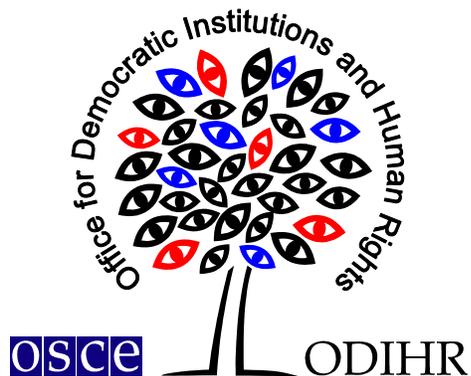


Address by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic
Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

Winter Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
Vienna, 20 February 2004



Madam Chair,
Honourable Members of the PA,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Parliamentary Assembly at the Winter Session for 2004.

When I was given the opportunity to address you for the first time, I outlined the activities my office is undertaking and the new challenges we face in the Human Dimension. I was pointing out that the OSCE PA and ODIHR were natural partners, partners in building democracy and its institutions. I am glad to say today that this partnership is developing fine. At ODIHR, we have been able to re-invigorate our activities, setting longer-term priorities and reassessing our project work.

The ODIHR, as the OSCE's specialized institution for the human dimension, is tasked with promoting democratic elections, strengthening democratic institutions, and protecting and promoting human rights. The underlying concept of pursuing these goals is that democracy and the protection of human rights are the best guarantee for creating fair and open societies, thus preventing possible human security threats from emerging or from endangering the stability of the OSCE area.

We assist participating States in fulfilling their commitments in the Human Dimension. In this, we work in close cooperation with government authorities, civil society, and of course with the legislative structures. It is here that I see a particular potential for further developing the cooperation between the ODIHR and the OSCE PA and its members, and where your work as Parliamentarians and our work as an Institution should complement and reinforce each other.

Legislative Support

For democracy to function properly, it is vital for laws to be drafted through a transparent and consensus-driven legislative process. Respect for the processes of law is key to the efficiency of law. For this reason, ODIHR has been stepping up activities in the field of Legislative Support. We have placed particular importance on providing support in areas where legislators

face new challenges and the OSCE's regional approach can be useful. One such case is the fight against the trafficking in human beings.

The ODIHR is able to offer flexible responses tailored to the needs of individual participating States while drawing on the good experiences and expert advice from other participating States. Our demand-driven approach ensures active participation by our partners among authorities, civil society and lawmakers.

In order to further consolidate our work in this field, we have created a new Legislative Support Unit, which will be responsible for elaboration and the implementation of legislative assistance programmes across the OSCE region.

An important tool in this context is our web-based legislative library, **Legislationline**, which provides direct access to more than 5,000 pieces of domestic and international legislation for 13 thematic areas in the human dimension. This resource has proved successful as a source of inspiration for law makers, enabling them to draw on experiences and best practices in other countries. It is also an essential component of the law reform assistance strategy we are developing.

I invite you to visit the site www.legislationline.org and make use of this simple, practical and effective web-based tool, both in reviewing existing legislation as well as when drafting new laws.

Rule of Law and Human Rights

Legislation sets the framework of operation for all legal institutions, including the judiciary, prosecutors' office, the defense bar, penitentiary system. Therefore one cannot over-emphasize the importance of an active role of institutions such as the PA. The exchange of best practices and experience between lawmakers contributes to development of the rule of law and assists participating States with their legal reform efforts.

The rule of law needs not only good laws and strong instruments, it also needs continuous commitment and engagement. In this, your role is crucial.

I also welcome the CiO's intention to keep action to prevent and combat terrorism high on the OSCE agenda. In our work, which focuses primarily on preventive action in the fight against terrorism, we will be looking to the

implementation of the OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism, the Bucharest Plan, and the Bishkek Programme. These documents reconfirm the OSCE commitment that all measures to prevent and combat terrorism must be carried out in full accordance with international law, in particular human rights, humanitarian, and refugee law.

Election Observation and Follow-up

Aside from the legislative support there are of course a number of further areas where our Institutions are already working together very well. One such area is election observation. I am particularly glad that President Bruce George is here today, for although we base our cooperation on a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1997, it is the personal dedication of Parliamentarians like your President that makes our relationship work. This was shown in our observation in the Russian Federation and the South Caucasus last year and will again be the case during the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia. To further enhance this cooperation, we are looking into possibilities to keep you up-to-date with ODIHR's evolving election observation methodology.

