



FINNISH FOREIGN MINISTRY/PETRI KRÖÖK

2008 OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP: FINLAND

# The year that was

## Was it all worth it?

*This is not a report of Finland's Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2008. These are my impressions of the efforts from the point of view of the Chairmanship Task Force in Helsinki. They can be challenged by colleagues who have certainly made their own assessments of the rather rough ride of the OSCE boat as it navigated towards Helsinki.*

**BY AMBASSADOR ALEKSI HÄRKÖNEN**

What is a Chairmanship Task Force? It is a group of people responsible for advising and assisting the Foreign Minister, who is the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE. It must help the Foreign Ministry to focus on the demands that the Chairmanship will place on the order of priorities, resources and the Minister's calendar. It has to make sure in advance that the lines of communication between the Minister and the Task Force are kept open 24/7. Equally important, the Task Force and the Finnish Delegation in Vienna needed to make up one seamless team and agree on a sensible division of labour. That's how it worked between us and Ambassador Antti Turunen and his crew.

I was able to recruit a team of 12 people to take care of these various aspects, including conference preparations. They did a very good job right from the outset. There were moments when their work load grew enormously, but they all stood their

ground. Two veteran diplomats and a member of parliament joined the team as special envoys. The youngest among us were twenty-somethings and the oldest were sixty-somethings. I think we all enjoyed the excitement of international politics and, yes, we were able to see unintended humour in people's behaviour in the middle of all the turmoil. This helped us a lot.

The worst time in every Chairmanship is before it all begins. It gets much easier once the Chairmanship's programme is presented and ready to be implemented. In fact, the early part of 2008 was the only rather calm period in our Chairmanship. Foreign Minister Ilkka Kanerva, the Chairman-in-Office, went on his first official trips. The Secretariat and the field operations offered their much-appreciated contribution towards making these visits successful.

The OSCE Mission in Kosovo survived the declaration of independence in February. The non-observation of the presidential elections in Russia in March was *déjà vu*; it neither caused any particular shock waves nor did it lead to other countries' following suit. Turkmenistan hosted its first-ever OSCE event on economic and environmental issues, and did it on a grand scale.

With the change of Foreign Minister in April, we got a chance to explain our priorities again. Alexander Stubb, the new Chairman-in-Office, carried out his share of visits and consultations in the spring and early summer. The budget and the scales of contribution were finally approved. This annually repeated farcical procedure bothered us less than it did some other Chairmanships. The mandate of the Office in Tajikistan was successfully

Helsinki, Sixteenth Ministerial Council Meeting, 5 December 2008. Ambassador Antti Turunen, Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb and Ambassador Aleksi Härkönen (front row, third, fourth and fifth from the left, respectively) and their team take a bow after the last speech is delivered and the last press conference is over. Also shown in the group picture is Special Envoy Heikki Talvitie (middle row, right) and Head of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, Ambassador Terhi Hakala (front row, fourth from the right).

negotiated, and activities important for the region were able to proceed.

At the same time, dark clouds started gathering over Georgia. Russia established official relations with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Incidents on the ground became more serious, involving heavy weapons. Earlier, conflict prevention had switched into high gear, led by Special Envoy Heikki Talvitie. The OSCE Mission to Georgia, headed by Ambassador Terhi Hakala, lent invaluable support.

Then it all exploded in August. A war between two participating States was a nightmare, made worse by the uninhibited propaganda that found its way even into reputable media outlets. We drafted statements with the great co-operation of the OSCE press people, who never seemed to be caught off guard in any situation. We got the feeling that, for once, the OSCE was being listened to. The Chairman-in-Office rushed to Tbilisi and Moscow to start ceasefire negotiations, which were successfully completed by the French EU Presidency. Additional military monitoring officers were quickly deployed by the OSCE, and the Chairman-in-Office visited Georgia again to kick off their work.

A second blow came when Russia decided to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. Although no other OSCE participating State followed suit, we knew that the conflict between Russia and Georgia would set the tone of the Chairmanship for the rest of the year.

