

*Karel De Gucht*

## Preface by the Chairman-in-Office

Chairing the OSCE is a challenging task, both politically and institutionally. Politically, because of the unresolved conflicts in which the OSCE has a role to play as mediator and because of the OSCE's endeavours to support democratization processes and respect for human rights in many countries. At the same time, the OSCE Chairmanship is a formidable undertaking from an institutional point of view. The OSCE is a rather unwieldy body with a broad, multidimensional mandate and a *modus operandi* based on co-operation among 56 equal partners. Nothing can be achieved by the will of the Chair alone. The OSCE rests fundamentally on consensus. And the goodwill and support of all participating States are essential.

The Ljubljana Ministerial Council of December 2005 gave us a mandate to pursue the ongoing discussions on institutional reform. This debate has been continuing for quite some time, and has threatened to paralyse the Organization. Thanks to the Ljubljana Meeting, we now have a roadmap to guide us in this undertaking. Merely having a map, however, is no guarantee that we will reach our destination.

The road itself remains difficult. As Chairman-in-Office, I believe there is undoubtedly room for improving the efficiency of the Organization. However, I doubt there is reason to profoundly alter the nature of the OSCE or to tamper with the delicate balance of power within it. Whatever differences and tensions may exist among the participating States, we must hold firm to that which binds us together, namely the fundamental values and commitments of the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter. These are the bedrock of what we collectively stand for – or should stand for.

The most pressing question, therefore, is not whether we share common values and commitments, but how we can turn them into collective plans for action and implement these plans.

Election observation is a key task that the OSCE fulfils via the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. It is a field in which the OSCE has acquired vast and internationally recognized expertise. It is also a common responsibility that is of direct concern to the OSCE as a whole and to each of its institutions. While election observation is part of the reform agenda, reform should be aimed at improving the implementation of existing commitments and the functioning of existing mechanisms to support participating States in the process of democratization.

The Belgian Chairmanship has had several additional priorities. One of these was to bring more balance to the OSCE's three traditional dimensions. All three are interlinked: There can be no effective and lasting democracy

without stability. Conversely, peace and security cannot be achieved without respect for democracy, civil liberties, and human rights. Finally, there can be no lasting stability without economic development.

The overall balance between the three “baskets” has been somewhat lost from sight over the past years. To put more “flesh on the bones” of the second dimension, we have chosen transport as the main theme for the 2006 Economic Forum. Economic co-operation and integration can contribute to regional security, and the OSCE is a useful platform to discuss problems and find solutions. In the light of current events, we believe that energy security is another area for dialogue and co-operation within the OSCE.

A second issue we have made a priority is the promotion of the rule of law and the fight against organized crime. This concerns all OSCE countries – East and West of Vienna. It is also of direct concern to our citizens. The fight against organized crime is not new to the OSCE, which has already developed action plans across its three dimensions: on combating human trafficking, the illegal trade in drugs and weapons, money laundering and corruption, and border management. The OSCE has initiated programmes to strengthen the rule of law and provide assistance for police and judiciary training. The ambition of the Belgian Chairmanship is to bring more coherence to the OSCE’s numerous activities in the field, and give them more substance and backbone.

With regard to the fight against trafficking in human beings, we have agreed to modify the relevant OSCE mechanism to ensure more effective action within a more coherent structure. The OSCE should be as effective as possible in promoting the fundamental right to human security. The tasks that need to be performed are not easy, but the commitment of the OSCE community to eradicating this vile form of exploitation is large enough to surmount institutional bickering and ideological differences.

I also want to emphasize the commitment of the Chairmanship to the promotion of tolerance and respect. The Ministerial Council in Ljubljana decided that the focus in 2006 should be on the implementation of the commitments made by participating States. We thus strived not only to keep tolerance high on the Organization’s agenda but also to put the agenda into action. Together with ODIHR, and with the support of the three Personal Representatives on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, the Chairmanship remains fully committed to this task. It is no coincidence that our Chairmanship commenced with a ceremony commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. Also on the issue of tolerance, I had the privilege, together with the Secretary General of the OSCE, to deliver the OSCE’s contribution to the UN Secretary-General’s Alliance of Civilizations initiative.

Prominent on the OSCE’s task list are its role as mediator in what are often called the “frozen conflicts” and its role in promoting democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

As an honest broker, the Belgian Chairmanship has been actively contributing to finding solutions to the frozen conflicts of Transdniestria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. As Chairman-in-Office, I have travelled to all the countries concerned and met with their leaders, trying to facilitate the emergence of solutions. Whether and when solutions are found will depend on the presence of genuine willingness on the part of the principal parties involved.

A window of opportunity appeared to open earlier this year with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, meetings between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Paris and Bucharest failed to take advantage of this chance. Serious obstacles remain, but in a new meeting in Minsk, the parties seem to have made progress in finding a common understanding on principles that may bring a settlement closer.

In the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, we have been urging all parties to return to the negotiating table while exercising restraint and refraining from any unilateral action that might worsen the situation. In June 2006, we held a donor conference in Brussels, where participating States pledged more than ten million euros for economic rehabilitation in the conflict zone. The meeting was the first of its kind for the OSCE and took place in the presence of all parties. It is our hope that the support gathered at the conference will help to build confidence between the parties and bring the settlement of the conflict closer.

In the Moldovan-Transdniestrian conflict, we have also been urging the parties to restart talks. Important developments have occurred since the start of 2006 with the introduction of the new customs regime and the deployment of the Border Assistance Mission of the European Union on the frontier between Moldova and Ukraine. This should bring greater transparency in trade flows. We believe that transforming the peacekeeping operation in Moldova into an internationally mandated and recognized mission could enhance security and stability. As the holder of the OSCE Chairmanship, we also did our utmost to create opportunities for a possible settlement of the status question.

During our Chairmanship, we have been committed to upholding the OSCE's common standards and values pertaining to human rights and democracy in all the participating States. In this respect, I commend and support the work of ODIHR, which plays an instrumental role in providing support for what we generally call institution building.

Democratization, rule of law, and respect for human rights are the main fields of action of the OSCE. I expressed my dismay at the flawed presidential elections in Belarus, in which opposition leaders and groups were denied their rights to free and fair participation. The events in the Uzbek city of Andijan raised grave concerns, and the resulting legal proceedings did not meet the standards required under OSCE commitments.

How do we, the OSCE as an Organization, work best to promote democratization, rule of law, and respect for human rights in countries that do not live up to the standards to which they are required to adhere as OSCE participating States? Dialogue and co-operation is the answer, but it must, of course, be a two-way street. The role of the Chairmanship is to facilitate this process, without compromising on our shared principles and commitments. At the same time, we must give full support to the OSCE field missions, which, in dialogue with the governments and civil societies of their host countries, contribute to democratic transition.

The OSCE is a living organization. Its agenda is and will always be a “work in progress”. The Chairman is far more a facilitator than a leader, and consensus is more than a decision-making process: It is a commitment to shared values and common standards, and a collective responsibility for co-operation and security. It has been an honour for me to be Chairman-in-Office of this great endeavour.