



OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President George Tsereteli (MP, Georgia)

Opening Address

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw | 16 September 2019

Check against delivery.

Minister Lajcak,
Minister Czaputowicz,
President Walesa,
Secretary General Greminger,
Director Gisladottir,
Dear Ambassador Zannier,
Dear Mr. Désir,
Distinguished guests,

It is a pleasure for me to be here to speak on behalf of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly today.

It is of course with regret that more than four decades after the Helsinki Final Act, the struggle to respect and promote human rights and human security continues to be such a challenge. I think that if we're honest, we would have to admit that the past decade has represented a downward trend.

This requires increased dedication and focus by all of us in this room.

Let me echo previous speakers in thanking the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Slovak Chairmanship of the OSCE for organizing this very important annual event, in spite of continued disagreements in Vienna regarding this meeting.

The consensus rule – which embodies the inclusiveness of our Organization – has been the basis of the OSCE’s strength.

We cannot allow it to become its weakness.

Consensus should not stand in the way of strong, principled decisions.

We know that participation by civil society in OSCE meetings has been the subject of much discussion in recent years.

This has also been the case within the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

At our flagship Annual Session in Luxembourg, we have addressed this square-on.

We have called on participating states to “allow the Chair-in-Office, in consultation with (...) the Troika as well as relevant OSCE institutions, the discretion to rule on the validity of claims by representatives of participating States that an individual or non-governmental organization seeking to participate in an official OSCE event “resorts to the use of violence or publicly condones terrorism or the use of violence”.

We need to encourage greater civil society engagement in all OSCE activities.

For the OSCE PA, this has for example meant facilitating side events during our regular meetings, in addition to regular consultations when we travel to different countries and observe elections.

These have often been inspiring opportunities to instill some grassroots energy in our work.

The monitoring and reporting conducted by civil society organizations, experts and activists is key to ensuring the fullest compliance with the principles and provisions of the OSCE.

We must do as much as we can to engage directly with civil society, not stifle their voices.

As Chairman-in-Office Lajcak underlined earlier this year, “dialogue, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity and human rights are not just good for humanity, but can also act as key drivers of peace.”

Dialogue is indeed key to achieve a culture of lasting peace, and we must encourage this dialogue to take place.

While the OSCE PA has long acknowledged the need for stronger engagement with civil society, we have ourselves not always followed through on making this engagement sustained and effective.

To remedy this, as a new initiative I have asked Ms. Pia Kauma, an experienced Member of Parliament from Finland, to serve as Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement and work to identify concrete ways to enhance our co-operation to advance OSCE values for the benefit of the people we serve.

Our Luxembourg Declaration for instance urges OSCE participating States to “open sessions of the Permanent Council to public observation” including through live streaming on the Internet.

We are convinced that such efforts will not only contribute to hold participating States accountable for their policies, but will also demonstrate the continued relevance of multilateral engagement on human rights topics.

Of course, more public interaction with NGOs will inevitably include criticism of certain OSCE countries.

But we need to bear in mind that, much like the demonstrations and protests we can observe throughout the OSCE area, these are not foreign plots or attempts to undermine a government.

Above all, these protests represent our failure to be responsive to the concerns, needs and aspirations of our people.

Because many countries of the OSCE region remain far from fully implementing our human dimension commitments, we need to encourage an open dialogue on controversial issues and between opposing voices.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The human dimension is a central part of our work in the OSCE PA, and the Assembly is proud to be able to offer a robust contribution at this meeting.

To strengthen our work here at the HDIM and our overall engagement with civil society, the Chair of the OSCE PA’s human rights committee will tomorrow be hosting a side event to open a dialogue on OSCE PA priorities and work.

This stronger engagement here in Warsaw has been reflected on the field and in our discussions over the past twelve months.

Our human rights committee has been extremely active, working to shed light on the dire humanitarian consequences of the conflict in Ukraine.

Our parliamentary field visits have been instrumental to relay the urgent need for a sustained ceasefire and increased demining activities in eastern Ukraine to put an end to the suffering of innocent civilians.

We must continue to pursue the implementation of specific measures to facilitate freedom of movement along the contact line for civilians, and encourage humanitarian gestures of goodwill, such as prisoner exchanges, in order to enhance the prospects for a political solution to the conflict.

Of course Ukraine is not the only OSCE country in which populations are suffering under conflict and occupation.

You will all also be familiar with the situation in my home country of Georgia, where so-called 'borderization' and discrimination by the occupiers makes daily life more and more difficult for a large part of Georgia's population. In recognition of such challenges in several countries, the OSCE PA recently called for a particular focus on the human rights of people in and affected by conflict areas and occupied territories.

Our Ad Hoc Committees on Countering Terrorism and on Migration have continued to be active by conducting field visits, reaching out to international partners, and raising vital issues in national parliaments.