We will continue to rely on your support not only in conveying the message immediately after elections, but also in ensuring that the necessary follow-up on observations is pursued. The Election Day is only the most visible element of a much larger, long-term democratic process. My office has been conducting observation missions, in close cooperation with you, since ten years. In many cases, we have been able to follow more than one election cycle. It is thus crucial that we ensure that recommendations are taken up and it is in this process that Parliamentarians have a very prominent role to play.

In accordance with the tasks assigned to my office by the Ministerial Council in Maastricht, we intend to develop, as part of our standard methodology for election observation, a consistent follow-up approach and to provide assistance to states in implementing their commitments "to follow up promptly the ODIHR's election assessment and recommendations".

To this end, the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting planned for 15-16 July will also deal with questions relating to OSCE election commitments. I am looking forward to continue discussions on how to further advance the development of the OSCE/ODIHR progress report

“Existing Commitments for Democratic Elections in OSCE Participating States” presented last year.

Parliamentary Participation

We will be organizing a number of other events this year at which the contribution of parliamentarians would be valuable and most welcome.

On 25-26 March, we will be organizing a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Human Rights Education and Training, a field in which Parliamentarians have an important role to play.

On 12-14 May, we will be holding our annual Human Dimension Seminar in Warsaw, focussing on Democratic Institutions and Democratic Governance. The Seminar will touch upon issues at the core of parliamentary practice, including political frameworks and its democratic functioning, separation of powers and legitimacy. I would very much welcome the active participation of the PA with your wide experience in this field.

We would also welcome you to a Conference on Trafficking in Human Beings we will be organizing together with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in Helsinki on 23-24 September. We will be focusing on victim protection measures in countries of destination. It will also be an opportunity to review the implementation of the Action plan to prevent Trafficking in Human beings, and I can only commend the efforts many of you are undertaking in your respective Parliaments to ensure that the Plan is being implemented. An Action Plan is only as good as the action it generates.

Other ODIHR priorities

Following the mandates given to us at the Ministerial Council in Maastricht, the ODIHR will also be stepping up its efforts in combating manifestations of aggressive nationalism, racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and all forms of discrimination. We have already begun working together with the Bulgarian Chairmanship and with delegations on the preparations for the three tolerance-related events to be held in Berlin, Paris, and Brussels. I look forward to discussing the outcome of these three conferences at this year’s Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw 4-15 October and I hope that some of you will be able to attend this important annual meeting mandated to review the implementation of commitments and address new challenges.

Moreover, we will continue our efforts to promote gender equality and therefore welcome steps taken by the Chairmanship to review the Gender Action Plan from 2000 in the light of our experiences since. We must see this not just as an instrument to combat discrimination but also a means to ensure democratic stability. We will be working closely with delegations in Vienna on this issue and I hope here too our emphasis will be on the action rather than on the plan.

The third SHDM of 2004 will address the issue of internally displaced persons. Unlike refugees, the over 3 million IDPs in the OSCE region are not under systematic international protection. The issue therefore lies in the responsibility of the respective participating States. The SHDM should assist all of us in addressing the plight of IDPs and implementing the decision taken at Maastricht. Here again it is up to you in your Parliaments to raise awareness and mobilise political will to address this problem.

While keeping this year's priorities in mind, we must not lose sight of major decisions taken last year. On the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti, our Contact Point will continue to act as a clearing house for new initiatives, while working to bring representatives of Roma and Sinti NGOs together with authorities in participating States. The first such meetings took place with Roma representatives and the Council of Europe. We will also continue to collect data to assist states in the elaboration of new policies in this area.

In order to ensure these priorities are effective, we have strengthened management at ODIHR, to provide stronger focus and capacity as well as a longer term perspective. Our new programme "package" for 2004-05 includes concrete activities, also in other areas, on nearly 300 pages. We would welcome input in developing it further.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to take this opportunity to thank the many Parliamentarians present here today who have been working hard to ensure the implementation of Human Dimension commitments at the national and international levels. Without these untiring efforts the process started in Helsinki almost 30 years ago would risk losing its dynamism.

I encourage you to continue the strong partnership with us in our common effort to raise awareness of Human Dimension commitments and to ensure their effective realization. In this, our two institutions share objectives and responsibilities. We should strengthen our capacity to share concrete activities in this regard.

Thank you for your attention.