



Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Tarja Halonen at the official OSCE dinner at the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, 4 December 2008

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The 16th Ministerial Council Meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe gives me the pleasant opportunity to welcome you to the Finlandia Hall. It was in this building, designed by Alvar Aalto, where the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe was held in 1975. The 35 Heads of State and Government convened here to sign the Final Act, which as you know is still considered a breakthrough in international relations.

Political leaders of the time made far-reaching compromises after years of confrontation and rivalry. Building on this achievement our countries and citizens have benefitted from growing cooperation in all spheres of life. It is now our task to safeguard a European future that is peaceful, prosperous and without dividing lines.

You have now one day of intensive discussions behind you. I have understood that your deliberations have been open, interesting and successful. When dealing with major issues, like security in Europe, it is only very natural that there are at least as many questions as answers. I hope that tonight's dinner will provide a possibility to continue discussions in smaller groups – but I sincerely urge you to talk about lighter issues too!

I wish to commend the work that the OSCE has undertaken to combat trafficking in human beings, to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, to improve the position of Roma and Sinti people and to promote gender mainstreaming. I hope that the OSCE continues to work closely together with other international institutions, especially the European Union, United Nations and Council of Europe, in promoting these goals.

Just before this ministerial meeting, Helsinki has been hosting the OSCE Civil Society Forum. The Forum produced a large set of recommendations that have been circulated to all delegations. The OSCE Civil Society Forum provided an unprecedented opportunity for NGOs to get their voices heard with the support of Finland's OSCE secretariat. This could be an example to be followed also in future ministerial meetings and possible summits.

OSCE cooperation is based on common values and commitments. The participating States have agreed to follow democratic principles of governance. International observation of elections serves to enhance electoral practices but also to build confidence between participating States. The parliamentary dimension of the OSCE has an important role in election-related issues as well as in promoting OSCE values in the participating States.

I wish you all an enjoyable evening and I want to remind you that knowing each other better personally leads to understanding each other better.