



Hearing US Helsinki Commission

Washington, 28 June 2006

Address by Belgian Foreign Minister. Karel De Gucht, OSCE Chairman-in-Office

Mister Chairman,

Distinguished commissioners,

Thank you very much for the invitation to discuss with you the challenges the OSCE is facing today and the way the Belgian Chairmanship in 2006 is putting its efforts into steering an Organization that was born during the Cold War as an instrument of détente between East and West, and re-born after the Cold War as a vehicle of cooperation and support to the new democracies and newly independent states.

This hearing comes at an appropriate time. With six months of Chairmanship behind us and six months ahead of us, it's a good moment indeed to share with you a kind of 'mid-term review.' Of course, it's too early to draw conclusions, especially when you know that the heaviest workload tends to concentrate during the months right ahead of the Ministerial Council meeting in December. But it is not too early to make an overall judgment of where we stand and where we are heading.

Steering the OSCE is a challenging task, both politically and institutionally. Politically, because of the unsolved conflicts in which the OSCE has a role

to play as mediator, and because of the democratization process and respect for human rights that the OSCE endeavours to support in many countries. The OSCE chairmanship is at the same time institutionally a formidable task to accomplish. The OSCE is an rather unwieldy body with a broad multidimensional mandate and a “modus operandus” of co-operation among 55 – now 56 – equal partners.

Let me give you a brief overview of where we stand at this juncture in relation to our program. I must say the review is mixed, but reasonably promising. Achievements, though, will not come by sheer will of the chairmanship. Consensus is the ground rule of the OSCE. Goodwill and support from all participating States is essential.

The Ministerial Council of Ljubljana gave us a mandate to pursue – and hopefully conclude – the discussions on institutional reform. The institutional debate has been going on for quite some time, even threatening to paralyze the organization. Thanks to the Ljubljana meeting we have now a roadmap to guide the debate. Having a roadmap is, however, no guarantee to achieve our destination. The road itself remains difficult. As chairman-in-office, I believe there is undoubtedly room for improving the efficiency of the organization. However, I doubt there is reason to profoundly alter the nature of the organization or to tamper with the delicate balance of power within the organization itself. Whatever differences and tensions that may and do exist among participating States, we should stick to what keeps us together, namely the fundamental values and commitments of the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter which are the bedrock of what we collectively stand for, or should stand for. I would like to reiterate our

profound attachment to these common principles and to the institutions of the OSCE. The most pressing question, therefore, is not whether we share common values and commitments, but how we turn them into common actions and implementation.

The mandate for reform has two tracks. The first track aims at improving the proper functioning of the OSCE, the second track involves the more sensitive issue of election observation and other election-related activities. We agreed at Ljubljana that ODIHR will present a report to the Ministerial Council meeting in Brussels in December, and will consult with participating States in preparing its report. This process is on track, and we are committed to keep it on track.

I do not have to stress the critical importance of election observation, certainly not to the Chairman and the members of the US Helsinki Commission who are closely and actively involved in this key task which the OSCE fulfils via ODIHR and the Parliamentary Assembly. Election observation is a field in which the OSCE has acquired a vast expertise. I do not want to anticipate on the result of the review undertaken by ODIHR, but I would like to underline that election observation is a common responsibility which is of direct concern to OSCE as a whole. Parliamentarians, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE in particular, have a key role to play in the field of election observation where they can and should contribute on the basis of their own experience as practitioners and as elected politicians. ODIHR, for its part, is instrumental in making an objective assessment of the conditions in which elections are

held according to OSCE principles and commitments. Its contribution is widely recognized and appreciated.

Mister Chairman,
Distinguished Commissioners,

Let me briefly touch upon the other priorities that the Belgian chairmanship has put forward for 2006.

One of these is to bring more balance to the three traditional dimensions of the OSCE. They are interlinked. There can be no effective and lasting democratic rule without stability. Conversely, peace and security cannot be achieved without respect for democracy, civil liberties and human rights. And, also, there will be no lasting stability without economic development.

The overall balance between the three 'baskets' has been somewhat lost out of sight over the past years. To put 'more flesh on the bones' in the second dimension, we have chosen transport as the main theme for the Economic Forum this year. As economic cooperation and integration can contribute to regional security, we regard the OSCE as a platform for all countries concerned to discuss problems and find solutions. We got the support of all participating States to put transport on the agenda. We will now work to translate the outcome of the Economic Forum which took place in January and May into results at the Ministerial meeting in Brussels. It is in that sense that we have also put the energy issue high on the agenda and that we intend to organize a conference on the subject later in the year. Energy

security is a concern to all OSCE Participating States, producers and consumers alike.

