



15 November 2004: On a visit to the Zadar field office of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Stephan Minikes (left) and Peter Semneby, then-Head of Mission, look in on the situation of Serb returnees. One of them, Sofia Skoric, shows off her pictures with Prime Minister Ivo Sanader.

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHAN M. MINIKES

“U.S.-Russian relations crucial to OSCE future”

In his farewell address on 14 July 2005, the outgoing United States Ambassador to the OSCE, Stephan M. Minikes, called on the Permanent Council to “fight for and defend valiantly the principles embodied in the Helsinki Final Act that are at the core of this great Organization”. He urged his fellow ambassadors, as they debated the OSCE’s future, “never to give up your principles, never yield to the temptation of thinking, that even one life of an Uzbek refugee in Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan does not matter”. Shortly before turning over the helm of the U.S. Mission to Ambassador Julie Finley, Ambassador Minikes was interviewed by the *OSCE Magazine* about his three and a half years in Vienna.

OSCE Magazine: What gave you professional satisfaction in your term as U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE and what were the main frustrations?

Ambassador Stephan Minikes: I have gained great satisfaction from working with my fellow ambassadors — all outstanding professionals — to do things that have brought a better life closer to millions of people. We have helped to bring them freedom and democracy, market economies, free and fair elections, honest and corruption-free government, and an independent and trustworthy judiciary. We have strengthened, or created, conditions in which men and women can freely choose their governments and how to worship; in which they can accept each other and live peacefully regardless of race, creed, culture, religion or colour; and in which they can earn a living, enjoy the fruits of their labour and educate their children as they desire.

My main frustration is twofold: that we cannot make this way of life available to more people more quickly, and that there are a number of States whose commitment to the OSCE’s principles has been weakening.

What are the Organization’s main strengths and weaknesses?

The OSCE’s greatest strength is what it stands for. Its other strengths are its low operational costs, lack of bureaucracy, a broad membership generally based on shared commitments, and a rotating political leadership. The consensus principle is a weakness that also happens to be a strength: Achieving consensus can be frustrating while we are forging it, but the result is always solid unity.

How do you see the future of OSCE field missions?

The field missions are a vital aspect of the OSCE’s work. As long as there are countries — whether east or west of Vienna — with concerns that can be addressed by the Organization’s expertise, I see the field missions and their broad range of activities as an indispensable resource.

Field missions are vehicles for positive change and are a sign that a country wants to be a member of the community of democracies. If a participating State wants to limit or close a mission without an agreement that it is time to do so, it can damage the way it is perceived as a State. The mere presence of an OSCE Mission, however, cannot.

Could the decision-making process in the OSCE be improved and if so, how?

Common Purpose, the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons, has some interesting ideas in this regard. I don’t see any appetite for abolishing consensus, but there might be some interest in the recommendation that States blocking consensus be identified, or that States with candidates for key positions should not abuse consensus by unilaterally blocking decisions. We have to realize that the way the OSCE makes decisions strongly influences our effectiveness. The inability to adopt a decision because of a lone holdout and protracted delays in filling key jobs because one State is blocking consensus paint an unattractive picture of the Organization.

In which areas in participating States has the OSCE made a significant impact?

Firstly, in OSCE missions. In most cases, they have been carrying out excellent work. I say “in most cases” because there have also been some poor leadership, but that is now changing. With poor leadership, we can achieve almost nothing.

Secondly, in recent election-monitoring activities of the Office for Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In each of the 12 elections that the ODIHR observed in 2004 — including the U.S. presidential election — it upheld the single standard that all 55 participating States have agreed upon: The election outcome must represent the will of the people. Otherwise, the resulting government lacks legitimacy. The criticism that the ODIHR has used an alleged “double standard” is, to use a homely but appropriate English word, hogwash. There is no double standard. There is, however, double interpretation of the universal standard by some States as they see fit to meet their political objectives.

What are your thoughts on the OSCE's future?

I think the OSCE has a wonderful future. The OSCE's basic principles form the bedrock upon which its work is shaped. What the OSCE most needs is to have staying power so that future generations can continue its work in security, democracy, migration and tolerance — to name just a few crucial areas.

