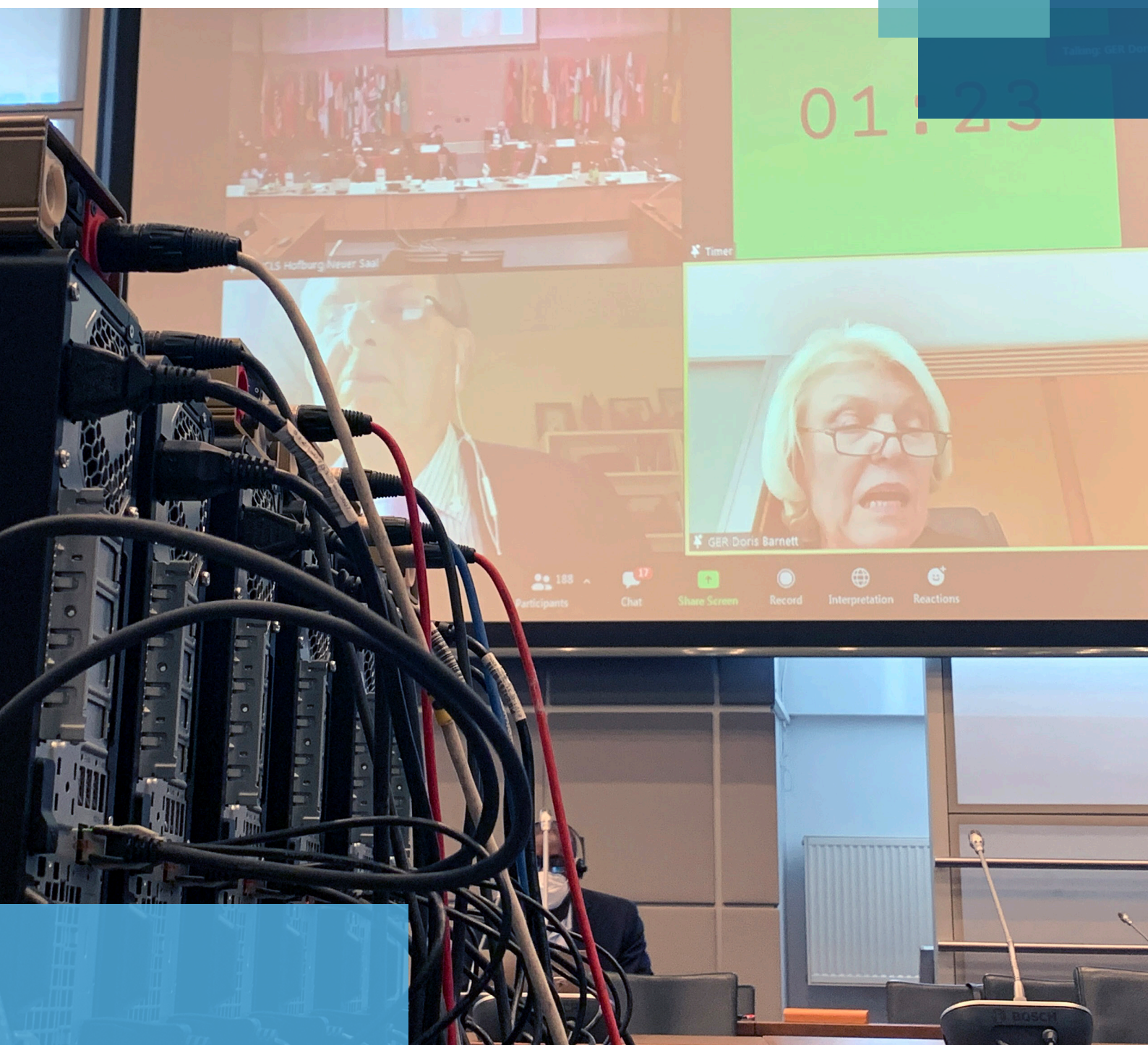


The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's 20th Winter Meeting



2021
24-26 February

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Summary

Some 270 parliamentarians gathered in an online format for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's 20th Winter Meeting – the first-ever virtual statutory meeting of the Assembly – to discuss issues such as protracted conflicts, the crisis in and around Ukraine, building economic and environmental security, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on security and democracy. The Standing Committee met on 24 February, followed by a joint session on 25 February and meetings of the general committees on 25-26 February.

The Winter Meeting was co-ordinated from OSCE headquarters in Vienna, where OSCE PA staff ran the technical aspects of the hybrid meeting, Secretary General Roberto Montella moderated a number of sessions, and some OSCE officials, as well as members of the OSCE PA's Austrian Delegation, addressed the parliamentarians who joined the meeting online. At the opening joint session, OSCE PA members heard keynote addresses by President of the Austrian National Council Wolfgang Sobotka, OSCE PA President Peter Lord Bowness, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Foreign Minister of Sweden Ann Linde, and OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid, followed by a question and answer session.

The meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs and Security was chaired by Richard Hudson (United States) and featured a presentation by Rapporteur Laurynas Kasciunas (Lithuania). The committee also heard presentations by Ambassador Neil Bush, Chair of the Security Committee of the OSCE Permanent Council and Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the OSCE; Ambassador Philip T. Reeker, Acting Assistant US Secretary of State, US Chairmanship of the Forum for Security Co-operation; Ambassador Kairat Abdrakhmanov, OSCE High Commissioner

on National Minorities; and Ambassador Yasar Halit Cevik, Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

Chaired by Doris Barnett (Germany), the OSCE PA's Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment was addressed by Ambassador Florian Raunig, Chair of the Economic and Environmental Committee; and Ambassador Vuk Žugić, Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities. Their presentations were followed by a discussion focused on how OSCE parliamentarians and governmental representatives of the OSCE can join forces in building economic and environmental security amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Committee Rapporteur Elona Hoxha (Albania) presented her ideas for the report that will be considered at the 29th OSCE PA Annual Session.

Kyriakos Hadjiyianni (Cyprus) chaired the meeting of the Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions, which heard presentations by Matteo Mecacci, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; Teresa Ribeiro, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media; and Anne-Kirsti Karlsen, Chair of the Human Dimension Committee of the OSCE Permanent Council. Rapporteur Kari Henriksen (Norway) presented her ideas for the report to be considered at the Annual Session.

The committee meeting also featured reports and discussion on recent election observation missions to Montenegro, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the United States of America. Committee Vice-Chair Michael Georg Link (Germany) reported on the US election observation mission, noting that it was a successful effort despite the difficult circumstances due to the pandemic.





Joint Session of the General Committees

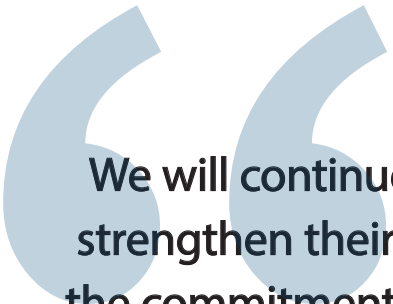
The opening joint session featured speeches by OSCE PA President Peter Lord Bowness (United Kingdom), President of the Austrian National Council Wolfgang Sobotka, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Foreign Minister of Sweden Ann Linde, and OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid, followed by a question and answer session.

