



**OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President
George Tsereteli (MP, Georgia)**

Winter Meeting opening remarks

**Vienna
21 February 2019**

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Mr. President,
Minister
Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow parliamentarians,
Ambassadors,
Distinguished guests,

It is my great pleasure to see you in Vienna for the 18th Winter Meeting of our Parliamentary Assembly.

Every year since 2002, this gathering at the headquarters of the OSCE has provided us the opportunity to hear from OSCE experts and officials, to interact with ambassadors and delegations from our home countries, and to set our sights on our Annual Session in July.

Let me first express my gratitude to President Sobotka and the Austrian Parliament for their long-lasting support and commitment to parliamentary democracy.

My thanks also go to Secretary General Greminger for the OSCE's hospitality this week and for continuing to spare no effort to promote close and constructive co-operation with our Assembly.

I am delighted to also see the Chairperson-in-Office among us today and look forward to his remarks and the possibility for our Members to engage in a question and answer session.

This direct interaction with parliamentarians by the head of the governmental side of the OSCE is an important strength of our organization and demonstration of transparency.

Dear colleagues,

We meet today as tensions have reached new levels all across the OSCE region.

For the sixth consecutive year, our conversations will be dominated by the news of violence in eastern Ukraine. Not only that, but we have seen with the incident in the Sea of Azov last November how fragile security is in the wider Black Sea region.

During the past week the SMM has witnessed a 37 per cent increase in cease fire violations and lost a long range UAV in non-government controlled areas of Luhansk region.

In the South Caucasus, we continue to hear heart-wrenching stories of separated families and inaccessible ancestral homelands.

While a high-level commitment to intensify negotiations and reduce tensions renews the hope to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I can only deplore the lack of progress in Georgia, where our citizens continue to live in fear of being kidnapped at any moment for venturing near the administrative boundary line and also suffer a continuing practice of illegal borderization.

But we have also witnessed some positive developments which deserve to be recognized as such. The resolution of the longstanding name dispute between Skopje and Athens is a crucial step for the South East European region and should serve as a template to further advance regional co-operation.

The Transdniestrian settlement process has also marked tangible progress and should be looked at as a template to advance the resolution of other protracted conflicts in the OSCE region. We must build on these successful examples of international diplomacy, redouble our efforts, and complement our respective added values in good.

There is a palpable climate of dissatisfaction for a wide range of our populations: the Yellow Vest protests in France have captured our attention for several months now, as have demonstrations in Belgrade, Budapest and most recently in Tirana.

These set of domestic challenges should not come at the expense of important democratic reforms, including in the electoral and the judicial spheres, nor serve to distract from strategic foreign policy priorities.

In the shadow of Brexit, half of our countries will lay these concerns bare in European elections. In Moldova this weekend, in Ukraine and in North Macedonia crucial elections with various geopolitical implications are also taking place this spring.

The refugee and migrant crisis that has been at the heart of European concerns for several years is now at the center of political debates in the United States.

With uncertainty characterizing our political landscape, we are faced with even more uncertain times ahead. This was made evidently clear at the Munich Security Conference earlier this week which also exposed how international order is under constant threat.

Old alliances have been undermined by verbal clashes, and treaties at the foundation of the post-Cold War order have crumbled.

We should anticipate greater tensions and possible arms races that could escalate following the collapse of the INF treaty.

For example, we must be prepared for problems that could emerge with Brexit and the complicated situation around the Irish border. We should be mindful of the impacts that lay ahead with climate change. We must respond proactively to rollbacks of human rights standards by governments across the OSCE area.

The scope of these joint challenges demonstrates the need for greater transatlantic and pan-European co-operation and it is precisely in this spirit that I recently visited Washington. Multilateralism is a crucially important tool in assisting us meet our commitments and enable the next generations to inherit a better world.

A noted political commentator once said: “the most important four words in politics are: ‘up to a point’.”

So we must ask ourselves: up to what point will we allow our commitments to go unfulfilled? Up to what point can we renege on our promises? At what point will the people we serve no longer tolerate broken promises or the unfulfilled dreams of the post-Cold War period?

Our people don't ask much from us and demand very basic expectations. Above all, they want a job, a safe environment where to live, a decent education for their children and health. Their demands are more than legitimate. Now more than ever, their voice reminds us that it is time to ensure decisive actions.

