

HDIM 2011 Opening Statement by
Matteo Mecacci (Italy), Chair of the OSCE PA Committee
on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

I am pleased to attend this year's session on the Human Dimension to give some input, on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of our Organization, on issues and questions that are becoming every year more relevant for the development of international relations among the Governments, the Parliaments, the Non Governmental Organizations and most of all for the life of our citizens.

Since last year, some extraordinary political events have taken place at the southern border of the OSCE: the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Lybia and the ongoing unrests in Sirya, Yemen, Bahrein and in other countries, have been a striking (and for some shocking) reminder that authoritarian and corrupt Governments cannot guarantee stability, and they cannot sustain themselves - especially in a time of economic crisis - at the expense of the respect of human rights and without the democratic support of their citizens.

The OSCE, an organization committed to the promotion of democracy and human rights, cannot overlook these historical events; for this, I am pleased to announce that our Parliamentary Assembly has taken some months ago an initiative to support the new election processes in the area and over 80 of our Parliamentarians will participate on October 23 in Tunisia, together with MPs from the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, in the international monitoring of the election of the Constitutional Assembly.

The invitation to observe these elections is the first of its kind in Tunisia, one of our Mediterranean partners, and I wish to take this opportunity to call on the OSCE Governments to fully use our expertise in the election processes, the rule of law and the monitoring of human rights in the region, not only for the clear challenges posed by these events to our societies (for example in the field of unregulated immigration), but also because these events remind us that the mandate of our Organization is still relevant for millions of people who live both inside and outside our territory.

The implementation of human rights standards inside the OSCE area is still a serious challenge: we all know that a statement or a declaration is not enough to make these values live in our societies, The non-adoption of the Action Plan in Astana has proven to be a serious shortcoming for our work. We need to reform and update the work of our Organization to make it more effective and in this regard the help, the expertise provided by NGOs and private groups is of great relevance, because it allows the Governments and the Parliaments to make more informed and more accountable decisions.

We know that human rights abuses continue in the OSCE area, and we should review our organizations mechanisms for example on deploying expert rapid-reaction missions in cases of abuses. Our Assembly stands ready to contribute to these mechanisms and the crisis in Georgia in 2008 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 – should serve as important lessons.

One fundamental question on which our Assembly has tried to act this year concerns the decision making process of the OSCE. We believe that the absolute consensus rule among 56 Governments is risking to make our decision making process more irrelevant by the day; and that the rule of consensus should have clear and significant exceptions when urgent issues arise. We live in a time in which events and decisions are happening at a much higher speed than in the past, and inaction is a recipe for failure and irrelevance: in a time of economic crisis, all organizations must deliver results to be supported by national public budgets, and this is a challenge for the next months and years for all of us. Governments, Parliaments and international organization.

We have also proposed that human dimension issues should be more regularly on the agenda of the Permanent Council – and they should be conducted generally with the participation of civil society and open to the public.

In this spirit, we hope to be able to build closer links and cooperation between our Assembly and the OSCE governmental side and as Chair of the OSCE PA's Human Dimension Committee – I look forward to working more closely with the Human Dimension Committee in Vienna.

In regard to the role of field missions, we believe that limited mandates – limit the scope of cooperation on Human Dimension issues, and our Assembly's most recent resolution urged for long-term, minimum three-year mandates for field missions – working in all spheres, including the human dimension.

We deeply regret the closure of the Missions in Georgia and Belarus, especially because these closures happened at times of crisis, where the work of our organization is most needed; I hope that dialogue on re-opening these missions will continue and bring results.

As regards the situation in Belarus, I am sorry to say that Post-election developments have been very disappointing. The OSCE has no field presence in Minsk, and OSCE institutions, including the OSCE PA Working Group on Belarus have limited access to the country and their traditional interlocutors.

Major issues with regard to the trials of politicians, journalists and activists persist and we look forward to reading the ODIHR monitoring report on these trials.

Freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, political pluralism, independence of the media – are just some of the serious human rights issues in Belarus that we should all be concerned with.

We often hear the Belarus authorities calling for political dialogue in international institutions. Our Assembly is always ready to do that, as we did at our Annual Session in Belgrade in July this year, but we also call on the authorities in Minsk to release the opposition and civil society members who have been incarcerated and to start a political dialogue also with them on the needed democratic reforms in the country.

As regards Azerbaijan, I have recently expressed my concern over the situation of six opposition activists and one candidate from the 2010 elections, who were convicted to long prison sentences in trials which seemed to limit the right to defense. I have pointed out to my colleagues from Azerbaijan that to silence critics of our Governments through criminal trials is not acceptable and is against our common values and commitments. I repeat my call to the authorities of Azerbaijan to ensure fair and transparent appeal processes for these people.

The continued incarceration of human rights defender Evgenii Zhovtis in Kazakhstan is of serious concern to our Organization. I'm glad that recently ODIHR visited him, as I also did in 2010, and we will continue to lobby for his release, as well as for the respect of fair trial to other prisoners in Kazakhstan. We are also concerned with the treatment of striking workers and due legal process in their regard.

Also, the conduct of the last election in Kazakhstan was not encouraging. Political pluralism – remains an issue. We hope to see progress in political party registration, a fair campaign and improvements in the overall election process in next year's parliamentary election.

Finally on the issue of the death penalty I wish to express my regret over the recent execution of Troy Anthony Davis by the state of Georgia in the United States.

The Assembly has passed several resolutions calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in the two OSCE participating States that continue to carry the practice out. We have stated in last year resolution that "in view of the fallibility of human justice, recourse to the death penalty inevitably carries a risk that innocent people may be killed." The case of Troy Davis, is just one example where very legitimate and serious doubts concerning his conviction were expressed, and is clear that the implementation of a moratorium of the death penalty is the best way to improve both the fairness of a justice system, and to save lives. I also regret that in Belarus executions had been carried out again.

This issue brings to the fore the question of the respect of the rights of inmates and the right to justice in the entire OSCE area. The question of overcrowding in prisons is becoming a human rights issue in many countries, including my own, Italy, where over 67 thousand inmates are held in prisons which can legally hold only 46 thousand. Also, half of the prison inmates are held in pre-trial detention, which often - 50% of the cases on average - ends up in declaring the inmate not guilty. The European Court on human rights is increasingly sanctioning several Governments for their failure to guarantee the right to justice to the victims and a fair and speedy trial to the accused, including the question of degrading and inhuman treatment in the prisons. This is an area where the OSCE could

develop new ways to permanently monitor the judicial and prison systems of our countries to avoid situations where in the name of justice and security, there are once again hidden violations of the right to individual freedoms. I thank you for your attention and I am looking forward to working with all of you.