



**Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
Joint Session of the Three General Committees
Address by OSCE PA President Peter Lord Bowness
25 February 2021**

As delivered

Mr. President,
Madam Chair,
Madam Secretary General,
Ambassadors,
Fellow parliamentarians,
Distinguished guests,

It is with great pleasure that I note that so many parliamentarians are connected today!

Of course, we would have liked to return to the home of the OSCE in Vienna.

Whilst we all miss being in Vienna and the warmth of the Austrian welcome, we should perhaps take a moment to remember that we are in a position to carry on with our role, and remember the thousands of our citizens who have died, lost loved ones, and who are without jobs as a consequence of COVID-19.

We are able to carry on with our work, albeit in a very different way since

our regular work was upended by COVID-19. We have got quite accustomed to the remote conferences and parliamentary deliberations.

At home, I think in all our parliaments, we have had to deal with emergency legislation, to agree urgent economic relief, and provided much-needed oversight to ensure that our government's responses don't encroach on the rule of law or our fundamental democratic principles.

Over the past year, hundreds of you have joined our webinars and you have contributed to the work of the OSCE.

Three-hundred Members of Parliaments are participating in this first-ever fully virtual Winter Meeting.

All this demonstrates the resilience of our national parliaments, the Assembly itself, and of parliamentary democracy.

I have to tell you, Members, that the resilience will be needed for longer, because it has become quite clear in the last few days that an Annual Session in Bucharest in the usual way is not going to be possible.

Conversations are taking place with the Secretariat of the Romanian Parliament and with our own Secretariat to see exactly what forms the meeting could take, whether in Bucharest or elsewhere.

Of course, we would have been delighted to be in Bucharest in the ordinary way and thank the Romanian Parliament for its invitation, and we look forward to further discussions on this issues.

The pandemic has been a trying time for the OSCE. We have witnessed social unrest and armed conflict.

In several of our participating States, cries for racial justice have laid bare deep-rooted tensions.

Independent media face ever-growing political and financial pressure.

The simmering conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has led to outright war in the autumn.

In Ukraine and in Georgia, there has been no significant progress towards the implementation of existing agreements.

And in Moldova, the pandemic has slowed the headway that had already been achieved in the settlement of the Transdniestrian problem.

All this has prolonged the uncertainty and suffering of civilians trapped in conflict zones.

In the midst of these strains, our Organization suffered through an unprecedented leadership vacuum that crippled our collective security.

Nevertheless, the challenging circumstances of the past year have also demonstrated that the OSCE itself is resilient.

We look forward over the next few days to hosting the OSCE's Chairperson-in Office, Minister Linde, and the new heads of the executive structures, starting today with Secretary General Schmid.

On behalf of OSCE parliamentarians, let me wish this new team every success in this complicated mission.

I am sure that our discussions in this Winter Meeting will showcase our eagerness to work together to advance the goals of building comprehensive security in all dimensions, and in the interest of delivering real results to the citizens of the participating States.

It is my sincere hope that the consensus reached on these nominations at the Ministerial Council will mark the start of an era of renewed international dialogue and co-operation.

And that would fittingly mirror the thirtieth anniversary of the Charter of Paris, which we celebrated last autumn.

I am strongly encouraged, Madam Minister, that Sweden's Chairmanship of the OSCE will champion these fundamental values and principles in 2021.

As I said to the Permanent Council in answer to a question, the Parliamentary Assembly has made it clear over the years that whilst we embrace dialogue, this does not mean shying away from debates or pretending that disagreements which exist do not exist.

After all, debating opposing points of view and holding governments to account is the essence of our work as parliamentarians.

I remain convinced that only principle-based dialogue can guarantee true security in the OSCE region.

We will speak out when core OSCE principles are defiantly trampled.

We will continue to keep every OSCE participating State accountable.

We will voice our concerns when established democracies teeter on the edge of populism.

We will support democratic processes through genuine and inclusive dialogue.

We will call out the harassment, intimidation, or attack of opposition figures.

So, we will denounce the fact that, while Alexey Navalny is arbitrarily imprisoned and his supporters detained, the perpetrators of his assassination attempt are left continue to run free.

In Belarus, we will continue to push for meaningful dialogue between the authorities and the legitimate representatives of the political opposition and civil society.

Following the welcome truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan, we remain ready to deploy our mediation capabilities to advance constructive interparliamentary dialogue between Yerevan and Baku and ensure that there is an enhanced involvement of the OSCE in the search for a sustainable solution to the conflict.

As witnesses to the growing challenge of post-election unrest throughout the region, and despite all the practical impediments to our work, we will continue to deploy observation missions to elections and deliver clear and impartial assessments.

We will continue to help all OSCE participating States strengthen their democratic institutions and live up to the commitments taken by their leaders in Helsinki and in Paris those years ago.

Fortunately, this Assembly can rest on a strong tradition of international co-operation.

Our ad hoc committees on migration and on countering terrorism, which met last week, have brought a particular and distinct parliamentary contribution in trying to answer these major challenges.

Our general committees today and tomorrow will tackle the impact of COVID-19 on conflicts, on economic and environmental security, and on democracy and elections.

These debates are essential to inject political pluralism and diverse policy viewpoints in the work of the OSCE.

But alone they are not enough.

Whilst our meetings are essential to reinforce multilateralism in these times of global crisis, genuine commitment to international dialogue and co-operation must go beyond participation.

We need concrete parliamentary action.

Back home, in our capitals and national parliaments, we must continue to generate debates on key OSCE issues.

We need to carry on engaging our governments to bring back much needed high-level political attention to the OSCE.

We must keep on calling for the timely adoption of the budget. The institution cannot be fettered by uncertainty over its resources.

As the parliamentary institution of the OSCE, we have demonstrated that we are ready to assist and co-operate with the governmental structures.

If all of our 323 Members engage directly with their governments on matters relevant to the effectiveness of the OSCE, I believe that would make a significant difference.

The success of the OSCE largely depends on our ability to fight misperceptions, build trust, and bridge divides to support the work of the executive structures.

So, we must continue to exploit the full potential of parliamentary diplomacy to flag crucial issues and break political deadlock.

Our Assembly already has a strong track record in making proposals and recommending initiatives to make the OSCE more effective.

You will have all seen and read the Call for Action, which we will be taking forward with the help of Ambassador Zannier, who is working with the Parliamentary Assembly.

The leadership of the Assembly will be meeting so that we can agree on a programme and how that work is going to be taken forward.

Your active engagement over the past year, and your vigorous participation in this Meeting, highlights the eagerness of parliamentarians to make the OSCE work.

Today, tomorrow, and in the months to come, I count on you to mobilize this energy to tackle the challenges affecting our participating States.

I should perhaps at this stage just say to you that parliamentary initiatives will be at the heart of our theme for our Annual Session, namely “Reinforcing Multilateralism in Times of Global Crisis: a Parliamentary Call for Future Action.”

This seems to me to be exactly what the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly should be about.

I thank you for your commitment to this Organization and your attendance and wish us a successful and productive meeting.

Thank you.

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