

OSCE Must Act on Belarus

By [Matteo Mecacci](#)

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Foreign ministers from the 56 countries of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will meet next week to try to accomplish what heads of government could not at this time last year.

A lot has changed since a draft action plan died for lack of consensus at the 2010 Astana Summit.

From popular protests to worrying economic unrest, the threats to our comprehensive security — including threats to human rights — make the upcoming ministerial council meeting in Lithuania a real test for the world's largest regional security organization.

To get consensus for action this time, foreign ministers will want to be sure the decisions they take in Vilnius have popular support from Vancouver to Vladivostok as well.

And in this 56-nation club, no one has a better understanding of the pulse of the people than OSCE lawmakers.

As leaders of OSCE election observation missions for more than two decades now, the Parliamentary Assembly has seen time and again that democratic communities cannot form where there are not basic human rights.

That is why we are pleased to see that some of the very issues the assembly — with its 320 members — voted to approve in recent years are now visible in the draft decisions being prepared for Vilnius.

Drafts on resolutions related to the protection of journalists, freedom of expression, human rights and combating discrimination all include language from our democratic process.

Considering the Committee to Protect Journalists has reported that more than 45 journalists have been killed in the OSCE area in the last decade with no suspects ever convicted for their crimes, diplomats in Vilnius should use the stronger language that we already voted on calling for vigorous prosecution of all those responsible for murdering investigative reporters. Otherwise impunity will continue to propagate a culture of self-censorship among media.

Other drafts now being discussed for Vilnius, including an item aimed at strengthening national human rights institutions, echo the longstanding position of the Parliamentary Assembly that engagement with civil society is essential to produce policy solutions in the human dimension — the field that has defined the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security.

But the most serious human rights crisis that has hit our region since last year is not even the subject of a draft resolution by the OSCE foreign ministers at this time.

On Dec. 19, 2010, I saw Belarussian forces surrounding citizens gathered in Government Square to demonstrate against an election result that gave President Alexander Lukashenko more than 90 percent of the vote, and that observers found was conducted without transparency or fair competition. Several presidential candidates were beaten and arrested together with hundreds of others who only sought the respect of the basic rule of democracy.

Some of those people are still in jail, like former Ambassador and presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov. Others were forced into exile, and others live in fear of the KGB.

Since that day, several national parliaments, our own assembly, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, have asked for concerted action to support the democratic opposition that is struggling to survive under the iron fist of the Belarussian government.

Some governments trying to use OSCE mechanisms to investigate human rights abuses have been blocked, while individual parliamentarians have been denied access to Minsk. This is not sustainable for an organization devoted to the protection and promotion of human rights. The acceptance of the status quo by political leaders is a worrying signal for democratic countries as well. Those who continue to block OSCE action on Belarus should know that they are not only stifling the Belarussian people's call for democracy, but also the life of the OSCE.

Regardless of the debates that will ensue in Vilnius, foreign ministers should call upon the experience of their parliaments now to ensure the decisions in Vilnius drive us to more comprehensive action. If no collective action can be taken regarding a country sitting just 30

kilometers from the site of the meeting, it will be hard to look back at this year's Lithuanian chairmanship and call it a success.

Matteo Mecacci is a member of the Italian parliament and chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions.

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