

News from Copenhagen

Prisons, economic crisis and arms control focus of Winter Meeting



The panel of the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions on 23 February.



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The 11th Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly opened on 23 February in Vienna with a meeting of the PA's General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions, in which former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Manfred Nowak took part, along with Bill Browder, Eugenia Tymoshenko, and Iryna Bogdanova.

Committee Chair Matteo Mecacci (Italy) noted the importance of highlighting individual stories to "drive home the urgency of human rights." In this regard, Browder spoke about the case of his former attorney, the late Sergei Magnitsky, who died in pre-trial detention in Russia.

Eugenia Tymoshenko discussed the case of her mother, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, currently serving a seven-year prison sentence. Lucia Uva talked about the case of her brother Giuseppe Uva, who died in police custody in Italy; and Bogdanova, sister of former Belarusian presidential candidate and opposition leader Andrei Sannikov, gave a heartfelt presentation on behalf of her brother, who is serving a five-year sentence for protesting following the December 2010 election.

In his address to the opening joint session, Assembly President Petros Efthymiou spoke of the need for governments to respect the rule of law, particularly in prison systems, and called for better protection of freedom online.

President of the Austrian Parliament Barbara Prammer called on the parliamentarians to protect and strengthen OSCE commitments, especially in the human dimension, while OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier highlighted the need to strengthen relations between the Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE's executive structures.

In the General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, chaired by Serhiy Shevchuck (Ukraine), parliamentarians debated the economic and financial crisis in Europe. The meeting of the General Committee on Political Affairs and Security, chaired by Karl-Georg Wellmann (Germany), included a discussion on the fight against terrorism and crime with briefings by UN and OSCE officials.

The committees also heard presentations by committee rapporteurs on their plans for resolutions and reports for the Annual Session in Monaco, as well as follow-up reports from

the vice-chairs on developments related to the 2011 Belgrade Declaration.

The Standing Committee of Heads of Delegations met on 24 February to hear reports of recent OSCE PA activities, as well as discuss upcoming meetings and election observation. After a discussion of the 4 March presidential election in Russia, President Efthymiou decided to deploy a small OSCE PA delegation to observe.

Treasurer Roberto Battelli presented to the Standing Committee the audited accounts of the Assembly for the past financial year. The report of the Assembly's outside independent professional auditor has given a positive assessment on the PA's financial management and the audit once again did not result in any qualification. Battelli also emphasized that for the 19th year in a row the Assembly has stayed within the approved budget.

Secretary General Spencer Oliver reported on the activities of the International Secretariat, highlighting the support it provides to presidential visits and the work of special representatives and ad hoc committees. He also pointed to the PA's successful research fellowship programme and the effective work done by the Assembly's Liaison Office in Vienna.

The Winter Meeting concluded with a joint session of the three committees, with presentations by Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Minister of State For European Affairs of Ireland, Lucinda Creighton; OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebaek and OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues Hedy Fry.

A special debate on conventional arms control in Europe included participation from Damian R. Leader, an arms control expert from the United States; Anton Mazur, Head of the Russian Delegation to the Vienna Negotiations on Military Security and Arms Control; and Mathew Geertsen, Senior Forum for Security Co-operation Support Officer of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Center. More than a dozen parliamentarians participated in the debate.

The two-day meeting brought together 241 parliamentarians from 54 OSCE participating States, plus several from the Mediterranean Partners. The meeting was streamed online for the first time, drawing around 2,000 viewers.