



Margit Waestfelt has been Head of the Permanent Mission of Austria to the OSCE since December 2002. Upon completing her studies in Law and French at Graz University and graduating from the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, she joined the Austrian Foreign Ministry in 1978. Her overseas postings have included Paris and Moscow.

Ambassador Waestfelt delivers statement after statement — often switching easily between English and French — at the weekly Permanent Council meetings in the Hofburg.

Each text is the result of many hours of preparation involving delegations representing OSCE countries that are also part of the EU or are on the path to membership.

Critics argue that the EU's practice of speaking with one voice at the OSCE results in watered-down statements and spoils the debate — whether it is about the latest human rights developments in a participating State or the cartoon controversy earlier this year.

Ambassador Waestfelt, however, argues that the EU position is beneficial to the OSCE: By agreeing on a single stand, the countries give the Organization a head start in its search for consensus.

“The EU is working ahead, so to speak,” she says. “It doesn't mean that the EU works in isolation, draws up its position and says, ‘That's it, take it or leave it!’ On the contrary, we consult in a variety of ways.”

Throughout the week, she holds a series of meetings with a wide range of EU and non-EU countries for an exchange of views. In addition, individual EU country delegations sound out their partners at separate meetings.

“Taken together, these regular encounters provide a wide reservoir of knowledge and opinions which the EU presidency takes into account,” she says. “So the relationship is much more interlinked than it might appear.”

There are basic guidelines, though, and they come from European Council Conclusions reached in Brussels, which serve as what Ambassador Waestfelt calls “the real fundament of our work”.

Reaching agreement on what the EU and its associates should say and how to say it can be challenging. Delegations debate heatedly and — taking into account last-minute instructions from their capitals — often hash out final details right up to the time the ambassadors are about to take their seats at the *Neuer Saal*.

“Fortunately, we have never found ourselves in a situation where we could not

INTERVIEW WITH AUSTRIAN AMBASSADOR MARGIT WAESTFELT

The OSCE and the EU: Complementing each other's strengths

BY SUSANNA LÖÖF

It's a demanding task that calls for tough negotiations, skillful diplomacy and endless hours. But that's not what Austrian Ambassador Margit Waestfelt chooses to dwell on in an interview about her role representing the European Union presidency in the OSCE in the first half of 2006. Instead, she speaks about the excitement and exhilaration that the position brings. “The thrilling thing about it is that one gets to work closely with the decision-making mechanisms,” she says, adding that this is what she will miss the most after Austria passes on the revolving presidency to Finland on 1 July.

agree on a text. Otherwise, the consequence would be no text,” Ambassador Waestfelt says. “The Union’s coherence is strong enough for us to be able to send out a joint message. The process relies on common values and a spirit of shared attitudes.”

This ability to reach a final agreement marks a main difference between the EU and the OSCE, Ambassador Waestfelt says.

“The EU is a union, which means its members stand on solid common ground — and this is why, despite our differences, we do eventually succeed in coming together,” she says, “whereas in the OSCE, although we share common values, we still have some way to go before achieving a strong sense of unity of understanding. Therefore, well, that’s why we have the OSCE.”

OSCE-EU DECLARATION

Co-operation between Vienna and Brussels is close, but even so, the Austrian and Finnish EU presidencies have proposed that a joint OSCE-EU declaration be drafted to reaffirm the complementary way the two groupings work together.

Some think this initiative unnecessary, pointing out that the interaction functions quite well. Ambassador Waestfelt believes, however, that this does not diminish the potential usefulness of a document setting out forms of OSCE-EU co-operation.

“Anything can change, so I think to confirm something that is already happening naturally is always an advantage,” she says.

And things *are* certain to change as the European Union expands to encompass even more of the OSCE’s participating States. Currently, the EU comprises 45 per cent of OSCE countries, with the proportion likely to increase in the next few years.

Two OSCE participating States — Bulgaria and Romania — have acceding country status, while Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey are contenders for membership. Three others — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro — have begun the Stabilization and Association Process, which could lead to eventual membership. Serbia and Montenegro was suspended from the process on 3 May because of insufficient co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. [For the latest developments on the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, see page 17.]