Joint Session of the General Committees

Peter Lord Bowness, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President

President Bowness said that the OSCE must defend principle-based dialogue as the core of comprehensive security. Underlining that the pandemic has been a trying time for the OSCE, Bowness pointed out that the past year has also been impacted by social unrest and armed conflict.

the Organization. But President Bowness also stressed that challenging circumstances of the past year have demonstrated that the OSCE is resilient. He welcomed the OSCE's new Chairperson-in-Office, Secretary General and heads of the executive structures, noting the PA's eagerness to work with them on upholding OSCE values.



We will continue to help all OSCE participating States strengthen their democratic institutions and live up to the commitments taken by their leaders in Helsinki and in Paris all those years ago.

- President Peter Lord Bowness

Independent media, he said, face ever-growing political and financial pressure, while the simmering conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh led to outright war in the autumn. In Ukraine and in Georgia, there was no significant progress towards the implementation of existing agreements, the President regretted, and in Moldova, the pandemic has slowed the headway that had already been achieved in the settlement of the Transdniestrian issue.

The OSCE itself suffered through an unprecedented leadership vacuum that deeply impacted

"We will speak out when core OSCE principles are defiantly trampled," Bowness pledged. "We will continue to help all OSCE participating States strengthen their democratic institutions and live up to the commitments taken by their leaders in Helsinki and in Paris all those years ago."

Fortunately, he said, the Parliamentary Assembly can rest on a strong tradition of international co-operation, with important work being done by general committees and ad hoc committees.



Photo courtesy of Austrian National Council / Thomas Jantzen

Wolfgang Sobotka, President of the National Council of Austria

President Sobotka stressed the need for a strong commitment to multilateralism and inter-parliamentary diplomacy, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. He called for working together in order to ensure greater success in meeting challenges.

Another focus of his address was on the fight against terrorism and anti-Semitism, as well as questions related to the security of parliaments. In view of the many crises around the world, there is a palpable need for advocating political solutions that are fair and sustainable, he emphasized.

The OSCE is an indispensable organization, Sobotka said, especially in times of crisis. COVID-19

affects all countries and therefore requires global solutions, he noted, stressing how indispensable multilateralism is in this regard. The OSCE has set itself the goal of overcoming differences between States and building trust through co-operation on issues of conflict prevention, crisis management and conflict resolution, Sobotka recalled.

The parliamentary dimension of the OSCE should be given even greater importance, he said, noting in particular special challenges in eastern Ukraine and Belarus and the role the PA can play in building dialogue. Another important topic for which co-operation at the inter-parliamentary level is needed is the fight against and prevention of terrorism, Sobotka said.

Joint Session of the General Committees

Ann Linde, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Foreign Minister of Sweden

Foreign Minister Linde outlined the priorities of the Swedish OSCE Chairpersonship and highlighted the role of parliamentarians in the OSCE's work. "The parliamentary dimension of the OSCE is an important link between the people in the participating States and the work of the OSCE in Vienna and in the field," Linde said. "Through your participation in election observation missions, you strengthen the connection between our organization and the more than one billion citizens across our 57 countries and contribute to the role of the OSCE when it comes to democracy and the rule of law."

She highlighted the personal experience of parliamentarians in elections as providing vital

input to election observation, which is an essential contribution to the comprehensive concept of security.

She pledged to include exchanges of views with parliamentarians as an important component of her diplomacy, saying that the security situation facing the OSCE area calls for more common solutions and more multilateralism.

"As Chair, Sweden will continue to emphasize the fundamental commitments on which the OSCE was founded and to defend the European security order," Linde said. "Underpinning them is, of course, international law and the Charter of the United Nations."





Roberto Montella, Ulrika Funered, Helga Schmid and Wolfgang Sobotka at the Winter Meeting, 25 February 2021

Helga Maria Schmid, OSCE Secretary General

In her remarks, Secretary General Schmid said that the PA is an essential part of the OSCE family, noting that parliamentarians consistently provide fresh ideas for the Organization's work.

"The OSCE can better tackle the challenges we face, from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, if we work together," Schmid said. "The PA's recent Call for Action on higher-level engagement and support for the OSCE is an important and timely initiative. Let us reflect together on what we have achieved over the last nearly 50 years and what the OSCE should look like in the years to come. We should be ambitious and work toward concrete outcomes that will strengthen security for everyone."

She highlighted many potential areas for synergies between the PA and the OSCE's governmental side. "Many of the PA's Special Representatives and Ad Hoc Committees are working on issues that complement the OSCE's efforts," Schmid said, including issues like promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, fighting terrorism, combating corruption, strengthening co-operation with the Mediterranean region, and promoting dialogue as a key tool for conflict prevention and resolution. "The OSCE has much to gain from your expertise," she said. "So I will be looking for ways to co-operate even more closely with the PA and to further engage parliamentarians in our work."

Joint Session of the General Committees

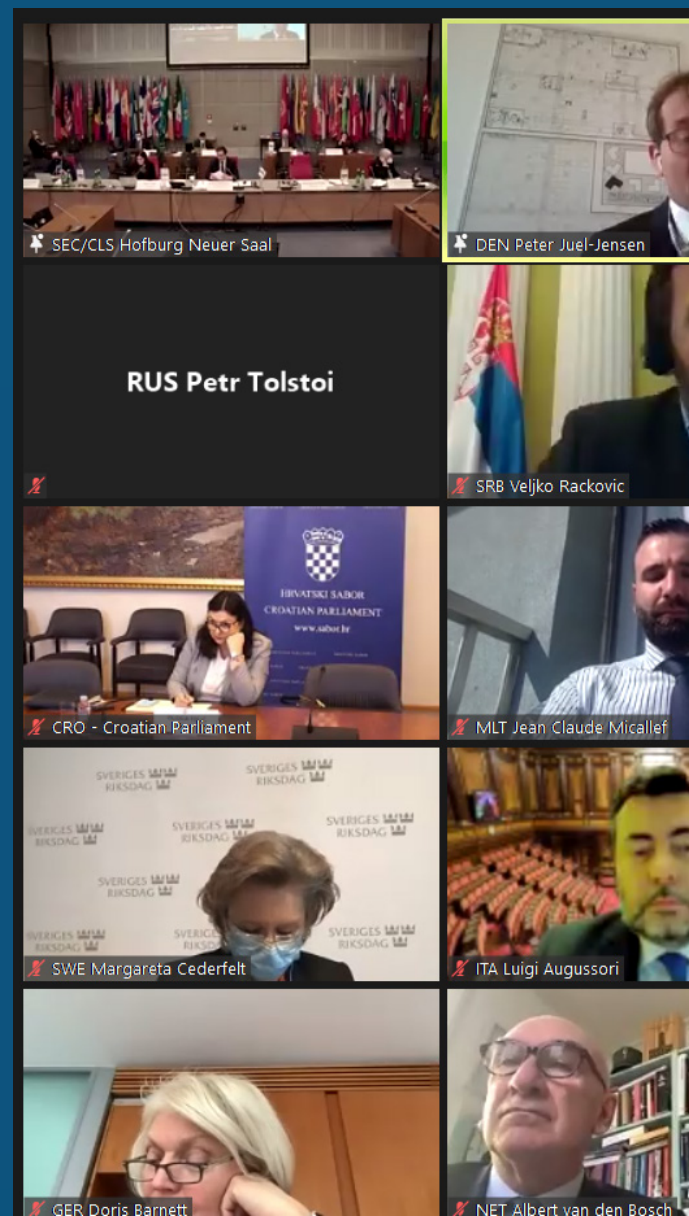
Questions and Debate

In the general debate, moderated by OSCE PA Secretary General Roberto Montella, members stressed the need to avoid creating new dividing lines in the OSCE area and raised issues including media freedom, protracted conflicts, and deteriorating human rights standards.

