

Greek Chairmanship 2009 gears up for “interesting times”

Strengthening the presence and role of the OSCE in early warning, prevention and management of conflicts and crises will be a prime pursuit of the Greek Chairmanship, said Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis in an interview in mid-November with OSCE Spokesperson Martin Nesirky. Although the events in Georgia in the summer of 2008 had “shattered long-standing perceptions regarding security in the region”, she believed that the crisis could serve as a springboard for a broader discussion of a new and comprehensive security architecture in Europe, with the OSCE providing “a pretty good table” for this discussion.

Dora Bakoyannis assumed the post of Foreign Minister in February 2006, becoming one of the first women in the history of Greece to occupy a senior cabinet position. She was also the first female mayor of Athens, serving for three years, from October 2002. She was voted “World Mayor” in an annual international competition among mayors after Athens successfully hosted the 2004 Olympic Games. Since 2006, she has been included in the Forbes Magazine annual list of the world’s 100 most powerful women leaders.

After studying political science and communication at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, she went on to pursue further studies in political science and public law at the University of Athens. The Foreign Minister was married to the late journalist and parliamentarian Pavlos Bakoyannis, who was assassinated in 1989. Her father, Greek statesman Constantine Mitsotakis, now 90, served as Foreign Minister (1980-1981) and Prime Minister (1990-1993).

Martin Nesirky: Why is the OSCE important to Greece? In your view, what is special about the OSCE compared with other organizations?

Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis: The OSCE is a living organism that, since the 1970s, has stood by the peoples of Europe in their efforts to realize the vision of more progress, more stability and more democracy.

It is a unique forum for dialogue and co-operation, with a comprehensive approach to security. And it has an unparalleled ability to swiftly adapt to Europe’s ever-changing geopolitical environment.

The OSCE is the “underdog” among regional organizations, and we Greeks have a soft spot for it. Its staff works tremendously hard, with a lot of care, and does a great deal of good in the world on a modest budget. For all these reasons, the OSCE deserves our full support.

What will the priorities of your Chairmanship be, and why have you chosen them?

I wouldn’t dare steal the Finns’ thunder, Martin! We’re just halfway through November. We are



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preparing for the Ministerial Council meeting in Helsinki and I can tell you for sure that our plate is more than full. Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb and his Finnish team have done an amazing job, and I am confident that in Helsinki we will take another important step towards a more cohesive and effective OSCE.

What I can tell you, though, is that Greece will be an honest broker. The Greek Chairmanship will try to build a stronger OSCE at the heart of the European security architecture. This comes at a time when the quest for security has become ever more complex and difficult, when the only constant in the international environment lies in the fluidity and multifaceted nature of the challenges. The current international financial crisis, which concerns and affects everyone, only accentuates this fluidity.

The Greek Chairmanship will endeavour to fulfil the exacting obligations of the mission it is undertaking to the best of its abilities. Three principles will guide our work: respect for the Organization’s regulations, pursuit of optimum convergence and consensus, and strengthening of the presence and role of the OSCE in early warning, prevention and management of conflicts and crises.

I will therefore be so bold as to make a promise to the other 55 participating States: You can put your trust in Greece. As for the rest, you will have to wait until 15 January in Vienna, when we will launch the Greek Chairmanship!

What impact has the Georgian crisis had on your preparations for the Chairmanship and on the OSCE?

The crisis in August shattered long-standing perceptions regarding security in Eurasia. At the same time, it reminded us that, after so many wars and so much suffering, we still resort to violence to resolve disputes. Mistakes and miscalculations continue to lead to tragic misadventures at the expense of the lives of ordinary people. It is a disgrace for all of us to be repeating the same mistakes. You would think we might know better by now.

At the end of the day, however, the crisis can serve as a springboard for a broader discussion of a new, comprehensive security architecture that takes into account the changes in the geopolitical map of Europe, the enlargement of the EU, the evolution of NATO and the strategic role of the Russian Federation.

One thing is certain: There cannot be a lasting peace in Europe as long as we continue to view our relations through a zero-sum lens. We should be able to sit at the table and talk our way through our problems. And I think the OSCE is a pretty good table for this discussion.

How would the Greek Chairmanship of the OSCE tackle the unresolved conflicts in general?

I want to be very clear on this: My approach is not “general”, but rather specific and conflict-oriented. Every single conflict reflects a failure of diplomacy. It is a tragedy for the people on the ground. Every case is unique and demands our special attention.

I believe that, by choosing Greece to hold the next Chairmanship, the other participating States have entrusted my country with a great responsibility. We will do our best to live up to everyone’s expectations. I will consider even the most modest progress on any of these conflicts to be a huge success if it makes people’s lives just a little bit better. That is where our focus will be throughout the year.

What is your vision for the future of the Balkans, including Kosovo, and what role should the OSCE play in the region?

The recent history of the Balkans is a sad reminder of the shortcomings of the international community in conflict prevention at the end of the Cold War. It demonstrates our weakness in responding to the urgent need of the times for a vision and a courageous handling of the break-up of Yugoslavia. It also marked the OSCE’s coming of age.

