SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR

# Prevention is Not Very Sexy: A Conversation with Knut Vollebaek

**Knut Vollebaek in conversation with Walter Kemp**

Knut Vollebaek was Foreign Minister when Norway chaired the OSCE in 1999, he was a leading member of the Panel of Experts on OSCE reform in 2004/5 and was High Commissioner on National Minorities from 2007 to 2010. In this interview, he reflects on these roles as well as topics including quiet diplomacy, reform of the European security order, and the possibility of Norway chairing the OSCE again in the future.

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**Q: As High Commissioner on National Minorities you were engaged in quiet diplomacy. That also used to be a general characteristic of the OSCE. But now in the Permanent Council there is a lot of public diplomacy, reading out of speeches, point scoring, and use of social media. Do you think there is still a place for quiet diplomacy in the OSCE and elsewhere?**

KV: I hope there is a place for quiet diplomacy because I think it is very useful. My experience, particularly as High Commissioner on National Minorities, is, however, that it works best in conjunction with public diplomacy. Quiet diplomacy may give reason for not doing anything. When I could work together with heads of other OSCE institutions, particularly ODIHR and Representative of Freedom of the Media, it worked well. Also working with countries seeking to join the European Union quiet diplomacy provided a channel for honest assessments, for example of draft legislation, without having to reveal publicly any sort of criticism, and then these governments could take that advice and present it almost as their own. In this way, they could achieve something that they wanted on the road to EU accession, or in bilateral relations. It was a kind of carrot. But today it seems the carrots are gone. There is less interest or incentives for cooperation, not least because the EU accession process seems to have stalled. We need to go back and look at the conflict prevention idea, explaining and showcasing to countries that quiet diplomacy can actually reduce tensions both domestically and in inter-state conflicts.

**Q: Finger-pointing is becoming more prevalent in international relations. And instead of speaking softly and carrying a big stick, some countries seem to be wielding sticks instead of providing carrots. Forget about quiet diplomacy for a moment; what is the place for diplomacy at all in a transactional international system?**

KV: In the past, when you look back at the Helsinki process 50 years ago, both the East and the West perceived that there were benefits for taking part in the CSCE process and abiding by the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The West had its priorities, such as the human dimension, while the East had its interests, such as arms control. The process was perceived as a win-win. Today it seems like the mentality is win-lose. If you win, I lose and vice versa. I think this is fundamentally wrong in diplomacy and international politics. In the past, it has been shown that there can be negotiations to the benefit of all parties, such as the creation of international organizations or even in bilateral diplomacy. I think this winner-takes-all mentality can be attributed in part to certain personalities in power today, but also to the loss of trust or confidence in globalization. For many years, we had a globalization where many people saw benefits. Now many people have experienced globalization as a loss. They are losing jobs. They are losing their cultural environment. Some people feel globalization causes insecurity. Governments and authorities have not taken these social challenges seriously enough. Maybe because of that, international diplomacy has lost credibility in the eyes of the electorate. This has an impact on politicians. They seem to think that to reassure their people they need to use loud voices instead of quiet diplomacy. Politicians even create antagonism in order to win short term electoral victories

**Q; Do you think that the loss of confidence associated with globalization has also contributed to the rise of populism**

KV: Perhaps, it also contributes to a lack of trust in international institutions. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. As leaders came out of the end of that war, they were keen to create institutions that would avoid a repetition of that disaster. Today, the generation that experienced the Second World War is gone. The new generations have no living memory of a major war in Europe. They

do not think the same way about the consequences of conflict as the post-World War II generation did. Or think back to the early 1990s, to the period that created a number of innovative institutions such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities. This was partly a response to the terrible wars in the former Yugoslavia. Foreign ministers wanted to avoid any further such conflicts. But that was more than thirty years ago. Now, some politicians are letting identity politics flourish and using it for short-term political gains. As I already mentioned, politicians are using this to create enemies and support for themselves.

**Q: It is the 80th anniversary of the UN and the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. The world is different now. The last three times there were major reforms of the international system – in 1815, 1919 and 1945 – it was always after a war. There is war raging in Ukraine today. Do you anticipate a reform of the European security order after this war?**

KV: It is not obvious, and maybe the situation is not felt as dramatic enough outside of Ukraine. If you look at the world today, leaders should be taking the situation so seriously that they would say "let's sit down, let's do something", but they are not. Maybe it is because the current conflicts in the world do not have a major impact on great powers or their electorate to the extent that wars did in the past, outside of the countries at war. In 1945, there was a political environment, a desire to get out of the situation, to rebuild, and you had political leaders who wanted to escape the legacy of two world wars – who wanted to rebuild Europe in a way that people (not least in Germany) would have a sense of ownership to their societies. The U.S. saw an interest in helping to rebuild Europe. It was a great help to a Europe in ruins, but it was also helping the U.S. - both by stabilizing Europe, creating a buffer against a possibly expansionist Soviet Union and creating foundations for a vibrant economy that would benefit the populations both in Western Europe and the U.S.. These were serious measures of prevention. Now, prevention is not very sexy. Politicians have become more reactive than proactive. There has to be a big crisis for politicians to react decisively, but by then it is often too late.

