



Report of the Special Representative on Central Asia

Mr. Reinhold Lopatka

20th OSCE PA Winter Meeting, Vienna, 24 February 2021

Background

It is an honor for me to have been appointed on 8 December 2020 to act as the President's entrusted representative in a key region for the OSCE with the following mandate:

- Encourage active participation by parliamentarians from Central Asian OSCE participating States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and Mongolia in the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to strengthen parliamentarism in the region;
- Liaise and support the work of the OSCE field missions in the region, as well as relevant OSCE institutions, international and regional organizations and diplomatic missions;
- Encourage closer contacts between the parliaments in the region to promote greater intra-regional cooperation in all three OSCE dimensions;
- Report to the President of the Assembly on developments in the region, including opportunities for enhanced parliamentary dialogue and further inter-parliamentary co-operation among the Central Asian OSCE participating States and Mongolia.

It is heartening to hear that the OSCE continues to be of relevance for the Central Asian region, where hand-in-hand with national governments, parliaments, and citizens, it has been carrying out excellent work as an instrument of multilateral diplomacy in the areas of early warning, conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict reconstruction.

The pandemic which swept across our OSCE region posed a serious challenges to our countries' economies and health care systems and did not spare Central Asia and Mongolia. **Labour migrants** were particularly hard hit, losing their jobs in the agricultural and construction sectors in Russia and elsewhere, and finding themselves stranded and unable to send money back home to their families.

The Covid-19 pandemic furthermore posed serious challenges to the renewed regional co-operation we have witnessed over the past years. The third meeting of Central Asian Heads of State, due to have taken place last Autumn in the Kyrgyz Republic, and the signing of an inter-state document on friendship, good-neighbourliness and co-operation for the development of Central Asia in the 21st century, have been postponed to 2021.

Regrettably, mitigation measures negatively impacted **fundamental rights and freedoms**, especially freedom of movement and assembly but also freedom of expression as reporting on the pandemic was subject to restrictions in some countries under the guise of combating disinformation. While some temporary curbs on human rights might be justified by the need to protect lives, we should always encourage our governments to be transparent and to work hand in hand with citizens and civil society to effectively fight this common challenge.

It is heartening to see that a number of Central Asian countries have taken steps to further strengthen regional co-operation to face the consequences of the pandemic, for example in the areas of trade, transport and digital connectivity. Let me reiterate that our Organization stands ready to facilitate these efforts and the exchange of experiences in devising strategies.

Having recently visited the Programme Office in Bishkek, I was reminded that **OSCE field presences** not only represent the OSCE, but also work for the benefit of the countries' populations, jointly designing and implementing projects in all three dimensions, and addressing a broad range of issues such as countering terrorism, border co-operation, combating corruption, water policies, gender issues, judicial reform and human rights. I was encouraged to see that they continue to act as a valuable resource, now more than ever.

Let me also say a few words about our newest participating State, **Mongolia**. Early on, it implemented prompt response measures to protect the health of its people and frontline responders. Until last November, it had recorded no Covid-19 related deaths and no local transmission. According to the World Health Organization, many factors including solidarity across all sectors and all levels, multi-sectoral collaboration, risk communication and community engagement have been key to Mongolia's success. While it, too, is now dealing with local transmission, strict mitigation measures seem to be containing the spread.

Priorities

I intend to implement my mandate by carrying out activities across three dimensions:

- 1. Encourage active participation by parliamentarians from Central Asian participating States and Mongolia in the work of our Assembly.**

My task in this regard is greatly facilitated by the strong commitment of parliamentarians from Central Asia and Mongolia to the values underpinning our work. The appointment of high-level representatives to head their delegations is a testimony to the importance which they attach to our Organization.

I very much regret that I will not have the opportunity to meet in person with the delegations on the occasion of this 20th Winter Meeting. However, I look forward to meeting with all Heads of Delegation in the coming month in order to discuss priorities and future co-operation.

I have also already met in person with the Permanent Missions of all five Central Asian participating States and Mongolia to the OSCE in Vienna, and plan to maintain a regular channel of communication.

One area of activity which I intend to encourage and which the PA has prioritized in the face of the pandemic, is that of **election observation**.

I was honored to head the PA delegation of 44 observers, including 29 Members of Parliament, for the Special Limited Election Observation Mission to the **Kyrgyz Republic's** early presidential election on 10 January. While the Kyrgyz Republic has previously distinguished itself within the region for its level of political debate, discussion was more centred on personalities than programmes which may account for the relatively low turnout. I will be closely following developments, including the drafting of a new Constitution and implications for parliamentarism and look forward to observing the repeat parliamentary elections in the Spring.

I was not able to travel to **Kazakhstan** for the 10 January parliamentary elections but am positively encouraged by the willingness of authorities to work together with the OSCE PA and ODIHR to implement our recommendations aimed at strengthening the conditions to ensure the free expression of the opinion of electors in the choice of their representatives, in line with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

I also look forward to returning to **Uzbekistan**, which I visited in December 2019 for the parliamentary elections, this time for the 24 October presidential election.