Another issue that was discussed was terrorism, with counter-terrorism emphasized as a common responsibility of the international community. The challenge of migration and refugees was also emphasized, with members stressing that a common approach is needed based on solidarity and responsibility-sharing.

The COVID-19 pandemic was cited as an example of why improvements are needed to the collective capacity of the international community to address common challenges.

OSCE parliamentarians stressed the need to re-commit to the spirit of multilateralism, especially in light of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. The resumption of armed confrontation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict last autumn was highlighted as a tragic example of what happens when protracted conflicts go unresolved.





	 <p>OSCE PA</p> <p>Timer</p>	 <p>OSCE PA Anna D...</p>	 <p>PA</p> <p>OSCE PA Anzhelika Ivanishcheva</p>
	 <p>BLR Savinykh Andrei</p>	 <p>TUR Selami Altinok</p>	 <p>SPA Pere Joan Pons</p>
	 <p>ROM Costel Neculai Dunava</p>	 <p>CAN Terry M. Mercer SENATOR</p>	 <p>AZE Azay Guliyev</p>
	 <p>KYR Isa Omurkulov</p>	 <p>MKD Igor Janushev</p>	 <p>UKR Artur Gerasymov</p>
	 <p>MNG Solongo Batsaikhan</p>	 <p>NOR Torill Eidsheim</p>	 <p>KAZ Askar SHAKIROV</p>

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security

Chaired by Richard Hudson (United States), the General Committee on Political Affairs and Security met on 25 February 2021. The meeting featured presentations by Neil Bush, Chair of the Security Committee of the OSCE Permanent Council and Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the OSCE; Philip T. Reeker, Acting Assistant US Secretary of State and Chair of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation; Kairat Abdrakhmanov, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities; and Yasar Halit Cevik, Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. The speakers' interventions provided an opportunity to update participants on their activities over the past months and plans for the coming year.



NEIL BUSH

HEAD OF DELEGATION OF THE UNITED STATES
TO THE OSCE

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security

Richard Hudson,
Chair of the First Committee

In his opening remarks, Richard Hudson (United States) noted the challenges accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the uninterrupted and effective work of the First Committee. He recalled the series of parliamentary web dialogues held in 2020 that explored the security implications of COVID. "These discussions have underlined the depth of the challenges to the political and security environment in the OSCE area that is the remit of this committee," Hudson said. "But they have also confirmed the validity of the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, and the unique role of parliaments and parliamentary diplomacy, to addressing these challenges."

He also highlighted ongoing challenges facing the OSCE, including political events in Belarus, Russia and Georgia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Laurynas Kasciunas,
Rapporteur of the First Committee

OSCE PA Rapporteur Laurynas Kasciunas (Lithuania) shared with First Committee members his ideas and intentions for the report he is preparing for the 29th Annual Session, focusing on conflicts and security threats in the OSCE area, including the situation in Georgia, the unfinished Transdniestrian settlement process, and the crisis in and around Ukraine. "We, as members of the OSCE PA, must go on calling for the restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognized borders," Kasciunas said.

His remarks focused on the need to resolve enduring conflicts in the OSCE area. In that context, he specifically mentioned the Russian Federation's actions in Ukraine and its annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Kasciunas also discussed the latest round of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and stressed the importance of achieving a lasting political solution by involving the OSCE



Minsk Group. Similarly, he referred to the process of borderization in Georgia and violation of affected people's human rights

Kasciunas expressed concern over the recent detention and repression of opposition figures in Belarus, Russia and Georgia and called for an immediate stop to such practices. Kasciunas finished by considering other persistent threats to the regional security order, including the emergence of cyberwarfare and hybrid threats. He noted with regret that there has been no substantial progress with regard to talks within the OSCE to improve military transparency and

Neil Bush, UK Ambassador to the OSCE, Chair of Security Committee

In his presentation, Neil Bush emphasized the crucial role parliamentarians play in the implementation of OSCE commitments, lauding in particular the engagement by the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism. Conveying his condolences about the attack in Vienna on 9 November 2020, Bush affirmed the importance of further efforts to combat violent extremism, as the COVID-19 pandemic had provided an environment conducive to such thought.

Amb. Bush also described the Security Committee of the OSCE Permanent Council's ability to achieve consensus on a Declaration on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime in the OSCE area at the 27th Ministerial Council in Tirana. In this connection, he informed participants that the value of criminal organizations was steadily growing, now being estimated to form an equivalent of nearly 1.5 per cent of the global GDP, largely unhindered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the last year having exposed society's reliance on technology, Bush drew attention to the importance of increased cooperation on matters surrounding cybersecurity. He ended by recognising the essential role gender dynamics played in the fight against transnational threats and encouraging the adoption of more appropriately calibrated responses.

Philip Reeker, Acting Assistant US Secretary of State and Chairman of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation

Philip Reeker identified the modernization of the Vienna Document as the central priority of the US Chairmanship of the Forum for Security Co-operation, as the current version, which was formulated nearly a decade ago, was simply no longer in keeping with today's demands. In this context, he noted that at the 27th Ministerial Council in Tirana 45 participating States had signed a joint declaration issuing their support for such an undertaking

In order to eliminate obstacles to the renewal of this significant confidence building tool, Amb. Reeker explained that he had decided to make the topic of the first regional security dialogue hosted by the US Chairmanship of the FSC that of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence. He added that since then, the FSC had also successfully held the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar, which gave senior military figures a chance to consult on issues like conventional deterrence, competition, co-operation and crisis management.

Other objectives listed by Reeker included addressing the threat emanating from SALW and creating a practice guide on the use of MANPADS by non-state actors. Finally, he reiterated the US's dedication to the promotion of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security

Kairat Abdrakhmanov, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

Kairat Abdrakhmanov said that in times of increasing diversity, one of the main tasks is to promote policies for integration to prevent the eruption of inter-ethnic conflicts.

Amb. Abdrakhmanov noted that he was supported in this endeavour by a wealth of recommendations on matters ranging from inter-state relations to more domestic issues, like the preservation of heritage, enhancement of public participation, and sensitization of law enforcement. The HCNM especially underlined last year's Recommendations on COVID-19 measures to

support social cohesion.

