



PERMANENT MISSION OF IRELAND TO THE OSCE

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FSC-PC.DEL/3/08
27 February 2008

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**31st (Special) Joint Meeting of the
Forum for Security Co-operation and the Permanent Council,
Vienna, 27 February 2008**

Mr. Chairman,

It is both an honour and a pleasure to address this combined meeting of the Permanent Council and the Forum for Security Cooperation in the elegant and historic setting of the Hofburg.

The OSCE, and its predecessor the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, played a central role in the winding down of the Cold War and creating civilized relations between former antagonists. I would like, by my presence here today, to signal Ireland's strong desire that, in these changed circumstances, the OSCE should continue to be an important actor in the areas of security, conflict prevention and resolution, democracy and human rights.

Chairman,

Ireland and Finland have a long history of close, friendly and effective co-operation in international peace building and I can assure you that the Finnish Chair will have our full support throughout 2008. I should also like to say a word of congratulations to the Ambassadors of Greece, Kazakhstan and Lithuania, whose countries have been selected to chair the Permanent Council over the coming three years and of course to congratulate the Ambassador of Spain on his country's recent successful chairing of the organisation.

In preparation for my visit I have received extensive briefing from Ambassador O'Leary and his colleagues on the role and functions of the OSCE and its institutions, and on its many activities. It is truly a remarkable organisation and I am proud that Irish personnel are active in the secretariat, the institutions and the many field presences.

I doubt if those who put their signature to the Helsinki Final Act on the first of August 1975 could have foreseen where their agreement would lead. The commitments to which they subscribed have underpinned political, social and economic progress on a scale which could not have been imagined at that time. These positive developments across the OSCE area since 1975 need to be recognised.

Difficulties remain but when one looks at the long term perspective, the OSCE area has to a very large extent developed as a zone of peace, whose participating states have committed themselves to observing fundamental norms with regard to democracy and human rights. Had anyone said forty years ago that every state from Vancouver to Vladivostok would have signed up to the human rights commitments on which the OSCE is founded, the reaction would have been one of outright incredulity.

The OSCE, like every other international body, finds itself confronted with many challenges - from difficulties in reaching agreement over funding to disagreements regarding the very basis on which the organisation is founded.

It is important, however, to keep a sense of perspective. I know of no international body that is easy to run. In all multilateral settings, whether it be the European Union or the United Nations, there are invariably differing points of view and difficulties in arriving at a consensus. Against this background I feel it is important that the OSCE should play to its proven strengths, ranging from the identification of potential threats to security, to our organization's impressive record in the Human Dimension. I would suggest that we build upon that which is already agreed and on areas where we have a proven track record.

The example of the European Union may be helpful in reflecting on the current situation in our organisation. Within the EU there have been periods of stalemate when relations were strained and negotiations failed to move issues forward. It proved possible, however, to overcome difficulties by focussing on common purposes and deciding to put to one side proposals regarding which agreement plainly was not possible. A similar approach within the OSCE would in my view be fruitful.

I very much regret that it has not been possible to hold a meeting at the level of heads of State and Government since 1999. Our failure to do so is particularly regrettable, as meetings at summit level should be the political driving force of the OSCE. I therefore very much hope that the obstacles that have prevented the holding of a summit for nearly a decade can be resolved. If the way can be cleared, I am sure that incoming Chairs will treat the holding of a Summit as a priority.

Mr. Chairman,

The long term and very positive change of perspective in the OSCE region is echoed in the history of my own country. In 1975, when the Helsinki Final Act was signed, violence in Northern Ireland was a daily reality. For almost three decades the conflict seemed insoluble and the story of Northern Ireland was one of division and distrust and the absence of consensus or agreed political institutions.

Yet today, there is peace in Northern Ireland. Democratic institutions have been successfully established within a political system established under the agreed framework provided by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In the North, political parties are now working constructively in democratic, devolved, power-sharing institutions. Every party is committed to supporting, and working with, the institutions of policing and justice. Individuals who not too long ago were bitterly divided are co-operating as leaders of political and community groups.

This progress did not occur by chance. It required a sustained partnership between the Governments of Ireland and Britain, working with the parties and people of Northern Ireland,

in order to provide the basis for a sustainable peace. This required constructive engagement, creative thinking and the painstaking building of trust between divided communities. It required a willingness to take risks for peace and to step forward into a different, shared future, leaving behind the divisions of the past.

It also involved a willingness to revisit strongly held historical claims and to forgive sometimes bitter wrongs on all sides. Perhaps most importantly it required the development of a generous and inclusive view of the good of society as a whole. For lasting solution must, in the words of John Hume, be about “principled compromise not compromised principle”.

This is not to say that all is resolved. A key challenge now is to translate the positive achievements at the high political level to deep-rooted change on the ground, to ensure that transformed institutions lead to a transformed, and healed, society.