The Balkan countries and their peoples have suffered enough. They have finally turned the page. They are building a brighter future on a clear European path, which was set out at the EU Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, during a Greek EU Presidency. Since then, Greece has continued to support this path in a consistent and tangible manner.

The OSCE’s role is crucial here. With field operations in all the Western Balkan countries, the OSCE

combines knowledge of the local environment with international expertise. It runs tailor-made projects at community level that reach out to people, while consolidating democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights.

We expect a lot from our OSCE missions in this part of the world, especially from the largest of the Organization’s 19 field operations. Kosovo remains a sensitive issue and continues to demand our constant care and attention. The OSCE Mission in Kosovo will receive it.

In the end, the Balkans will take their rightful place in Europe. There can be no other future but one of prosperity and peace within the European family. Until we reach that point, Europe will never be complete.

French President Sarkozy has responded to Russian President Medvedev’s security pact proposal by calling for an OSCE summit in mid-2009. This would be the first OSCE summit since 1999 in Istanbul and would come 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What is your view on such a summit? Could this help revive the future of the arms control regime for Europe, and the CFE Treaty in particular?

As I said, the crisis in Georgia may have prompted or re-energized a broader discussion on the need for a comprehensive security architecture in Europe. Indeed, some of the Organization’s participating States, such as France and Russia, have argued in favour of initiating such a dialogue. Whether this dialogue will eventually reach the level of a summit meeting remains to be seen.

The discussion is under way as we speak. But time is going by fast. At the upcoming Ministerial Council meeting in Helsinki, we will have to agree on some more specific directions. Greece recognizes the need to carry out an open and substantial dialogue — we believe it useful and necessary — without trying to predetermine its outcome.

We will be in ongoing communication with all our partners and, provided the participating States decide in favour of this dialogue, we are prepared to host any meeting decided upon. Of course the European Union and NATO will continue to play a decisive role as well-defined poles of security in our region, with the United States and Russia each weighing in heavily, and this is a good thing. The fact that both countries are participating States represents a great added value for the OSCE.

Finally, we will work closely with our partners in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, which, in 2010, will be the first participating State from this geographic area to assume the OSCE Chairmanship.

How do you see the future of the “Quintet” — the Chairmanships from 2007 to 2011?

Reinventing the wheel is a waste of time. And in the OSCE, it is an expense we cannot afford. I have supported the idea of the Quintet from the very beginning. I consider it to be a very useful framework that guarantees long-term planning of



Athens, 13 November. Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis with OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut at a seminar to introduce the OSCE and the forthcoming Greek Chairmanship to the diplomatic corps, academics, civic groups and representatives of the media.



DOLUKAS ANTONIOS / GREEK FOREIGN MINISTRY

activities and a more sophisticated elaboration of the overall OSCE strategy. It builds up consistency, continuity and the institutional memory of the Organization.

You have already mentioned the global economic crisis. It could have an impact on the OSCE. What would you say to those who would cut funding?

Budget approval is a headache for every Chairmanship. But the OSCE is asked to do a lot with very little, and so the least we can do, as participating States, is to give the Organization the means with which to do its job and to become more effective. Above all, if the OSCE is to be successful, consensus must be forged among the participating States.

We will spare no effort to bridge the diverging views — step by step, if we have to — so that we can build the necessary consensus, with full respect for transparency. The smooth functioning of the Organization is vital to the success of any undertaking and thus will be a fundamental priority of our Chairmanship.

You make great use of social networks such as FaceBook. What plans do you have in this area for your Chairmanship?

It is a fact that nowadays the new social media and Web tools 2.0, as developed on the Internet, play an important role in shaping public opinion and in mobilizing people's participation. We saw this in the recent US elections. My contact with citizens has been reinforced by my presence on the Web.

A large proportion of — for the most part — young people use these new means of networking to exchange views, create groups, get to know each other better and support common causes, so we need to tap into these new social media if we want to be successful in communicating our messages.

Using the already up-to-date website of the OSCE as a starting point, we will aim to develop

our presence in Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube, and other new modern social media tools. In doing so, we will open up new channels of communication and platforms for public participation and we will be able to share the OSCE's activities with the public. We hope that this will be our contribution towards making the OSCE more accessible to average citizens — so that they do not perceive it as an impersonal, gigantic, bureaucratic mechanism, but rather as an Organization that, with the help of new technologies among other tools, can better affirm the diversity of the citizens of its 56 participating States.

You have been a trailblazer for women everywhere — not just in your own country — throughout your public and professional life. You have doubtless heard this question before, but does this place a special onus on you to promote gender issues, including during your Chairmanship year?

I feel that a special onus is on me to rise to the challenge of an OSCE Chairmanship at a difficult time such as this. You know the ancient Chinese saying: "May you live in interesting times." It was a wish and a curse at the same time. Today, we are living through what are clearly interesting times, and we all just have to do our best.

That entails a broad and diverse agenda. Gender issues are certainly a major element — the case for the link between gender empowerment and security is clear, after all — but I doubt that we will have the luxury of focusing on a single issue.

And which would you prefer — Chairman-in-Office, Chairperson-in-Office or Chairwoman-in-Office?

Any of these will do. I was never big on titles.

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