Moreover, he invited participants to upcoming activities on the education rights of national minorities, policing in multi-ethnic societies and socio-economic participation of disenfranchised women. In the meanwhile, Amb. Abdrakhmanov provided an overview of past cooperation with the OSCE PA, including joint events in Moldova and the US and suggested increased collaboration on future visits on any legislation that might affect national minorities.

Yasar Halit Cevik, Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine

Yasar Halit Cevik spoke about the current situation in Ukraine, stressing the need for all parties to build on the promising developments since the Trilateral Contact Group's adoption of the Additional Measures to Strengthen the Ceasefire on 22 July 2020 and to pursue more sustainable modalities for peace.

Amb. Cevik announced that in the past half year, violations of the Minsk Agreements declined dramatically to stand at one-sixth of the level before the summer. However, he also emphasized that amid a sharpening in rhetoric, the SMM is now observing once again observing an increase of prohibited conduct.

At the same time, he shared that the number of casualties from unexploded ordnance and other

explosive devices remains high and that restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians under the pretext of COVID-19 have resulted in serious problems for people on both sides of the line of contact.

While many difficulties could be resolved by further negotiations in the Trilateral Contact Group, Cevik indicated that preliminary concessions regarding an updated mine action plan and new disengagement areas have yet to be finalised and that dialogue on the establishment of a co-ordination mechanism have stalled.

In conclusion, Cevik appealed to all parties to ensure the SMM's unrestricted movement throughout the entire territory encompassed by its mandate.



Debate

Opening the debate, Vice-Chair Costel Neculai Dunava (Romania) reminded participants of the webinar organized by the First Committee last spring, which addressed COVID-19's impact on conflicts in the OSCE region. He contended that the resulting recommendations continued to be relevant and that parliamentarians must do their best to protect their constituents' welfare and security. Therefore, he looked forward to the 2021 Annual Session, which will focus on the urgent need to reinforce multilateralism in times of global crisis, providing a parliamentary call for future action.

In their remarks, participants discussed the crisis in and around Ukraine, the occupation of Georgia, and the division of Moldova. The recent clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh also attracted much attention, with the pending release of prisoners of war, accountability for breaches of international humanitarian law and plans for post-conflict reconstruction at the centre of many interventions. Speakers also voiced concern regarding the erosion of democracy in a number of participating States, denouncing Belarus' suppression of political rivals and the spread of misinformation and far-right violence in the United States.

General Committee on Political Affairs and Security

Debate

In their remarks, the parliamentarians addressed a number of topics, including the crisis in and around Ukraine, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other conflicts in the South Caucasus region.

On the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict it was pointed out that the discussions between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan at the Munich Security Conference should provide a basis for further discussions on achieving peace.

OSCE PA Vice-President Margareta Cederfeldt affirmed that the terms of the Minsk Agreement need to be finally implemented and other parliamentarians equally expressed their concern over the conflict. It was also stressed during the discussion that the Open Skies Treaty should be used as a framework for further progress in resolving the conflict.

Other topics included the role of education in tackling extremism, Chinese involvement in the development of the 5G Network and female involvement in conflict resolution.





General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment

Chaired by Doris Barnett on 26 February, the General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment heard presentations from Committee Rapporteur Elona Gjebrea Hoxha, Chairperson of the Economic and Environmental Committee (EEC) Florian Raunig, and Co-ordinator of the OSCE Economic and Environmental activities (OCEEA) Vuk Zugic, followed by a lively debate.



General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment

Doris Barnett, Chair of the Second Committee

Doris Barnett (Germany) in her opening remarks underlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies, economies and the environment. Barnett drew particular attention to the environmental security and in this regard, emphasized the vital role of parliaments in ensuring scrutiny of governmental activity and promoting inclusive, green recovery measures.

The Chair stressed the connection between COVID-19 mortality rates and the environmental degradation affecting human security, particularly the pervasive impact of air pollution. "Appallingly," she said, "most of the pre-existing 'conditions' that increase the risk of hospitalization and deaths among COVID-19 patients are the same diseases caused by short- and long-term exposure to sustained pollution."

She explained that the scale of the problem is greater than had been previously known, pointing to recent research that has found that exposure to fossil fuel emissions accounted for nearly one in five global deaths in 2018.

The immediate threat of pollution on public health is compounded by unsustainable development and global warming, she pointed out, and, like these related issues, requires common approaches and solutions.

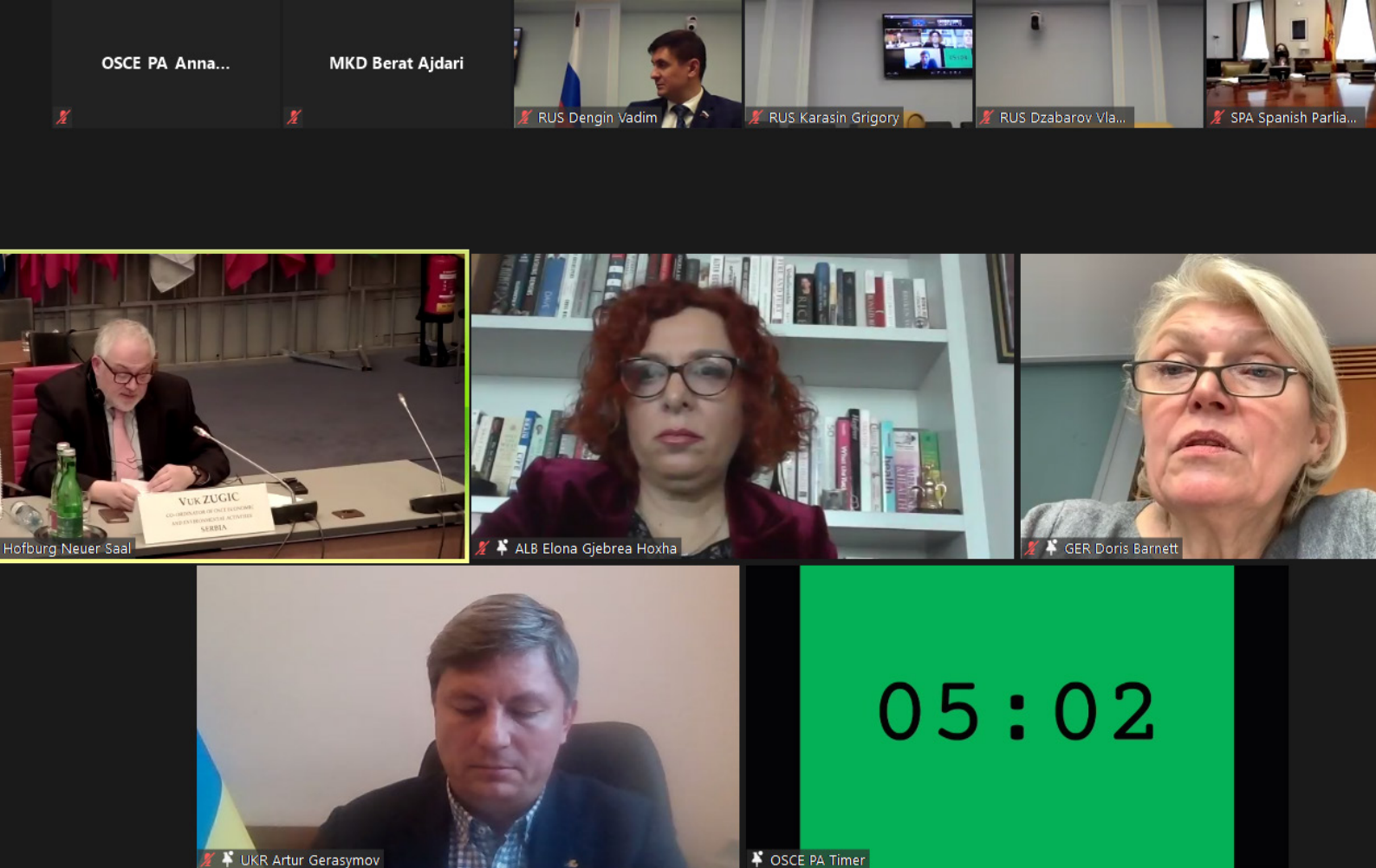
Elona Gjebrea Hohxa, Rapporteur of the Second Committee

