

Check against delivery!

Opening Remarks by
Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights (ODIHR)
at the
International Colloquium
“Prospects and Challenges of the Human Rights
Movement”

*‘Can the OSCE Effectively Support and Promote
Independent Human Rights Activities?’*

Helsinki, 16 November 2007



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends!

It is my honour and pleasure to address you at the International Colloquium. It is particularly gratifying to be here together with so many of you who play a key role in the defence of human rights, and in the defence of those who promote their effective implementation.

All of us convened here today are familiar with the long standing relationship the OSCE has with human rights defenders and the important role they have played all along the history of the Helsinki process up to today. Already in 1990, the Copenhagen Document paid tribute to them; since then, their role has been reflected in numerous other OSCE commitments and decisions in which participating States have bound themselves to protect them and promote their work. This is particularly important as the nature of their work makes human rights defenders vulnerable to action of authorities when they chose to ignore or repress fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The question you have chosen for presentation today is if, and how, the OSCE can effectively support and promote independent human rights activities. The OSCE is, of course, a family of different actors: governments, the Chairman-in-Office, Institutions, field missions, the secretariat, as well as the Parliamentary Assembly. They all have their specific role, and

together they share a common responsibility, that of ensuring the implementation of OSCE commitments by all participating States.

Therefore, your question is in no way academic, but touches a core issue, representing our daily reality and challenge. This is particularly true for our work at the ODIHR: we cooperate with human rights defenders and independent NGOs each and every day; without these partners we would not be able to conduct many of our core activities. They provide us with information, they implement projects with us, they advise us and improve our own functions. Simultaneously, ODIHR is mandated to give assistance and support back to them and this has always been a high priority for us.

But by posing the question, we already indicate that there is a problem: human rights defenders need to be defended themselves, because they are under threat from their governments, and increasingly so, in a number of OSCE participating States. Threats taking all the range from bureaucratic obstacles through curbing of activities to physical danger. You know this better than me, because we take our knowledge from you.

So what have we been doing in order to counter these developments? How can we influence the political arena, and how can we help build capacity and support? Let me start with our own capacity-building work at ODIHR and give you a few recent examples:

- we provided strategic guidance, expertise, and resources to the Women's NGO Coalition in Georgia;
- organised trainings on domestic violence with an Austrian implementing partner;
- trained Central Asian NGOs in drafting monitoring reports about places of detention; and
- helped raise awareness of trafficking among Albanian Roma women activists.

In the work of my Office, independent activists are assisted in various ways, both directly and indirectly. In terms of direct assistance, we have several tools at our disposal. One of the main ones is raising concerns with governments on the treatment of independent human rights activities, for example through direct interventions with governments and through assistance to the Chairman-in-Office.

Secondly, high on our priority list are projects aimed at civil society capacity building, including trainings for human rights defenders. For example, a four-stage training course for civil society activists on planning and carrying out human rights monitoring was conducted last year in Armenia and Tajikistan, which equipped new civil society activists from outside of their respective capitals with the skills needed to work actively and effectively on human rights issues.

ODIHR has also strongly advocated NGO participation in line with OSCE commitments. My Office has worked to ensure that all non-governmental organisations – whether popular with their governments or not – have a voice at the table of OSCE’s Human Dimension meetings and other conferences in the human dimension. It is at these meetings where the collective responsibility of governments for the implementation of their commitments is being reviewed, and instructed, by information from civil society, and dialogue and interaction with them.

This, as you know, has not always been easy this year, and has been done in the face of adversity and challenge. In some parts of the OSCE region we have witnessed that the space for civil society is compressing; let us work together so that the OSCE human dimension meetings continue to be an occasion for civil society to engage governments freely and fully.

There are also a number of indirect ways in which we seek to assist independent activists in a more structured way. As a rule, ODIHR is encouraging closer consultation between legislatures and other political structures with civil society at the national level, in particular in the legislative process and in building inclusive political decision-making processes. Joint workshops and roundtables are further examples of how the OSCE can provide useful assistance.

Much of this category of indirect support includes advice and recommendations to one or several or even all OSCE States on

how to deal with issues relating to the entire human rights community. ODIHR has assisted a number of participating States in drafting NGO-related legislation, including on freedom of assembly – a right with direct and very concrete implications for the civil society. Over the past year or so, we have also developed a practical instrument on this subject: the *Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*, which are aimed as much at organisers as at the authorities, and set out how this right can be most effectively guaranteed in law and practice. Another work-in-process is a *Guidebook for Freedom of Association*, which will detail best practice in this area and effectively assist governments and NGOs in going through what has become, in some parts of the OSCE region, a cumbersome registration process.

As you know, my Office has also sought to assist National Human Rights Institutions. NHRIs have to play a vital role in protecting independent activists. We have worked to improve the ways they protect and liaise with human rights NGOs. A project aimed at bringing together civil society and the ombudsman institution in Armenia is currently under way, in order to create closer ties of cooperation between these two actors of human rights protection. Some of this assistance also relates to individual human rights activists to facilitate their playing a concrete role. One example of this is the training of assembly monitors: a first pilot project was recently undertaken to train freedom of assembly monitors in Moldova, with more such trainings being foreseen in the future.

Let me come back to concrete challenges for defenders today: On 10 December, my Office will be presenting a first report on the situation of human rights defenders in the OSCE Region. The report, frankly, makes rather depressing reading. It highlights, with specific examples, a whole host of serious challenges and obstacles which human rights defenders face, reminding us all of why OSCE's support is needed. In drafting this report, we have also received invaluable assistance from the NGO community in the OSCE region. In this report, we will make a number of specific recommendations to the participating States on what they can and should be doing to enhance protection of independent activists.

In questioning whether OSCE can do more to support and promote independent human rights activities let me briefly return to the wider OSCE family. The Permanent Council is the forum where peer review can and should take place. States are called to account by one another if they fail to protect defenders and independent activists. It is the common responsibility of OSCE participating States to make peer review more effective. Further, the field operations have always been at the forefront of support. Often, they are the first point of access for these groups, providing information on OSCE commitments and other advice and assistance. They have numerous projects independently or jointly with ODIHR playing a crucial role in this regard. Finally, the Chairman-in-Office can play a vital role when it demonstrates its will to stand up for defenders. I am confident that the Finnish Chairmanship is already committed to this task. You will be able

to rely on the ODIHR to actively assist you in a wide variety of ways in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

dear friends,

In closing, let me just take this opportunity to thank the IHF and its members for all that they have done to put the issue of support to and protection of human rights defenders on the forefront of the debate within the OSCE. The Helsinki Federation itself has shown to be an example of a hugely successful capacity building network. Through its many programs, the IHF has been an invaluable partner to us and provided a significant contribution to informing us of violations of the rights of defenders, advocating remedies, and providing the entire OSCE community with thoughtful and principled suggestions for change. In these dire times, it is perhaps most appropriate to extend my best wishes to the Federation: *ad multos annos*. I look forward to continuing our very close cooperation in the future.

I thank you for your attention.