



Hofburg, 15 February. Micky Kroell and Finnish Ambassador Antti Turunen announce the lucky tombola winners of the OSCE Charity Ball. This year, the Finnish Chairmanship offered attractive prizes ranging from Nokia mobile phones to Silja Line and Viking Line cruises and a Vienna-Helsinki round trip on Finnair.

Ball photos courtesy of *Fotoatelier Doris Kucera*.
www.doriskucera.at

Dancing and diplomacy for a worthy cause

BY PATRICIA N. SUTTER

For most staff of the OSCE and national delegations, the annual OSCE Ball is all about waltzing in swirling ball gowns and smart dinner jackets, and, for one night at least, partaking in the glamour of a traditional Viennese Ball. Yet unbeknownst to many, the event touches the lives of those less fortunate throughout the OSCE region.

“Initially, we were donating proceeds from the sales of ball tickets to Austrian charities,” says Micky Kroell, a staff member in Conference Services. “It must have been around 1996 when we thought, why not support small projects in OSCE countries where our own colleagues in the field can advise us on where the needs are the greatest and can also assure us that the money is well spent?”

Ms. Kroell has been organizing the ball, held at the Hofburg’s sumptuously ornate imperial rooms since 1994, a year before the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe was transformed into the OSCE.

“At that time, some 500 guests attended; this year, we had double that number,” she says. “Compared with the other society goings-on in Vienna during its festive ball season, ours is a small, low-key and cozy affair — but that’s part of its charm.”

Some 17 OSCE Balls later, 14 of which she has co-ordinated, Ms. Kroell thought that it was about time that the annual tradition, held on 15 February this year, be officially called “The OSCE Charity Ball”. “This makes it easier to obtain sponsorships,” she says. Faithful sponsors include the Hofburg Congress Centre, Hotel InterContinental Vienna and Roemerquelle.

The OSCE Ball in 2007 featured the *Ladies Orchestra*.



Welcoming guests at this year's event, Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut reminded them that the annual ball had raised a total of about €230,000 so far, with most of it going to the most vulnerable across the OSCE area, including those suffering from particularly harsh winters.

The choice of which field activities to support is far from haphazard, explains Sean McGreevy in the Secretariat's Programming and Evaluation Support Unit, which oversees the charity requests.

"Once the proceeds of each Charity Ball are counted, the Secretary General selects special themes or causes he feels deserve support," he says. "The Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre then invites OSCE field operations to submit proposals. There are no set selection criteria, but we do look for activities that are small-scale, have a strong humanitarian aspect and are distinctive from the Organization's day-to-day work."

The goal in most years is to help as many worthy causes as possible, so applications entailing no more than €5,000 in expenditures are encouraged.

In 2006, the Secretary General sent out a call for projects focusing on the fight against trafficking. Previous years included donations to benefit relief efforts related to the earthquake in Tbilisi, the Beslan school tragedy and the Asian tsunami, which affected Thailand, an Asian Partner for Co-operation.

The selection process and administrative procedures are as unbureaucratic as possible. Funds are disbursed through OSCE field operations directly to the selected projects. "All we require are no-nonsense reports on their overall impact," says Mr. McGreevy.

Last year, every field operation that submitted proposals received funding for at least one project each, for a total of nearly €70,000. Beneficiaries ranged from abandoned babies in Albania and homeless people in Bishkek, to schoolchildren in the Georgian-South Ossetian zone of conflict and disabled young people in Uzbekistan.

"The help may seem like a drop in the bucket, but you'll be surprised at how far the money goes," says an OSCE officer in Skopje whose proposal, focusing on street children, was approved.

The projects described in the following pages reveal that the home-grown initiatives that the OSCE Ball favours usually operate on a shoestring budget and are run professionally by local NGOs, civic groups and volunteers, with an eye towards sustainability.

The Hofburg's *Festsaal*. Flowers from Salerno, courtesy of the Italian Delegation, added a special touch in every room.



A hotline to life

Breaking the silence on family violence

Since opening its doors in Chisinau to victims of domestic violence in 2004, Refugiul Casa Marioarei — “Little Mary’s House” — has been serving as a temporary haven and providing a wide range of assistance to hundreds of Moldovan women and children. It has also counselled many of the aggressors, who are usually men, and has helped them seek drug or alcohol rehabilitation.

But Moldova’s only existing domestic violence shelter was sorely lacking a vital tool that it needed to expand its outreach: a telephone service offering professional emergency information, referral services and confidential counselling.

Thanks to a donation of close to €4,000 from the proceeds of the OSCE Ball, Casa Marioarei got its wish. On 14 September 2006, the NGO started the country’s first domestic violence hotline, available 24 hours a day throughout the year. The launching ceremony was especially significant, as it coincided with the first death anniversary of Antonina Lucinschi, founder of the shelter and wife of former President Petru Lucinschi, who came especially for the occasion.