Rapporteur Elona Gjebrea Hohxa (Albania) presented to the committee members her ideas and intentions for the report at the 29th Annual Session this July. She focused her remarks on themes such as economic recovery, migration management, good governance, economic empowerment of women, and pollution and climate change as top priorities to be addressed through new regulations, technologies, partnerships and development schemes.

Hoxha noted that the pandemic has underscored the need for co-ordinated efforts in addressing a multitude of complex, interlinked issues, for which the international community must provide strong and credible responses.

"We should collectively seize this opportunity and encourage our parliaments to play a pivotal role in forging the new, post-COVID-19, world order," Hoxha said. "An order which will have to effectively address our growing development needs while fully safeguarding the planet where we live."

Hoxha stressed that parliamentarians should take an active role in the post-pandemic recovery, underlining that inter-parliamentary bodies such as the OSCE PA offer useful platforms to share best practices and develop common approaches to speed up recovery and prevent future similar crises. She also noted that supporting women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for inclusive and equitable economic recovery, which is inextricably linked to security.



Presentation by Amb. Florian Raunig, Chair of the Economic and Environmental Committee, Permanent Representative of Austria to the OSCE

Florian Raunig briefed committee members about the 2021 Economic and Environmental Committee Work Plan. The EEC meetings will focus on environmental topics such as climate, biodiversity, sustainable economic development, COVID-19 economic recovery, good environmental governance, and hazardous waste management.

The disastrous effects of both the pandemic and the environmental degradation can only be dealt with by closely connecting mid-term economic measures with the long-term protection of environment, Amb. Raunig said.

With regard to the 29th Economic and Environmental Forum, he announced that it will be devoted to the OSCE Chairpersonship's priority of economic empowerment and increased economic participation of women.

The Economic and Environmental Forum deliberations, synergized with the outcomes of the committee's work and with the Economic and Environmental dimension implementation meeting in October - to focus on good governance - will create a solid foundation for the development of meaningful deliverables in view of the Ministerial Council in Sweden in December, he said.

General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment

Presentation by Vuk Žugić, Co-ordinator of the OSCE Economic and Environmental activities

Vuk Žugić presented the Work Plan of his office for 2021. The office will continue to support the participating States in addressing economic and environmental challenges, he said, including by coping with and recovering from the COVID-19 crisis. The Work Plan represents a combination of advisory and technical support, capacity-building to strengthen regional and transboundary co-operation, promotion of multi-stakeholder dialogue as well as gender and youth empowerment.

The office will continue to support the States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including through strengthening cross-dimensionality by co-operating with all the executive structures, the OSCE PA, Partner countries and other international organizations to promote security and sustainability.

In line with the Swedish Chairpersonship priorities, the Work Plan gives particular emphasis to the activities focused on the economic empowerment of women. Ambassador Žugić added that gender equality is critical to the achievement of macroeconomic stability and should be assigned high priority on the policy-makers agenda, including parliamentarians.

Debate

In the discussion, members raised issues including climate change, corruption, money laundering, infrastructure development, the economic effects of COVID on women, and cybersecurity. Committee Vice-Chair Artur Gerasymov raised concerns about the impacts of conflicts on environmental security, highlighting the problems that his country of Ukraine faces in this regard.

OSCE PA Special Representative on Arctic Issues, Torill Eidsheim (Norway) stressed that the OSCE as security organization must decisively address security threats stemming from climate change and environmental degradation. Irene Charalambides (Cyprus), Special Representative on Fighting Corruption, highlighted political will and coordinated response at national and international levels as key to preventing corruption and promoting good-governance.

It was noted that with COVID lockdowns, the internet has become more indispensable than ever and therefore it has become increasingly important to ensure digital access and freedom of information online. Participants focused on the need to urgently promote green, sustainable recovery that incorporates gender and youth perspectives. Members also discussed the adverse impact of the pandemic on employment, especially of vulnerable populations. The parliamentarians underlined, in particular, that multilateralism is key in addressing the effects of the pandemic and in building a more sustainable and resilient development model.



General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

Opening the meeting of the Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions on 26 February 2021, Chair Kyriakos Hadjiyianni (Cyprus) noted that much has changed since the last time the committee met a year ago, but the human rights problems have only continued, stressing in particular the importance of humanitarian protection in conflict zones. He updated members on his recent activities, highlighting his focus on the human rights situation and humanitarian protection in conflict zones. The Chair also thanked Michael Link and Kari Henriksen for their strong support and co-operation. He described their ongoing exchanges on human rights challenges in the OSCE region with a number of officials in various countries and his intention to build constructive dialogues that can result in positive changes. To conclude, the Chair expressed his satisfaction with the OSCE PA's response to the challenges that emerged this year and its upholding of OSCE principles in the midst of a global pandemic.



General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

Kari Henriksen, Rapporteur of the Third Committee

Presenting her ideas for the 30th Annual Session, Rapporteur Kari Henriksen (Norway) noted the worrying decline of trust in public institutions and governments across the OSCE region. “The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been deep and will be long-lasting, with profound impact on the lives of almost all of our populations within and beyond the OSCE region,” Henriksen said.

She stressed in particular the need to maintain focus on the most vulnerable members of society, including those impacted by conflicts, and noted that COVID-related social and economic challenges have been particularly hard on women and children, with increased domestic abuse related to lockdown orders. Migrants are also

faced with additional closures of borders and serious threats to their well-being in migrant camps, she pointed out. Citing the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine, the Rapporteur called for greater attention on the serious humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts.

The Rapporteur drew attention to the need to adopt a serious approach to freedom of expression on social media platforms and to find solutions to the misuse of social media that both protect free speech and protect individuals and groups against discrimination, abuse and persecution. Finally, she stressed the importance of fostering inclusive and tolerant societies which bolster the foundations of democracy and democratic processes, which have been impacted by



the pandemic. Henriksen reminded parliamentarians of their mission to ensure the fulfillment of common commitments and to respond to the needs and concerns of citizens, as well as the importance of multilateralism to improve the situation of human rights across the OSCE region.