“Of course the OSCE’s character will change as the EU enlarges, but that’s in the nature of the Organization,” Ambassador Waestfelt says. “Last year, when we celebrat-



SPILLOVER MONITOR MISSION TO SKOPJE/MICHEL COUPLAN

ed the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, we were reminded how much the CSCE/OSCE had evolved through the years. And it will continue to do so. There is no such thing as a task that is completed. The need for comprehensive security will always be with us.”

The EU will always remain an active partner in the OSCE process, the Ambassador said.

“Within the OSCE are the EU, the United States and Russia working alongside countries that do not belong to any of these large entities,” she says. “In a real sense, their participation in the OSCE is what brings — and keeps — them together.”

But with such an enlarged Union, will there really be a need for the OSCE? Austria and the European Union would answer that question with a resounding “Yes!”

“We have always believed in the OSCE and we want the OSCE to continue being an active player in European security,” Ambassador Waestfelt says. “We are convinced that no one organization can cope with all the problems confronting us —

“Police Open Day” in Kumanovo, near Skopje: The OSCE and the EU are working side by side to strengthen relations between the police and the community.



Austria and Finland are proposing a joint OSCE-EU declaration.

whether they relate to traditional security issues, or new threats, or the so-called frozen conflicts, or any phenomena that might arise. Each organization has specific goals and tackles a problem from its particular perspective.”

The Ambassador is convinced that the EU and the OSCE cannot and should not exclude each other from their work. “On the contrary, they should continue

exploring how they can best co-ordinate with one another and complement each other’s strengths. This holds true for other organizations as well, especially the Council of Europe and NATO.”

Susanna Lööf is a Press Officer in the OSCE Secretariat’s Press and Public Information Section.

WWW.EU2006.AT



“Communities based on shared values”

The EU, for many reasons, is conscious of its great responsibility towards the work of the OSCE, particularly as, through its member States, it covers three-quarters of the Organization’s budget.

By way of example and to illustrate how co-operation between the EU and the OSCE can be developed, allow me to recall the success that we can look back to in the EU:

- Between member States, the era of violent conflicts is over for good;
- More and more obstacles to economic relations between member States are being removed; and
- Within each member State, civil liberties are better guaranteed than ever before in history.

In the OSCE, we are concerned with comparable problems and expectations:

- Averting traditional and new dangers in the security area;

- Removing political and other obstacles to economic development; and
- Removing restrictions on the freedom, rights, creativity and spirit of enterprise of human beings.

I see it as our immediate task to strengthen the confidence of all participating States in the OSCE as a regional security organization with a comprehensive security concept, which places the individual human being at the centre of attention.

Despite the differences between the two organizations, the EU and the OSCE are both communities based on shared values; their interests and goals coincide to a considerable degree.

Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, in her address to the Permanent Council on 2 February 2006



BERNHARD J. HOLZNER/PHOTOMEDIA

The difference between [the EU and the OSCE] is where the strength of the EU lies: to some extent this is in its exclusivity and selectivity... Once you are a member of the EU, you are assured not only of support and solidarity, you are also assured that your laundry will not be washed in public.

The OSCE has had the exact opposite of that approach: at the OSCE, nothing is taboo. We spend a lot of time, usually on Thursdays, criticizing other participating States, most of the time for good reason.

Armenian Ambassador Jivan Tabibian, in his response to Foreign Minister Plassnik



OSCE/MIKHAIL ENSTATIEV

The inclusion of our countries in the priorities of the Austrian presidency confirms the EU’s commitment to the full European integration of the Balkans. This is particularly important in light of the pending resolution of certain open issues in the Balkans...

We assure you, Madame Minister, that our countries intend to seize this momentum and justify the confidence vested in them by continuing the process of reforms, strengthening our regional co-operation, implementing in full the recommendations of our individual European partnerships, and meeting all necessary conditions and criteria to achieve the goal of EU membership.

Albanian Ambassador Zef Mazi, in his response to Foreign Minister Plassnik on behalf of the delegations of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro



OSCE/MIKHAIL ENSTATIEV