

**Plenary session:**  
**The cooperation between the OSCE and civil society**

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I will start my intervention on the cooperation between the OSCE and civil society with some **history** since civil society participated very closely and from the beginning in the history of the OSCE, starting with its contribution to the success of the **Helsinki Final Act**. It would be too long to recall the extraordinary fate of the Moscow Helsinki Group which activities gave the third basket all its sense. Even if the group was dissolved in 1982, its example had been followed in several other countries. For the OSCE, the Helsinki Final Act is not only a founding document, it is also the beginning of an **ongoing dialogue with civil society that lasts for more than 30 years now** and which interest was never denied since then.

In this ongoing dialogue in the field of the human dimension, **the OSCE has a double mission**: on the one hand **to engage with civil society and foster channels of communication** between participating States and NGOs and on the other hand **to protect civil society and pluralism** within the OSCE area. Co-operation with civil society is a two way process. NGOs have also a key role to play in the OSCE: **to observe and to report** on the respect of the commitments taken by participating States in the field of the human dimension. In other words, civil society is essential to the activities of the organization through its role of checks and balance, raising issues and specific concerns and to remind participating States of their commitments.

**How does this work?** We can summarize the role and participation of civil society as well as cooperation in the OSCE in three main ideas.

**First of all**, civil society contributes to the OSCE's human dimension work on a daily basis. The daily work of OSCE institutions, such as the ODIHR and the field operations is realized in close partnerships with civil society. Unfortunately, I don't have enough time to elaborate on how the ODIHR for instance involves civil society

in its programmatic areas. But overall, I would like to stress that it is thanks to the expertise and knowledge of grassroots organizations that field operations in the OSCE region are able to respond on the ground in a concrete and rapid way to security threats. We are also aware that civil society is often a major agent of change, the decisive element inducing evolutions in terms of democratization and human rights. NGOs are therefore key partners for the OSCE institutions when it comes to training projects for various societal groups including public authorities, awareness raising campaigns, or educational projects.

**Second of all**, very well aware of the role civil society can play **the OSCE institutions and field operations aim at supporting its development throughout the OSCE region**, through capacity building activities, but also through monitoring of human rights development. In this regard, I would like to mention a **worrying trend related to the activities of civil society** in some areas of the OSCE region. Genuine independent civil society groups and individuals are increasingly impeded in their activities by restrictive legal measures and administrative harassment as well as denigration campaigns. The civil society groups that usually are the partner of the ODIHR, such as human rights defenders including those working in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination, are particularly hit by this trend. Furthermore, **they increasingly are the target of violent acts**: cases reported during the year 2006 encompass a broad range of offences covering all levels of violence from intimidation, to threats, destruction of property and murder. Alarmed by this evolution, the OSCE and for instance the ODIHR has addressed this issue during several meetings where civil society organizations, participating States and Intergovernmental Organizations raised concerns and discussed potential strategies to address this issue. Following the recommendations issued at one of those meeting last year, **the ODIHR set up a focal point for human rights defenders** which activities will focus on support to human rights defenders and to national human rights institutions.

**Third of all**, the ongoing dialogue between the OSCE and civil society finds its concrete institutionalisation in so-called **Human Dimension events** that take place throughout the year. This is where the OSCE aims at giving NGOs “a seat at the table” and fostering exchanges between States and civil society. The year 2007 not

being an exception to the rule, the ODIHR convenes under the auspice of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office several human dimension meetings.

As a basic rule, the ODIHR organizes a number of major meetings each year which include: the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, three Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings and a Human Dimension Seminar. Some of these events touch upon the whole dimension while some are designed within a more thematic approach or a targeted theme pertaining to the human dimension. **Reflecting the current priorities of the ODIHR, the topics of the SHDM for 2007 put civil at the heart of discussions:** the SHDM convened last March was devoted to *Freedom of assembly, association and expression* (I will recall that on this occasion the ODIHR presented its “Guidelines on Freedom and peaceful Assembly”), the HDS organized in May focused on *Effective participation and representation in democratic societies* the next SHDM planned in July will focus on the *Promotion and Protection of Human Rights*. The past meetings were very well attended and some of you, who where there, will confirm that civil society organizations were granted the space to make their voices heard.

However, **the cornerstone of the human dimension conferences stays the Human Dimension implementing**, the so called HDIM. Every year, in autumn, the ODIHR hosts the HDIM, Europe’s largest human rights conference with an attendance of more 1000 persons. The HDIM is primarily a forum where OSCE participating States discuss the implementation of human dimension commitments that were adopted by consensus at prior OSCE Summits or Ministerial Meetings. **In the field of tolerance and non-discrimination, the High Level Conferences that are organized on an ad hoc basis are perhaps even more important.** I know that many of you participated already actively in the Berlin Conference on Anti-Semitism in April 2004 that launched a series of High Level Conferences on tolerance and non-discrimination during the following years in Brussels, Cordoba and now in Bucharest. These High Level Conferences were followed by so-called **Implementation Meetings** where key issues identified during the Conferences could be dealt with on a practical and technical level, such as *data collection related to hate crime, Education to promote mutual respect and understanding and to teach about the Holocaust and Inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue.*

**The most significant feature of those OSCE Conferences and Meetings** is that they are open to the participation of NGOs where they discuss with participating States on **an equal footing**. For NGOs operating in participating States where civil society is struggling to survive, these events undoubtedly are one of the few opportunities they have to make their voices heard before an international audience. If NGOs can take the floor during the plenary sessions, they also have numerous opportunities of exchanging information and networking on the sidelines of those sessions. Side events on a particular topic can be organized throughout the conference or meeting by any interested party. In contrast to the more formal plenary sessions, these smaller meetings enable more in-depth and lively discussions. **Many of the ideas generated at these meetings feed back into the work of ODIHR's departmental programmes**. NGOs can also use side events as a platform to make major announcements, as was the case when Amnesty International launched its report on the May 2005 events in Andijan. And I think that this Conference will not be an exception to the rule since Human Rights First will launch tonight their annual report on hate crimes.