Equally important, the Organization has the ability to evolve in order to meet tomorrow's challenges. For example, before 11 September 2001, the OSCE did not have a focus on terrorism. But it mobilized quickly to become a significant actor in the world's counter-terrorism efforts. The Bucharest Plan established the Secretariat's Action against Terrorism Unit, which now responds rapidly and efficiently to requests from participating States for anti-terrorism assistance. It is this kind of reaction to future events and changing needs that will ensure a bright future for the OSCE.

How can the OSCE's leadership strengthen its ability to fulfil its mandate?

The Chairmanship should have a vision and a plan for meeting its goals, and should stay on message. It is vital that it should keep its main objectives in sight and not be tempted by the “flavour of the week”. One of the most important tasks of the Chairman-in-Office is to constantly remind fellow foreign ministers of the OSCE's capabilities so they understand the Organization and support it.

The Secretary General must have the tools and flexibility needed to support the Chairmanship and the participating States in fulfilling the OSCE's political goals. He must also take a broader view of how the OSCE can be most effective in sustaining long-term activities — both in the administrative area and in implementing fundamental OSCE principles and commitments.

Marc Perrin de Brichambaut brings great experience and capabilities to the position. He has a tremendous opportunity to work closely with the Chair and to ensure the best use of the OSCE's capabilities, including co-operation with other international institutions.

How do you see the U.S.-Russia relationship within the framework of the OSCE?

The OSCE is a forum in which the U.S. has worked closely with Russia and the EU on issues of common interest. In the course of my tenure as Ambassador, the U.S. and Russia have jointly tabled numerous proposals, ranging from the administrative (press and publications) to the security-related (adoption and implementation of International Atomic Energy Agency standards for the

handling of radioactive materials) to the strategic (our joint draft for the *Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century*).

Russia has many ideas on how to improve the OSCE and we are always willing to listen. It is critical for the future of the OSCE that the U.S. and Russia work well together. However, the OSCE must continue to build on the fundamental principles on which it was founded. We do not want to return to the bad old days when we were criticized for so-called “interference in internal affairs”. The very founding of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe — the CSCE — laid that issue to rest once and for all. We remain prepared to work constructively with Russia and others to enhance OSCE activities in the security and economic dimensions, while also maintaining the vital work that the OSCE does in the human dimension.

What role do you see for the OSCE as one of the pillars of the Euro-Atlantic security structure?

I strongly support the expansion of co-operation with other international organizations, including the recent discussions between the OSCE and the Council of Europe on how to improve co-ordination between the two bodies, as well as the on-the-ground work that the OSCE is now doing with NATO on such issues as border management and security. It is important that we all work closely together. However, to be really effective, these co-operative efforts also need to be strongly reinforced in the world's capitals by the Chairman-in-Office and the Secretary General.

Is there a need for the OSCE's “soft security” approach?

The phrase “soft security” has always puzzled me. What is “hard security”? Is it security that is enforced from the business end of a weapon? The OSCE's comprehensive security approach, as I prefer to call it, is as useful today as ever — perhaps even more so. While the OSCE will continue to foster a wide range of traditional politico-military confidence- and security-building measures, it also has the flexibility to negotiate new agreements that address the evolving security threats in Europe.

The accords reached after 11 September 2001 on small arms and light weapons, travel documents, and container security demonstrate the OSCE's willingness to tackle real-world, transnational issues that help combat terrorism. Its flexibility also provides a unique opportunity to effectively combine such new agreements with traditional arms control security measures.

Where do election-monitoring, tolerance, anti-trafficking, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation fit in? If that is “soft security” to some, it is pretty “hard” where I have seen it in action. Not long ago, when wars were won, they stayed won. That is not so today. Instead, peace and security require a comprehensive approach. That is what the OSCE does so well, and that is why it is needed more than ever. It is time for those who lament over the OSCE's future to stop wringing their hands, put their shoulder to the wheel, and help move this great organization forward.