The nationwide hotline has since answered over 800 calls, mostly from women in urban areas. “The desperate cries for help concerned a combination of emotional and physical aggression from a spouse or a partner,” says Tatiana Tofan, who was the first director of Casa Marioarei’s hotline programme.

The unexpected infusion of funds went towards purchasing and installing telephone and office equipment, a campaign promoting the hotline and a round-table discussion to analyse the impact of the hotline. A four-member team, including two psychologists, was formed. Eventually, additional permanent staff will have to be hired and volunteers will have to be trained.

“For a person caught up in the vicious cycle of family violence, dialling the hotline number is a crucial first step. The victim admits that what is being experienced is not normal,” says Ms. Tofan. “After we provide emergency counselling on the phone, we encourage callers to take advantage of our psychological, medical and legal services. Victims can also choose to stay in the shelter for up to 30 days. We have 25 beds for women and their children with all the amenities.”

According to a Moldova-wide survey in 2005, about 40 per cent of women between the ages of 16

Promotional poster:
“If you feel scared in your home, if your partner beats you, threatens you, harasses you physically or emotionally, injures your children, call the Hotline for help.”



and 35 have reported being a victim of abuse or of a violent act at home at least once. Many believe this estimate to be deceptively low.

Judith Hale, the OSCE Mission’s Anti-Trafficking and Gender Adviser, attributes this mindset to traditionally hierarchical structures, with every person assigned a subordinate or a dominant position. Poverty and unemployment aggravate the situation, leaving victims with no choice but to stay put.

Fortunately, large segments of society are beginning to wake up to the existence of domestic violence and to realize that it *is* a serious problem.

With the help of government authorities and a number of international partners, including the OSCE, Casa Marioarei is leading the way — helping victims to recover from their pain and suffering, regain their self-esteem, overcome their fear and shame, and discover their potential to make a fresh start.

Tatiana Tofan is ecstatic that the shelter has again received a donation from the OSCE Ball this year. “Starting this summer, we plan to make the hotline toll-free and we hope we can continue operating it far into the future,” she says.

In March 2008, Moldova entered a promising new era when President Vladimir Voronin signed a law laying out an ambitious framework designed to help Moldova’s families address the complex issues surrounding domestic violence. For the first time, the issue is legally defined. The law makes clear that violence against women is a criminal offence and that perpetrators will be held to account.

“Casa Marioarei represents one small step towards making Moldovan families feel safe and secure in their own homes,” says Judith Hale. “In Moldova, as in many countries, there is a strong link between trafficking and domestic violence, so the shelter’s initiatives are a perfect fit with the OSCE Mission’s anti-trafficking and gender activities.”

With reporting from Antonia De Meo, former Senior Anti-Trafficking and Human Rights Officer, Mission to Moldova.

The Brakja Ramiz Hamid School Music Band performs at an event for OSCE donors.



Making music is popular morale-booster in Roma school

Mako, 13, has a confession to make. “My friends and I meet almost every day to make beautiful sounds together. It’s the main reason I come to school,” she says. “I plan to practise really hard and when I grow up, who knows, I might be able to make a living through music.”

Ilmi, 14, adds: “Many people in this country don’t know too much about the Roma community. We’re very proud of our music and the role it plays in our lives. Through it, we hope that we will be better understood.”

“I have a mandolin, but it is missing two strings; it should have eight and it has only six,” volunteers Nadire, 12. “I have learned a lot from our music teacher and am keen to play even better.”

She is referring to Samir Mehmed who is a graduate in classical music from the Skopje Music Academy and has devoted the past decade to teaching music at the Brakja Ramiz Hamid Elementary School in the municipality of Shuto Orizari.

When he is not in the classroom, Mr. Mehmed shifts his full attention to the school orchestra and its 30 members — 15 girls and 15 boys between the ages of 10 and 15. Amidst the school’s broken windows, decaying walls and floors, and sparse teaching materials, his music classes and the award-winning orchestra serve as a beacon of hope for the school’s 2,000 students, inspiring them to believe in themselves.

“So many other children would take up music and join the group if only they could, but unfortunately we don’t have enough instruments,” says Mr. Mehmed. “The instruments have to be shared, and besides, most of them are ageing and need repair and maintenance.”

Mako, Ilmi and Nadire are among the lucky ones. They have been able to continue their music lessons because of a brand-new set of instruments — an acoustic bass guitar, a synthesizer and three mandolins — purchased with a contribution of €1,000 out of the proceeds of the OSCE Ball.

