolbox to play a role in facilitating international cooperation to address the pandemic.

The second avenue of cooperation is with partner parliamentary organizations, such as the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe (PACE) and of NATO (NATO PA), with which we already enjoy an excellent cooperation, for instance, on election observation activities. We have increased coordination meetings with the aim to learn some best practices from each other especially on how to best support international parliamentary activities in times of telecommuting. In this regard, we are sharing ideas and information on the organization of online meetings and other work. We have also strengthened our coordination on common messages, such as, for instance, the joint appeal by the PACE and OSCE PA migration committees urging states to relocate unaccompanied minors.

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In conclusion, the main aim of the OSCE PA in these challenging times of pandemic is to feed and give lifeblood to multilateral cooperation leveraging on the unique and distinct assets of parliamentary diplomacy. In particular, ensuring that the main parliamentary legislative, oversight and representation functions are concerted and amplified at a wider international level, leading to coordinated and joint decisions for the benefit of all our citizens, equally affected by a virus that does not distinguish between race, ethnicity, religion or administrative borders. Finally, I take this opportunity to thank our Members for their precious support and active engagement, as well as for the excellent interaction we enjoy almost on a daily basis, in various formats. Together with the indispensable contribution of our staff, we are managing to keep our Assembly alive and relevant despite social distancing, and this is a great success. We will spare no efforts to ensure this continues in the difficult months ahead of us.

⁴ <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2020/comprehensive-security-approach-needed-for-global-response-to-covid-19-osce-leaders-say>