The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

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As one of the newest OSCE Institutions, organized and created at the request of the Heads of State or Government of the participating states of the CSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly occupies a unique place in the structure of the OSCE. The Assembly's primary task is to facilitate inter-parliamentary dialogue, an increasingly important aspect of the overall effort to meet the challenge of democratization. In addition, the Assembly provides a vital link between the governmental side of OSCE and representatives directly elected by the popular will of voters in 54 OSCE countries.

Important objectives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly are — as stated in the Assembly's Rules of Procedure — to: 1) assess the implementation of OSCE objectives by participating states; 2) discuss subjects addressed during meetings of the Ministerial Council and the summits of Heads of State or Government; 3) develop and promote mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts; 4) support the strengthening and consolidation of democratic institutions in OSCE participating states; and 5) contribute to the development of OSCE institutional structures and of relations and cooperation between existing OSCE institutions.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly employs a variety of means to pursue these objectives: a Final Declaration and a number of resolutions are adopted at each of its Annual Sessions; committee work addresses important contemporary international issues; different programmes, including an extensive election monitoring programme, have been designed to help strengthen developing democracies; and, delegations have been sent on special missions to areas of tension and crisis.

Most importantly, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly can act on declarations, resolutions and recommendations adopted by majority vote rather than the consensus rule of agreement which tends to limit, delay and sometimes even prevent decision-making in many international organizations. Among other controversial subjects, the Ottawa Declaration of the Parliamentary Assembly condemned both the Russian military campaign in Chechnya and the French nuclear testing, as well as calling for developing criteria for suspending participating states for 'flagrant failure to implement OSCE decisions and commitments.' The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has been highly critical of the consensus requirement within the OSCE, and has suggested that a model of approximate consensus — e.g. 90 percent of both membership and financial contributions — be adopted. A strong majority in the Parliamentary Assembly believes that only by abandoning the outdated consensus rule can OSCE emerge as a strong and safe umbrella for security and cooperation on the Eurasian continent.
The creation of the Parliamentary Assembly
At the NATO Summit in July 1990, U.S. President George Bush urged the creation of a Parliamentary Assembly as part of the 'institutionalization' of the CSCE. Included in his proposal, which was endorsed by the NATO Summit, was also a call for the establishment of a CSCE Secretariat in Prague, a Conflict Prevention Center in Vienna and an Office for Free Elections1 in Warsaw. According to the proposal, the new CSCE Parliamentary Assembly was to be tied to the already existing Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. However, during preparatory meetings for the CSCE Summit in Paris it was determined that the CSCE Assembly should be independent from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, or any other already existing inter-parliamentary body. One major reason for this was that important CSCE states — including the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union — were not, or could not become, members of the Council of Europe. Further, it was determined that the Parliamentary Assembly should only hold its main Plenary once a year, at a time when most parliaments would be likely to be out of session, so that leaders and key members of the various parliaments could attend.

Although all CSCE parliaments supported the initiative of their governments, most parliamentarians felt that the national parliaments themselves should agree on the structure and mission of the new CSCE parliament. Consequently, the section on 'New Structures and Institutions of the CSCE Process' of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe stated:

'Recognizing the important role parliamentarians can play in the CSCE process, we call for greater parliamentary involvement in the CSCE, in particular through the creation of a CSCE parliamentary assembly, involving embers of parliaments from all participating states. To this end, we urge that contacts be pursued at parliamentary level to discuss the field of activities, working methods and rules of procedure of such a CSCE parliamentary structure, drawing on existing experience and work already undertaken in this field.'

In April 1991, parliamentarians from all CSCE signatory countries gathered in Madrid at the invitation of the Spanish Cortes to undertake the task of establishing the CSCE Parliamentary Assembly. The meeting encountered problems almost from the very beginning due to the wide variety of views among the 34 delegations — whether to maintain the consensus procedure used by the governmental OSCE; determination of the frequency of assembly meetings; the role and number of committees; the number of votes to be assigned to each parliament etc. Eventually, compromises were reached and a document, the Madrid Declaration, was adopted by consensus. The Declaration set forth the basic rules of procedure, working methods, size, mandate, and distribution of votes for the first official meeting of the CSCE Parliamen-

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1. Now the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).