



**The Foundations of Parliamentary Oversight:  
Ensuring Accountability in Democratic Societies**

**George Tsereteli  
President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly**

**Keynote address**

International Seminar on Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight in the Kyrgyz Republic -  
Session I – Defining the Foundations of Effective Oversight  
*(Bishkek, 27 September 2019)*

Check against delivery

Chairman Dzhumabekov,  
Your Excellencies,  
Fellow parliamentarians,  
Distinguished experts,

Let me first thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the United Nations Development Programme, the Supreme Council of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Legal Clinic “Adilet”, and our friends from ODIHR for organizing this very important seminar.

I am glad to be back here today in the Kyrgyz Republic and to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on how to ensure effective parliamentary oversight as this is a topic to which the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly attaches great importance.

I am glad to see that although this event focuses on strengthening oversight in the Kyrgyz Republic, members of parliament from a number of other countries in Central Asia and beyond are also represented. We can all benefit from reinforced inter-parliamentary cooperation and exchange of best practices in this area.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before we begin to explore the foundations of effective oversight, I would like to offer here some remarks that will help frame our discussion.

Let me first point out an inherent contradiction in our parliamentary oversight work.

Oversight is intended to strengthen trust in our institutions.

At the same time, the practice of oversight will often uncover wrongdoing within these institutions. I suspect that all of us in this room can recall a situation in which public attention to misconduct in a government or parliamentary institution has weakened confidence.

But such situations must strengthen our resolve for robust processes, to ensure that while trust may falter for those holding office now, the public trust in institutions will remain strong and grow.

This is further complicated by the fact that parliamentary oversight is a fundamentally political process.

Even if oversight is embedded in law, the political will to drive the process forward remains a key requirement for effective implementation. Finding the political will to hold governments to account can be hard to find – especially if they are your political friends.

It is often said that parliament serves three core tasks: lawmaking, representation, and oversight.

Firstly: we pass laws to implement the policies we believe will improve the lives of our fellow citizens.

Second: we represent our constituents to ensure that all citizens can have a voice at the table of parliament.

Taking into account the critical importance of these two roles, it is not surprising that the third role, oversight, is sometimes deprioritized in parliamentarians' activities.

We are all busy, with multiple demands on our time. Robust efforts at holding institutions accountable are unlikely to yield political friends, and the benefits of this work are usually hard to identify and may only take effect years later.

But prioritizing oversight may nonetheless be the most important long-term contribution that a parliamentarian can make to democracy and good governance in their country.

Oversight powers and effectiveness are part of a never-ending dynamic requiring constant attention by parliamentarians if we are to maintain this vital activity of holding governments to account.

Parliament is the steady hand that makes sure that state actions are efficient and that they respond to the needs of the public. It cannot be the rubber stamp of the executive.

For example, we have seen the Westminster parliament reasserting itself in the United Kingdom in an effort to take back control of Brexit from the government.

I hope that we can further discuss some of the political pre-conditions for effective oversight in this session, in addition to the necessary legal, procedural and financial foundations.

We should also bear in mind the problems parliamentarians face related to access to information and also that some sensitive topics, such as investigating corruption issues, may even require providing security to parliamentarians who are conducting their legitimate oversight work.

\*\*\*

I speak to you today both as the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and a Member of the Georgian Parliament.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to promote the excellent work of our Organization, of the ODIHR, and of our Parliamentary Assembly, in supporting participating States to follow through on their OSCE commitments.

Every year, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopts a Final Declaration at its Annual Session, which often will include recommendations on how to improve parliamentary oversight in a number of areas.

At our Annual Session this past July in Luxembourg, we emphasized that the primary role for the oversight of States' adherence to their commitments lies with their national parliaments.

We urged parliaments of OSCE participating States to exercise full oversight of any limitations on fundamental freedoms and human rights in cases of states of emergency and to regularly evaluate whether such measures may be considered legitimate.

I am also proud that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has been at the forefront of efforts to promote discussions relevant to the governance and reform of the security sector. This includes implementation of the OSCE's Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has specifically called for the sharing of best practices in the area of oversight of private military and security companies – an area which has rapidly expanded since the start of the 1990s.

Most recently in Luxembourg we underlined that States have an obligation to ensure that private military and security companies operating in or from their territory act in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law.

The OSCE PA has therefore urged parliaments to draw up legislation that efficiently regulates the activities of such companies. We need to strengthen parliamentary powers on matters relating to the privatization of security services, and democratic control and the regulation of the private security industry.

This is also a priority of Slovakia's Chairmanship of the OSCE this year. By working hand in hand with the executive structures I have good hope that we can this year take further tangible steps towards developing a common understanding of parliamentary oversight in this area.

