



25th Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Tbilisi, Georgia, Opening Plenary – 1 July 2016

President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Ilkka Kanerva (MP, Finland)

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President,

Prime Minister, Chairman-in-Office,

Dear parliamentarians, friends, and guests,

It is a real honour to open the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's 25th Annual Session in Tbilisi. I am sure I speak for the whole Assembly when I say that it is our privilege to be here in this historic city as Georgia celebrates its 25th year of independence.

My thanks to our Georgian hosts for your hospitality. I look forward to the programme you have prepared and to the next several days of discussion as we also celebrate 25 years of parliamentary co-operation and building trust through dialogue.

But dear friends, we should also take a moment to reflect on how fortunate we are to be here in one piece, considering the horrific act of violence that took place just a few days ago in Istanbul, where many of us transited through on our way to Tbilisi. Terrorism continues to be the biggest threat of our time that we all must confront together. In response to this threat, we must promote effective strategies to prevent terrorists from carrying out their crimes, and recommit ourselves to building a more secure and stable world.

Last year, to mark the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, we met in my home country of Finland. Under the theme of "Recalling the Spirit of Helsinki," we reconfirmed the undiminished validity of the Helsinki Final Act's principles, and recalled the commitment that OSCE participating States have made to ensuring that all of our people, that all of our nations, can live lasting peace free from any threat against their security.

One year later, it is hard to see much tangible progress in achieving that lasting peace, sadly. The security environment has largely deteriorated across the OSCE area due to ongoing crises and unresolved conflicts, as well as environmental and humanitarian concerns that are undermining human security in many of our countries.

As you may know, today, the first of July, marks the 100th anniversary of the First World War's Battle of the Somme. This battle ultimately lasted some five months and resulted in the gain of ground by the Allies of just more than ten kilometers. The largest battle of the First World War, it was also one of the bloodiest in human history, resulting in more than one million men wounded or killed.

On this day, we should reflect on the futility of warfare and indeed the essential nature of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and forums like it, where all countries – big and small – have an equal voice. This is particularly the case in the wake of the British people's momentous decision last week to leave the European Union. In this time of uncertainty on the continent, it is all the more important that we come together to continue our work of building trust through dialogue.

We parliamentarians have an important role to play in strengthening ties between our nations and creating conditions for successful co-operation. This is essential for lasting security and prosperity, and to achieve this, there can be no doubt that all countries should co-operate on issues of common ground.

But of course, finding common ground requires a basic level of trust. Therefore, all of our efforts are weakened when fundamental principles such as respect for territorial integrity are violated. This has happened to an unacceptable degree in the OSCE area due in large part to protracted conflicts, including here in Georgia, and of course, the crisis in and around Ukraine.

It is my hope that the PA can contribute to resolving the crisis and promoting the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which remain the best path forward for Ukraine and the region as a whole.

The challenges we face are real and require real co-operation. As we see the interrelated effects that various crises are having on our mutual security, we cannot afford to retreat into an isolationist mindset. Instead we should utilize the OSCE's comprehensive security framework and work together towards building bridges, not walls.

On our agenda are issues including climate change, the global migration crisis, transnational terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism.

I hope that you all take a look at the special paper I have prepared entitled “Our common vision for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly,” which has been distributed here in Tbilisi. It outlines the OSCE PA’s strengths, as well as its prospects for increasing its political relevance by strengthening its toolbox. We can also further add transparency and accountability to the OSCE, while contributing to its development as an organization.

Dear colleagues,

The Parliamentary Assembly is a unique and inclusive forum that engages in open and transparent dialogue, keeping the original spirit of the OSCE alive. Therefore, we have a special responsibility to not only speak openly and honestly, but also to listen with openness and honesty.

I thank all of you for the trust you have placed in me and for the opportunity to serve as your President for the past two years.

The Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli once said, “His own enemy is he who will not seek a friend.” In that spirit, I look forward to continue working together with all of you in the years to come, as well as with the new OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President who will be elected here in Tbilisi in the coming days.

And on behalf of the Assembly, again, my heartfelt thanks to the Georgian Parliament for all that you have done in preparation for hosting this Session.

Thank you very much. *Madloba!*