

Parliamentary Web Dialogue

Parliamentarians & Journalists: Partners Against Corruption

Wednesday, 14 October 2020, 15:00-18:00 CET

HIGHLIGHTS¹

OVERVIEW

On the initiative of **Ms. Irene Charalambides**, OSCE Special Representative on Fighting Corruption, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) held the Parliamentary Web Dialogue “*Parliamentarians & Journalists: Partners Against Corruption*” on 14 October 2020. The online event provided an informal platform for approximately 100 representatives of national parliaments and the media to engage in a focused security debate exploring the critical contribution of politicians and journalists to the global fight against corruption, as well as their multifaceted relationship in this context. Moreover, it offered an opportunity to reiterate the centrality of the principles of accountability, transparency and oversight in protecting democracies from corrupt practices. Finally, the participants underscored the importance of effective policies that enable journalists to pursue investigative reporting without fear of reprisals, including by strengthening protections for whistle-blowers. Notably, this was the first OSCE PA Web Dialogue open to active participation and contribution by the media.

The event was moderated by **Mr. Marco Bonabello**, Director for Economic and Environmental Security at the OSCE PA International Secretariat, and chaired by **Ms. Irene Charalambides**, OSCE PA Special Representative on Fighting Corruption. In her opening remarks, Ms. Charalambides set the scene for this policy dialogue by highlighting the critical contribution of parliamentarians and journalists in fighting corruption. **Mr. George Tsereteli**, OSCE PA President, and **Mr. Roberto Montella**, OSCE PA Secretary-General, welcomed participants and underlined that fighting corruption shall remain a priority across the OSCE region, especially at this critical juncture. High-level speakers included **Prof. Paola Severino**, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairmanship on Combating Corruption, **Mr. Gianluca Esposito**, Executive Secretary of Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), **Dr. Odysseas Ph. Michaelides**, Auditor General of the Republic of Cyprus, **Mr. Drew Sullivan**, Editor of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and **Mr. Franz Wild**, Editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism’s Enablers Project. All keynote panellists built on their own experience to highlight the key challenges and opportunities in fighting corruption. Finally, **Ms. Elona Hoxha**, Rapporteur of the General OSCE PA Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, closed the event by congratulating all participants on their constructive engagement and by proposing to consolidate relevant findings in a targeted OSCE PA Resolution.

¹ DISCLAIMER: The Highlights from the OSCE PA Web Dialogue are not intended to be official conclusions, nor an exhaustive list of all issues raised during the debate, but rather a collection of main points pulled together by the International Secretariat for possible future reference. As such, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about their completeness and reliability.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Corruption hampers democracies**, curbs development, weakens the rule of law, and undermines stability of OSCE participating States, thus affecting all layers of society.
- Lack of transparency in public institutions and widespread perceived corruption in public offices **hampers citizens' trust in democratic institutions** and processes.
- The **roles of journalists and parliamentarians in fighting corruption are**, albeit different, **mutually reinforcing**: both work in the interest of the public while preventing and uncovering abuses of power; both are expected to “lead by example” in conducting their own business; both actively contribute to boost transparency and accountability while exercising their respective functions, and both play a key role in maintaining high quality journalism and advocating for protection of whistle-blowers.
- As part of their legislative, oversight and representation functions, **parliamentarians** are expected to create pertinent anti-corruption legislation, empower independent institutions and law enforcement, promote media freedom, scrutinize the work of Governments and adopt effective internal regulations to prevent corruption among their ranks.
- **Journalists** play a vital role in fostering a culture of accountability by uncovering and publicly exposing malpractices as well as by fighting impunity. Hence, they act as a watchdog over shortcomings in public governance system.
- There are many stark reminders of the risks involved in journalists' work aimed at uncovering malpractices, which directly affects the extent to which media can exercise their critical anti-corruption function. **Protecting the freedom of expression and promoting a safe work environment for journalists** is, therefore, critical.
- As the **public information function** is so critical in the proper functioning of modern societies, boosting overall transparency and accountability, citizens have the right to know who owns the newspapers, TV channels, radio and online portals they follow.
- In several OSCE participating States, **journalists are suffering from growing restrictions** imposed by local courts. Regrettably, many of them are facing criminal prosecution for reporting alleged corrupt practices.
- While the role of traditional media has evolved significantly due to the **profound digital transformation** affecting of our societies, the potential contribution of social media in fighting corruption grew exponentially. New communication technologies help improve transparency and foster accountability by digitising public services and enabling/expanding corruption reporting opportunities. Simultaneously, it is crucial to counter new corruption-related risks embedded in the dark web, cryptocurrencies and misuse of new technologies.
- Despite all international efforts over the past few decades, **money laundering** has become a very cheap and effortless process, carried out on an increasingly larger scale. Opacity in the ownership of off-shore companies facilitates corruption and raises security concerns. Notably, as the ultimate beneficial owner of companies remains unknown in several jurisdictions, this opens the door to corruption, money laundering and other illicit financial practices.
- It is vital to ensure that **strong transparency and anti-corruption safeguards** are in place and fully operational while Governments are called upon to respond to the on-going health and economic crisis through emergency spending.
- As the proper management of public funds represents an indispensable part of a regulatory system, **effective state audit services** are critical to reveal deviations from

accepted standards and violations of the principles of legality, efficiency, effectiveness and economy of financial management.

