



**Address by OSCE PA President Peter Lord Bowness
Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council
21 January 2021**

As delivered.

Thank you very much indeed Madam Chair,
Madam Secretary General,
Your Excellencies,
And friends of the OSCE family,

It is a great privilege to be addressing you this morning.

May I first of all wish you a very happy new year! And thank Madam Chair for her remarks about the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and its activities. I would also like to take the opportunity of thanking the OSCE Secretary General for her address and assure her of the support she will receive from the Parliamentary Assembly.

I am very aware of the privilege of being able to address the Permanent Council this morning. I thank you Madam Chair, and indeed the whole Permanent Council, for acceding to that request.

As Members will know, I took over the presidency of the Assembly from President Tsereteli just last month. I want to take this opportunity before you all to thank him for his extraordinary commitment and dedication to the work, not just of the Parliamentary Assembly, but the OSCE as a whole.

Although I have not sought this position, I am honoured to carry out its duties until we elected a new President in July 2021, whether that be physically or remotely.

You can be assured that, together with the rest of the Parliamentary Assembly leadership and with the assistance of the Secretariat, we will carry on with the good work that has been undertaken in recent years. In the light of my longstanding association with the Parliamentary Assembly, I can attest how much the OSCE has benefited from an enhanced partnership between the Chairmanship, the executive structures, and our parliamentarians.

In this vein, I repeat our congratulations to Sweden for taking over the Chairmanship of the OSCE this year. I am convinced that you will be able build on Sweden's steadfast

commitment to international co-operation and multilateralism to guide our Organization's work.

The Parliamentary Assembly and I welcome the priorities outlined by the Chairperson-in-Office, Foreign Minister Ann Linde, in all three dimensions of the OSCE's work. I note your emphasis on living up to the commitments laid down in the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris, which all OSCE participating States freely adopted.

You can rest assured of the continued full engagement of OSCE parliamentarians in supporting these and your Chairmanship's projects throughout the year. Can I just on a personal note take this opportunity to greet the appointment as Special Envoy of Ambassador Kent Harstedt, with whom I have had the pleasure to serve as an OSCE PA Vice President.

I also welcome Poland as the new member of the Troika, and salute the decision taken last month to have North Macedonia chair the Organization in 2023. I am encouraged that additional participating States have made it clear that they wish to chair the OSCE in the future. It demonstrates that, despite the many problematic phases we have been through, these countries believe in the future of the OSCE.

I would be remiss if I did not reiterate today our collective appreciation of the work of the Albanian Chairmanship last year, especially in the light of the unprecedented upheavals of last year. I specifically congratulate our Albanian colleagues for steering the process to appoint new heads of executive structures and reach consensus on this crucial issue.

I hope, Madam Schmid, that your appointment, along with that of your colleagues will mark the beginning of an era of renewed commitment to co-operation and dialogue. I wish this new team every success and perhaps the Permanent Council will excuse me if I single out the ODIHR Director, Matteo Mecacci, who served for a number of years as Chair of the PA's human rights committee. This, with Kent Harstedt's appointment, perhaps emphasizes the close relationships that are being built up between the governmental side of the OSCE, the Permanent Council, and the Parliamentary Assembly.

In this context, I would also like to express my deep appreciation for the efforts made by Secretary General Montella, who just started his second term of office, to ensure that the Parliamentary Assembly works closely together with all OSCE institutions in the interests of delivering real results to the citizens of the OSCE area.

We enjoyed excellent co-operation with the ODIHR some ten days ago when we deployed two election observation missions over the same weekend, in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. These, along with the sizeable missions we deployed to Georgia and the United States, show that we remain determined to help OSCE participating States implement their democratic commitments.

Members of the Permanent Council,

In the light of the violent attack against the U.S. Capitol, which caused so much concern, I hope you will allow me to congratulate our colleagues in the United States on the constitutional and peaceful transfer of democratic government to President Biden, and at the same time welcome his support for international institutions and co-operation.

But may I also reiterate today the concerns that were raised by President Tsereteli when he addressed you last November. And that is that, for some time, we have been increasingly worried by post-election developments characterized by unrest and violence. And, as some parts of the OSCE region have slipped into a democratic recession, these clashes have precisely sent the wrong message.

They have made painfully clear that democracy is fragile. They are a clear reminder that no matter one country's democratic standing and influence, commitment to the OSCE's values and principles is an everyday effort.