Shuto Orizari, on the outskirts of Skopje, is home to perhaps the world’s largest concentration of Roma and holds the distinction of being the world’s sole municipality to be governed by a Roma Council. More than 66 per cent of the estimated population of 22,000 are Roma, some of them refugees from the Kosovo conflict.

Recently, another €1,000 from the OSCE Ball benefited a second project for Roma in Skopje, also focusing on education, which undoubtedly holds the key to uplifting the community and integrating it into the mainstream of society. This time around, the money will go towards teaching reading, writing and mathematics to 60 children between the ages of 7 and 15, who are at risk of dropping out of school. The activity is part of the broader efforts of Skopje’s Topaana settlement to improve its lot, in co-operation with Sumnal, a local Roma NGO, and the OSCE Mission to Skopje.

With reporting from the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje: Senior Project Officer Giuseppina Grillo and Programme Assistant Kalina Lakinska.

Babushkas wait patiently to collect their monthly subsidies sent in by sponsors from Europe, the United States and Kyrgyzstan itself.



Lonely *babushkas*

The comfort of strangers

BY AZAMAT ABABAKIROV

It's an all-too-familiar story by now, but rarely is it given a human face: In Kyrgyzstan, as in many ex-Soviet States, the post-independence transition years are proving economically and socially dire for the most vulnerable groups of the population.

Among the most neglected are the country's older citizens, many of whom are ailing and have no family network to fall back on. Most of them are women. Having worked hard all their lives, they now find themselves subsisting on monthly pensions of about 1,000 soms (\$26), or less than a dollar a day.

Not a moment too soon, the Babushka Adoption Foundation, an NGO, was founded by Markus Mueller in 1999, a few years before his stint as Head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek from late 2003 to early 2008.

"The idea was to find individuals who were willing to donate \$10 a month towards meeting the basic needs of a selected *babushka* (grandmother) or *dedushka* (grandfather)," says Ambassador Mueller, who was an official with the Swiss

Agency for Development and Co-operation at the time.

"The Foundation started with eight *babushkas* and two employees. And now, I'm told, nearly 750 individuals from all over the world, led by Switzerland and Denmark, sponsor more than a thousand elderly people in Bishkek and the southern oblast of Batken, the country's most remote and least developed region. Over the past nine years, the Foundation has distributed about \$500,000 from donors to the most vulnerable."

And the administrative team has expanded to 15, most of them social workers who actively seek out and identify the neediest pensioners and who run errands and do household chores for them. They also provide psycho-social support, though this is not meant to replace the work of Kyrgyz social welfare institutions.

Vera Wolfe, a 76-year-old *babushka*, thought she was terminally ill and was expecting to undergo at least three surgical procedures.

"I weighed only 38 kilos and could barely walk," she says. "I had no other source of income apart from my meagre pension. My

Beneficiaries of the Adoption Foundation include a few *dedushkas* (grandfathers).

grandchildren had abandoned me for better job opportunities in the far east of Russia. Then I heard about how Babushka Adoption helps people like me cope during these difficult times. Thanks to the additional monthly allowance from my sponsor, I can afford healthier food and pay for medicine and other incidentals.”

Klavdia Pogodina, 75, can't say enough about “the most attentive and kindest people” at the Foundation. “They even organized a New Year's party for us and took all of us on an outing to the mountains.”

Sponsors are encouraged to write letters to their adopted grandparents. These are translated and read out to them by Foundation staff or volunteers. “Most of the beneficiaries feel lonely, so the notes and cards mean a lot to them,” says Aidai Membetalieva, Director of the Foundation.

Gift parcels are also welcome and are eagerly anticipated on birthdays and other special occasions. A few sponsors have even visited their *babushka* or *dedushka*, while taking the opportunity to explore Kyrgyzstan's natural wonders.

“The €5,000 from the OSCE Ball fell into our laps in our eighth year of operations, and it went a long way, especially because Swiss support came to an end at about that time,” says Ms. Membetalieva. “We increased our beneficiaries by 250 in Bishkek and Batken oblast and raised €10,000 through special events.”

“Most important of all, the money enabled us to establish ourselves as a strong and sustainable local NGO. We devised a long-range strategy and improved our managerial and organizational skills, and we clarified our vision: to mobilize and increase opportunities for the most vulnerable of the elderly through community self-help groups, income-generating activities, and partnerships with local and international groups concerned with the problems of the ageing.”

As Vera Wolfe sees me to the door after my brief visit with her, her eyes sparkle with hope. She now feels well enough to give back to the Foundation by delivering monthly allowances to those who can no longer walk and doing their grocery shopping for them.



“Every day I pray for the continued good health of the people working at the Babushka Adoption Foundation and the donors from around the world,” she says. “They have restored my dignity. Without them, where would I be now?”

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www.babushkaadoption.org