**Q: OK, but we have a big crisis in Ukraine. How much more urgent can this get?**

KV: No doubt the war in Ukraine is very serious. It has created some uncertainty among the population in Europe. However, the reaction varies from country to country, and seems to depend on the geographical distance to Russia. Russia's attack on Ukraine has not been perceived by many as a threat to Europe as such. However, President Trump's indication that the U.S. may not be as ready to defend Europe as before, has certainly drawn European countries closer together. At the same time economic and energy interests certainly play a strong role in determining foreign policy of European countries towards Russia. For some countries (or at least politicians), short-term interests seem to outweigh bigger more abstract questions of European security.

**Q: Then what is left of the Helsinki principles?**

KV: The principles are still valid. As it said in one of the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons reports, the fact that cars violate traffic signals does not mean that you change the rules of the road. At the same time, there needs to be a political will to hold countries accountable to those principles. As a result of the Second World War, many good instruments to solve conflicts and avoid wars were established. They are available. What worries me greatly, however, is that they are not being used. These instruments and organizations need to be used to create a more "ruly" world. We need to get politicians to understand that.

**Q: If steps are successful to de-escalate the conflict in Ukraine, you would also need a discussion on the future of European security. By default, that could fall to the OSCE. Some people say that the greatest days of the OSCE are in front of it. Do you think that despite the current crisis there could be a pendulum swing back towards managing relations more predictably and peacefully through the OSCE, or something else?**

KV: I hope that's true. I think the OSCE is a very valid and useful instrument, where all countries of Europe come together and all countries have an equal voice because of the consensus rule. I think that's very important. But then also Western countries have to be more willing to use the OSCE. For example, when it comes to disarmament, the United States has tended towards making bilateral deals, often using the excuse that organizations like the OSCE are cumbersome. Yes, such organizations can be cumbersome, but they are important for having a comprehensive agreement. The fact that it is so hard to convince countries to chair the OSCE shows the lack of enthusiasm and support for the organization and willingness to engage with it.

**Q: What about Norway chairing the OSCE?**

KV: I have told the government that they should. They almost did it a few years ago, but then changed their mind. I think it is very unfortunate if Norway doesn't chair again. Hopefully politicians may see its value. Finland has stepped up and is doing a good job. We should too. Governments need to realize that the OSCE is a useful instrument, but they do not have a recent good experience of the organization and are paying insufficient attention to the OSCE.

**Q: Last time that Norway chaired the OSCE, in 1999, the Kosovo Verification Mission was deployed at short notice. Fifteen years later, in 2014, the OSCE was called upon to deploy a Special Monitoring Misson to Ukraine. Can you imagine the deployment of an OSCE or OSCE/UN monitoring mission to Ukraine?**

KV: I don't think that's impossible, and I think there are very few other European security organizations that could be deployed. I think deploying a monitoring force to Ukraine will be challenging, but I believe it will be less controversial for Russia if it is an OSCE mission than an EU or NATO or Western coalition of the willing. However, this boils down to political will. Russia is part of the OSCE, OSCE decisions are based on consensus and for the time being it does not seem that Russia is interested in a peace deal.

**Q: You were a leading member of the Panel of Eminent Persons in 2004/05. The Panel's report, called Common Purpose, included a number of recommendations such as thematic missions and a Statute or Charter for the OSCE. Twenty years later do you think those recommendations are still valid?**

KV: From the perspective of prevention, I do believe that thematic missions could serve an important purpose. It would probably be perceived as less controversial than interference in an ongoing conflict, thus, it might be possible to obtain a consensus. Such missions could definitely be part of quiet diplomacy. I would even claim that the work of the OSCE HCNM at times is a sort of thematic mission addressing specific issues aiming at preventing conflicts. However, this means that the participating States have to give priority to prevention.

I still believe that a Charter or a legally binding statute could be useful for the OSCE. However, the situation today is very different from what it was in 2005 when we presented the report by the then Group of Eminent Persons. Again this has to do with political will. In today's polarised world, I think it would be a futile exercise to start a process of creating a Charter or developing a legally binding statute for the organization. If there

is a will there are already instruments available for prevention and conflict resolution. It is also important to remember that the three autonomous institutions of the OSCE, ODIHR, HCNM and RofFM, do not require consensus or decisions by the Permanent Council to engage in its activities.They are the great asset of the OSCE and should be used to their fullest in a situation when consensus is difficult to obtain.

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