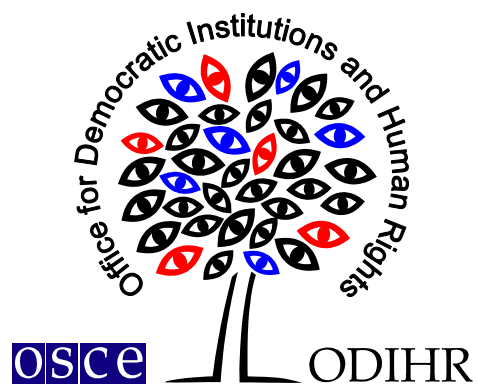


Address by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic
Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

Conference

OSCE and Minorities: Assessment and Prospects
Warsaw, 7/8 April 2006



Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by saying that I am thankful for having been invited by the Centre Thucydide of the Université Panthéon-Assas and the Institute of International Relations of the Warsaw University to participate in this Conference here today., and I am glad that we were able to make a contribution to setting up this event to be with so many prominent experts, and friends, on such a topical subject.

It is a pleasure to represent the OSCE and its main Institution for the human dimension. The ODIHR has kindly, and very aptly, been hosted in Warsaw since it has been created as the Office for Free Elections in the Paris Charter for a New Europe of the CSCE in 1990; . Since then, the mandate of the Office has developed, becoming broader in scope to cover almost all aspects subsumed under the so-called Human Dimension. Today, we have more than 130 staff working in five thematic programmes, covering activities from election observation, democratic institution building, human rights monitoring, combating intolerance and discrimination, and providing a Contact Point for Roma and Sinti.

throughoutThroughout the years, our links with the academic community, including notably here in Poland, have been growing steadily. I trust that such links will continue to develop and I can only express my support for initiatives such as this Conference in this regard.

This Conference aims to assess the current state of the situation of minorities in the OSCE region, and to discuss existing international regulation tools in light of their contribution to stability and peace. Indeed, ethnic conflict was and still is one of the main sources of small- and large-scale violence in Europe today.

At the beginning of the 1990's, Warsaw was among the key places where the high hopes for a profound transformation were most tangible and where the 'historic expectations' of the Paris Charter were most justified. In the wider region, however, disillusionment was not far away. Indeed, important parts of Europe were confronted only too soon with violent conflicts, war, and atrocities driven by inter-ethnic tension, by tension between minority and majority, abused by politicians with extreme nationalistic paroles and policies.

The participating States of the then Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe recognized that the capacity to deal with these issues should and could be enhanced. Therefore, in 1992, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was created as a key tool to identify and seek early resolution of ethnic tensions. His mandate describes him as "an instrument of conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage" in order to ensure peace, stability and friendly relations between OSCE participating States. And I am grateful to share this brief introduction with Krzysztof Drzewicki, Senior Advisor to the High Commissioner, who will present you with more details on their activities.

The decision to establish the post of High Commissioner on National Minorities was – without any doubt – pioneering and groundbreaking; it was marking, as was the creation of the ODIHR, the moment of transition from Conference to Institution, from elaborating commitments to actually doing something about their effective implementation on the ground, in the participating States. Subsequently, and as a consequence of the wars in Yugoslavia, the deployment of field missions contributed to making the OSCE the unique framework for security cooperation it has become today, based on a comprehensive concept of human security.

Indeed, the protection of persons belonging to national minorities is a priority concern of CSCE/OSCE principles and commitments since the very beginning:

Already with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, participating States committed themselves to respect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to equality before the law and to protect their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, participating States agreed to facilitate the contribution of national minorities within the field of culture and education.

It was clear from the very beginning that the protection of minorities did not only serve the actual improvement of their human rights, but was above all there to ensure security at local, national and European levels and remains a core element in any security policy.

With the adoption of the Copenhagen Document of the OSCE Conference on the Human Dimension in 1990, the participating states agree on the most extensive OSCE set of commitments on minority rights. With this, the OSCE constitutes a kind of code for conduct for all institutions and field missions involved in minority issues.

The Copenhagen Document has in fact been the first catalogue of minority rights adopted by consensus by participating States of the OSCE region.

It is therefore not surprising that the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities – the first comprehensive international treaty on minorities – translates much of the Copenhagen Document's political commitments into legally binding rules.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in turn, also contributes to further promoting minority rights standards. The ODIHR, in conjunction with the High Commissioner and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), arranged for the elaboration in 2000 of Guidelines to Assist National Minority Participation in the Electoral Process, the so-called Warsaw Guidelines.

These Guidelines build on the Lund Recommendations of the High Commissioner on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life; they intend to assist both governments and organizations that support or represent national minorities in developing a legislative framework for an electoral system that ensures effective participation of national minorities. Within the framework of our election observations, these Guidelines are a highly useful and practical tool to assess the political participation of national minorities. Whenever deemed necessary, the ODIHR, often, as most recently in the Ukraine with the generous assistance of the High Commissioner, assigns includes a national minority expert to strengthen the analysis of the election observation mission on this particular issue.

Furthermore, the High Commissioner kindly assists our efforts in this regard, such as most recently by providing the Election Observation Mission in Ukraine by with the support of a senior adviser for national minorities.

Beyond participation in elections, we are supporting a number of initiatives to foster not only tolerance and non-discrimination, but also respect and inclusion, in order to ensure better protection and participation of minorities. Let me give you just a few examples:

- In Serbia and Montenegro the OSCE field Mission, with our joint support, has launched a civil society capacity building project aimed at monitoring of and reporting on hate motivated incidents.

- In several countries, we are conducting training programmes for police officers on these issues.
- The participating States have identified, at high level Conferences, the need to strengthen the fight against anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination, including against Christians. We are actively working to establish networks of good practice, in monitoring, education and training.
- Their Ministers have adopted, some two years ago, a comprehensive Action Plan to improve the situation of the Roma and Sinti, who have been described as a minority in Europe.
- The development of stronger frameworks to effectively guarantee Freedom of Association and Assembly, for these freedoms are especially important for minorities.

And I could go on.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With these few examples, I hope to have illustrated some of the key challenges for the OSCE region. Legal, institutional, and practical frameworks for co-operation need to be complemented by expert input. I am convinced that you will identify concrete actions that can be taken to enhance international co-operation to translate commitments into reality. Still much too many persons belonging to minorities suffer discrimination, harassment, or worse. The role of civil society and academia is crucial, not only as seismographs, and as support, but also in its role to hold politics accountable. In the final analysis, it is political will that is needed. We all share the same values, and commitments, in the region. We also share the responsibility for their effective implementation. This is vital to achieve and keep sustainable stability, prosperity and security in our region.

I am looking forward to your discussions and conclusions.

Thank you.