



# Orchestrating language needs

## Andrey Groshev's mission: Making sense of Babel

Diplomat, interpreter for presidents, translator and CSCE/OSCE expert — Andrey Groshev is all that and more: He is also the OSCE's first Chief of Language Services. After graduating from the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Languages specializing in techniques of interpretation in Russian, English and French, Mr. Groshev worked as an interpreter at the United Nations Office at Geneva for five years. He went on to a 20-year career with the Russian Foreign Ministry, 17 of which were spent commuting between Vienna and Geneva to help in follow-up work on the Helsinki Final Act and U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms control negotiations. Shortly before Mr. Groshev completed his seven-year assignment with the OSCE Secretariat at the end of August, Nadia Puchinyan, intern with the Press and Public Information Section, asked Mr. Groshev about the world of interpretation and translation, and what it was like to be — literally — in the middle of East-West history in the making.

**Nadia Puchinyan:** How true is it that simultaneous interpreters are born, not made?

**Andrey Groshev:** It's a fact that for some people, listening to one language while orally translating it into another language, almost at the same time as the speaker, is virtually impossible to learn no matter how much training they undergo. Some scientists say that when the brain does not have sufficient neuron fibres connecting the left and right hemispheres, it simply cannot process information quickly enough.

Another complicating factor in the process is that different types of memory are applied depending on whether it's simultaneous or consecutive interpretation. Simultaneous interpreters store a message only briefly, and they usually cannot reconstruct what has been said. In contrast, consecutive interpreters, who have a pause between language conversions, often take notes and rely both on their short- and on their long-term memories, so in most cases they are able to recall what they have interpreted.

**In your experience as an interpreter with the United Nations and later with your Foreign Ministry, are practices pretty standardized?**

In international organizations — and the OSCE is no exception — interpreters always translate *into* their native language. So, in the English-language booth at the Hofburg Congress Centre where there is an OSCE meeting practically every day except during three recess periods, you will find only English native speakers interpreting from other foreign languages, and in the Russian booth, only Russian native speakers.

In bilateral diplomatic talks, however, interpretation is always *from* a native language into a foreign one — that is, for the benefit of the “other” party. This is because it is assumed — correctly, I believe — that official interpreters, especially those who work in their government ministries, have the advantage of being familiar with the subject in hand and can therefore deliver more accurate interpretations into the foreign language.

A view of the interpreters' booths during a meeting in the Hofburg's *Neuer Saal*.  
Photo: OSCE/Mikhail Evstafiev



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Language Services took the Documents Control function under its wing within Conference Services.

This gave me an opportunity to put my background to practical use on the job — whether I'm authorizing, reviewing and approving translations, doing spot-checks in interpretation booths, or handling the concerns of both the providers and consumers of our services. It also helps that I was once at the receiving end of language services when I was a member of the Russian Delegation to the OSCE.

**What is the profile of a translator and interpreter in the OSCE?**

Most of them are graduates from internationally recognized schools of interpretation and translation and have university degrees in such fields as languages and political science.

They are required to have at least two foreign languages. Some have three languages. We even have some people who know all six OSCE official languages.

You can imagine how complex it is to interpret and translate the discussions at the Permanent Council, the Forum for Security Co-operation, the Open Skies Consultative Committee and the Joint Consultative Group, which is all about compliance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. There are terms that have had to be "invented" in another language. This is why we hire only seasoned interpreters and translators.

**You served for long periods as interpreter for some formidable personalities — Soviet leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov. Have you thought about writing your memoirs one day?**

Well, I'll have to think about that, since my recollections of these diplomatic meetings may not be as important as those of the main actors.

This much I can tell you: I was Gorbachev's back-up interpreter from 1985 until the end of his leadership in 1991, and I interpreted at the summit meetings between him and U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and President George Bush, Sr. The most significant of these was of course the very first meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan in November 1985 in Geneva, which marked the thawing of U.S.-Soviet relations.

I then became the official English-language interpreter for President Yeltsin from 1992 to 1998, which covered almost his entire term in office. I liked working with him. Even when he did not rely on prepared

Geneva, 19-21 November 1985: Andrey Groshev sits next to Mikhail Gorbachev at the first summit meeting between the Soviet leader and U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Also in the picture are Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Reagan's Chief of Staff, Donald Regan.