Over the years we have also called for strengthening parliamentary oversight in the fields of combating crime and corruption. This is based on our recognition of the threat which corruption poses to security, democratic governance and the rule of law, as well as social and economic development.

In an important resolution on the role of national parliaments in preventing and combating corruption in the OSCE area, the OSCE PA recently highlighted the failure of political, economic and judicial systems to provide robust and independent oversight and accountability as a root cause of corruption.

To lead our work in this field, in July I appointed a Special Representative on Fighting Corruption. The PA thus aims to reinforce the activities of the OSCE in this field.

The fight against corruption calls not only for parliamentary oversight of the executive and judiciary branches but also for members of parliament to adhere to strict transparency and accountability standards themselves.

The OSCE PA has therefore reiterated a call for the adoption of binding codes of conduct for members of parliament.

Indeed, as members of parliament we should lead by example and adhere to the same strict standards which we demand of members of government.

Within the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly we require that participants in our election observation missions abide by a strict Code of Conduct and declare any potential conflicts of interest.

\*\*\*

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

As mentioned, I also stand here today as a Member of the Georgian Parliament.

I must therefore also highlight here the central role that national parliaments and MPs must play in modern democratic societies to hold governments to account on behalf of the people.

As a matter of fact, as an elected representative of the people, my highest obligation should be to remain accountable to my fellow citizens.

After all, they are the ones who choose whether or not I should continue to represent them when they go to the ballot box.

I have been a member of the Parliament of Georgia for close to twenty years now and can personally attest to the incredible transformation that has taken place in this country. This has meant overhauling our political system, liberalizing the economy, and opening to the world as well as enhancing the role of parliament and its oversight functions.

Indeed, the newly adopted Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Georgia provides the parliament with greater powers for oversight, such as summoning a Minister to Sector Committee hearings, instituting the ‘Minister hour’ and ‘interpellation’ functions, and providing more possibilities for ‘committee inquiry’ mechanisms.

I have argued strongly in my home country that our government members must make themselves available to all relevant committee hearings, political faction meetings, and not only appear for strictly regulated parliamentary plenary sessions. Rules should be a basis for, but not limitation on, oversight.

\*\*\*

At the same time, we must be realistic about the diversity of political systems within the OSCE area and the varying degrees of effectiveness of oversight mechanisms in place.

In the Charter of Paris for a New Europe adopted in 1990 and subsequent OSCE documents, all OSCE countries pledged to “build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of their nations.”

Let’s consider for a moment what the OSCE looked like in November 1990, when this commitment was made: the Soviet Union was still months away from collapsing, uprisings were breaking out across the OSCE area, and the German reunification meant bringing an authoritarian communist state under the rule of law.

This was the extent of the challenges facing us twenty-nine years ago.

Overcoming them has required a sustained effort to uphold democratic principles in an increasing number of participating States.

After all, while the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris had 35 signatories, let's also bear in mind that our Organization now counts 57 participating States – or 57 different systems of government with their own peculiarities.

But regardless of these challenges, we see today that our Organization has done tremendous work to consolidate democratic institutions and increase government transparency and accountability in all our countries.

Times are changing, and we now live in the modern era of 'fake news' in which any malicious actor with an internet connection can publicize unverified material.

Under these circumstances it is doubly important for parliaments to be seen as sources for thorough and reliable information.

In the end, our parliaments must ensure that policies are debated and delivered to enhance overall trust in public institutions.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Parliament's work in holding governments to account may be an irritant in the short-term for those in power, but undoubtedly serves the long-term interests of our citizens and public institutions.

To put it simply: oversight improves government.

Before I conclude I would like to stress the need for a vibrant civil society and for effective mechanisms for interaction with civil society as an important precondition for effective oversight. Civil society organizations should not be viewed as a threat but rather as a mechanism for dialogue with the broader population and as a means to ascertain specific areas of concern to citizens. Enhancing parliamentary openness is thus of utmost importance.

I would also like to highlight the symbiotic relationship between freedom of the media and parliamentary oversight. It sometimes requires good journalism to spur parliaments into action. Likewise, journalists often rely on the investigative powers of parliaments to shed light on topics that they are writing about.

Furthermore, I hope that we can agree that, in order to better uphold our democratic commitments, it is vital that we reinforce the representative nature of our national parliaments, so that they reflect the diversity of our societies.

This means including both men and women, minorities and disadvantaged groups, as well as people holding a different political opinion from our majority, all chosen through free and fair elections.

Before I conclude, let me underline that this seminar echoes the regular work of our Parliamentary Assembly, which over the years has established itself as a unique platform for dialogue and the exchange of best practices.

It is my hope that through our continued engagement with all our Members, by listening to every voice, and by considering every perspective, we can continue to foster a spirit of co-operation, which makes it possible to reinforce parliamentary oversight throughout the OSCE region.

Thank you.