

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Address by OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President João Soares

**Permanent Council, Vienna
19 November 2009**

Distinguished Excellencies, dear friends,

I ran for the office of President because I believe deeply in this organization, and that we must always remember to be loyal to the spirit of Helsinki.

That is why I have worked to balance the activity of the Organization between the “East and West of Vienna,” while at the same time ensuring the full respect for the principles of the OSCE in an inclusive, not exclusive, manner involving all participating States. We continue to work hard to ensure that dialogue between parliamentarians in the Assembly remains open, regardless of difficulties that may exist between governments.

It has also been important for me to continue the Parliamentary Assembly’s role as a forum for cutting-edge debate, such as the one we hosted in Toronto last fall on Georgia, this year’s Winter Meeting debate on European security architecture, and the one we just hosted on climate change at our Fall Meetings in Athens. This was a most timely discussion just weeks before the Copenhagen climate conference.

As an integral part of the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly is involved on many fronts – contributing to dialogue in all three dimensions; assisting the OSCE in trying to solve remaining conflicts and preventing new ones from erupting; increasing the respect for human rights; fighting against human trafficking; and strengthening OSCE election observation. And I have tried, and I will continue to try to encourage more work on the national level to increase the number and influence of women in politics.

As parliamentarians, we are not aiming to replace the crucial role of diplomats in negotiating settlements, but parliamentary diplomacy is an important complement, and we must make sure we fulfil that role. Democracy plays a vital role in long-term solution to conflicts, and MPs can bring this aspect to the table. Parliamentarians also have a critical role in ‘selling’ agreements to

the public, which can sometimes be sceptical of new settlements. Our presence in all OSCE activities raises the level of public acceptance and contributes to achieving essential democratic aims, particularly transparency and accountability in governmental institutions and public life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Election observation will continue to be a priority area for the Assembly, because parliamentarians' expert political judgment is critical to credible observation assessments. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has, ever since the first Russian Duma elections in 1993, led OSCE election observation, completing over 90 election observation missions with the participation of more than 3,000 parliamentarians. I am sure you'll agree that parliamentarians provide unmatched credibility to the OSCE's efforts in election observation, because they, themselves, are practitioners of politics and elections.

To underscore the importance of the role that parliamentarians play in democratic processes, Assembly Members have participated in many elections observation missions also during this past year. In January next year, I will personally lead the OSCE PA's observation mission to the important Presidential election in Ukraine. Starting with my recent visit to Kyiv, our preparations for that mission are well underway. I have consistently and actively engaged in discussions on improving OSCE election observation activities and underlined the unique role of parliamentarians in this work, particularly the importance of adhering to the 1997 Co-operation Agreement between the Parliamentary Assembly and the ODIHR. Such adherence is today, as it has always been, the key to good and successful cooperation within the OSCE family on election observation.

The strength of OSCE election observation is that participating States are being held accountable to commitments that they themselves have created and agreed to, mainly in the Copenhagen Document from 1990. If we go beyond these commitments, we undermine our own credibility.

I note that in his address to the Permanent Council on 29 October, the Director of the OSCE ODIHR indirectly called on those – who have not done so yet - to sign on to the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*. This came as a surprise to me, since as the Director of the ODIHR well knows, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has chosen not to sign on to this Document. We have argued that individual OSCE Institutions are not in a position to unilaterally decide to apply standards which have not been agreed by participating States. We regret that Members of the Permanent Council have not studied the *Declaration of Principles* in detail, because I am convinced that participating States would agree with the Assembly that this document includes severe technical and political flaws, including among others, provisions which allow for the undisclosed funding of observers and clauses which would eliminate even the possibility for observation in some OSCE participating States as a rule. If such rules were to be implemented, they could prevent election observation entirely.

The Parliamentary Assembly continues to be a very strong supporter of the OSCE's field missions. These missions represent the core of the OSCE's current work, and they must be

maintained and indeed strengthened. I have visited almost all missions – ten of them this year, and I can personally attest to the excellent work that the hard-working, dedicated individuals in these missions do under often difficult circumstances.

Within the Assembly, there are a number of Members who have developed particular expertise in certain countries and regions, including in Eastern Europe, South East Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and who regularly visit OSCE missions in these countries. We are proud to lend support to missions' work.

It is a fact that greater involvement of the Parliamentary Assembly raises visibility and awareness in interested circles. That is one of the important aspects of a continued and reinforced parliamentary element in all OSCE activities, not only with member parliaments.

We also strongly support the involvement of NGOs that are devoted advocates of human rights issues. However, round-table discussions between civil servants and NGO representatives should never be allowed to replace orderly democratic decision-making by the elected representatives of the people. In functioning democracies, parliamentarians remain the only legitimate representatives of civil society.

The Parliamentary Assembly will continue to address current issues and will continue as a forum in which fresh ideas for improving the OSCE can take shape. In the coming year, I expect the Assembly to bring a particular focus to issues related to rule of law in the OSCE and of the serious problems posed by corruption and transnational crime. The destabilizing effects of these challenges must be addressed head-on, as they increasingly present very real security threats throughout the OSCE region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our organization continues to be an instrument for the kind of political dialogue that ensures peace, security, and freedom and must continue to work for a secure Europe without divisions. In this regard, the dialogue requested by Presidents Sarkozy and Medvedev and which the Parliamentary Assembly debated during the Winter Meeting has been taking place since Corfu. I want to commend the Greek Chairmanship for their initiatives and their stewardship.

