

THE ANNUAL MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF DEFENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEES FROM SEE PARLIAMENTS HELD IN ZAGREB

The Annual Meeting of Representatives of Defence and Security Committees from South East Europe Parliaments was held in Zagreb on 2 and 3 June 2026, jointly organized by RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation and the Defence Committee of the Croatian Parliament, in cooperation with DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR), and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The meeting brought together more than 40 participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Türkiye, providing a valuable platform for the exchange of experiences and good practices in parliamentary oversight of the defence and security sector. Discussions focused on parliamentary procedures, current security challenges, and oversight mechanisms, with particular emphasis on the OSCE Code of Conduct as a normative framework for democratic control and parliamentary oversight of defence and security institutions in today's evolving security environment.

Held over two days, the Meeting featured three interactive working sessions and fostered open dialogue among parliamentarians, experts, and practitioners from across South East Europe. It opened with welcome addresses delivered by Ambassador Miroslav Šćepanović, Director of RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation, Mr. Arsen Bauk, Croatian Parliament Defence Committee Chairperson, Mr. Ante Deur, Croatian Parliament Defence Committee Deputy Chairperson and Domestic Policy and National Security Committee Member, Mr. Drago Matanović, State Secretary in Ministry of Defence of Republic of Croatia, Dr. Teodora Fuior, Senior Manager in DCAF Geneva Europa Asia Division and Dr. Yulia Netesova, OSCE ODIHR Chief of Democratic Governance and Gender Unit.

In his welcome address, Ambassador Miroslav Šćepanović, Director of RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation noted that this year's meeting marks the last in the current annual cycle under this format, recalling that, following a decision of RACVIAC Multinational Advisory Group from April 2026, the event will continue as a biannual meeting starting from 2028. He underlined that this adjustment reflects the commitment of Member States to streamline and adapt RACVIAC programming in response to the evolving security environment, while preserving a strong parliamentary dimension within the Centre's mandate.

Ambassador Šćepanović emphasized that, as security challenges continue to grow, parliaments remain central democratic institutions, and RACVIAC serves as an important platform for observing and supporting regional security cooperation in South East Europe. He described RACVIAC as a "microcosm" of regional challenges and opportunities, offering insights into the evolution of security dialogue, key

thematic priorities, and engagement with partners supporting capacity-building efforts across the region. He also highlighted close cooperation with parliamentary defence and security committees, noting the long-standing partnership with the Croatian Parliament, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, DCAF, and the OSCE ODIHR.

Ambassador Šćepanović concluded by expressing hope that the meeting would further empower parliamentarians to better influence, scrutinize, legislate, and advocate for effective democratic oversight within their respective constituencies, ultimately contributing to positive developments in the security sector across South East Europe.

In his opening remarks, the Chair of the Croatian Parliament's Defence Committee, Mr. Arsen Bauk, underlined that the Annual Meeting provides an important opportunity for the exchange of views and experiences on parliamentary oversight in the field of defence and security, noting that the practice of such meetings had been successfully resumed following a short interruption.

He thanked RACVIAC for enabling the co-hosting of the meeting and its contribution to regional cooperation, as well as DCAF, OSCE ODIHR, and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina for their support.

Mr. Bauk stressed that inter-parliamentary dialogue and exchange contribute to strengthening cooperation among parliaments and play an important role in maintaining peace and stability in South East Europe.

Concluding his remarks, Mr. Bauk expressed confidence that the meeting would provide an opportunity for constructive dialogue, exchange of good practices, and potential inspiration for improvements in parliamentary oversight mechanisms, ultimately contributing to strengthened cooperation, stability, and peace in the region.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Ante Deur, Member of the Croatian Parliament's Defence Committee and the Committee on Domestic Policy and National Security, highlighted status of RACVIAC as the only international organisation headquartered in the Republic of Croatia and its long-standing role as a regional platform for dialogue, cooperation, and exchange of experience in the field of security and defence.

He emphasized Croatia's continued support for RACVIAC and underlined the growing importance of regional cooperation and confidence-building in today's complex security environment, marked by geopolitical challenges, hybrid threats, and the need to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions.

Mr. Deur stressed that parliamentary oversight of the security and intelligence sector represents a key pillar of democratic governance, requiring a balance between effective security institutions and the protection of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic standards. He expressed confidence that the discussions over the two-

day meeting would further strengthen inter-parliamentary cooperation, enhance the exchange of experience, and contribute to greater mutual understanding among participating states.