Mr Chairman,

The spread of peace and democracy in the OSCE region has enabled the broadening and deepening of the European Union. Today indeed the EU Members constitute almost half the participating States. The EU has been one of the principal catalysts for social and economic development in Ireland. We well understand the attraction which eventual membership holds for other European States and are sympathetic to their aspirations.

The EU Reform Treaty aims to give the Union the capacity to meet the challenges of twenty-first century including at an international level. The implementation of the Treaty will enable the EU to continue and enhance its peace keeping and development role on the world stage. The OSCE will continue to be a key partner of the EU in those efforts. For this reason I shall be working hard in my own country to ensure that the new Treaty is strongly endorsed by the Irish people when it is put to a referendum later this year.

Mr. Chairman,

It is a truism that no two conflicts are the same and it is equally true that experiences in conflict resolution and rehabilitation cannot be replicated. However, experience of conflicts and their resolution may provide lessons which are broadly transferable and generate principles which can be applied to many conflict situations.

With this in mind, my Government last year established a Conflict Resolution Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs, which will assist international organisations and States in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. At the same time, the Conflict Resolution Unit will promote academic research and other study into causes of conflict. One of its key objectives will be to encourage the sharing of lessons learned about how best to resolve conflict and to establish enduring peace and stability. This is an international dialogue in which the OSCE can make an important contribution based on its experience and insights

Mr. Chairman,

Most of the vast changes in the OSCE region have come about peacefully and through popular will. While these changes, which have their roots in the Helsinki process, have been tremendously positive and have improved the lives of millions, there have been setbacks, wars and conflicts which have blighted the lives and prospects of many others. The OSCE

has, and continues to, play a critical role in helping to resolve these conflicts. I therefore welcome the intention of the Finnish Chair to try, if at all possible, to secure movement towards solutions. While I do not propose to deal with each conflict in turn, I feel it would be remiss of me if I did not say a few words about the current situation in Kosovo.

I know that Kosovo's declaration of independence, though recognised by many within the international community, is opposed by some and causes concern to others. I believe that we must consider it in its full political and legal context. Kosovo has existed under UN administration since 1999, pending a final status settlement as envisaged in UN Resolution 1244. We regret that years of status talks failed to produce an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. A new UN Security Council resolution clarifying the position would of course have been preferable to the current situation.

But as the European Council noted in December, the status quo in Kosovo was inherently unstable. More than 90% of the population favour independence. The terrible legacy of conflict has made change inevitable, and as the EU has noted, along with nine years of UN administration renders the case of Kosovo *sui generis*. The EU has made clear its commitment to the future stability and development of Kosovo and the Western Balkan region in the interest of all of its people. We will cooperate closely with the OSCE and other international actors in pursuit of these goals. Ireland will play its part through our participation in KFOR, in the EU's rule of law mission, as well as through our support for Kosovo's economic development. I know that the OSCE has been doing excellent practical work in Kosovo, across a range of areas and we should ensure that it continues to do so

Recognition of Kosovo is not an expression of hostility towards Serbia. The European Union wishes to deepen its relationship with Serbia, and has offered to intensify political co-operation with a view to accelerating Serbia's progress towards the EU, including candidate status. The Serbian people are part of the European family. A deepening relationship with the European Union, leading to membership, will bring concrete benefits to the people of Serbia.

Mr Chairman,

The OSCE has developed an impressive range of roles and functions in the Human Dimension. This dimension has graduated over the years from the position of the "third basket" in CSCE negotiations to a central element in the OSCE's work.

This increased focus on the human dimension reflects the realities of our societies, where there has been a growing concern with the rights of the individual. This concern has its origin in a genuine wish to advance freedom. It has also been driven by recognition that extending rights is in our national and individual interests. You cannot ensure that a modern society is cohesive unless the individual feels valued and free. It is not possible to build a modern competitive economy without individual enterprise and responsibility. In the long term enterprise and responsibility can only flourish in a society where each individual is afforded the opportunity to shape his or her destiny, environment and government.

This is the principal reason why Ireland attaches the greatest importance to the observation of elections by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Elections which conform to internationally accepted standards are at the heart of any sustainable social progress. They are the basis for the legitimacy of any system of government. The monitoring

of elections by experienced observers and the recommendations they make are benefits of participation in the OSCE and not burdens imposed on some by others.

The one feature all electoral systems must have in common is that they are perceived by the voters and by objective observers, as having been conducted in an acceptable, transparent and legal manner.