So let's work together and use the instruments already at our disposal.

I listened with great interest last month when Foreign Minister Lajcak outlined the Slovak Chairmanship's priorities for 2019.

Preventing, mediating and mitigating conflict with a special focus on the people it affects; empowering women and youth in contributing to peace and security efforts, adapting the OSCE to new threats; and recommitting to multilateralism.

It is clear that there is much overlap between these priorities and what has been the OSCE PA's agenda for several years.

I recall in particular one sentence from Minister Lajcak's opening statement: "Slovakia will dedicate its Chairmanship to bringing the OSCE closer to the people it is working for."

Parliamentarians are ideally suited to reinforce that special link between our Organization and the people that should most benefit from it and I am confident that the governmental branch of the OSCE appreciates this valuable avenue.

It is a good sign that the Italian and Slovak Chairmanships have offered me, in my capacity as President of the OSCE PA, the opportunity to address the Permanent Council twice per year. These are valuable opportunities to take stock of our cooperation but also to advance criticism whenever appropriate.

Working in close coordination with the Chairmanship, the Secretariat and the OSCE Institutions, we must continue to push our countries and governments to achieve some tangible progress in putting an end to the crisis in and around Ukraine, protecting journalists, enabling the contributions of civil society, and promoting the participation of more women, youth, and citizens who are underrepresented.

Looking around this room, I see strong national voices and leaders recognized abroad. We have among us several speakers of parliament, a

number of former government ministers, and numerous politicians likely to be called to fulfill higher duties in the future.

With such expertise and wealth of experience on hand for the OSCE, our ambitions are realistic.

Today we have close to 300 Members of Parliament from 54 participating States and four Partners for Co-operation present.

Such numbers are a testament not only to the importance we all give to the OSCE, but also to our collective desire to work together on issues that affect us all.

I look forward to engaging and constructive deliberations here in Vienna this week.

Yesterday already, our Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism met to plan the next steps in its active work. The Ad Hoc Committee on Migration will also gather today.

Our economic and environmental committee will debate a timely issue with "Good governance in the area of fighting corruption, money laundering and the financing of terrorism in the OSCE region."

The fight against corruption is an area where much progress can be done within the framework of multilateral co-operation. I am glad that we will also hear from the OSCE Special Representative on Combating Corruption on this issue tomorrow.

In our human dimension committee, I expect an engaging conversation on "The Scope of Legitimate Restrictions on Human Rights in Times of Emergency".

With protracted and open conflicts in the OSCE area, and in the context of renewed terrorist threats, it will be interesting to discuss how to find the right balance between public safety and the safeguard of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Finally, our political affairs and security committee meeting will be the opportunity to discuss the tools and mechanisms of the OSCE to resolve "protracted conflicts" and hear what parliamentarians can bring to the table to complement these efforts.

Throughout these debates, I invite you to engage actively with our guest speakers who are leading OSCE efforts in Vienna, Warsaw, The Hague and in the field.

We should continue to be open and further seek cooperation with outside partners. I was glad to see that yesterday's meeting of the Silk Road Support Group included lively discussions with Austrian counterparts to encourage economic co-operation.

Your suggestions and constructive criticism is always welcome. After all, we should seize on your political influence to encourage greater political dialogue about the work of the OSCE, with the aim of strengthening our Organization.

From our side, we will also continue to conceptualize and implement reforms.

I am pleased that we have already endorsed at the Standing Committee some fundamentally important electoral related reforms which will further strengthen the prestige and credibility of this Assembly in the field of election observation.

Let us also use our debates here in Vienna to nourish our conversations in our home countries.

Let us continue to engage with our national parliaments and build on their oversight functions to push for the implementation of key OSCE commitments. With the same intentions we are launching new follow-up mechanisms to support this process.

It is only walking hand-in-hand and in the same direction that we can climb up and achieve concrete progress for our citizens. In this sense, as the President of this distinguished Assembly, allow me to conclude by saying that I am very proud with the spirit of collegiality that our Assembly is capable of displaying notwithstanding the challenging times upon us.

I wish you much success over the next two days. I would now like to give the floor to Minister Lajcak.

Thank you.