The idea of the EU, the UN and the OSCE co-operating closely in Georgia had been floated by the Finnish Chairmanship even before the war. Now such a platform was much in demand, and the three organizations decided to co-chair the Geneva talks, which had been proposed by France and Russia. The Chairman-in-Office presented his ideas on Georgia and other OSCE issues to the UN Security Council in September. The following month, the Geneva talks were initiated and, by the end of the year, had made some progress.

While humanitarian organizations were able to operate in the region, new obstacles were placed in the path of the OSCE. Military monitoring officers were not allowed to do their work in South Ossetia. All OSCE representatives had to enter through the famous Roki Tunnel from the north, which was not the most direct route from Tbilisi and Gori in the south. It was, therefore, to be expected that no consensus would be reached for the 2009 mandate of the OSCE Mission, covering the whole territory of Georgia.

We were asked: “What is the situation in South Ossetia now, after the war?” “Is ethnic cleansing taking place?” “Why can’t the situation be monitored by international organizations such as the OSCE?” We asked Janez Lenarčič, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and Knut Vollebaek, High Commissioner on National Minorities, to find out about the situation regarding human rights and minorities. They did a great job under difficult circumstances. Please read the ODIHR report, to which the HCNM contributed.

As the Helsinki Ministerial Council Meeting drew near, the number of foreign ministers attending grew by the day. We had decided to arrange a working lunch for the ministers on a topical issue. “The Future of Security in Europe” was the obvious choice, since the Russian and French Presidents had introduced the subject in a visible way and had also mentioned the OSCE as a potential forum for such a debate. It turned out to be a fascinating discussion, undoubtedly reminding us all of the OSCE’s



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Helsinki, 4 December 2008. Ambassador Aleksii Härkönen is flanked by outgoing Chairman-in-Office Alexander Stubb and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband at the ministerial talks.

potential to facilitate a high-level dialogue on relevant security issues.

We were pleasantly surprised by the approval of quite a number of decisions in Helsinki. The lack of consensus on a political declaration became clear right from the first day. However, it also became clear that our proposal for a new kind of text was receiving a great deal of support, with only a handful of delegations digging their heels. We were left with the nagging feeling that finding compromises may not be on the list of priorities in international politics at the moment.

The arrangements for the ministerial meeting had kept many of us busy day and night, so we were pleased with the way the 1,500 guests — delegates as well as press people — interacted with our liaison officers and conference assistants. The ministerial meeting was quite an experience for all of us, especially for the first-timers.

It is early February as I’m writing this — time to wish the Greek Chairmanship well. Almost everyone in the Finnish Task Force has gone or will soon be going. They’re off to New York or Georgia, or other departments of the Foreign Ministry, or to prepare for Finland’s participation in the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. I am happy for them and will soon have a new assignment myself.

Politics is about people. It was great to have co-operated with the office of the OSCE Secretary General and the Secretariat, the institutions, the field operations, the delegations and the Parliamentary Assembly — but, above all else, with the great people in these places. We may not always have found agreement on everything, but we always trusted each other when confronting difficult situations.

Yes, indeed, it was definitely well worth it.

**Ambassador Aleksii Härkönen, Head of the Finnish OSCE Chairmanship Task Force from 2007 to early 2009, has been appointed Foreign Policy Adviser to the President of the Republic of Finland, effective 1 March. He was his country’s Permanent Representative to the OSCE from 2002 to 2007. Earlier, he held a number of senior positions in the Finnish Foreign Ministry, specializing in security policy and arms control. Other diplomatic assignments took him to Caracas, Bonn and Washington, D.C. Ambassador Härkönen holds a master’s degree in political science from the University of Helsinki.**

## Sixteenth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council

The OSCE Ministerial Council in Helsinki adopted 13 decisions focusing on the politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions of security. The 56 participating States issued a Ministerial Statement on Nagorno-Karabakh encouraging the parties to the conflict to intensify their efforts in the negotiations process. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the participating States reaffirmed their strong commitment to its principles in a joint Ministerial Declaration.