Henriksen also highlighted the stress that COVID has placed on healthcare systems. "It is time that we recognize effective healthcare as a full-fledged human right," she said. "The state has a responsibility to protect its population from health challenges just as it has a responsibility to protect against terror attacks or other hostile forces."

In the discussion, OSCE parliamentarians raised issues such as the need to follow international humanitarian law during armed conflict, media freedom, gender equality, difficulties facing refugees and migrants, the imperative of building resilient societies in order to deal with challenges such as COVID-19, and the need for constructive dialogue on human rights concerns. Discussion also focused on the humanitarian implications of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Anne-Kirsti Karlsen, Chair of the Human Dimension Committee of the OSCE Permanent Council and Permanent Representative of Norway to the OSCE

Ambassador Karlsen highlighted the importance of protecting and strengthening fundamental rights, democratic institutions, gender equality, as well as the safety and wellbeing of citizens to uphold peace and stability in the OSCE region. She described the plans of the OSCE Human

Dimension Committee for the year which were established with a holistic approach following consultations with delegations to define human rights priorities.

As a result, Ambassador Karlsen noted the Human Dimension Committee will focus its work on media freedom, women's participation in politics, the social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, combatting intolerance and non-discrimination, the right to peaceful assembly, prevention and eradication of torture, trust in political parties, national minorities and indigenous peoples, and public confidence in electoral processes.

The Human Dimension Committee will focus on the commitments participating States have already made and will seek to create a space to share experiences on how to fulfill existing commitments, she said. Ambassador Karlsen stressed the vital role OSCE parliamentarians play in the work of the OSCE Human Dimension through their ability to raise important issues with their parliaments, governments and constituencies. She concluded by praising the contribution of the OSCE PA to election observation and its successful implementation of EOMs during a global pandemic.

General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

Matteo Mecacci, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Matteo Mecacci opened his remarks by emphasizing ODIHR's continuous commitment to monitoring democratic institutions and human rights amidst the pandemic, noting ODIHR was the first international organization to resume election observation during the pandemic. He thanked the OSCE PA for its co-operation and its dedication to election monitoring despite strenuous circumstances.

Director Mecacci shared his concerns over the impact COVID-19 restrictions had on human rights, fundamental freedoms and the function of democratic institutions, adding the pandemic was a stress test for democratic institutions. ODIHR's analysis of emergency measures adopted across the OSCE region revealed these measures overall lacked legal certainty and

proportionality and were often applied with little consideration for vulnerable groups, he said. Mecacci noted with concern that emergency measures linked to the pandemic had also greatly weakened parliamentary oversight, legislative processes and in some cases the legislative function itself.

According to Mecacci, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for efficient multilateral institutions, to engage citizens and civil society, to establish trust between citizens and institutions, to provide citizens with accurate information, as well as the need for social justice, protection and inclusion of vulnerable groups. Mecacci concluded by encouraging parliamentarians to advocate for the use of ODIHR's expertise with their governments.





Teresa Ribeiro, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Teresa Ribeiro opened her remarks by emphasizing the great importance of the parliamentary dimension in the work of the OSCE. She urged participating States to consider human rights and fundamental freedoms as part of the solution rather than an impediment in responding to the challenges they face, expressing the readiness of her office to co-operate with national parliaments to ensure legislation adopted across the OSCE region is fully in line with commitments on freedom of expression.

In regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ribeiro noted that while strong measures were important to counter the spread of the disease, these measures had to be necessary, legitimate, non-discriminatory, temporary and proportionate to achieve their objectives while also needing to be subject to regular oversight.

Ribeiro stressed the important and unprecedented role of technology and social media in this crisis allowing citizens to remain informed on the situation and stay connected. However, she regretted the further spread of disinformation and

misinformation, sometimes encouraged by state actors, and the growing distrust in media and journalists. She also noted with concern that the crisis was instrumentalized by some state actors to silence critical voices.

Discussing the role of governments and parliaments in relation to the protection of freedom of expression during the crisis, Ribeiro called on participating States to promote media plurality, investigative journalism, clear regulation and independent oversight on digital platforms, media literacy and an enabling environment for journalists.

She also encouraged participating States to ensure data protection and non-discrimination against certain media outlets and to combat incitement to hatred. Ribeiro concluded her remarks by recalling that parliamentary oversight and control is also crucial to ensure that emergency measures are constantly reviewed, adjusted or lifted once their legitimate aim ceases to exist or the measure is no longer proportionate to the purpose it should serve.

General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

OSCE PA EOM reports

The heads of recent OSCE PA election observation missions presented reports on the missions which were held in 2020 once EOMs resumed amidst the pandemic and in the beginning of 2021. Margareta Cederfelt (Sweden) reported on the 30 August 2020 elections in Montenegro, Elna Hoxha (Albania) reported on the 31 October 2020 elections in Georgia, Michael Georg Link (Germany) reported on the 3 November 2020 elections in the United States of America, Kristian Vigenin (Bulgaria) reported on the 10 January 2021 elections in Kazakhstan, and Peter Juel-Jensen (Denmark) reported on the 10 January 2021 elections in Kyrgyzstan.

Debate: The impact of COVID on democracy and elections

In addressing the debate on “The impact of COVID on democracy and elections,” parliamentarians discussed the assessments of elections and recommendations produced by ODIHR and the PA, the measures and best practices adopted to hold elections during the pandemic, and the various challenges raised by COVID-19 in relation to human rights.

During the general debate, members of the OSCE PA delegations raised various points related to political prisoners, human rights violations in conflict areas, torture, xenophobia, racism, freedom of religion and belief, corruption, gender equality, women’s rights, gender discrimination, migration, the rights of refugees, the rights of minorities, the right to free and fair elections, impunity of human rights violations, and the critical role of parliaments in responding to crises.





Standing Committee Meeting

The Standing Committee of the OSCE PA, consisting of the heads of national delegations and members of the Bureau, met on 24 February 2021 online to hear reports and discuss ongoing Assembly work. The meeting was the first event of the 2021 Winter Meeting.

Report of the President of the OSCE PA, Peter Lord Bowness

Peter Lord Bowness (United Kingdom) in his report highlighted that on 2 December 2020 the Bureau endorsed a set of provisional emergency rules if an in-person gathering in Bucharest for the OSCE PA Annual Session proved to be impossible due to the epidemiological situation.

In thanking former President George Tsereteli, Bowness highlighted his work at the PA and briefed the participants on the OSCE “Call for Action: Reaffirming a Common Purpose” initiative which was launched at the OSCE Ministerial Council in December, followed by an online roundtable discussion in January.

He concluded by emphasizing that 52 former OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office, Presidents of the OSCE PA, Secretaries General and other Heads of Institutions of the OSCE endorsed this initiative, together with the active participation of the Bureau of the PA.

