



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Winter Meeting, Vienna 22 February 2024
Remarks by Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid**

President Kauma,

President Sobotka,

Minister Borg,

Secretary General Montella,

Distinguished Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies, Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to address you, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, today. Ever since I took office three years ago – I advocated the “whole of the OSCE”-approach and invested in close cooperation with the OSCE institutions, our field offices, and of course, the Parliamentary Assembly. Whenever I travel, I try also to meet with Parliamentarians – as you are the key link to the citizens we all serve.

And I was honored to meet members of the Parliamentary Assembly delegation in Malta two weeks ago. And let me start by paying tribute to our Chair. Minister Borg, you have taken up this important task of chairing this organization at such short notice. And let me thank you for the leadership displayed and also for what you stand for. Principled engagement in defense of OSCE commitments and values and bridge building.

In the past months, I heard more and more often that the OSCE was dysfunctional, lost its purpose or is in complete deadlock.

There is of course some truth to it – Russia’s war against Ukraine has not only caused death and tragedy to so many innocent civilians it has also changed our discussions in the OSCE fundamentally. And like for other international organizations, especially consensus-based ones, this polarized political environment creates strong challenges for the OSCE.

But – “dysfunctional” or “paralyzed”? That is not at all what I see in the OSCE. And let me use the next few minutes I have to share with you why.

In 2022, we had to close all our Missions in Ukraine. And let me say that the evacuation of our monitors, who were so dedicated and committed, will always remain in my memory as one of the saddest moments in my professional career. But as the host country approached us, and with the help of donor countries, we now have OSCE officials back working in Ukraine. (42.20)

The Support Programme for Ukraine is wholly donor-funded, financed by 34 participating States, the European Union and partners for co-operation – great evidence of trust in the OSCE and appreciation for our work.

There are 20 projects up and running, implemented by 73 staff in Kyiv. These projects address a broad range of issues: building national humanitarian demining capacity, support on cyber security, combating the illicit trade in arms, help combating the ecological impact of this war and work on providing psychosocial support for children and combatting trafficking in human beings. Only to name a few.

Delegates,

Unfortunately, three OSCE officials, who were working for the Special Monitoring Mission back in 2022, continue to be in detention in Donetsk and Luhansk. It is almost two years now. They enjoyed functional immunity when they were arrested in April 2022. Their release remains my top priority. My team and I are in close contact with their families, and I am concerned now that their health conditions are deteriorating. I use every opportunity and channel I have to raise this, also together with our chair, including at the highest political level, with states and International Organizations.

And I want to assure you that I will continue to spare no effort to do this. Every day that passes is another day too many, and I would like to call on you, to support me and my team in our efforts to secure their release as a matter of the most urgent priority.

Dear delegates,

Poland, North Macedonia, and now our Maltese chair have defined Ukraine as a priority of this organization. You will hear more also on the work we do by some of my colleagues who will have the opportunity to speak in the

committees. Let me use this opportunity to share a bit more about the work we do across the continents on so many different - yet interconnected - issues.

In Central Asia, where we have five field operations, we are working with the countries to promote regional approaches to common challenges. One key issue here is climate change, but also strengthening border security and the promotion of connectivity in the region. With the help of very dedicated projects.

This is all the more important as the region continues to cope with the implications of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Back in 2021, at the Ministerial Council in Stockholm, I suggested to the Ministerial Council to develop a programme dedicated specifically to supporting Central Asian participating States, and I am proud to say that we continue to implement concrete projects, including in support of women and girls. With also very concrete capacity building.

In South-Eastern Europe, we're working to build bridges and strengthen social cohesion and integration of diverse societies while also helping to address corruption – this is a drain on the population and an impediment to good governance.

Our work on trial monitoring for instance, has produced concrete results and helps participating States in the region address systemic issues in handling organized crime.

Our Mission to Moldova just marked its 30th anniversary and continues to work on trust and confidence building and supports dialogue between the Sides.

As mentioned by President Kauma, I was in Yerevan and used this opportunity for consultations with the Armenian leadership. Last week, at the Munich Security Conference, I also had the opportunity to meet both leaders and used this to discuss the support the OSCE can offer in support of sustainable peace.

Through the Geneva International Discussions, that deal with the consequences of the 2008 war in Georgia and the related Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism, we are supporting conflict prevention in ways that not only supports stability but also provides everyday benefits to the population.

In all this work, we follow the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security, which recognizes that sustainable peace can only be achieved if all parts of society can participate equally in decision making.

That is why we include a gender perspective in all the work we do – whether in the context of combatting gender-based violence, or in promoting women as agents for change, from water management to arms control.

Through a network I launched in 2021, we are supporting women peace-builders and mediators from across the OSCE region, including in Ukraine, to help them to improve their skills, expand their networks and advocate for the inclusion of more women at the negotiating table.

This year is the 20th anniversary of our action plan on the promotion of gender equality, and this is an opportunity to ensure that women are truly part of the solution to address all intersecting crises and challenges we face.

Across the whole of the OSCE region we are working to combat human trafficking, which is not only a human rights disaster, but is often linked to organized crime. We are working with governments and parliaments to take more consistent action against this form of modern-day slavery, whether through improving support to those who might be vulnerable, addressing websites that knowingly or unknowingly promote human trafficking, or tackling labour exploitation hidden in global supply chains. And I am proud to say that this organization has become a world leader in promoting this comprehensive approach.

There are many more examples I could offer – from climate change, to cyber security. But what I would like you to take away from my speech is the following: despite the challenges we face, the OSCE continues to deliver tangible results. Every day.

One of the challenges of course, and I will conclude with that, is related to budget. Also address by the President. For an organization, any organization, to function properly it needs resources. None of this work that makes us so proud would be possible without the resources that all our participating States entrust us with, and I want to thank you – as elected representatives of those States – for these valuable and key resources. I want to reassure you they are being spent carefully, and to great impact for the people we serve. And I hope I can count on your support as we move into the next phase of our budget negotiations for 2024, after three years without an adopted budget.

And as I shared with you in Yerevan, I am very proud of the dedicated staff we have. I am proud of the work we do despite the insecurity related to three years without an adopted budget. Added to years and years of zero nominal growth. And also that affects particularly our local staff as in some of our field missions we can only pay 65% of the agreed UN salary scales. And despite all that they are proud to work for this organization and they do dedicated work.

In closing let me say, there is no denying that we find ourselves in a difficult moment for European and Eurasian security. And there is no doubt for me that the OSCE has an every more critical role to play in supporting stability and sustainable peace in support of the people we all serve.

The work of the Parliamentary Assembly is an essential element of this, and your role as the representatives of your communities and delegates represents a vital link between the OSCE and the people it serves.

I count on your continued support. Together we can ensure that despite the challenge the OSCE will continue to deliver meaningful and impactful work for the 1.3 billion people across our region, in support of comprehensive and sustainable security.

Thank you so much.