In his address, Mr. Drago Matanović, State Secretary at the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia underlined that the current security environment, marked by the ongoing war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical tensions, has become increasingly complex and unpredictable, contributing to the erosion of long-standing assumptions about global stability and a rules-based international order. He noted that these developments also affect the South East European region, where security challenges remain significant.

Mr. Matanović stressed that long-term stability in the region is closely linked to Euro-Atlantic integration processes, which remain a key framework for peace, democratic development, and prosperity. In this context, he emphasized the importance of increased defence investment and the strengthening of overall societal resilience, noting that investment in defence represents not only a response to current threats but also a foundation for safeguarding sovereignty, peace, and stability.

He also recalled that Croatia recently marked the 35th anniversary of the establishment of its Armed Forces, highlighting ongoing modernisation efforts, increased defence spending in line with NATO commitments, and the reintroduction of basic military training with positive results.

The State Secretary reaffirmed Croatia's commitment, as a member of the European Union and NATO, to supporting regional initiatives aimed at strengthening defence cooperation, strategic dialogue, and mutual trust in South East Europe.

Addressing parliamentarians, he underlined the key role of defence and security committees in ensuring effective civilian oversight of the armed forces, encouraging their active use of available oversight mechanisms in support of democratic governance.

He concluded by stressing that, in an uncertain security environment, the greatest strength of the region lies in cooperation and joint action aimed at achieving a stable and secure South East Europe.

In her address, Dr. Teodora Fuior, Senior Manager at the Europe and Asia Division of the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) pointed to public concern over war on the continent, drone and cyber attacks, disinformation, polarization, and growing pressure on democratic institutions, alongside expectations for governments to act faster, spend more, and respond more effectively to increasingly complex threats.

Against this backdrop, she stressed that parliamentary oversight of the security sector is more important than ever. She underlined that security oversight is more complex and demanding than many other areas of parliamentary work, given that

security institutions hold exceptional powers, handle sensitive information, restrict rights in times of crisis, act quickly, and classify many of their decisions. She also noted that, in many countries, the security sector represents a major part of public administration and is among the largest recipients of public resources.

She warned that as defence and security budgets increase across Europe, so do risks related to lack of transparency, rushed procurement, corruption, and decisions presented as national security while serving narrow interests. In this context, she emphasized that parliamentary oversight cannot be treated as a procedural luxury but parliaments must do more in terms of explaining security choices to the public, keeping citizens informed and engaged, and reassuring them that decisions are made in the national interest.

Referring to DCAF engagement, she noted that the regional meeting has special meaning for the organisation, which has supported these exchanges with RACVIAC and OSCE since 2012. She emphasized that such exchanges build trust between people and institutions, sometimes even friendships, across countries with different histories but shared security challenges.

She added that these meetings matter because they enable parliamentarians and experts to speak frankly, compare real practices, and learn beyond formal statements and protocol. They also help defence and security committees recognize shared challenges and support continuity and democratic solidarity in the region.

Dr. Fuior noted that over the years, defence and security committees in the region have become among the most active and institutionally developed parliamentary committees, with security oversight in many cases more advanced than in other areas of parliamentary work.

She further emphasized that South East Europe should not be seen only as a region facing security problems, but also as one that has experience, knowledge, and democratic practice to offer. Further to this, she stated that regional dialogue helps preserve and consolidate this experience, ensuring continuity when parliaments, political majorities, or institutional memory change.

She concluded by stressing DCAF commitment to supporting this continuity by bringing committees together, strengthening parliamentary expertise and staff, encouraging peer learning, and helping parliaments move from formal oversight to meaningful and effective oversight. Building on this, Dr. Fuior underlined that in the current security environment, this dialogue is not only relevant but a necessity, as security oversight is one of the ways democracies defend themselves.

In her remarks, Dr. Yulia Netesova, Chief of the Democratic Governance and Gender Unit at the OSCE ODIHR, emphasized that the continuity of the dialogue among parliamentary committees is a genuine achievement that is deliberately built and sustained by participants over time.

She noted that the meeting takes place at a moment when security challenges in Europe have become more demanding and less predictable, increasing the pressures on institutions responsible for oversight. In this context, she underlined that the role of parliaments remains central.