Report of the Treasurer of the OSCE PA, Peter Juel-Jensen

Peter Juel-Jensen (Denmark) stressed that the PA’s external independent professional auditor gave the PA a positive assessment of the financial management for 2020.

The Treasurer in his report noted that the Assem-

bly’s current budget reflects the amounts saved in the previous years, resulting in a reduced quota paid by all Delegations and concluded underlining that the PA will be applying this measure for the second year in a row, while in 2022 the PA will return to standard procedures.

Report of the Secretary General of the OSCE PA, Roberto Montella

Roberto Montella said that besides the coronavirus, we are also facing a virus of selfishness and indifference that is reflected in other challenges such as climate change, corruption, organized crime, terrorism and movement of people.

He commended the work of the Secretariat, which managed to adapt quickly to the pandemic by adopting a new way of working, and developed creative solutions. The Secretary General recalled the activities carried out in person: election observation missions in Montenegro, Georgia, United States, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and announced that the PA is planning two EOMs in Bulgaria (4 April) and Albania (25 April).

In thanking the Albanian Chairmanship which led the Organization in 2020 and delivered four new Heads of Institutions and in welcoming the new Swedish Leadership underlined that the PA triggered the “OSCE Call for Action: Reaffirming a Common Purpose” initiative following the failure to reach consensus on the reappointment of OSCE Heads of Institution last summer.



He concluded by announcing that Lamberto Zannier joined the International Secretariat as a consultant to co-ordinate the efforts of the PA to bring back political attention to the OSCE, also in view of the 50th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

Debate

Parliamentarians highlighted the importance of strengthening multilateralism during the pandemic and co-ordinated efforts on vaccination. The conflict in Ukraine and its ongoing security threats were also raised. Speakers noted that during this challenging period some important anniversaries occurred: the 45th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the 10th an-

niversary of the Astana Summit of the OSCE. Appreciation was expressed with regard to the consensus on appointing all four Heads of Institution of the Organization during the Ministerial Council Meeting. A number of speakers underlined the importance of the efforts of the PA in continuing election observation missions and promoting sustainable peace and reconciliation, inter alia, between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Speakers also welcomed the establishment of the Association of Former Members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and appreciated that it will be independent from the PA.

Standing Committee Meeting

Report of the Chair of the Sub-Committee on the Rules of Procedure and Working Practices, President Peter Lord Bowness

Peter Lord Bowness (United Kingdom) presented a set of emergency provisions to the Rules of Procedure, noting that the measures are intended to ensure that voting can take place during the Annual Session if a full in-person meeting proves to be impossible.

In his remarks, Lord Bowness highlighted that the Secretariat will make sure that the most secure electronic voting system will be in place. With no objections, the emergency provisions were approved.

Report by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism, Reinhold Lopatka

Reinhold Lopatka (Austria) underlined that terrorism poses a major threat to international security and regional stability, terrorist groups in fact are quickly finding new ways to advance their grim agenda. Moreover, COVID-19 gave new opportunities for terrorists and violent extremists to recruit new sympathizers, targeting the most vulnerable layers of our societies.

Lopatka noted that the COVID-19 crisis revitalized many radical movements of right-wing extremists, which became especially dangerous for governments and parliaments. Notably, both radical Islamic groups and right-wing extremists

use similar communication strategies – especially on social media – for recruiting. Lopatka's report also featured the consideration that supporting international assistance and promoting responsible solutions to the challenge posed by detained terrorists – usually in extremely poor conditions in Syria and Iraq – must be a top priority in our counter-terrorism efforts.

Lopatka remarked that the CCT has been particularly successful in promoting a greater parliamentary engagement in counter-terrorism matters by significantly expanding its network of partnerships through concrete activities and formal agreements, for example the Memorandum of Understanding with UNOCT and co-operation with Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM). He stressed that the CCT can play a significant role in five areas: prevention of terrorism, prosecution, reintegration and de-radicalization, support to the victims of terrorism, border security and information sharing, intersection of terrorism with other serious crimes.

Report by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, Margareta Cederfelt

Margareta Cederfelt (Sweden) underlined that the Ad Hoc Committee managed to hold eight online meetings focusing, inter alia, on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee and migrant populations and the humanitarian situation in Lesbos and Bosnia and Herzegovina. She emphasized that, with regard to COVID-19, the committee followed up on this topic with a parliamentary web dialogue at the end of May 2020

focusing on “Protecting refugees and migrants during the pandemic: Camps and closed centers under lockdown.”

Cederfelt outlined other key activities of the committee: due to concern for the situation in Lesbos in the wake of the fire which destroyed the Moria Reception and Identification Centre, the committee addressed the humanitarian situation during its second online meeting in September. In addition, the committee engaged in comprehensive discussions on 27 October with the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum as well as non-governmental organizations.

Committee members have also been monitoring the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been experiencing increased migratory pressure as migrants have sought alternative routes to the EU via its border with Croatia. In this regard, on 17 December 2020, the Committee convened an online roundtable on the migratory situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina with representatives of the OSCE Mission, UNHCR and dedicated NGOs. During this meeting, the committee was made aware of an impending humanitarian crisis in connection with the imminent closure of the Lipa camp.

Cederfelt commended Committee Vice-Chair Gudrun Kugler (Austria) for keeping the humanitarian situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina high on the agenda and for helping secure €1 million in humanitarian assistance from her government.

As for future activities Cederfelt announced that the Committee will continue to follow developments in Lesbos and Bosnia and Herzegovina and to carry out field visits as soon as conditions permit. Furthermore, the Committee wishes to pursue co-operation with the OSCE in the field of combating human trafficking along migration routes.

Debate

During the debate the speakers voiced their concerns on the security challenges and on the humanitarian situation in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ukraine. Reference was also made to foreign terrorist fighters in conflict zones and to the need to intensify efforts to find peaceful solutions with the support of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

Reports by OSCE PA Special Representatives

The Standing Committee Meeting also featured reports by the OSCE PA Special Representatives.

Special Representative on Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Intolerance Ben Cardin (United States) expressed alarm for the violent consequences of extremism, discrimination and prejudice throughout the OSCE region and noted that the COVID-19 aggravated pre-existing inequalities disproportionately impacting, inter alia, people of color, heightened anti-Asian discrimination and conspiracy theorists.

Standing Committee Meeting

Special Representative on Mediterranean Affairs Pascal Allizard (France) noted that the Mediterranean region is facing a number of unresolved conflicts, tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, and ongoing crises in Syria and Libya. He underlined that new actors are emerging in the Mediterranean, changing the regional landscape, such as Turkey, with their territorial claims. In addition, the Russian Federation has become a major actor in the Middle East and Black Sea region, and China is continuing to expand its investments.

Special Representative on Gender Issues Hedy Fry (Canada) welcomed the appointment of high-level OSCE officials, including Helga Schmid as Secretary General, Teresa Ribeiro as Representative on Freedom of the Media, and Ann Linde as Chairperson-in-Office. She noted that COVID-19 has exposed women and girls to heightened levels of domestic violence exacerbated by stay-at-home orders. Fry reported a 2016 survey of women politicians by the Inter-Parliamentary Union which found that among female respondents who held office, 82 per cent had experienced psychological violence, such as targeted sexual and sexist remarks and threats; 22 per cent had experienced sexual violence; and 26 per cent had experienced physical violence. Special Representative Fry concluded underlining the threats of sexual violence against female opposition activists in Belarus, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and encouraging to speak publicly in support of colleagues who are being targeted.

