

Opening remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal, Director
of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human
Rights (ODIHR)

Civil Society Policy Impact Conference: Building Regional
Partnerships and Networks

Pristina, 27 June 2003

Ladies and gentlemen,
dear colleagues,

Thank you, for the warm welcome.

As this is my first visit to Kosovo as the Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, generally known as the ODIHR, and as it has been a while since my predecessor visited Kosovo in December 1999, let me briefly speak about my Institution and our past involvement in Kosovo.

The ODIHR is the OSCE's specialised institution for promoting democratic elections, strengthening democratic institutions, and protecting and promoting human rights. In fostering democracy and the rule of law, the ODIHR assists participating States in building institutions capable of promoting and protecting basic human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as conducting free and fair elections. That and a number of other areas of activity, such as supporting gender equality and civil society is designed to improve basic human security across the OSCE region. The underlying philosophy of pursuing these goals is that democracy and the protection of human rights are the best guarantee for creating fair and open societies.

While the mandate of the ODIHR relates to the entire OSCE region - 55 states - in areas like Kosovo, the OSCE has deployed field operations which are themselves mandated to fulfil several of the functions of the human dimension

of security - democratisation and human rights. In Kosovo, the OSCE was tasked with these responsibilities as one of the pillars of UNMIK.

That is why the ODIHR, contrary to other countries in the region, has not played a very visible role here until now. We nevertheless follow developments in Kosovo and the entire region closely, and try to play our role as part of the international community in areas we consider of particular relevance. One such area is the support of civil society networks.

Civil society and regional networks are almost synonymous: civil society necessarily has an element of people reaching out to others in order to communicate, to promote certain ideas, and to enlighten society. Regional networks do not make much sense if they are not filled with the enthusiasm of civil society, sharing real common concerns, and held together by the relationships between real people. Just a few days ago, the ODIHR participated in a conference held here in Prishtina, which was organised by the Project on Ethnic Relations. Many high-ranking representatives from Kosovo and the region participated in this event. It was a prime example of how a strong civil society can promote dialogue and build bridges among a region's neighbours.

It should not be forgotten that the OSCE, and therefore the ODIHR, are intergovernmental institutions. It is, however, essential for us to work with non-governmental actors and organisations in order to achieve our goals. These goals include the establishment of strong, responsive and responsible state institutions but also the emergence of a strong civil society. In a way, you can see it as a function of democratic governance in our own activities to be open to others and to let others - including independent voices - participate in your analysis, planning and operations. In its efforts to promote human rights and to strengthen democratisation processes, the OSCE is dependent on the information and collaboration provided by civil society. I see it as one of the

duties of governments and intergovernmental institutions to be open and inclusive towards civil society. In other words, it has to be a two way street.

Looking closer at the region of South Eastern Europe, the prominence of civil society groups becomes even more relevant. Throughout the 1990s, civil society and its networks constituted a beacon of light during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. During the depressing years of parallel societies in Kosovo, civil society networks kept up a minimum of communication and mutual understanding. Even during and after the terrible events of 1998 and 1999 in Kosovo, civil society groups and courageous independent individuals were those who kept up a minimum level of humanity and decency. They thus provided some hope to those who wanted to believe in a better future.

A good example for such co-operation was the documentation of these very events in the summer of 1999 which led to the publication of a grim reminder of what can happen when a crisis gets out of hand. I am speaking about the reports on the human rights findings of the OSCE collected during the spring and summer 1999. Already in the beginning of that unique exercise of interviewing thousands of refugees in Macedonia and Albania, the OSCE often drew on assistance by civil society, including Kosovo NGOs but also some courageous NGOs in Serbia and in Montenegro. The ODIHR, together with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, had the great responsibility to compile and analyse the information thus collected in Warsaw and published the testimonies in a book and website under the name "Kosovo/Kosova: As Seen, As Told". And it was a Serbian NGO with which we have a longstanding relationship which eventually translated this important historical document into Serbian and presented it in Belgrade. It is now part of Serbia's difficult process of coming to terms with its own recent past. Civil society networks play an absolutely crucial part in this process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and reconciliation.

Many of you know the OSCE, and in particular this mission, as a prime international partner in building up non-governmental organisations, in receiving advice and training and in assisting you to connect to likeminded groups elsewhere. The region has been a testing ground for the international community in dealing with local and international NGOs. It has gone through a learning process about the importance of civil society, and about what measures to create or support it work, and which don't.

We have come to a stage where it is time to de-romanticise the concept of civil society and look at it from a pragmatic angle. This means asking, primarily, what services certain groups can provide for society as a whole.

Some of the more important lessons learnt after many years of civil society related work include:

- NGOs can be created by international donors, a civil society cannot.
- The number of NGOs in a country does not necessarily reflect the quality of civil society.
- A large number of NGOs alone cannot provide for a democratic society in a situation where state institutions are weak, or unrepresentative, or where there is not mutual trust and functioning channels of communication between civil society and public institutions.
- Civil society is active, not a passive receiver of aid and training assistance. Viable civil society groups learn and develop by themselves as long as the parameters exist.
- Regional NGO networks as such are by far not enough if they are an end in themselves. These networks cannot be “co-ordinated”.

- Civil society must be part of making important decisions for the whole society, including in the planning, implementation and evaluation of government policies.

The OSCE Mission in Kosovo has been doing pioneer work for the international community in seeing to it that the romantic civil society concepts of the early 1990s were developed into practical arrangements for providing the parameters for a civil society to take root and grow: to ensure that civil society groups fulfil their function as a monitor of government actions, to be involved in consultative processes and policy reviews and in defining and communicating the continuing needs of society.

Civil society is also about being critical. And many of you have been and are very critical of the very international administration in Kosovo which has started out to bring you the benefits of democracy and human rights. Indeed, some aspects of the very well-intentioned international administration and supervision you have enjoyed bear an element of tension with concepts of democratic representativeness, transparency and accountability. These democratic deficits displease many who had been longing for quicker emergence of 'normalcy' in Kosovo. The unresolved status issue and the insistence on benchmarks by the international community are sometimes perceived as frustrating and disillusioning.

But whenever things seem to be stuck due to certain factors beyond your own control, you can still do a lot to build a democratic society from within. Since, democracy does not only mean the rule of the majority, but also the inclusiveness towards all parts of society. It means equality and the protection of minorities. It means that institutions are more important than individuals who happen to hold a certain office for some time. It means maximizing chances of

everyone to get on, to make his or her own choices and to feel secure. I do not intend to sound moralizing - you have heard enough of those speeches before.

But I want to encourage you to continue with what you have achieved so far: building bridges and bypasses where the roads are blocked. Thinking about the today, instead of dreaming of some tomorrow.

Democratisation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. It is not the achievement of certain results, but the way in which you get there that counts. No society ever graduates from the ongoing challenges of building fair and open systems of distribution of power, governance and social justice. And it is the constant dialogue between state institutions and civil society and the inter-linking of this dialogue in a regional context that make democracy so exciting.

I hope that you will have an exciting exchange of views and ideas during this weekend, and build new or reinforce already existing bridges across communities. I expect those that prepare decisions for the lives of people living in this region to listen to you, and to explain their policies and actions to you.

Thank you again for having me here today, it is a pleasure to meet with you, and I hope that my next visit will already follow soon.