

# OSCE Chronicle

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## **1. Relations between the ODIHR and the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE restored**

The highly embarrassing rupture in the relations between the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in the area of election observations at the end of last year has come to an end. In May this year both organizations were again working together, this time in Bulgaria, where they co-operated, just as before, in observing the parliamentary elections. The unilateral move of the PA in December last year had been a shocking experience for the OSCE and many of its participating States, as it demonstrated rifts within the organization in an area where joint efforts are necessary, maybe more so than ever before. The PA had been accusing the ODIHR of violating the mutual agreements, although it remained rather unclear what exactly the Assembly had in mind. In all probability some of the parliamentarians and possibly even more the executive staff of the Assembly had been upset by the fact that in the joint election observations they could not always score their points, as joint statements at the end of sometimes highly sensitive election observations are the result of consensus and, therefore, compromises.

On the 15th of April the Parliamentary Assembly issued a press statement in which it announced that the 1997 Cooperation Agreement between both bodies would be reactivated, as it is said to be in the interest of the PA to speak with one voice. In the press statement PA President Wolfgang Grossruck is quoted as saying: “We are all interested in reaching a solution to prevent problems from occurring in the future that we have had in the past.”<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it remains completely unclear what these ‘problems’ exactly were. One cannot avoid the impression that apparently somebody or some persons became angry about something and managed to convince the leadership of the PA to go public with statements that were rather offensive for the ODIHR.

The observations of the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in May once again produced a joint statement by the ODIHR, the PA and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Speaking with one voice had been the tradition which now seems to have been restored once again. This is a welcome development, since election observations is one of the remaining key areas where the OSCE clearly still has added value in comparison with other areas of its work. The fact that the organization is speaking with one voice again is, therefore, a positive development.

## **2. Swiss and Serbian Chairmanships Work Closely Together**

The preparation for the upcoming chairmanships of the OSCE are showing some very interesting developments. Switzerland will take over the chair at the end of this year, while Serbia will be the political head of the organization in 2015. Traditionally each chairmanship strongly focused on its oneyear term with its own priorities, whereas the cooperation with the preceding and succeeding chairmen only took place in the so-called troika of the OSCE. And it was only the chairman of the year which decided how (intensively) to use the troika.

This year, however, shows a very different picture. Switzerland and Serbia can almost be seen as ‘twins’, as they cooperate closely together in almost all areas in preparing for the chairmanships in the next two years. This became very clear at the presentation of their joint workplan for 2014 and 2015 at the Permanent Council meeting of 2 July this year.<sup>2</sup> In the ‘living’ document (which means that it can be updated in time) both foreign ministers outline their main priorities for the next two-year period. It comes as no surprise that the strengthening of the human dimension is one of the priorities and this immediately raised some questions in

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1 <http://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/1247-osce-pa-bureau-reactivates-election-observation-agreement>.

2 For more information, see: [http://www.shrblog.org/blog/Switzerland\\_and\\_Serbia\\_present\\_joint\\_workplan\\_in\\_the\\_run\\_up\\_to\\_their\\_consecutive\\_Chairmanships\\_in\\_2014\\_and\\_2015.html?id=394](http://www.shrblog.org/blog/Switzerland_and_Serbia_present_joint_workplan_in_the_run_up_to_their_consecutive_Chairmanships_in_2014_and_2015.html?id=394).

the PC, as not all countries (in particular Belarus and Russia) are so keen on this dimension of the OSCE's work.

“By taking the helm next year, we wish to contribute to creating a security community for everyone,” said Swiss Foreign Minister Burkhalter.

He stressed that dialogue in the South Caucasus, modernizing military transparency arrangements, exchanging on the future of conventional arms control and improving governance in the security sector were among the Swiss priorities in the politico-military area of the OSCE's work.

Improving people's lives by “combating torture, respecting human rights in the fight against terrorism, protecting human rights defenders, and respecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities,” would also be areas of focus, Burkhalter announced. Given the close co-operation between the two chairmanships, co-operation in the Western Balkans is also a priority for the Swiss Chair.

The joint work of the two upcoming chairmanships is a major step forward in the functioning of the OSCE, as one of its weaknesses is the lack of continuity due to the annual changes in its political leadership. The joint operation by Switzerland and Serbia sets a good standard for the future and it looks like subsequent chairmen will also follow this approach. It not only leads to more continuity, but it also strengthens the capacity of each individual chair which can fully benefit from the resources of the other chair in the ‘team’.

### **3. New High Commissioner on National Minorities Appointed**

In July the OSCE participating States finally reached consensus about the appointment of the new High Commissioner on National Minorities. The Finnish politician Astrid Thors, with extensive experience in the international arena, managed to get all 57 states behind her candidature. In mid-August she started her new position for an (initial) three-year term as the successor of the outgoing HCNM Knut Vollebaek. In this way she is continuing what is almost becoming a tradition, namely that Nordic countries deliver the High Commissioners for the organization. Started in 1993 with the Dutchman Max van der Stoel, he was succeeded by the Swedish ambassador Rolf Ekeus in 2001 and the Norwegian former foreign minister Knut Vollebaek in 2007. Thors has been a Member of the Finnish Parliament since 2004. She has also served as the Finnish Minister of Migration and European Affairs and was a Member of the European Parliament. In Finland she belongs to the Swedish minority in the country. Her background indicates a good knowledge of the issues of minority problems in the OSCE area and that is a rich asset for this position.

Unlike her predecessor, who had a very intensive knowledge of the OSCE as Chairman-in-Office of the organization in 1999, Thors is a relative newcomer in the organization. Unlike during previous succession rounds, this time there were only three candidates for the HCNM position, none of whom were former foreign ministers (such as Van der Stoel and Vollebaek). Whether this reflects a lessening importance of the position is hard to tell, but it does demonstrate that the ‘hot’ period of the 1990s, when minority problems regularly resulted in rising tensions between OSCE states, seems to be behind us.


Commenting on her new role, Astrid Thors said: “It remains important to work towards lowering tensions involving national minority issues. Assisting in the implementation of the HCNM guidelines and recommendations, participation in society and education policies will be some of the central themes in my future work. I look forward to working with all participating States on these issues.”

The High Commissioner's task, agreed upon in 1992, is to identify and seek an early resolution of ethnic tensions that might endanger peace, stability or friendly relations between OSCE participating States. The mandate describes the role as "an instrument of conflict prevention at the earliest possible stage."

#### **4. Roma Leader Nicolae Gheorghe Passes Away**

While it is not the habit to write obituaries about former OSCE officials in this journal, this time an exception has to be made for Nicolai Gheorghe who passed away in August this year. Gheorghe has been an indefatigable fighter for the rights of the Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area since the beginning of the functioning of the organization in the 1990s. First representing Roma and Sinti NGOs at the many OSCE meetings on human dimension issues, he was thereupon appointed as the very first Contact Point for Roma and Sinti issues at the ODIHR, a position he held until 2006. The ODIHR paid tribute to the memory of Nicolae Gheorghe. "Nicolae Gheorghe made an enormous contribution, through his tireless work as an activist, advocate and expert, to raising awareness in Europe of the need to guarantee the security of Roma communities and the human rights of their members," Ambassador Janez Lenarčič said. "The establishment of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, at ODIHR, and the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area, are both the direct results of his efforts – they are part of his legacy."





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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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