I urge a continuation and deepening of this dialogue on European security issues and for all participating states to embrace this unique opportunity. We should be at the forefront of change. Looking back is not an option, the Cold War is a thing of the past. We must now use modern thinking to overcome our current challenges.

Last week we commemorated the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago. The CSCE has certainly made a major contribution to ending the Cold War. With too much old East-West thinking still in the minds of many, we have to revive the spirit of Helsinki. It seems that the Corfu Process has at least seen some good will in this direction. This needs to be continued.

We must not be afraid to address difficult topics. We must show the courage that our leaders showed in the 1970s that led to the Helsinki Final Act. That is the only way for us to continue to

make the OSCE relevant. The dialogue should not know any taboos, it should be frank and open and show the collective interest of everybody to come to concrete results. After the disappointing results of the “Reform Discussion” that took place five years ago, there is now a real need to make substantial progress on OSCE reform.

We must renew our devotion to OSCE commitments and we must maintain the OSCE as a pan-European, Euro-Atlantic, and Eurasian forum for dialogue with a strong and effective field presence. We must embrace a discussion aimed at enhancing security and recommit ourselves to maintaining the OSCE’s flexibility through increased transparency. I hope that all representatives, particularly in the Permanent Council, will be more willing to engage in real and open dialogue than we have seen in the past.

It is my hope that the opportunity offered by the Corfu Process will also be used to consider improved transparency within the OSCE. Just as in each democratic participating State, parliamentary oversight is vital in international organizations, as we must always be accountable to the people we serve and whose tax money we spend.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Helsinki process has been about opening up societies and about dialogue. It is not in line with the spirit of Helsinki that the Permanent Council conducts its work largely in private, behind closed doors. This democratic deficit remains to be addressed. In my one and a half years as OSCE PA President, I have continuously pushed for greater transparency in the OSCE. PC meetings need to open up and allow for the presence of the press and the interested public, particularly when it comes to the debates under Current Issues.

I believe that the OSCE’s flexibility has been its strongest asset. Unfortunately, I have noticed an increasing tendency for OSCE activities to get bogged down in bureaucracy and in the cumbersome decision-making process here in Vienna. This is most worrisome. I am seriously concerned with the lack of political relevance of the OSCE, which is largely due to the current decision-making process, which not only lacks transparency, but has also resulted in the inability of these decision-making structures to reach agreements, including on key political issues. In this context, I would once again like to express my deep regret that the OSCE Mission in Georgia has had to close.

During our recent Annual Session in Vilnius, the OSCE PA passed a resolution with concrete proposals on how transparency and accountability can be improved within the OSCE in order to strengthen the Organization. A few months ago, I wrote to your foreign ministers, and I was pleased to receive responses indicating an understanding of the need for improved accountability in the Organization. In this regard, I hope that you will all reconsider the proposals put forward in the Colloquium on ‘The Future of the OSCE’ which the OSCE PA organized in 2005. I would like to hear your comments on these recommendations. This important, valuable, and relevant document has never even been acknowledged or discussed in this forum.

The Corfu process effectively asks the question: ‘where is the OSCE heading?’ I hope that the result will be a stronger political role that enables the Organization to make a greater impact and

to deal more effectively with the prevention and the resolution of conflicts. Early warning mechanisms in all dimensions, as well as improved confidence-building measures, have to be further developed. On minority issues, standards developed by the High Commissioner on National Minorities should be made binding. Also, the idea of codes of conduct should be expanded to other areas, for instance on energy security.

It is of great importance that the OSCE provides decision-makers with reliable information. This requires further professionalization. The Parliamentary Assembly has always urged the OSCE to do away with term-limits on professional staff and to decrease the Organization's reliance on secondments, which impact negatively on the OSCE's expertise. Professionalization also calls for a quick decision on the organization's legal status.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For years now, this Organization has not been able to agree on a political statement at our annual Ministerial Council meeting. So at next month's Ministerial Council, rather than striving for new decisions and documents, I encourage participating States to focus primarily on implementation of existing commitments and the refinement of instruments and rapid response mechanisms for future crisis situations. The OSCE already has an excellent and comprehensive set of political commitments, and it would serve the Organization better if we, in Athens, focused on how these political commitments are being implemented in the light of present challenges.

As to climate change, we in the Parliamentary Assembly hope that the resolution passed at our Annual Session in Vilnius, and our lively discussions at our recent Fall Meetings in Athens, have made a contribution to the preparations for the COP15 Copenhagen meeting next month.

Looking ahead to next year, the Parliamentary Assembly has a busy schedule, and we particularly appreciate the support provided by the parliaments of Norway, Italy, Serbia, Croatia, Denmark and Kazakhstan, each of which will be hosting PA meetings in the coming two years.

I am pleased to welcome the incoming Kazakh Chairmanship. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly was an early and strong supporter of Kazakhstan's proposed Chairmanship. Having visited Astana last week, I firmly believe that the Chairmanship will be good for this Organization, and for Kazakhstan. During my visit, our hosts acknowledged the existence of democratic deficiencies in the country and an increased willingness to engage and address these remaining challenges. In the Parliamentary Assembly, we look forward to continuing to work with our colleagues from Kazakhstan in overcoming these obstacles.

The OSCE is in need of revival. The Parliamentary Assembly has regularly encouraged an increase in high-level political dialogue on the OSCE. The Corfu process serves as an excellent starting point for this. I believe that 2010 - as both the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 20th Anniversary of the Charter of Paris - is the appropriate moment to reinvigorate the OSCE through the convening of an OSCE Summit.

Thank you.