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Questions

Statement for Opening Session

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Warsaw

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to once again represent the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at this key event in the OSCE calendar. I take this opportunity to welcome the new Director of ODIHR, Mr Michael Link – we look forward to continuing and expanding on the close co-operation that we had with your predecessor.

And I applaud the organizers for their work in bringing us all together. The topic could not be more important, as we must maintain focus on the implementation of our commitments. Without effective implementation the hard work of our governments in agreeing commitments is wasted and perhaps even insulted. As Members of Parliament that are regularly held to account through elections, we in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly are keenly aware of the need to deliver on our commitments.

I would like to take this opportunity not only to update you on some of the recent work of the OSCE PA in the human dimension, but also to offer some thoughts regarding implementation of commitments.

In our Annual Session in Baku three months ago, OSCE parliamentarians particularly voiced their concern on issues related to the rights of migrants and refugees. In our Baku Declaration, the OSCE PA made it clear that it is high time for OSCE participating States to prioritize the protection of migrants' rights, and in particular the rights of labour migrants and asylum-seekers. These segments of society are far too often neglected and we must help them to come out of the shadows with human dignity. I was pleased to note that there was broad recognition from MPs from all parts of the OSCE region that these are serious issues that must be addressed. As a result, the OSCE PA strongly condemned hate crimes against any migrant and called for the investigation of crimes and protection of victims, regardless of their status in the host country.

In Baku OSCE Parliamentarians also indicated their resolve to address the issue of political prisoners in the OSCE area with openness and candor. While the topic is sensitive, a culture of impunity works against us, and indeed against the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act. Specific recommendations are presented to OSCE Ministers, including a call to avoid the political use of INTERPOL Red Notices. The persistence of the persecution of people based on their political views goes against the very fundamental principles that underpin our Organization going back to the days of Helsinki.

Parliamentarians also took the time to again address issues related to tolerance, and to combatting trafficking and torture. The broad consensus achieved on these issues within our Assembly should not be allowed to hide the fact that these problems persist within the OSCE. We all have work to do in this regard. With reference to trafficking, the OSCE PA presented some clear and practical recommendations related to the protection of victims particularly when prosecuting perpetrators. The need for a proactive commitment by participating States to

combat torture was also underlined, reiterating the concern the MPs have regarding the persistence of torture in the OSCE region.

Needless to say, the situation in Ukraine and the significant human rights challenges in that country was also brought into focus. On a humanitarian level, the tragedy that took place in Odessa on 2 May was also highlighted by parliamentarians in Baku, when we called upon the authorities of Ukraine to carry out an open investigation. Parliamentarians passed a specific resolution entitled the “Clear, Gross and Uncorrected Violations of Helsinki Principles by the Russian Federation” which brought both political and human rights concerns forward. With thousands dead from the ongoing fighting, and more than a million now displaced, the human tragedy of this crisis cannot be ignored. I have personally visited Ukraine in December 2013 and expressed my solidarity with Ukrainian people in Maidan. There is an urgent need to address the humanitarian disaster that has occurred as a result of the conflict in Ukraine and to prevent further violence. The OSCE’s important role is recognized by all parties of the conflict. But we need to step up our peace building measures and other actions to ensure immediate impact on the ground. We need to address the humanitarian disaster unfolding especially now when the winter season is not far away.

In Baku, the OSCE PA also offered a number of suggestions on how to improve the OSCE’s effectiveness in implementing our human rights commitments. Most notable in this regard was the concern we expressed regarding the continuous reduction in the capacity of OSCE field operations to monitor and report on human rights issues. Over many years the OSCE has established missions staffed with excellent professionals well-equipped to support participating States in many fields. Unfortunately, we have seen a trend through which the monitoring and reporting mandates, particularly to do with human rights, have been diminished and entire missions closed. OSCE Parliamentarians have consistently and strongly advocated in favour of more robust field missions, where much of the most important work of the OSCE takes place. In these missions, we have at our disposal an excellent tool to help with implementation of human rights commitments – for the benefit of all of our citizens, we should make use of them.

The important role that civil society plays in our work was also addressed, when OSCE parliamentarians reiterated our call for the creation of a civil society board comprised of representatives of leading NGOs working on OSCE issues. Civil society has always played a critical role in making this Human Dimension Implementation Meeting an interesting place for debate. Unfortunately however, it is currently one of very few OSCE events where civil society plays such a central role and where representatives of governments come face-to-face with courageous individuals and groups who want to hold us all to account. Further development in this field would be of benefit to the OSCE as an institution and to our constituents – the populations of all our countries.

We must all be open to improvements on how we deliver on our commitments – we owe it to our populations. Therefore I want to once again reiterate the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's long-standing recommendation to the OSCE Permanent Council on addressing human rights. We have recommended that the Permanent Council organize fortnightly meetings on human rights in a way that is open to the public and media and with the participation of civil society representatives. For regardless of how hard we all work for these next two weeks here in Warsaw, this HDIM should not be seen as a replacement for continuous monitoring of the implementation of OSCE human dimension commitments.

Of course monitoring of some of our key democratic commitments does place on a regular basis through OSCE election observation missions. As the basis for all of our representation, the role that elections play in our societies cannot be overstated. As politicians with our hands on the pulse of our populations, parliamentarians feel the importance of democratic institutions more than anybody else. Indeed, if democratic institutions fail, we are some of the first ones to feel the effects. As a publicly elected official myself, and as a person who has observed elections with the OSCE PA, it is a point of pride that we regularly point to shortcomings whenever and wherever we see them – East or West of Vienna. There is no room for compromise on this issue of principle. Indeed, compromise in this field would present a serious

setback for us all – democratic values should not be open to compromise. The leadership role of OSCE parliamentarians in election observation, whose independence and political judgment brings added legitimacy, together with the expertise and data from ODIHR’s long-term observers, provides a sound basis for the OSCE’s monitoring activities.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has become a key place for debate on OSCE topics, where each elected parliamentarian has a voice and a vote, regardless of what their government may say. I hope that the ideas that have come out of the OSCE PA debates in Baku will now be addressed here, with governments also taking a stand. An open airing of all opinions is critical if we are to find lasting solutions to the challenges that we all share.

The PA will continue playing its part in the monitoring of human rights commitments and you can count on us to continue to raise difficult issues that may otherwise remain stuck in the pipelines of diplomacy. Next week in Geneva, our OSCE PA Autumn Meetings will give us the opportunity to further discuss the role of MPs in addressing the new security challenges arising in the OSCE area.

Thank you