

Statement delivered by Col. Stephen Howard FSC Coordinator for the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security

Security Dialogue on the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security "Strengthening Compliance with the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security"

20 May 2026

Chair,

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to take the floor in my capacity as FSC Chair's Coordinator on the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security.

Allow me also to join the delegations in thanking the keynote speakers for their very interesting and substantive presentations. As a coordinator, I am attaching great importance to your contributions, which enable us to better discuss and debate the value of the OSCE Code of Conduct and its implementation. Today's Security Dialogue on "Strengthening Compliance" has clearly shown that the topic is both timely and needed for our discussion in the FSC.

Strengthening compliance with the Code of Conduct involves three key areas of focus, firstly enhancing democratic oversight of security forces, secondly increasing the transparency of military activities and thirdly intensifying the use of existing reporting mechanisms. As a politically binding document, its effectiveness relies on proactive participation by participating States to address both interstate security and democratic control of forces.

An important question for our consideration is how can we further enhance democratic oversight of security forces? The answer to this is to increase accountability and strengthen parliamentary oversight of our security forces. Paragraph 21 of the Code clearly states "Each participating State will at all times provide for and maintain effective guidance to and control of its military, paramilitary and security forces by constitutionally established authorities vested with democratic legitimacy. Each participating State will provide controls to ensure that such authorities fulfil their constitutional and legal responsibilities. They will clearly define the roles and missions of such forces and their obligation to act solely within the constitutional framework".

This gives rise to another question; how must we further increase the transparency of military activities?

Recently completed Annual Mandatory Information Exchange submissions by participating States on the national implementation of the Code of Conduct indicate that while much work has been completed, in today's ever challenging geo-political environment, additional sustained efforts would further enhance compliance. The Conflict Prevention Centre's workshops on the Code facilitates better implementation. Participating States, when appropriate and with consensus, may also take account of the possibility of an update of the Codes Reference Guide, Working Paper and resumption of the Annual meeting to discuss implementation.

So finally, how can we further intensify the use of existing reporting mechanisms?

As outlined in ODHIR's 2021 seminal publication, *Human Rights of Armed Forces Personnel: Compendium of Standards, Good Practices and Recommendations*, it remains essential that armed forces develop effective mechanisms to prevent impunity and support a culture of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, for instance through education, command responsibility, military justice and authoritative ombuds institutions. The Code of Conduct takes a dual approach to human rights; First, participating States are to ensure that their armed forces respect the human rights of civilians and follow international humanitarian law (IHL). For example, care must be taken to avoid injury to civilians, and crucially, use of force must be proportionate. I refer to two specific paragraphs:

- Armed forces personnel can be held individually accountable for violations of IHL (paragraph 31).
- Armed forces are, in peace and in war, commanded, manned, trained and equipped in accordance with the provisions of international law (paragraph 34).

Equally, the human rights of members of the armed forces themselves are to be protected by states, whether through the courts or other independent means, such as military ombuds institutions.

There is an onus on all participating States to continue to actively utilise the FSC to address any shortcomings in our Human Rights obligations. In this regard, the Codes Paragraph 38 stipulates that "Each participating State is responsible for implementation of this Code. If requested, a participating

State will provide appropriate clarification regarding its implementation of the Code. Appropriate CSCE bodies, mechanisms and procedures will be used to assess, review and improve, if necessary, the implementation of this Code”.

I must emphasise once more that the Code of Conduct on politico-military aspects of security remains the OSCE’s unparalleled cross-dimensional norm-setting document for parliamentary-democratic oversight of the security sector. It is precisely in times of conflict, such as those that exists today, that the Code of Conduct becomes even more relevant, why? – because it enshrines our commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms, underlining the legally binding obligations of IHL for the entire OSCE region. Therefore, to uphold values, norms and principles of the OSCE Code of Conduct, activities related to its awareness raising and better implementation, such as today’s Security Dialogue should actively be supported by all participating States because it is in these difficult times that the Code needs to be strengthened, not diluted.

Thank you.