Special Representative on Human Trafficking Issues Chris Smith (United States) noted that traffickers did not shut down during the pandemic, but adapted their activities and methods meanwhile vulnerable people were made even more vulnerable by the virus and its effects on the economy. He encouraged to investigate and prosecute traffickers through financial transactions, inter alia, cryptocurrencies. Smith also expressed regret for the lack of consensus last December to strengthen OSCE commitments in relation to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concluded stressing that we must make it a top priority to educate our children to keep them safe online.

Special Representative on Eastern Europe Daniela De Ridder (Germany) underlined the key importance of promotion of dialogue to enhance diplomacy, rule of law and defense of human rights, especially with regard to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. The Special Representative informed Members that she had discussions with the Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and noted that from the two sides she heard different perspectives when it comes to the process of democratization in the country. De Ridder concluded highlighting that the German Parliament collected toys destined for the children of those imprisoned and stressed that children should not be held responsible for the actions of their parents.

Special Rapporteur on Disinformation and Propaganda Oscar Mina (San Marino) in his report noted that media outlets dissemi-

nate information that at times can be misleading, hence it is often difficult to interpret the news. Special Representative Mina also said that San Marino is committed to contribute to the OSCE, inter alia, he is looking forward to collaborate with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OSCE Chairmanship.

Special Representative on Central Asia Reinhold Lopatka (Austria) informed participants that elections were observed in Kyrgyzstan and will be observed in Uzbekistan. He also expressed his hope for working together with the Delegations of Central Asian countries and Mongolia to facilitate the engagement in the PA's activities.

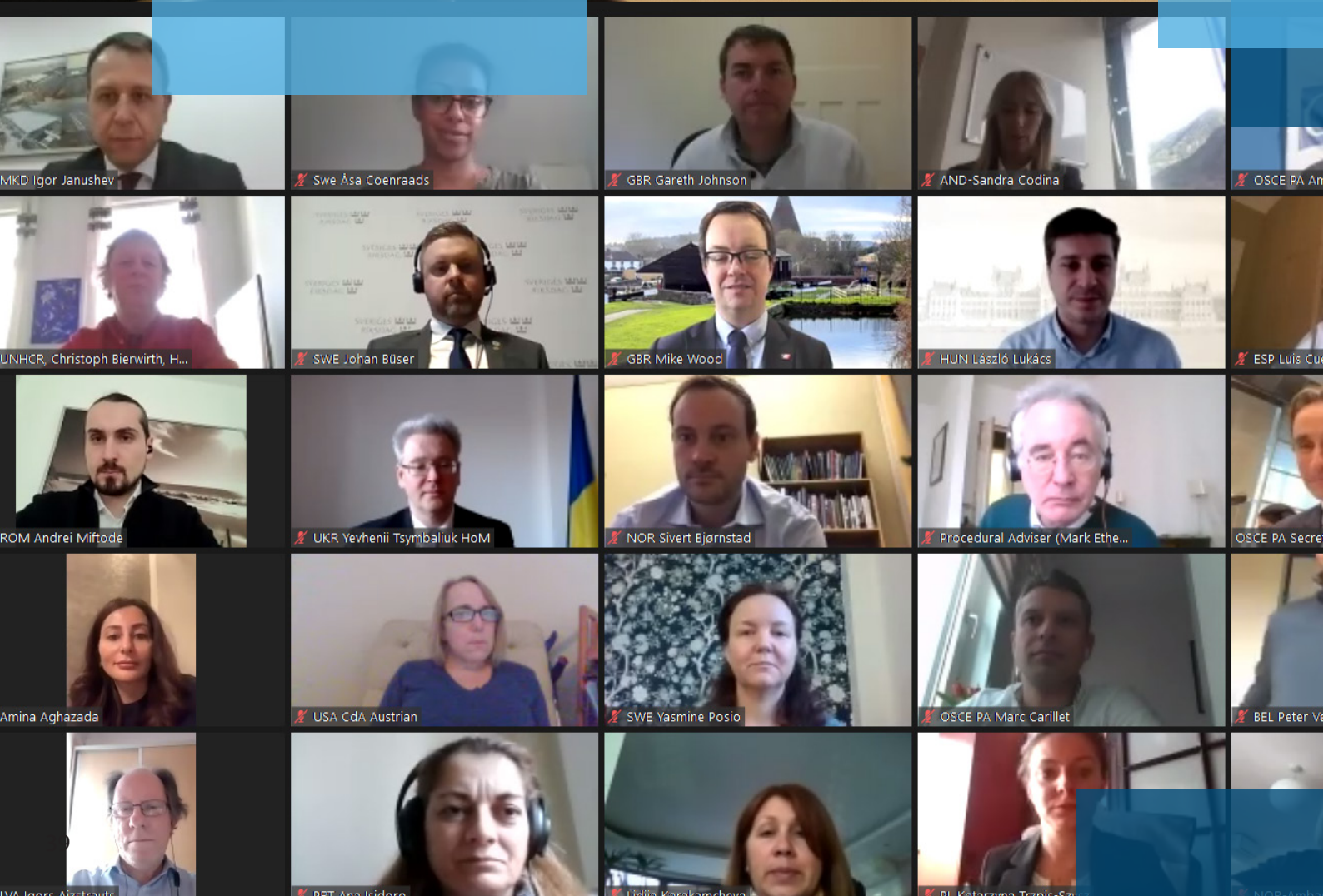
Special Representative on Arctic Issues Torill Eidsheim (Norway) underlined that her priorities are to look into the effects of climate change on Arctic societies and raise awareness on how what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic. Eidsheim also pointed out the importance of enhancing legislative and oversight capacities by parliamentarians, encourage the adjustment of national legislation to relevant international agreements and mobilize adequate resources, de-politicizing the topic.

Special Representative on Fighting Corruption

Irene Charalambides (Cyprus) underlined that journalists and parliamentarians are at the front-line in the fight against corruption. Parliamentarians are responsible for developing anti-corruption legislation and journalists play a vital role in fostering transparency and accountability. Furthermore, Charalambides said, strong legal frameworks are essential to provide effective safeguards for freedom of expression and safe working conditions for the media. She noted that ultimate beneficial ownership laws should be adopted throughout the region and justice systems should be sheltered from undue influence aimed at "silencing" investigative journalism.

Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement Pia Kauma (Finland) explained that burdensome registration procedures, pressure by tax authorities and demonization through labelling as "foreign agents" are only some of the efforts to silence critical voices. She underlined that widespread restrictions on freedom of assembly caused by COVID-19 have also significantly reduced the space for public engagement. Special Representative Kauma concluded by emphasizing the need to organize in person events as soon as possible, to provide interested groups with an opportunity to raise issues directly with OSCE PA Members.









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