Dr. Netesova stressed that parliamentary oversight of the security sector carries particular weight, given that the state holds the legitimate monopoly on the use of force. She explained that oversight is essential to ensure that the powers entrusted to armed forces, police, and intelligence services remain legally bounded, democratically accountable, and consistent with human rights commitments.

She also presented the work of ODIHR Democratic Governance and Gender Unit, highlighting its focus on strengthening democratic institutions, including parliaments, through technical assistance, capacity-building, and peer exchange.

Looking ahead to the programme, she noted that the discussions would cover parliamentary oversight practices, the rights and responsibilities of members of the armed forces and police, and the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security, which she described as a long-standing but still highly relevant framework.

In his address, the Deputy Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, Professor Željko Reiner emphasized Croatia's long-standing support for RACVIAC and its role in promoting regional cooperation in security matters.

He opened with a reflection on whether societies are prepared for what tomorrow brings, stressing that countries are currently considering multiple future scenarios and best ways to respond to growing challenges which extend beyond security cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration in South Eastern Europe.

He further noted that traditional geopolitical zones are becoming fluid, with rapidly shifting alliances and strategic interests. In this context, he questioned how prepared the world is for such changes and responses to them. He suggested that the answer lies in multilateralism, partnerships, diplomacy, negotiations, and goodwill, emphasizing *bona fide* to ensure safety and security.

Professor Reiner added that partnerships within the EU and NATO are based on trust, knowledge, and tolerance and that dialogue remains the key to building them and preventing conflict. Following this, he stressed that continuous communication channels, therefore, must be maintained.

Deputy Speaker Reiner noted that Croatia, as a member of the OSCE, the EU, and NATO, recognizes the importance of sharing its expertise and experience with non-EU and non-NATO participating States within the OSCE community. He noted that such cooperation contributes to closer connections among all stakeholders involved in promoting security, safety, and conflict prevention.

He stressed that while all states strive to prevent armed conflicts, even wars are governed by laws. However, situations continue to occur in which the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law are not fully respected, leaving the most vulnerable civilian populations insufficiently protected during and after armed conflicts. He described this as unacceptable and emphasized that the current generation bears an enormous responsibility to address these challenges.

Professor Reiner further noted that it is necessary to bridge traditional and new forms of cooperation and conflict, as technological developments, including artificial intelligence, drones, and cyberattacks, are adding new dimensions to warfare, while conventional armed conflicts continue to cause profound human suffering. Referring to Russia's aggression against Ukraine as an example of these trends and the changing perception of security, he raised the question of how societies can respond to such challenges while ensuring that the pillars of democracy remain strong and resilient.

In the light of this, he stated that parliaments and parliamentary diplomacy represent an important source of knowledge and expertise in the field of security, while parliamentary oversight remains a key instrument for preserving and defending democracy. He noted that parliaments have evolved significantly over the past two decades and are increasingly recognised as valuable partners in addressing emerging challenges and contributing to informed decision-making.

Deputy Speaker Reiner underlined the importance of parliamentary participation in multilateral dialogue, stressing that parliamentary diplomacy brings a valuable perspective to traditional diplomatic efforts and helps ensure that all relevant stakeholders are included in decision-making processes. In this context, he highlighted the role of the Croatian Parliament in hosting international visits, conferences, round tables, and initiatives aimed at promoting the rule of law, resolving instability, and supporting peace.

He also pointed to initiatives that engage young people in democratic processes through parliamentary simulation activities, emphasizing the importance of involving future generations in law-making and democratic governance. Concluding his remarks, Professor Reiner stressed the value of openness to different viewpoints, noting that constructive and regular debate remains essential for comprehensive security and addressing broader global challenges.

Session one called *"Parliamentary Oversight of the Defence and Security Sector – current situation and good practices"* was moderated by Mr. Krešimir Čosić, Ph.D. (the Croatian Parliament, Defence Committee, Appointed Member) and the speakers were Dr. Teodora Fuior (Senior Manager, Europe Asia Division, DCAF Geneva) and Mr. Quentin Rumeau (Associate Democratic Governance Officer, Democratic Governance and Gender Unit, OSCE ODIHR).

During the first session, participants discussed the current state of parliamentary oversight of the defence and security sector and exchanged good practices from across the OSCE region. Speakers highlighted the importance of effective parliamentary oversight in safeguarding democratic accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and public trust, particularly in light of evolving security challenges, increasing defence expenditures, and expanding security powers.