This is especially true in the Russian tradition. We have only one term for both interpreter and translator — *perevodchik*. They are also diplomats who have access to confidential matters, so there is a strong trust element there. In one-on-one meetings, you will often find an adviser or counsellor serving as the translator, whose notes are, in fact, the main source for follow-up action by the relevant ministries.

**What about the interpretation/translation practices in the OSCE and at the United Nations Offices at Vienna? How do they compare?**

We are guided by the same high international standards and norms, and do in fact consult and co-operate closely with one another, but obviously our precise needs vary.

The UN and the OSCE have four official languages in common: English, French, Russian and Spanish. In addition, the OSCE has German and Italian, while the UN has Arabic and Chinese.

An important distinction that works in our favour is that, in the OSCE, the meetings mostly involve heads and members of Vienna-based delegations and they get to know the quality of the work of our interpreters and translators. At the UN, with its numerous committees and working groups, participants come and go. Here, delegations give me feedback directly, which I then relay to the Language Services team. This encourages us to become more responsive to our clients' needs. I must say I can't imagine it any other way.

**Language Services expanded on your watch, and the new responsibilities turned out to be a perfect fit for you. How did that come about?**

The task of the head of Language Services used to be limited to recruiting interpreters and translators. That changed in 2000 under an OSCE-wide reorganization, when

texts, he spoke calmly and clearly, which made my job much easier.

**I know that interpreters have to be discreet, but can you give us a glimpse into their fascinating world?**

One event that I experienced up close took place after the signing ceremony of the Russian-NATO Founding Act on 27 May 1997, which also called for a strengthening of the OSCE, by the way. This was in a small restaurant in Paris, and although every leader was entitled to his own interpreter, the protocol people said initially that only one interpreter could be allowed in. The Russian interpreter was given priority by virtue of the Russian language being less well known.

So I found myself sitting between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton, with Jacques Chirac across the table. I had to help them understand each other both in English and French. Eventually, the logistics were solved and the U.S. and French interpreters joined us.

Earlier that year, in March, there was also an occasion in Helsinki with a highly intimate character — one of the most crucial meetings between “Boris” and “Bill”, which is what they called each other. That was when both were on the mend — Clinton from right-knee surgery and Yeltsin from quintuple bypass surgery. There were anxious moments on both sides about issues such as arms control and NATO expansion, and the talks threatened to collapse a couple of times.

Then Clinton said he wanted to have a private conversation with Yeltsin without the usual entourage around them. Normally,

Clinton’s interpreter should have been present, but since they wanted the utmost privacy, it was agreed that I could serve as sole interpreter between them.

I can still picture the scene — both walking slowly towards a corner without anyone else except me between them, Clinton hobbling, on crutches. Clinton put his arm around my shoulder, as if for support, and almost instinctively, Yeltsin also did the same. The gestures seemed to me an effort by the two leaders at building friendship and confidence and trust. At that dramatic moment I might as well have been non-existent — which, is in a sense, precisely what the main actors want their interpreters to be: inconspicuous.

**Nadia Puchinyan was the first Russian intern in the OSCE Secretariat’s Press and Public Information Section. She is currently finishing her doctoral studies at the Moscow State University of International Affairs.**



Helsinki, November 1997: Andrey Groshev (standing, left) “whispers” President Yeltsin’s remarks into President Clinton’s ear.



## The OSCE’s Language Services at a glance

The provision of interpretation and translation services in the OSCE follows international guidelines that are tailored to the Organization’s special needs, focusing on flexibility, pragmatism and cost-effectiveness without sacrificing professionalism.

- Language Services has a core team of 12 interpreters and 12 translators, who are hired on a freelance, local basis for the duration of one session, ranging from three to four months. The OSCE annual calendar of meetings comprises three sessions.
- The OSCE’s six working languages are English, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish. This goes back to the “Blue Book” — the Final Recommendations of the Helsinki Consultations in 1973 setting out the arrangements for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).
- Up to eight regular meetings a week are serviced. Interpretation is also provided at OSCE Summits, Ministerial Council meetings, and Economic Forum meetings.
- Two interpreters take turns every half-hour in a booth. A team works no more than three hours continuously and services not more than two consecutive meetings a day, with a break of one and a half hours between meetings.
- Most written translations are from English into the other OSCE languages (95 per cent), followed by Russian into English (about 4 per cent).