This has contributed to replicate best practices and develop sound policies both for the short- and long-term.

For instance, our Members have dedicated time to better understand the policy implications of minors returning from foreign conflict zones.

This sensitive issue requires a broad, multi-disciplinary approach – involving state authorities, health professionals, social services and national education authorities – to ensure that children's traumatic experiences do not impact their future, nor ours.

Drawing on France's experience, the Chair of our counter-terrorism committee pressed to hold a substantive debate on this question in his home country and defend the idea that children, no matter how and where they were brought up, are not a danger to society.

This has led the Government of Norway to alter its policy and deploy efforts to bring children back from Syria and Iraq and work to reintegrate them in Norwegian society.

Like this example shows, we need to be proactive in encouraging our governments to tackle this issue head on to prevent innocent children from becoming radicalized adults.

The refugee and migrant crisis continues to occupy a prominent place on the international agenda and the work of the OSCE PA.

This is not a tragedy limited to the Mediterranean.

As we have seen on the other side of the Atlantic, every single one of our countries is affected in one way or another.

This compels all of us – NGOs, politicians, and administrations – to work together to protect the rights of migrants and refugees and prevent the hardships that force people to flee their homes.

As the OSCE PA stressed in our Luxembourg Declaration, we must ensure that every effort is made to reunite children with their parents or family members.

Distinguished guests,

OSCE parliamentarians have continued to actively observe elections throughout our region to promote effective institutions.

We continue to enjoy ever-closer relations with our partners from the ODIHR – both at a leadership and staff level.

The proliferation of unprofessional and biased election monitoring, often promoted by host governments and national parliaments, has in recent years had the unfortunate consequence of undermining public trust in election observation overall.

We have continued to work hand-in-hand with Director Gísladóttir and her team – as well as with our traditional partners in the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly – to enhance the high value of the OSCE’s election observation activities.

Our Organization possesses this unique asset recognized throughout the world. We must do all that we can to safeguard it.

With that said, our practices are not immune to some criticism, and we have remained open to suggestions.

In the past year, I am proud that the OSCE PA reviewed its election observation practices to preserve the overall credibility of this exercise.

Dear friends,

In times of increased polarization in our societies and our political discourse, we have seen more aggressive verbal attacks against activists and politicians online and in the real world, sometimes with tragic implications.

A fully functioning democracy requires that politicians, officials and activists be able to work without fear for their lives, nor fear of being imprisoned for their beliefs.

Attacks on politicians or civil society representatives are nothing less than an attack on democracy. This is why it is so important that any political attack be investigated thoroughly, independently, and transparently.

The investigation into the murder of Boris Nemtsov four years ago has left many questions unanswered.

Based on a call by our Assembly and Russian civil society representatives, I tasked Vice-President Margareta Cederfelt to carry out a report on the investigation.

I believe it is important that we continue to raise this issue, not only for the memory of Boris Nemtsov and for his loved ones, but also to further guarantee the safety of politicians, lawmakers, and all those fighting daily to promote democracy and the rule of law.

Everybody in this room will also recognize the need to protect those fighting against corruption. This is a scourge impacting all of our societies that undermines everything we try to achieve.

In order to contribute to anti-corruption efforts and to consider how to protect those who are involved in this vital pursuit, I'm pleased to have recently appointed Ms. Irene Charalambides from Cyprus to lead OSCE PA contributions as my Special Representative.

The difficult situation of journalists has also been a focus for OSCE parliamentarians.

Noting the particular sensitivity of attacks against journalists, the OSCE PA recently called for effective parliamentary oversight of government actions on all cases of journalists' murders, their imprisonment or ill treatment.

Of course this is only one aspect of the challenges facing journalists. We have seen in many countries a narrowing space for critical opinions in the media. Even when done under the cover of technically legal actions, this stifling of freedom of expression is an unacceptable trend that requires dedicated attention.

I would like to underline the excellent work conducted by OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in countering these challenges.

The search for truth also compels us to counter the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda that continues to pollute the media environment, polarize politics, and erode public confidence.

To complement the work of Harlem Désir in this particular challenge, I appointed last month Luca Santolini from San Marino as Special Rapporteur on this issue so that we can also identify more synergies in this field.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the next dozen days, I expect many creative ideas and best practices to be presented here.

I sincerely encourage all participants to seize this unique opportunity to learn from one another and take a deeper look at oneself.

This forum should be seen as an opportunity for discussion and self-reflection, rather than an arena for finger-pointing and self-justifications.

But, of course, honest discussions and debates need a practical follow-up.

We need political will to put all these ideas into practice.

With this in mind, "The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly looks forward to working with all our partners around this table today to promote accountability and advance human security for all across the OSCE area."

I wish you all a successful session.

Thank you.