Unfortunately, last year we were forced to cancel observation of the June parliamentary elections in **Mongolia** due to the pandemic. This year again we do not expect to deploy an observation mission for the 9 June presidential election due to the lockdown and associated logistical difficulties.

Turkmenistan has also decided to introduce a bicameral parliament. While we will not observe the indirect elections to the new upper chamber at the end of March, I hope to have the possibility to visit the country at a later occasion to learn more about the impact of this change.

Just as the PA makes every effort to observe elections in the region, we warmly invite parliamentarians to participate in our observation missions elsewhere as this enables learning about different approaches to fundamental democratic processes.

There is also great potential for sharing of experiences in the areas of **countering terrorism** and the re-integration of foreign terrorist fighters, e.g. through the work of our Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism.

2. Liaise and support the work of the OSCE field missions in the region, as well as relevant OSCE institutions, international and regional organizations and diplomatic missions;

In line with the PA's new vision which calls for closer co-ordination and co-operation with the OSCE and its Institutions, I plan to meet representatives from relevant departments within the OSCE Secretariat as well as the Heads of OSCE Institutions with a view to discussing strategic priorities for 2021 and to identify areas where the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly can contribute using the specific tools at its disposal.

Co-ordination with other international and regional organizations active in Central Asia is also key and I intend to reinforce ongoing OSCE/EU/UN co-operation by adding a parliamentary dimension.

I hope to have the opportunity to meet with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia Amb. Peter Burian to discuss implementation of the EU's new Central Asia strategy focusing on promoting resilience, prosperity and co-operation and to identify areas in which the EU and the OSCE PA can work together.

I also look forward to meeting the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Central Asia and Head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), Ms. Natalia Gherman.

Country visits – when the conditions permit – are essential for strengthening the PA's working relationship, for promoting parliamentarism and for raising the visibility of the **OSCE field presences** which are carrying out valuable work. During my mission to the Kyrgyz Republic last January, I visited the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek. The scope of their activities and the dedication of the staff during what has been no doubt a difficult year made a very strong impression on me.

I would also like to visit the **OSCE Academy in Bishkek**, which has emerged as a centre of excellence in the region. We benefit from this expertise through a Memorandum of Understanding which provides for the recruitment of recent graduates as part of the PA's International Research Assistant Programme.

3. Encourage closer contacts between the parliaments in the region to promote greater intra-regional cooperation in all three OSCE dimensions;

I will aim to facilitate meetings of all the delegations on the sidelines of PA statutory meetings, with the intention to supplement existing contacts and to ensure that regional aspects are discussed in a multilateral setting. I will also seek to encourage participation by PA members from Central Asia and Mongolia in regional initiatives.

The Parliament of Uzbekistan had indicated interest in hosting a thematic conference in 2021. Although this is currently on hold, I stand ready to assist with this initiative.

Foreseeable steps forward

To summarize, my planned activities for the coming months include:

- Meeting with Heads of Delegation of all five Central Asian states (online, date tbc)
- Meeting with the Head of the Delegation of Mongolia to the OSCE PA Mr. Tsogtbaatar DAMDIN (online, date tbc)
- Meetings with representatives of relevant departments within the OSCE Secretariat and Heads of OSCE Institutions.
- Meeting with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia Peter Burian and the Special Representative of the UN SG for Central Asia and Head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) Natalia Gherman.
- Participation in upcoming PA election observation missions
 - Kyrgyz Republic: parliamentary elections (Spring, tbc)
 - Uzbekistan: presidential election (24 October 2021)
- Participation in the Regional Meeting of Heads of OSCE Field Operations in Central Asia (place and date tbd)
- Additional country visits if feasible (second half of 2021, tbc)

Concluding Remarks

The past year was a challenging one not only for Central Asia and Mongolia but for the entire OSCE region. I will continue to closely follow developments in each of the countries within my mandate and to working together with all of the delegations to further facilitate their engagement in the activities of the PA and to ensure that their concerns and perspectives continue to be heard within our Organization.

I look forward to reporting to you again at our Annual Session in Bucharest in July.

Annex I: Past Activities

- Meeting with the Permanent Missions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to the OSCE (Vienna, 17 December 2020):
 - Kazakhstan: Amb. Kairat UMAROV
 - Kyrgyz Republic: Amb. Bakyt DZHUSUPOV
 - Tajikistan: Amb. Idibek KALANDAR
 - Turkmenistan: Amb. Silapberdi NURBERDIEV
 - Uzbekistan: Counsellor Kodirjon MUKHAMMADIEV

- Head of the OSCE PA Delegation to the Special Limited Election Observation Mission (SLEOM) to the Kyrgyz Republic, 10 January 2021 Early Presidential Election
- Visit to the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek (10 January 2021)
- Meeting with the Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the OSCE Amb. Battungalag GANKHUURAI (Vienna, 13 January 2021)
- Meeting with the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre's Central Asian Desk (online, 15 January 2021)