



12TH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL MEETING

OSCE reform and political crisis in Ukraine dominate Sofia gathering

BY RICHARD MURPHY

SOFIA — The political crisis in Ukraine, following the country's disputed presidential election, and the question of OSCE reform dominated discussions among OSCE foreign ministers at the 12th Ministerial Council meeting in Sofia on 6 and 7 December.

For the second year in a row, the absence of consensus on a number of key political issues meant the two-day meeting ended without an adoption of a ministerial declaration.

But the ministers did adopt 19 decisions on a range of issues, including fighting terrorism, curbing illegal small arms and light weapons, promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, and combating corruption.

The Chairman-in-Office, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy, recalled in his address how important the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe — the forerunner of the OSCE — had been to him and others of his generation as they

struggled for democracy in Bulgaria in the late 1980s.

He described the modern-day Organization as a vital instrument for ensuring security and stability in the OSCE region and an inspiration for other parts of the world. "I appeal to all the participating States to make full use of the OSCE as a key forum for political dialogue and co-operative security," he said.

In the run-up to the meeting, the Chairman-in-Office had devoted considerable attention to the crisis in Ukraine — provoked by the second round of the presidential election on 21 November. OSCE observers said the election failed to meet a considerable number of OSCE commitments. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Kyiv to demand that it should be repeated.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kostyantyn Gryshchenko briefed his ministerial colleagues on the situation, while the OSCE Ministerial Troika — the Netherlands, Bulgaria and Slovenia — held informal talks

Bulgarian Foreign Minister
Solomon Passy hands
over the OSCE baton to
Slovenian Foreign Minister
Dimitrij Rupel.
Photo: OSCE/Svetoslav
Stanchev

with Boris Tarasyuk, a former Ukrainian foreign minister, who now chairs the parliamentary Committee on European Integration.

The Chairman-in-Office asked Secretary General Ján Kubiš to return to Ukraine on 6 December — his fourth visit in less than two weeks — to take part in a meeting of international mediators with the main political actors to help resolve the impasse.

In Sofia, clear differences were apparent among the ministers as they discussed perceived shortcomings in the work of the OSCE and the question of reform.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov said: “The OSCE’s contribution to the formation of the system for comprehensive security in Europe is immense, obvious and unarguable. It is, however, equally obvious and unarguable that the Organization has been in an ever-growing deep structural and conceptual crisis.”

He added: “Rectifying geographical imbalances in the OSCE’s activities remains a pressing problem.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that the OSCE could face an identity crisis and said it needed comprehensive reform. There was a major problem of “double standards” in election observation missions, and election monitoring was becoming “an instrument for political manipulation and a factor of destabilization”.

“Unfortunately, it must be said that the comparative advantages of the OSCE are being eroded,” Minister Lavrov said. “The Organization is not only ceasing to be a forum uniting States and peoples but also, on the contrary, is beginning to drive them apart.”

However, Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that while the OSCE must continue to adapt to changing environments, this did not mean starting from scratch.

“On the contrary, the OSCE is firmly rooted in its three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human,” he said. “The OSCE should evolve, but that implies moving on from what has already been achieved. It does not — and in the opinion of the European Union should not — mean undoing those achievements.”

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, addressing his last Ministerial Council meeting before leaving office, said that the OSCE could be proud of the accomplishments of the Helsinki Process, but that the United States remained concerned by the “unfulfilled promises of democracy and respect for

fundamental freedoms in some OSCE States”.

“Some countries have recently argued that the OSCE’s field work constitutes interference in internal affairs, that the OSCE has ‘double standards’, and that the OSCE has concentrated its efforts in the former Soviet republics for political reasons. I categorically disagree,” he added.

Chairman-in-Office Passy noted that the ministers had again failed to agree on a joint declaration because of differences of opinion on issues such as Georgia and Moldova.

“In such a large Organization, we could not expect unanimity of opinion on all the issues,” he said. “In my opinion, it is better to acknowledge our differences frankly than to agree on some lowest-common-denominator language of little substance.”

“In the months and years ahead, we will continue to work intensively to achieve lasting settlements in Georgia, Moldova and Nagorno-Karabakh. Courageous decisions will be required from all the parties concerned and the OSCE must remain fully engaged.”

Mongolian Foreign Minister Tsendyn Munh-Orgil attended his first OSCE Ministerial Council meeting since the OSCE Permanent Council granted his country the status of OSCE Partner for Co-operation a week earlier.

Secretary General Kubiš, addressing his last Ministerial Council meeting before the end of his term of office in June 2005, said he had witnessed the evolution of the OSCE from an instrument for bridging Cold War divisions into a tool for building a united Europe on the basis of shared democratic values.

“We are much more operational, better organized and better managed than we were a decade ago. The OSCE missions and institutions are a proven success,” he declared. But he questioned whether the OSCE was sufficiently dynamic in responding to new security challenges without abandoning its common values and asked whether it remained relevant to all the participating States.

“We need to reinvigorate the OSCE as a forum for high-level political dialogue on the most topical issues of security in order to prevent the opening of new dividing lines in Europe,” the Secretary General added. “Only the OSCE can be a platform for a ‘Europe whole and free’, embracing equally our European, Central Asian and North American States.”

For more on the OSCE’s 12th Ministerial Council, see: www.osce.org/events/mc/bulgaria2004

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and
U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in Sofia
Photo: OSCE/Svetoslav Stanchev