

Sebastian Kurz

Foreword by the Chairperson-in-Office

Austria assumed the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) at a time when the Organization saw itself confronted with a multitude of serious challenges. Violations of the OSCE's principles and values in recent years and a failure to implement agreements in good faith had damaged relations between the Organization's participating States. Challenges to peace and security, including armed conflicts and crises, the problem of violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism, and increasing lack of trust between states urgently had to be addressed.

There is no doubt that the OSCE can play an important part in finding solutions for these complex issues and in restoring trust among states. The OSCE has proven itself to be an ideal platform for dialogue and has a unique, comprehensive array of instruments at its disposal. Its specialized institutions and field operations make important contributions to ensuring that our common values and concerns are implemented on the ground.

In the past few years, however, the crisis of confidence has crept into many areas within the Organization and is considerably limiting its functioning. Dialogue remains the prerequisite for restoring trust; taking decisions together can help in that respect and form the basis for joint ownership of the Organization's work. But this only works if there is openness to flexibility and a willingness to negotiate, putting the interests of the Organization as a whole ahead of national interests. If 57 states seek to implement their will without compromise, the system cannot work.

During our Chairmanship, we not only promoted the use of the OSCE and its instruments, we also built consensus to ensure that the Organization has the necessary means to carry out its mandate by, for instance, brokering agreement on a budget for 2017 and on the new leadership of the OSCE and its institutions. This shows that the OSCE States can come together on core issues. Clearly, we need more of that if we want the Organization to play a meaningful role in the many crises we are facing.

One area where the OSCE has been successful in overcoming mistrust in the past is security and defence. Today, the level of confidence is alarmingly low. The erosion of the conventional arms control regime in Europe must be reversed; this is in the interest of every single participating State. To foster the open and constructive dialogue necessary to re-establish trust in this area, we launched a Structured Dialogue on current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area, focusing on the mutual benefits of increased military transparency, predictability, and stability in the OSCE area. Austria also promoted effective multilateral responses to emerging challenges by supporting the full implementation and modernization of the Vienna

Document and fostering regular military-to-military exchanges. We all need to co-operate actively to prevent future military conflicts.

Armed conflicts continue to cause much suffering, displacement, and destruction in parts of the OSCE area. We must find ways to enable political solutions and underline respect for international law and human rights standards. Most importantly, in my view, we must do more to help the local populations that are suffering most from these conflicts; their safety must be a priority. During my visits to several of these crisis areas, I was struck by how the local population wants more active involvement of the OSCE because the Organization directly contributes to their safety.

A good example is the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine. Through its monitoring and reporting, the SMM has prevented a worsening of the situation and facilitated the repair of critical infrastructure. We must continue to support the SMM to fully carry out its mandate, but this requires unrestricted access and security for the monitors. The tragic death of one member of an SMM patrol, caused by a landmine, shows the importance of increasing the safety of the OSCE's personnel.

As OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, I paid several visits to Ukraine to push for pragmatic steps to de-escalate tensions and ensure better protection and living conditions for the local population. The parties must focus on the fate of the people in this devastated region and prevent a humanitarian and environmental disaster in the Donbas. All sides must fully implement the Minsk Agreements and strictly respect the ceasefire to which they have repeatedly committed themselves. It is the responsibility of all sides – and those who have influence over them – to enable a political process to succeed.

This is equally true for the other conflict situations in the OSCE area, in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transdniestria, and Georgia. Throughout our Chairmanship, we have supported all efforts to make tangible progress and find peaceful solutions there.

Another major challenge to security today is violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, which targets and affects the internal stability of states, the rule of law, and our basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and the freedom of religion or belief. On the one hand, we have to deal with the threat posed by the people from the OSCE area, who have already been radicalized, and re-integrate them, where possible, into our societies. On the other, we must focus on preventing radicalization, particularly of youth, while fully respecting and promoting human rights.

Professor Peter Neumann, my Special Representative on Radicalization, is helping us to better understand these dynamics and identify ways to effectively address root causes and triggers for radicalization. In September, we presented a report with concrete recommendations on how to improve the fight against violent extremism and radicalization.

During its Chairmanship, Austria also focused on topics such as cybersecurity, economic connectivity, and green economies, where all states can

gain from more co-operation. Progress in these areas will generate more trust and confidence, and will act as a catalyst for further co-operation.

The same is true for adherence to our agreed norms and standards, particularly in the human dimension. This is key to fostering trust as well as long-term stability and security. Respect for human rights, the rule of law, and democracy are prerequisites for and an integral part of security, stability, and prosperity. The comprehensive concept of security nurtured by the OSCE substantially depends on progress in the human dimension. Respect for human rights, the rule of law, and democracy strengthen the cohesiveness and resilience of our societies, and enable us to better counter threats to our security.

As a traditional bridge-builder, Austria will continue its efforts to help overcome differences between states and to promote an inclusive and cooperative security space. The challenges we face can only be addressed and overcome through critical, but constructive dialogue between states, civil society, and experts. Fostering a genuine dialogue across all OSCE dimensions has been a key priority. It can be achieved only with the strong engagement and ownership of all 57 participating States. We owe this engagement to our people, especially those directly affected by conflict and lack of security, who expect the OSCE to live up to its principles.