### *Decisions concerning the human dimension*

**MC.Dec/5/08** Enhancing criminal justice responses to trafficking in human beings through a comprehensive approach

**MC.Dec/6/08** Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area

**MC.Dec/7/08** Further strengthening the rule of law in the OSCE area

**MC.Dec/8/08** OSCE Contribution to the implementation phase of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative

### *Decision concerning the economic and environmental dimension*

**MC.Dec/9/08** Follow-up to the Sixteenth Economic and Environmental Forum on maritime and inland waterways co-operation

### *Decisions concerning the politico-military dimension*

**MC.Dec/10/08** Further promoting the OSCE's action in countering terrorism

**MC.Dec/11/08** Small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition

**MC.Dec/13/08** Issues relevant to the Forum for Security Co-operation

### *Decisions concerning administrative matters*

**MC.Dec/1/08** Appointment of the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Decides to appoint Mr. Janez Lenarčič as Director of the ODIHR for a period of three years with effect from 1 July 2008.

**MC.Dec/2/08** Reappointment of the OSCE Secretary General Decides to reappoint Mr. Marc Perrin de Brichambaut as Secretary General of the OSCE for a period of three years with effect from 1 July 2008.

**MC.Dec/3/08** Periods of service of the OSCE Secretary General Decides that the OSCE Secretary General shall be appointed for a term of three years, which may be extended for a second and final term of three years.

**MC.Dec/4/08** Strengthening the legal framework of the OSCE Tasks the Chairman-in-Office, in consultation with the participating States, to pursue a dialogue on strengthening the legal framework of the OSCE and to report to the Ministerial Council meeting in Athens in 2009.

**MC.Dec/12/08** Time and place of the next meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council Decides that the Seventeenth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council will be convened in Athens on 1 and 2 December 2009.

The full decisions are available on the Ministerial Council website under "Documents": [www.osce.org/conferences/mc\\_2008.html](http://www.osce.org/conferences/mc_2008.html)



Helsinki, 5 December 2008. The outgoing and incoming OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb and Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis at the media centre. Helsinki hosted about 1,200 delegates and 300 media representatives.

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## “The Future of Security in Europe”

In the past several years, Ministerial Council gatherings have followed a set pattern of plenary speech-giving, long “PrepCom” meetings and behind-the-scenes negotiations. This pattern has produced some important decisions and provided useful impetus to the Organization’s work. But over lunch in Helsinki on 4 December, something that held significant promise took place which we had not seen for some time: a free-flowing discussion among foreign ministers on “The Future of Security in Europe”.

The invitation to all OSCE foreign ministers and heads of delegation for a working lunch on the first day of the meeting had come from the Chairman-in-Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb. Fifty foreign ministers took part in what was to become the first multilateral high-level debate on the proposal for a renewed look at pan-European security, an initiative that had been put forward by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on a visit to Germany on 5 June.

The lunch opened with brief remarks by the Chairman-in-Office, followed by Sergei Lavrov of the Russian Federation, Bernard Kouchner of France, EU High Representative Javier Solana, Ali Babacan of Turkey and Carl Bildt of Sweden. Thirteen other foreign ministers also took turns making their views known.

Minister Lavrov responded to

questions posed directly to him. Representing the incoming OSCE Chairmanships for 2009 and 2010, Dora Bakoyannis of Greece and Marat Tazhin of Kazakhstan delivered the final remarks.

Sergei Lavrov reviewed the main points of President Medvedev’s proposal for a broad “pan-European” debate leading to a legally binding “European security treaty”. The ministers exchanged views on the content of possible high-level discussions and on the most appropriate form in which to take these forward. In the end, there were more questions than answers, but all agreed that the debate should be taken further and that the OSCE had demonstrated its potential as a forum for engaging in candid and constructive dialogue.

The event also illustrated that the Organization’s unparalleled geographical composition and concept of comprehensive security, the product of more than 30 years of hard work, remain foundations on which to build in the future.

Summing up the discussions, outgoing Chairman-in-Office Alexander Stubb said he felt that the ministerial lunch had been one of the high points of the meeting: “It was refreshing, it was frank, it was open, and it was analytical, and that in and of itself is, for me, part of the spirit of Helsinki.”

— **Dov Lynch, Senior Adviser in the Office of the OSCE Secretary General**