Equally important for many participants is the chance for informal briefings. For many NGOs, these events provide a unique opportunity to meet with members of the delegation to the OSCE of their respective countries. It also enables exchanges between NGOs and OSCE delegations from different States, which can bring support and encouragement for new and ongoing projects. NGOs from across the region also use this meeting place to engage in networks with similar organizations and exchange ideas and experience.

### **How to turn words into action?**

Each year, hundreds of recommendations come out of those meetings and conferences. Many of these remind the States of their obligations under existing commitments, highlighting areas of particular concern, while others suggest methods for more effective and efficient implementation. Far from just being **a talking shop**, the ideas and recommendations discussed at the conference have achieved **real results** over the years.

To take one example, concerns raised at successive HDIMs about the increase of racism, xenophobia and intolerance and the decisive conclusions of the Berlin Conference on Anti-Semitism led to the **establishment of the ODIHR's programme**

**on tolerance and non-discrimination programme in 2004.** Detailed recommendations for activities such as collecting data on hate crimes, training law enforcement officers, promoting freedom of religion and belief and others were taken on board and project in these areas form now the backbone of the ODIHR's tolerance and non-discrimination programme.

Recommendations for action can be made both to the OSCE and to the participating States. The fact that all participants can make recommendations gives the event a valuable sense of reciprocity and shared responsibility. Rather than simply being a platform to attack particular States for shortcomings, these events seek to review the implementation of all participating States, highlight problem areas and find constructive ways forward.

### **Which follow-up?**

The recommendations made by NGOs and participating States alike are the food for thought of the OSCE's Ministerial Council Meeting in December of the same year. The decisions made there will prepare the Organization's policy for the year to come. Recommendations provide as well input for discussions and decisions in the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna.

### **Which way forward for the cooperation between the OSCE and civil society?**

These examples underline the uniqueness of the OSCE in the arena of intergovernmental organizations. Does it mean that the promise contained in the Helsinki Final Act and the numerous commitments adopted since then on the role of civil society have been fulfilled? The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act fostered a wealth of debates and reflections on the achievements of the OSCE, and naturally also on the current state of affairs. The **unique contribution** of the organization to the respect and the development of human rights in the OSCE region remain unchallenged, however **worried or even critical voices** could be heard. It is no secret that since the geopolitical environment has completely changed since 1975; the organization has to assert clearly its identity. One of the recommendations made by civil society organizations as well as by participating States was to make an even better use of the expertise of civil society **through a systematic and formalized involvement in the agenda of the organization.** (Some of the participants even think

that this process may contain the premises of the resolution of what is sometimes called the “crisis of the OSCE” in depoliticizing the debates and the processes.)

### **The contribution of ODIHR to improve cooperation**

Recognizing the irreplaceable value of civil society’s contribution to the success of the organization, the ODIHR – and for instance the tolerance and non-discrimination programme – has not spared its efforts **to further strengthen the involvement of civil society** in the agenda of the OSCE and of participating States. The organization of **civil society preparatory meetings** such as the one taking place here and now is one of the pillars of this strategy. Since I have described how many meetings the OSCE hosts, it may be legitimate to ask: why organize more meetings? These meetings are special: they open a space for civil society exclusively and should highlight the quality and the diversity of the civil society’s contributions to the Conferences and Meetings. Of course, they give civil society from the OSCE region to share information and practices, to engage in the constitution of networks and coalitions. But the **new element** of those meetings is the **idea to work on a common set of recommendations to the OSCE and to the participating States**. This is quite a challenge as you all know, but it shows the wealth of expertise and the capacity of civil society to formulate ideas and concerns in a common document emanating from different positions grounded in particular historical, social and political contexts. The quality of the existing documents demonstrates the role NGOs can play within the OSCE. **However**, the process of drafting and finalizing the document is still **experimental since it is the first time the ODIHR facilitates this process before a High Level Conference**. For this conference, the ODIHR has been guided by one principle: **transparency**. The agenda as well as the structure of the day have been elaborated in consultation with a large group of civil society representatives (**70**). Furthermore, the ODIHR has established a specific webpage on its TANDIS dedicated to civil society and including precise descriptions of the process of the conference, as well as practical information. The fact that more than **150 participants** have registered to the conference, that we have received so many recommendations beforehand (**60**) and the discussions are lively and focused reveals that our approach is the right one. However it does not mean that everything should be set in stone, on the contrary. There are ways to develop more ownership of the process to civil

society, so that the role of the ODIHR further disappears in the background. I am looking forward to hearing **your suggestions** on this precise point.

**To conclude**, it seems that the OSCE faces two challenges: further open to civil society so as to gain efficiency and pertinence and assure support to civil societies that are threatened. I am convinced that while tackling the first challenge, the organization will also provide with elements of response for the second. Indeed, in further involving civil society representatives as experts and associates in the agenda of the Organization, the OSCE will make clear throughout the region that civil society representatives are to be considered by State authorities as equal partners.