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Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

Remarks to the OSCE Human Dimension Committee
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Ambassador Sramek,
Dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me here today.

I know that many of you will have participated in parts of the OSCE PA's meeting last week. I hope that you found it useful and interesting. It is quite different from the usual diplomacy that takes place here in the Hofburg, but the parliamentary dimension in international affairs can bring important perspectives at times.

Particularly in the fields of democratic institutions, rule of law and good governance, a parliamentary perspective is critical, I believe. Thank you for placing these questions so high on your agenda this year.

Unfortunately, I think that democratic institutions and elections are not receiving sufficient focus globally. We are becoming complacent in many parts of the OSCE. Many seem to act under the assumption that democracy is static and that once 'achieved' we no longer need to be concerned with it.

But let's be clear: threats to democracy can come from many sources. Threats can come from an authoritarian government unwilling to accept opposing views. They can come from politicians ignoring democratic principles in the short-sighted pursuit of power. Threats can come from unelected bureaucrats, quietly thwarting the will of elected leaders. And threats can even come through court decisions, with duly elected politicians evicted from office on technical grounds.

We are looking at this question in a particularly difficult period. Lack of trust in our structures and institutions is at unprecedented levels. Just last month, Cambridge University published a report

concluding that some 57 per cent of people around the world are “dissatisfied” with democracy as they experience it. This is a rise of almost 20 per cent over the past 15 years.

This should be a wake-up call for us all. It impacts not only governments, parliaments and other representative bodies, but also international organizations, the media and others. Of course, parliamentarians as elected officials are perhaps most affected, and addressing this trust deficit must start ‘at home’ for us parliamentarians.

There are many related issues to address in this regard. To name just a few from the parliamentary perspective: 1) We must make sure that our own houses are in order. 2) We must make sure that our representative bodies are truly representative and inclusive. 3) We must take our responsibility of oversight and holding governments to account very seriously. 4) We must be robust in standing up for the principles of our societies, and not allow political considerations to undercut our principles. And 5) we must continue to pay attention to the process through which we are elected.

Let me briefly take these in the order I mentioned.

First, parliaments must continue to dedicate ongoing attention to their own integrity standards. I’m very pleased that the ODIHR, together with the Armenian Parliament and with the support of the OSCE PA will be holding a conference specifically on this topic in the near future.

While not the only way forward, codes of conduct adopted in many parliaments can be a useful tool. However, they must come with a warning: adoption of a such a code is not the end of the process. Quite the contrary, any such tool should set the framework for ongoing implementation as well as evaluation of systems and integrity expectations. As public expectations change, parliamentary responses must similarly be dynamic and respond to new challenges. I am confident that the coming Yerevan conference will enable useful discussions on this topic.

I addressed parliamentary integrity first not because I think it is the most challenging, but because the other topics I will address rely to a large degree on trust in parliaments.

The second topic I would like to address is representation. It is obvious that when parliaments and institutions do not effectively reflect the people they represent, confidence is diminished and our societies become less stable. For basic democratic reasons, as well as the stability of our societies, it is therefore important to consider representative imbalances.

For example, in the OSCE region women represent only some 25 to 30 per cent of parliamentarians. There are many aspects to this, but the troubling persistence of violence and harassment against women in public life clearly contributes to this. It undermines efforts to improve the imbalance, and must be addressed squarely explicitly. As my colleague Kari Henriksen said last week: abuse and oppression of women is not a private matter, but an issue of major public concern.

Under-representation of minorities can similarly undermine confidence.

The third topic I would like to bring attention to is parliamentary oversight work. This was the topic of a very successful ODIHR conference I was pleased to participate in last year in Georgia.

Effective parliamentary oversight is not only important in such traditional areas as preventing corruption, but is critical to broader good governance and human rights principles.

That being said, there is an inherent contradiction in parliamentary oversight work. Oversight is intended to strengthen trust in our institutions, but the practice of oversight will at times uncover wrongdoing within these institutions. I suspect that all of us in this room can recall a situation in which public attention to misconduct in a government or parliamentary institution has weakened confidence. But such situations must strengthen our resolve for robust processes, to ensure that while trust may falter for those holding office now, the public trust in institutions will remain strong and grow.

The need for clear parliament oversight responsibility and processes which are clearly embedded in law is crucial. The reality is that oversight is a political process, and finding the political will to hold governments to account can be hard to find – especially if they are your political friends.