The Irish General Election in May of 2007 was observed by an ODIHR election assessment team. It was a new experience for our election officials at national and local level to be the subject of international monitoring and one which they found beneficial. The positive assessment overall validated the Irish electoral system and was indeed very gratifying. As with all systems, there were certain aspects identified which could be improved and the independent expertise that the ODIHR has brought to bear on this is very welcome. My Government's Programme sets out a commitment to extensive electoral reform measures which will include the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission. It is envisaged that the Commission will take responsibility for administration and oversight of the electoral system, as well as a whole range of other related functions. The ODIHR report will be invaluable in taking this work forward.

It is important to see ODIHR's election work in the context of its full range of activities in promoting human rights, the rule of law and democratisation. These are areas which present us with a number of challenging commitments. I believe it is in the interest of all participating States to work towards their fulfilment.

I understand that discussions on election observation will take place in Vienna later this year. I hope that it will be possible to build upon what has already been achieved and that all participating States will approach these discussions in a constructive and positive frame of mind.

In the security field too, the OSCE has played a pivotal and in my view, less than appreciated role. It has built up a network of confidence building measures which have proved vital in lowering the temperature of conflicts and reducing the opportunities for conflict. The Forum for Security Cooperation, whose members are with us today, has overseen the implementation and continued development of a comprehensive range of agreements aimed at maintaining a space of peace and security in the OSCE area.

In this context let me stress the importance which Ireland attaches to the implementation of the CFE Treaty. Although not a party to the Treaty, we regard it as a cornerstone of European Security Architecture and hope that all States Party will soon feel able once again to meet their obligations under the Treaty.

The Economic and Environmental dimension is also a valuable element of our comprehensive concept of security. Challenges of unsustainable population increase, climate change and the unforeseen consequences of industrial and agricultural over-development often present security risks. While other international organisations are active in addressing these challenges, the OSCE is uniquely placed to evaluate their security implications and to coordinate effective and timely responses with other actors.

Mr. Chairman,

One of the signatories to the Helsinki Final Act memorably remarked “A week is a long time in politics”. Thirty two years is definitely a long time in the life of an international body. Many things have changed since 1975. The original 35 participating States are now 56. The system of two blocs and a small number of neutrals has collapsed. Some of the areas which were so painstakingly negotiated such as Family Reunions, Marriages between Citizens of Different States or Scientific Cooperation are now so commonplace as to appear quaint as subjects for international negotiation. But it is clear that dialogue and the exchange of views and experiences, as well as learning from the experiences of others, should still be central to the work of this organisation.

We should be on our guard against the danger of a two-tier OSCE developing. While the common commitments we have all signed up to must remain central to the work of this organisation, there is, I feel, a need for a less confrontational tone in the debate. In particular we must avoid a situation developing where only the faults of others are discussed. Every one of our states has human rights and political challenges to meet. For any group of states to approach their relations with another group on anything resembling a master-pupil basis is difficult to reconcile with the Helsinki commitment to sovereign equality and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty. Dialogue should be central to the work of the organisation, but it must be a dialogue of equals. Humility is a very useful quality in approaching exchanges in which criticism of others may seem justified.

Mr Chairman,

The archives of Foreign Ministries have no shortage of treaties and conventions, which were notable for being ignored rather than observed. It is a tribute to the OSCE that our focus is practical and our arguments are about degrees of implementation. This focus is central to the organisation’s future success. Implementation meetings offer the opportunity for a review of efforts, successes and failures.

In many areas, particularly in the Human Dimension, there is scope for expanding commitments and Ireland would welcome such expansion. We would like to see existing commitments on tolerance and non-discrimination expanded to include areas covered by the EU and the Council of Europe. We would welcome stronger action in the area of gender mainstreaming, we would be prepared to see new commitments on elections, but I recognise that these are all areas for patient negotiation.

New agreements are in any event an exercise in futility if we are not ensuring implementation of existing commitments.

Mr. Chairman, Ambassadors,

I know that the future viability and relevance of the OSCE has sometimes been questioned. Yet I see things somewhat differently. I look at the circumstances in which this organisation began. This took place in a Europe of ideologically rigid political structures, with nuclear armed superpowers facing each other, and an iron curtain dividing the continent.

I look at the vast achievements which have been made under the banner of OSCE and the Helsinki process. I look at the many ways in which the OSCE region is now united and the

many values and interests which we have in common, independently of international commitments. And I know that this organisation is too valuable to be allowed to fail or fade away. What is needed is recognition of current realities informed by the will to transform, or at least to improve, these realities.

We cannot expect any State to sacrifice its national interests in its approach to the OSCE. We can, however, expect that approach to be informed by the combination of enlightened realism and self-interest on which this organisation was founded. We can expect participating States to realise that this is not a zero sum game where any benefit to one must be at the expense of another.

We can seek to return to an era where there was a forum for negotiations, which were of mutual benefits and were conducted in a level headed and pragmatic fashion.

In short, Mr. Chairman, we can attempt to recapture the spirit of Helsinki.