If, by their words, democratically elected leaders encourage disrespect for their own democratic institutions and free media, this can lead to lawlessness and tragic consequences. We need to pay close attention to this worrying trend, find ways to remedy this erosion of public trust in our governments and institutions, and work towards building unity.

Trust builds on credibility, avoidance of double standards, and proper conduct. Failure to apply the same standards to friends and adversaries alike undermines this trust, with dire consequences for public confidence in the effective functioning of national – as well as international – institutions.

I see the OSCE as having a particular responsibility, and, at the same time, to be well-suited to the challenge.

After all, the ODIHR already conducts excellent work to make governments more responsive, accountable, and representative. The High Commissioner on National Minorities continues to promote the effective participation in public life of all segments of society. And the activities of Representative on Media Freedom are crucial to defend a free and independent press and combat misinformation.

With support from parliamentarians and with assistance from field operations, the OSCE already does this work effectively and efficiently.

Our Organization rests on a great potential with a comprehensive toolbox, deep expertise, flexibility, and comparative advantages. But the OSCE needs your support to realize the vision expressed in the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris.

As COVID-19 continues to strain all our societies, we must work together to choose dialogue over confrontation, and co-operation over unilateral action.

This is the essence of the Parliamentary Assembly's "Call for Action", which is steered by Ambassador Zannier and has already been endorsed by more than 50 former OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office, Parliamentary Assembly Presidents, Secretaries General and other Heads of Institutions. And I am sure that the current Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly will seek to endorse this Call for Action in a same way.

With a fiscal crisis looming over the OSCE region, it is also crucial that we provide the Organization with necessary resources. So, let me echo the call by Chairperson Linde to engage constructively in negotiations for the Unified Budget.

Dear Ambassadors,

Although we have not had the opportunity to gather in-person for the past year, our Members and Committees have remained actively engaged on behalf of the OSCE.

Earlier this month, the chairs of the humanitarian and migration committees put the spotlight on the crisis in and around Lipa in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In various other fields, you can continue to count on the strong engagement of our Special Representatives. Last month, my predecessor re-established positions to cover the important portfolios of the Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

We continue to monitor developments in Belarus and reiterate our support to facilitate meaningful dialogue between the authorities and legitimate representative of the political opposition and civil society.

Following the truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan, we can play a significant role in advancing constructive dialogue between parliamentarians of the two countries, including through formats that have already been tried and tested such as the Leinsweiler seminars.

In all conflict zones – including in Ukraine, in Georgia, and in Moldova – we will continue to bring attention to the plight of civilians caught up in war and hostilities.

I appreciate Chairperson Ann Linde's intention to strengthen gender equality in all aspects of the OSCE's work. You can count on the support of the OSCE PA to bring about greater women empowerment.

I have also noted Sweden's determination to safeguard civil society participation in the work of the Organization, which the Parliamentary Assembly has consistently called for.

We remain convinced that listening to the voices of civil society is an essential exercise to ensure that governments are responsive to the concerns, needs, and aspirations of their peoples.

Your Excellencies,

As I indicated earlier in my remarks, I will not be running for President during our next Annual Session. In July 2021, the Assembly must have a new President and Bureau. So, in the next six months, I will do my best to hand over the Assembly in good order and without commitments, which should rightly belong to the new President.

As we await a return to normality, I plan on calling our Bureau and Standing Committee to meet with perhaps greater frequency than heretofore to seek advice, to hear concerns, and ensure that political positions are adopted in a consensual manner. I expect that these online meetings will also provide opportunities for the OSCE PA to establish close contacts with the new OSCE executive officers. We look forward to welcoming Secretary General Schmid to our Bureau meeting next week.

As you already know, we have unfortunately decided it is not possible to hold our Winter Meeting in the Hofburg as usual. Preparations are currently underway to hold the event entirely online. We look forward to your participation in what has been a unique opportunity for direct interaction between parliamentarians and the governmental side of the OSCE for close to twenty years.

Looking ahead to July 2021, I find it most important to ensure that we have the rules and technology in place to hold remote elections, in the event that we are once again unable to meet in person for our Annual Session.

I also intend to try and bring to the Annual Session a set of proposed revisions to our Rules. A lot of work has already been undertaken. That initiative was launched after our Annual Session in Luxembourg in 2019. There will need to be many discussions with many people on this issue. I expect to give extra impetus to this project in the coming months, to ensure that proposed changes are shared and discussed with the Assembly leadership and key Delegations of the OSCE before they can be adopted.

Madam Chairperson, I thank you very much and the Members for your attention. I look forward to your comments and will try to answer any questions that you may wish to put.

Thank you very much.