- **Youth** is generally more open to social change, as well as to change in attitudes and behaviour towards corruption, which is why meaningful engagement of youth is instrumental to successfully curbing corruption.
- **International co-operation** in the domain of anti-corruption remains paramount. The OSCE, both through its inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary dimensions, and by virtue of its holistic approach, is ideally placed to support its participating States in preventing and countering corruption at all levels.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Fighting corruption shall remain a top priority** across the OSCE region as it represents a major security threat which reverberates across international borders, directly impacting participating States' development opportunities and citizens' lives.
- **Both parliamentarians and journalists should lead by example** – parliamentarians have to display and behave with the necessary integrity and ethics, while for journalists' voice to be credible and respected, they have to be accurate, truthful and unbiased in their reporting.
- In line with relevant international standards, clear legal frameworks should be developed and implemented to provide **effective safeguards for freedom of expression and safe working conditions for the media**.
- It is equally important to **protect the identity** and safety of citizens, journalists and politicians who have the courage to expose corruption in public and private sectors and act as whistle-blowers through effective legal protection schemes and clear guidance on reporting procedures for **whistle-blowers**.
- Parliamentarians across the OSCE region should pro-actively regulate issues such as **conflicts of interest, transparency in party financing and lobbying** practices. In this regard, the adoption of well-conceived **Codes of Conducts** by national parliaments is vital to building an atmosphere of credibility and ethics, as well as to boosting citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Such codes should regulate, *inter alia*, the management of conflicts of interests, relationships with lobbyists and third parties seeking to influence the legislative process, gifts, post-employment and incompatibilities.
- Journalists should be encouraged to pursue their own "investigations" independently, responsibly, and exclusively in the interest of the public. Against this backdrop, the **influence of editors, publishers, financiers and state authorities on investigative journalists** should be limited to the bear minimum. This is particularly relevant during the current health and economic crises, whereby many media outlets and independent journalists are facing financial challenges.
- **Media ownership should be 100% transparent**. This is also instrumental to avoid the creation of excessive concentration - or even monopolies - of media, which would limit pluralism of information and hamper anti-corruption efforts.
- The **unrestrainable digitalization process** offers golden opportunities to promote good governance by enhancing transparency, accountability, accessibility to information and citizen participation. OSCE participating States should harvest this potential through forward-looking strategies, balanced regulations and participatory approaches.
- **Justice systems** should be sheltered from undue influence aimed at "silencing" investigative journalism through restrictive court orders. Journalists should not be

criminalized for responsibly conducting their investigative work and uncovering alleged corruptive practices. More generally, state authorities should refrain from using the pretext of the ongoing health crisis for imposing growing restrictions on the media.

- It is essential to adopt and implement robust and updated regulatory frameworks intended to mitigate risks relating to **money laundering** in public and private sectors, in line with relevant international standards.
- Sound **ultimate beneficial ownership laws** should be developed throughout the OSCE region. All companies should publicly declare their ultimate beneficial owner before being allowed to operate in any market. Consequently, market access should be restricted for those companies hiding behind figureheads.
- To prevent corruption in public institutions, it is critical to establish an **effective matrix of internal and external controls and audits**, thus enhancing transparency and accountability of public authorities.
- As many participating States already adopted sound laws and policies in the above-mentioned spheres, it is key to ensure their **full implementation**, as well as to regularly **review and modernize** them, also leveraging on new digital technologies.
- OSCE participating States should consider a **more participatory approach** among parliaments, governments, civil society, business community, media and youth to foster social consensus in the fight against corruption (i.e. New Social Compact). The OSCE should support this effort at the international level.
- **International organizations**, such as the OSCE, should provide a privileged forum for promoting strategic partnerships among key actors in this field, including journalists and politicians. While parliamentarians may act as powerful catalyst of policy and legislative reform, journalists can contribute with specific information on corruption.
- **Interparliamentary fora**, such as the OSCE PA, should continue to facilitate focused debates and the exchange of lessons learned aimed at developing enhanced policy and legislative guidance on fighting corruption.