A second thematic priority is the promotion of the rule of law and the fight against organized crime. It is an issue that concerns all OSCE countries, East and West. It is also an issue of direct concern to our citizens. Moreover, the fight against organized crime is not new to the OSCE which, in its different dimensions, has already developed action plans on combating human trafficking, illegal traffic in drugs and weapons, money laundering and corruption, and border management. The OSCE has also started up programs to strengthen the rule of law, and provide assistance for police and judiciary training. We hope to bring more coherence between the numerous OSCE-activities in the field, and give more substance and backbone to these activities.

On the fight against trafficking in human beings, I can tell you that, on the initiative of the Chairman-in-Office, participating States have recently agreed to an institutional modification to the OSCE mechanism to ensure more effective action within a unified structure. The role of the OSCE in promoting the fundamental right of human security should indeed be as effective as possible. With the new structure in place we are ready to appoint a new Special Representative before long. The tasks are not easy, but the commitment of the OSCE community to eradicating this vile manifestation of exploitation is large enough to surmount institutional bickering and ideological differences.

I also want to emphasize the commitment of the chairmanship to the promotion of tolerance and respect. The Ministerial Council in Ljubljana decided that the focus this year should be on the implementation of the commitments made by Participating States. By doing so, we are not only keeping tolerance high on the Organization's agenda but also striving to put the agenda into action. Together with ODIHR and with the support of the three Personal Representatives on tolerance, the chairmanship is fully committed to this task. It is no coincidence that our chairmanship started the year with a ceremony commemorating the victims of the Holocaust.

When violent protests erupted earlier this year over religious cartoons appearing in several newspapers, we urged all sides to respect the basic freedoms of expression and media, while reminding the press of its responsibility towards society. We also urged the OSCE community to focus on positive steps. One of these steps we already took was the human dimension meeting last month in Kazakhstan, that focused on inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. Another step is the contribution of the OSCE to the 'Alliance of Civilizations' initiative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. We are exploring further steps, making full use of the framework of co-operation and dialogue with the OSCE's Mediterranean and Asian partner countries,

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Commissioners,

With your permission, I would like to say a few words on the role of the OSCE as mediator in the so-called frozen conflicts and its role in promoting

democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

As an honest broker the Belgian chairmanship is actively contributing to finding solutions to the frozen conflicts of Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia. In the first half of the chairmanship, I have travelled to all countries concerned and met with their leaders, trying to facilitate the emergence of solutions. If and when these solutions occur will depend on the genuine willingness on the part of the principal parties involved.

There seemed to be a window of opportunity earlier this year for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the meetings of the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Paris and Bucarest failed to confirm that opportunity. On the contrary, serious obstacles remain, and it will take time and a lot of wisdom and courage on the part of both presidents to overcome them. The Belgian Chairmanship, in co-operation with the Co-Chairmen of the Minsk Group, will continue to do everything possible to move this process forward.

In the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, we are urging all parties to return to the negotiating table, while exercising restraint and refraining from any unilateral action that might worsen the situation. Last month, in Brussels, we held a donor conference where Participating States pledged more than 10 million euros for economic rehabilitation in the zone of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. The meeting was a first of its kind for the OSCE and took place in the presence of all parties. It is our hope that the support gathered at the conference will help to build confidence between the parties

and bring closer a settlement of the conflict.

Also, in the Moldova-Transnistrian conflict we are urging parties to return to the negotiating table. Important developments occurred since the beginning of this year with the introduction of the new customs regime and the deployment of the Border Assistance Mission (BAM) of the European Union on the border between Moldova and Ukraine. This should bring greater transparency in trade flows. We would like to start also a serious discussion on the transformation of the peacekeeping operation in Moldova. Transforming the peacekeeping operation into an internationally mandated and recognized operation could enhance security and stability. As chairmanship we also want to offer our best and honest efforts to open perspectives for a possible status settlement. To that end, a team of Belgian constitutional experts has been working out some interesting proposals.

As Chairman-in-Office, I raised serious concerns about the presidential elections in Belarus. They were flawed and opposition leaders and groups were curtailed. Also, the Andijan events in Uzbekistan raised grave concerns, and the ensuing court proceedings did not meet the standards under the OSCE commitments. How do we, as OSCE, work best to promote democratization, rule of law and respect for human rights in countries that do not live up to the standards to which they adhere as members of the OSCE?

Dialogue and co-operation are the answer, but, of course, it must be a two-way street. The role of the chairmanship is to facilitate this process, without compromising on our shared principles and commitment. At the same time

we will give full support to the OSCE field missions which, in dialogue with the respective governments and civil society, contribute to the democratic transition of these countries.

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Commissioners,

Democratization, the furthering of the rule of law and of respect for human rights are the main fields of action of the OSCE. They are our common concern. I look forward to continue working with you, during the remaining months of our Presidency of the OSCE and beyond.

Thank you for your attention