

OSCE PA's 2021 Remote Session begins with meeting of human rights committee



The OSCE PA's General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions met virtually today for the first event of the 2021 Remote Session. Some two dozen committee members discussed issues such as the state of multilateral discussions on human rights, intolerance and discrimination, and the role of health care in contributing to the enjoyment of human rights.

In his opening remarks, Chair Kyriakos Hadjiyianni (Cyprus) highlighted the tragic impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had over the past year and a half, not the least of which being its effects on democratic institutions. "We have all become used to the daily tragedies and complications caused by the pandemic, but the societal consequences are also significant," Hadjiyianni said. "COVID profoundly impacts our democratic functioning but doesn't necessarily impede it. The distinction between these two comes from the political will to overcome the challenges."

Presenting her report, Committee Rapporteur Kari Henriksen (Norway) said that many OSCE countries have experienced increases in authoritarianism, restrictions on freedom of the media, attacks on journalists, surging domestic violence cases, and "a virtual pandemic of hate speech towards minorities, refugees and migrants and

other people made vulnerable."

She stressed the importance of multilateral diplomacy in reviving faith in institutions. "Unilateral approaches are often easier in the short-term, but they fail to provide sustainable solutions," she said. "We must reinforce dialogue, even in an online format, centered around delivery of humanitarian goals and communities' interests, if we want lasting fixes. We can all benefit from each other's experiences and advice through the OSCE PA platform." Henriksen also encouraged all parliaments to utilize the other tools that the OSCE has at its disposal, including recommendations issued by the ODIHR, HCNM, and RFoM.

Henriksen drew particular attention to the consequences of unresolved conflicts in the OSCE region, referencing the massive humanitarian impact of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. "We see from other areas, such as in Georgia, that the humanitarian impact continues even long after the guns have fallen silent," she said. "To this end, I urge parliamentarians to demand that their governments find the political will for mutually beneficial resolutions to these conflicts."

In the debate on Henriksen's report, parliamentarians raised concerns about the human rights situation in Belarus and the Russian Federation, including the ongoing imprisonment of opposition figures. Members highlighted the rise in domestic violence, the issue of universal health care as a human right, freedom of the media, and the situation of migrants and refugees in the OSCE area.

Committee Vice-Chair Michael Georg Link spoke about election observation, noting the importance of follow-up to ensure that OSCE recommendations are duly considered by participating States. He urged all colleagues to participate in this important OSCE activity.

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Remote Session runs through 6 July

The OSCE PA is meeting in a hybrid online/physical format this week and next. Due to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, the planned meeting in Bucharest was cancelled, and the Bureau decided on 19 April to hold a Remote Session. Consisting of virtual meetings of the three general committees on 30 June and 1-2 July, an in-person Standing Committee meeting in Vienna on 5 July, and a hybrid plenary session on 6 July, the Remote Session is streaming live at www.oscepa.org and the PA's Facebook and YouTube channels.

Assembly members will vote electronically over a 30-hour period starting on Monday 5 July at 10:00 (CEST) for OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and General Committee officers, including a new President. The plenary will consist of addresses by OSCE PA President Peter Lord Bowness (United Kingdom) and OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Ann Linde, as well as consideration of Urgency Items, review of OSCE PA activities, open debate, and announcement of election results.

The Standing Committee meeting will be the first physical meeting of the Assembly since the COVID-19 pandem-



ic hit last year, and will be comprised of Heads of Delegations, Bureau members, and Special Representatives.

The general committee meetings will focus primarily on the consideration of the reports prepared by the committee rapporteurs dealing with topical issues related to OSCE values and commitments. The reports cover topics such as the social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, sustainable migration management, post-COVID multilateral diplomacy, protracted conflicts in the OSCE area, the impact of the pandemic on transnational threats, and access to health care.

The meeting can be followed on social media with the hashtag #2021RemoteSession.