Having clarity on authority and responsibilities is therefore important, and the OSCE PA has – over time – identified a range of areas in which parliaments should exercise oversight responsibilities. Just last year we called for this in a range of fields including adherence to international commitments, financial institutions, states of emergency, journalists' murders and imprisonment, in addition to avoiding corruption.

The fourth field I would like to address relates to our consistency. We all know that it may at times be politically advantageous to compromise on principles in order to win a particular concession or fight. However, any such victory is illusory, as it will inevitably undermine one's credibility and public trust.

To put it simply: principles are made for when times are difficult, and it is at these times that we must maintain them at all cost. It is easy to stand up for freedom of speech when everybody agrees with you – the real test of integrity comes when you stand up for the freedom of speech of someone who is challenging you.

Politicians regularly have to balance principled issues when it comes to practical implementation, but as I said: principles are made for hard times.

These considerations are of course equally relevant around this table. All countries represented here have agreed to a range of important human rights commitments. Challenges such as states of emergency or terrorist action are no excuse to jettison these commitments. It is during such times

that our commitments are relevant, and I urge all of you to be diligent in holding each other to account on this.

Finally, I would like to return to the fifth field I have raised, related to election processes. This, of course, is how parliamentarians achieve office, and so maintaining trust in this process is crucial to the underlying trust in the institution.

In the OSCE we are very fortunate to have a set of clear principles outlining the basis of democratic elections, primarily in the 1990 Copenhagen Document. However, a look at many of our observation mission statements will make it clear that implementation of these agreed principles is inadequate.

Old practices, such as ballot-box stuffing and persecution of political foes continue. These now take place alongside newer challenges such as addressing digital privacy concerns and the weaponization of fake news in social media. Regardless of the method, however, the result can be the same: electoral failings undermine trust and credibility of democratic institutions. We must continue to dedicate attention to these issues and to invest in election infrastructure to ensure that we are delivering the best that we possibly can. Our publics deserve this.

As you all know, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly works very closely with the OSCE/ODIHR in election observation, and we are proud of the work that we do together. It is only natural that oversight and advice on democratic processes needs input from people chosen through democratic processes. The combination of parliamentarians, who have fought and won elections themselves, working with ODIHR experts able to process and analyse extensive information, is a winning combination. We are lucky to have developed this co-operation, and we look forward to continuing our work in this field.

We see, however, that there are efforts to undermine election observation. Observation is being actively and intentionally undermined by governments that don't like the inconvenient truths that credible observation missions sometimes produce. The OSCE PA has expressed concern at the proliferation of unprofessional election monitoring, often promoted by host governments, which undermines public trust in election observation overall.

I therefore take the opportunity of this meeting to reiterate our clear call for all OSCE participating States governments to refrain from participating in election observation processes that are not based on well-organized and transparent processes with a systematic methodology. In the OSCE PA we have recently strengthened our mechanisms and guidelines related to election observation, ensuring that we will continue to function in a clear and accountable manner. It is only reasonable that in holding countries accountable to their democratic commitments, we also hold ourselves to high accountability standards.

I will repeat what I started with: democracy is not ‘achieved’ – it is a process that requires constant attention. I therefore welcome this discussion today, and hope that it is replicated a thousand times over in a thousand different rooms, to ensure that credibility of democratic institutions remains a focus for all of us.

Thank you for your kind invitation to participate in this important meeting. I welcome such opportunities for exchanges, and look forward to hearing the discussion this morning.

[POSSIBLE RESPONSE TO DELEGATIONS LATER IN THE MEETING TO HIGHLIGHT OSCE PA PRIORITIES]

I will just say a few words about OSCE PA priorities outside of the field of this particular committee meeting. Our work is based on the realisation that we are overall witnessing a regression in Human Rights protection. In such a context, we must return to principles.

We are therefore prioritising issues such as the need for tolerance and inclusion, and promotion of freedoms of assembly and speech. Unfortunately, we cannot take these for granted. With this understanding, we are also trying to bring particular attention to the need for increased multilateral co-operation at the international level, to create again a genuine rights-based coalition. At the domestic level, we have been stressing the need for integrating human rights education into school curricula to promote long-term respect for human rights concepts and commitments. We cannot expect the next generation to respect the human rights that many in this room have dedicated their lives to if we don't effectively educate our children in the underlying principles.

I hope that you all take the time to study our work closely.