The discussion focused on the role of parliamentary committees in overseeing emerging security issues such as cyber threats, disinformation, artificial intelligence, and societal resilience. Participants also emphasized the importance of strong committee structures, access to information, institutional capacity, and meaningful involvement of opposition members in oversight processes. The session concluded with an exchange of national experiences and perspectives by representatives of the participating parliamentary committees.

The second session, titled *“Protection of Rights and Responsibilities of the Members of the Armed Forces and Police in South East Europe”*, was moderated by Dr. Stjepan Domjančić (Croatian Defence Academy), with Mr. Boško Šiljegović (Parliamentary Military Commissioner of Bosnia and Herzegovina) as the keynote speaker. The session focused on the protection of human rights, working conditions, and professional integrity of members of the armed and security forces, as well as the role of independent oversight mechanisms in safeguarding those rights.

Mr. Šiljegović presented the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina in developing a unified defence system following major reforms between 2002 and 2006, which resulted in the establishment of single armed forces and a unified Ministry of Defence. He underlined the importance of civil and parliamentary oversight, including the establishment of the Joint Committee for Defence and Security and the introduction of the Parliamentary Military Commissioner institution based on the German model, with strong support from international partners such as DCAF and OSCE.

The discussion highlighted the Commissioner’s mandate to investigate complaints from military personnel, conduct both announced and unannounced visits to military units, and issue binding recommendations aimed at addressing human rights concerns within the armed forces. Special emphasis was placed on access to justice for service members, protection from rights violations, and the importance of continuous monitoring of working conditions, gender equality, and fair career progression within the armed forces.

The session concluded by reaffirming the value of independent oversight mechanisms in strengthening accountability, improving institutional performance, and ensuring that members of the armed forces and police are treated as citizens in uniform whose rights must be effectively protected.

The first day concluded with a visit to city of Varaždin, where participants were welcomed by the Mayor of Varaždin, Dr. Neven Bosilj at official reception, allowing for informal exchange and further dialogue among colleagues.

The second day of the meeting continued with the third working session, titled “*OSCE Code of Conduct as a Normative Framework of Parliamentary Oversight over Defence and Security in the Current Environment for the Rules-Based International Order*”, was moderated by Dr. Yulia Netesova, Chief of the Democratic Governance and Gender Unit at the OSCE ODIHR, with Ms. Ruzanna Baghdasaryan, Project Officer in the Security Sector Governance and Reform portfolio of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre, as the speaker.

The session focused on the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security as a foundational normative instrument for democratic control of armed forces and parliamentary oversight in the OSCE area. Ms. Baghdasaryan highlighted the Code’s key inter-state and intra-state dimensions, its relevance for contemporary security sector governance and reform (SSG/R), and its continued importance in strengthening accountability, transparency, and democratic civilian control over defence and security institutions.

The discussion further explored the evolution of the Code’s principles within the broader OSCE security sector governance framework and reflected on a decade of implementation experience across participating States. In the second part of the session, parliamentary representatives shared national experiences on the implementation of the Code, including parliamentary oversight practices, reporting mechanisms, and key challenges and good practices.

The session concluded with a moderated discussion emphasizing that the OSCE Code of Conduct remains a central normative anchor for democratic oversight of the security sector, while parliamentary engagement is essential for its effective implementation and for strengthening trust, legitimacy, and accountability within security institutions.

The meeting concluded with a closing session, during which remarks were delivered by Mr. Ante Deur, Mr. Arsen Bauk, and Ambassador Miroslav Šćepanović, highlighting the value of continued dialogue, regional cooperation, and parliamentary engagement in strengthening democratic oversight in the defence and security sector.

The Annual Meeting of Defence and Security Committee representatives from South East Europe, held for the 11th time since 2008, is one of RACVIAC long-standing activities through which the Centre continues to fulfil its mission to foster dialogue and cooperation on security matters in South Eastern Europe. The meeting provides a sustained platform for dialogue on strengthening parliamentary oversight of the defence and security sector in South East Europe, directly contributing to dialogue, cooperation, and confidence-building among participating states. Over the years,

discussions have covered a wide range of topics from democratic control of armed forces and parliamentary practices to emerging security challenges such as cyber security, reflecting the evolving nature of the security environment.

Through this continuity, RACVIAC supports parliamentary committees in strengthening democratic oversight in line with the principles of the OSCE Code of Conduct, indirectly helping to build institutional capacity, transparency, and political accountability, while encouraging a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to current security challenges in the region.